



Research Series

Pathways to Information

Summary Report

Developing an integrated
approach at local level

information for all

**PATHWAYS TO INFORMATION:
DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED APPROACH
AT LOCAL LEVEL**

A Working Paper

Comhairle

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The views and opinions expressed in this working paper are those of the authors and should not at any time be attributed to Comhairle or the management, staff and volunteers of the participating services.

Preface

Information plays a key role in promoting active citizenship by enhancing people's access to their rights and entitlements. Information provision is a process which enables citizens to identify their needs in the context of existing statutory services and provisions. This provides an opportunity not only for access to and exchange of relevant information but, also, an opportunity for social policy feedback based on the direct experience of users of public services. The task of information providers is to bridge the gap between citizens who experience needs and problems as a whole and the wide and disparate range of Government services.

This Report draws on the study of four services (2 statutory and 2 independent) providing information to members of the public. The focus of the study was on the experience and perspectives of users of these services. The centres involved in the study were selected on the basis that they represent a wider population of information providers throughout the State. They comprised a Citizens Information Centre (CIC) and an ICTU sponsored Centre for the Unemployed (CfU) and two statutory services, a Community Welfare Office (CWO) and a Social Welfare Local Office (SWLO). They were all selected from the same urban centre, ensuring thus that the service users sampled could, in principle, choose between a range of centre types in order to get the information they required or make their way between two or more if necessary. The two statutory services are not dedicated essentially to providing information, but have developed information functions that in varying degrees assist citizens in obtaining their entitlements.

Over a short defined period, the survey recorded the experience of a total of 290 service users when they visited one of these four centres. For each centre, it provides information on the age and gender distribution of users, whether they were there on their own behalf or someone else's and how they became aware of the centre. They also reported whether this was their first stop or one of a succession in relation to their query, and whether they got the information they wanted in this visit or needed to go still further. The views and perceptions of representatives of the four services involved in the study are also presented in the Report.

People were making visits to services for a variety of reasons. In the case of the statutory services some visits were obligatory for the user in order to produce documentation. In others the user may have been exercising choice in order to get independent advice, have a benefit explained or make an appeal. A proportion of visits may have been desirable from the provider's perspective so as to verify claims. A proportion of visits may be futile for the user if they are referred inappropriately or do not start their search at the relevant point. Such visits may also be futile for the service provider if the user has been referred to the wrong service.

There were a number of users who were making multiple visits to different services or repeat visits to the same service to complete their transactions. Some respondents at different centres referred to the problem of going "to and fro".

While this flowed partly from the complexity of the service it also resulted from difficulties in getting the right information and from confusion at the stage of communicating between different information and service providers.

The provision of information by statutory bodies is a service that is evolving gradually, often as an outgrowth of existing services. While the information function, where it is an acknowledged responsibility, should be carried out in a thorough way, this does not imply that every service with a related information function should try to provide the full set of information services that is on offer in, for example a CIC.

Where there is a distinct information need that cannot be efficiently met locally due to economies of scale, it should be possible to provide an appropriate contact and referral, for example, access to a telephone information and advice line.

The study has reviewed the experience of service users from the perspective of information pathways. Evidently, many of the problems that respondents have with these pathways are to do with the service or entitlement or aspects of the process of seeking entitlement rather than general information on entitlements and services. It is important to distinguish between service problems and information blockages. The information function obviously becomes less complicated if there is clarity in relation to entitlements, simplicity in the processing of claims and availability of the services required.

Barriers to accessing information and entitlements may arise because of the culture surrounding a particular service or entitlement, for example, the legacy left by the Poor Law origins of parts of the range of welfare entitlements we have to-day. Some, particularly those based on a means test, and those with a residual role, such as supplementary welfare, the “scheme of last resort”, are particularly vulnerable to the persistence of stigma. It is important that every effort is made to counteract this image by underwriting the concept of entitlement at every point on the pathway. It is also important that the service user, in the processing of claims, does not become isolated from the wider population of entitlement beneficiaries or service recipients. For example, people should not be streamed into offices that are viewed as outside the mainstream of social welfare delivery, or in some way bear a label or image that is negative because the ambience and facilities are less than one would reasonably expect in a public service outlet.

The process can also break down at the interface between the provision of information and the application of the service. The client may not fully understand the information, or may have difficulty with forms received from the service provider. There may be a literacy problem. It is essential, therefore, that agency staff assist in identifying potential problems the user may have in going further along the pathway.

The study illustrates how appreciative respondents were when relatively straightforward advice on options was given. This points to enhancing the information function by developing the advisory dimension. It is implied in the study that a good deal of advisory work is carried out in, notably in the Centre for the Unemployed, and, also in the CIC, although the lengths to which such advice can be pushed are limited. Information provision may also include assistance with the completion of forms and claims, referral and advocacy as appropriate to the needs of the individual involved. The agencies at the beginning of the information path should try to anticipate situations where the client will need to go to several agencies, and work out the best sequence. All services with an information role should consider having access to the Comhairle Citizens Information Database as an essential tool of their work.

In order to minimise the perception by users of having to go from “pillar to post”, it is important that a good system of communication is maintained between the staff in each of the agencies in a locality, for example, with regard to when is the best time to attend, or who to ask for. Each agency can contribute to better communication and ensure that the service user not only has the right advice and documentation before going on as referred but that they will be assisted at the time they go. Regular contact between agencies that are typically located at different points is very important, both to discuss the kinds of problems that have arisen over a period and to address ways to improve co-ordination.

It is particularly important that the agencies at the beginning of the referral process advise clients on the type of identification or other documentation likely to be required at offices to which they are being referred. Some form of universal card with a photograph, that can be used as a “passport” or identification for a number of services would be in accordance with the Government REACH initiative which aims to integrate all public services and, also with the OASIS project which is designed to provide comprehensive information based on a range of life situations. The system adopted should allow a person to log into his/her own details in a central electronic database.

There is a need to address issues that arise from the study in relation to how we should develop the quality of the information service in a way that puts users’ needs at the centre. Information services should be viewed as a pathway with the objective of ensuring that citizens are properly guided in relation to their entitlements without excessive delays or derailment. This requires that information workers act as enablers and engage with the social, economic and community context in which people live and work.

1 Introduction

Background to the Study

In 1999 the National Social Service Board (NSSB) (now Comhairle¹) appointed Ralaheen to undertake a study on pathways of users to information. The resulting working paper is the second in a series commissioned by the NSSB with a view to informing the development of an integrated approach to information provision at local level.

The first study, *Information Provision at Local Level: Developing an Integrated Approach*, (Ralaheen 1999), aimed to get a sense of the situation on the ground from the perspective of the user of social and information services. The study assumed a user perspective by placing the needs of the user as the central focus of concern in examining the responsiveness of services to users. The study, which was carried out in three locations in Ireland, involved researchers making visits to a wide range of social and information services in these locations. The study found that each area contained a wide-ranging mix of public and independent services. Given the multiple points where the user can possibly seek information, it was not altogether clear where the user pathway to information should or could start, or indeed, how it should continue. The study concluded that the *'user is faced with a bewildering choice of outlets providing social and information services of varying scale and scope in different locations.'* Little substantive material exists on how individuals actually negotiate their way through services in seeking information about their benefit entitlements, either directly from relevant statutory agencies or indirectly via a variety of intermediary services.

Arising from the findings of the first working paper, and the NSSB's identification of the need for additional research to inform the planning of information services at local level, the NSSB commissioned a follow-up study. The main focus of this study is on the *actual pathways* to statutory services that users follow in order to acquire information and obtain their benefit entitlements. The need for such research was prompted by the NSSB's concern about the lack of base line factual information on how people seek information about their benefit entitlements.

¹ In June 2000 Comhairle was established as a new national agency responsible for the provision of information, advice and advocacy on social services. Comhairle combines all aspects of the work of the National Social Service Board (NSSB) and the information function of the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB). Comhairle provides information and advice on the broad range of social services via the national network of Citizens Information Centres (CICs), Comhairle offices and the Citizens' Information Database (CID).

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

- (i) identify and describe the actual pathways to information and services;
- (ii) describe and evaluate inter- and intra-agency referral methods and processes;
- (iii) identify aspects of the pathways identified that are unsatisfactory from the perspective of the citizen;
- (iv) identify factors which either assist or hinder citizens accessing information and services;
- (v) describe models of 'good practice' in integrated information provision (from the perspective of users of services);
- (vi) make recommendations for more effective information and service delivery at local level.

The User Pathway to Information

The concept of a pathway encompasses the idea of a journey and a route. A journey is an act of going from one place to another. A route or pathway is the way or course taken in getting from the starting point of that journey to the destination or end point.

Once a member of the public becomes aware of his/her, or a relative's or friend's, need for a benefit or service or raises the question of entitlement to a benefit or service, the citizen may have to go in search of information in relation to that particular need or query. He/she will not always have the information to hand for the circumstances or queries that arise. Citizens do not always know what public services are available to assist them. They may not know if they are entitled to a particular benefit or can avail of a particular service. To find out, the citizen sets out on a journey to obtain the information required. The journey may take the citizen to one, two or more offices to obtain the information sought. This will depend on a number of factors such as:

- whether the citizen's information need is simple or complex;
- whether the citizen knows where to go to get the required information;
- whether offices or centres delivering the required benefit or service are available and accessible in the locality;

- whether offices or centres delivering the required benefit or service can provide the information required.

Along the journey the user will come into contact with a range of different organisations, some public, others community and voluntary. The question can be asked as to whether there is a 'normal way' for users seeking information to proceed once they become aware of their need? Do users take a regular course of action or follow an unvarying sequence of acts to get from one place to another in their search for information? Do users conform to a standard, regular, usual, typical route in their journey to obtain information?

User-provider Relationship

Users are a heterogeneous group. In their transactions with social and information services, different users present with different needs, problems, preferences, demands, resources and abilities. The user is referred to variously as *claimant* or *beneficiary*, *client*, *customer* or *consumer* and *citizen*.

The providers of social and information services are also a heterogeneous group. Similarly to users, services are characterised by diversity and the ensemble of local 'street level' services is made up of many different types. They can be public or voluntary services, cover varying jurisdictions, have different organisational and managerial structures, differ in size and in the number and types of users and be guided by different principles or priorities, to name but a few.

The different types of users and different types of provider organisations influence the resulting service relationships, which are characterised by a double diversity (Schulze and Wirth, 1996). On the one hand, provider organisations are confronted with the different needs and problems of users. On the other hand, users of public services are habitually faced with complex provisions, which are often fragmented across various government departments and state agencies and compartmentalised within the departments and agencies administering them. Epstein (1990) describes the predicament in which users find themselves as follows:

[C]onsumers tend not to approach the right 'bit' and have to withstand the frustrations of being referred and re-referred, and possibly re-referred, 'in a ping-pong administration in which they play the part of the ball'.

Little is known about the process or actual pathways taken by users in the search for information.

Study Location

This study attempts to present a picture of the flows of users through different social and information services. It draws upon the findings of research undertaken in four services in one city centre location. The services at which information was obtained include two public social services and two independent information services. The two public service offices are:

- a Social Welfare Local Office (SWLO) of the Dept of Social, Community and Family Affairs;
- a Community Welfare Office (CWO) located in a Health Centre under the auspices of a Health Board.

The two independent information service centres are:

- a Citizens Information Centre (CIC);
- an ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

The services in the study are all services with offices providing services to the user at local level and are available and accessible to the public at 'street level'. These are in contrast to central offices, which are remote from the user. The user can walk into services and make face-to-face contact with 'front-line' staff, volunteers or Community Employment (CE) workers. There are, however, important distinctions between the public social services and independent information services.

SWLOs and the CWOs (administered by the Health Boards) provide, operate, manage and deliver services provided under statute law. The principles of operation are determined by law and by key considerations such as public accountability. The application or interpretation of these principles, however, can and do have some regional variations, which take account of differences in conditions of delivery. The responsibilities of personnel fall within a framework of delegated powers, guidelines of government departments and collective agreements.

The voluntary and independent services such as ICTU Centres for the Unemployed or Comhairle-supported CICs operate within a national framework and plan agreed by their elected or appointed governing bodies. Services are delivered by a combination of salaried staff, persons enrolled in labour market integration programmes and volunteers.

Factors with a Bearing on User Pathways:

- Standards and quality of service delivery

Ralaheen's (1999) study on developing an integrated approach to information provision examined access to and standards of information and social services from the point of view of the user.

The study found that substantial efforts had been made by some services to increase accessibility for users. However, access to many other services was restricted for a variety of reasons. Barriers included location and limited opening hours, limited transport (particularly in rural areas but also in an urban area on the periphery of a city), obstacles preventing people with disabilities, older people or people with prams from accessing buildings. The study also noted a general lack of Braille or audio support services.

Standards of service delivery were not always acceptable. The researchers encountered forbidding and unsuitable buildings, buildings in poor condition, premises with poor and confusing layout, premises that were open but with no apparent staff, services advertised as open but upon visiting could not be found or were closed, services that restricted access according to address or some other criteria as well as use of unsuitable hatches.

These findings followed a study undertaken by the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE 1996) on the quality and condition of services provided to social welfare recipients. Health clinics and labour exchanges were included in the study. The survey addressed:

- the condition of building/reception area;
- provision of information;
- privacy;
- queues and general facilities.

The study found that, overall, health clinics fared worse than the labour exchanges in relation to the display of opening times, condition/suitability of building, and where welfare recipients should go. Health clinics, on the other hand, were much more likely to have a reception area with someone to ask for assistance.

Building on the 1999 Ralaheen study, this study includes a comparable assessment of accessibility to and standards of the four services participating in the study. Based on a pre-prepared schedule, the researchers recorded observations during the

visits on the location of the services in relation to other services, identification of the building, opening hours, condition of the buildings, reception areas, use of hatches, queuing and queuing systems, physical accessibility and organisation of information provision.

- **Co-ordination of services by inter-agency co-operation**

Co-ordination of services by inter-agency co-operation was discussed in the 1999 study on developing an integrated approach to information. The report suggested that a planned, organised and systematic referral system can guide the user onto a 'pathway' through the information and service system. In a planned system of co-ordination, no assumptions are made about the user's knowledge of the system and the pathway is clearly presented to users.

Many independent information services get *referrals from* statutory agencies for clarification of their rights and entitlements. A high proportion of these referrals came from the Department of Social Welfare (now Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs) and the Health Board (Nexus, 1998). In a study of information and welfare rights services (Browne, 1996), almost all of the services surveyed reported making *referrals to* both the Health Board Community Welfare Officer and to the Department of Social Welfare. Referrals to the Health Board social worker were also frequently mentioned.² The SWLOs and Health Boards have been found to be the most common destinations for outgoing referrals from independent information services/centres (Nexus, 1998).

This study explores the practice of planned, organised and systematic referral systems between the four participating services.

² Services to which users were referred were not always available and accessible locally.

2 Methodology

The study of pathways of users of public and independent social and information services comprises three parts. Part 1 comprised a survey of users passing through four social and information 'street level' services. Part 2 involved researchers recording notes and observations during the same fieldwork duration. Parts 1 and 2 were undertaken concurrently. Part 3 involved obtaining the views of service managers on the preliminary findings of Parts 1 and 2. Their views were obtained by way of face-to-face interviews with key informants from the four services included in the study.

PART 1

Part 1 comprised a survey of users passing through four social and information 'street level' services. Users were asked to specify previous points of contact in the pathway taken by users to get to that particular service and which social and information services, if any, they were heading to next. Users in each of the four participating services were interviewed by researchers.

Attempting to indicate pathways of users through service delivery systems is by no means an easy task. A range of methods exists for examining the behaviour and views of users in their transactions with social and information services. Surveying users as they carry out their transactions at various 'street level' services is one approach. A number of other methodological approaches were considered before adopting this approach and embarking on the research.

One methodological approach would have been to undertake a longitudinal study, following routes taken by users over a period of time. Even before considering the difficulties that would arise in trying to construct a population sample, this approach would have carried a risk of high dropout over time. There was a danger that the focus of the research would have been on tracking users rather than on content. Furthermore, a project, which tried to track routes of 500 individuals through services for the elderly in Scotland, was stopped because of the complexity of emerging pathways. From 500 different individuals in the original sample over 200 different routes had emerged at the end of a 12-month period (Grunow, 1996).

A second methodological approach might have been to construct a sampling frame of former users of the services. Making this approach operational would have been incompatible with the principles of the independent information services where confidentiality is guaranteed to users.

The methodological approach adopted was to survey users on the day that they passed through social and information services. This methodology is limited because it did not include people who are not using any centre. Interviewing a sample of the general public would have included such people. However, this

approach was eliminated because it may not have captured the number of individuals who were currently using public social and independent information centres deemed necessary for the study.

Furthermore, the method adopted ensured getting user replies in 'real' time and avoided users having to make long recall or give retrospective or speculative replies. Asking users to speculate has been used in other research but exposes the research to the risk of obtaining replies that may not be converted into action.

Sample

The study chose to conduct interviews with users making personal calls to the participating services. Users were interviewed as they passed through the four social and information 'street level' outlets.

The study sampled available users of the four services using quota sampling. Quota sampling is regularly applied in exploratory studies and studies aiming to include a wide variety of people in a sample. It was chosen as the preferred method for the study because of the difficulties that would have been involved in drawing up a sampling frame from which to draw a probability sample for each of the participating services.³ To attempt to do so would have been extremely time-consuming and would have incurred high costs. Quota sampling yields a non-probability sample. In such a sample, some people have a greater, but unknown, chance than others of selection. The research was interested in getting an idea of the range of responses that people have at different service points in their search for information.

For the purposes of producing a reliable data set, a quota of 300 completed survey schedules, that is 75 user interviews per service, was set prior to the fieldwork. Much consideration was given to the prospect of reaching the specified quota. The researchers were aware that a number of variables could have a bearing on the number of interviews that could be completed in one week. These included factors such as method of administering the questionnaire, opening hours, flow of users through services and the weather.

Administration of Questionnaire

A team of four social science researchers with interviewing experience conducted the interviews. This was more advantageous than using self-administration

³ A discussion on the application of quota sampling can be found in de Vaus, 1994, pp. 77-79.

because it ensured that the completed questionnaires were highly harmonised and fewer questions were left unanswered.

Face-to-face interviews are widely known to produce a higher response rate than interviews with users making contact with services by telephone or postal surveys. Incidentally, the vast majority of independent information services consider face-to-face contact to be an important method of providing information (Nexus, 1998). Undertaking face-to-face interviews also afforded the researchers the opportunity of spending time on the 'user' side of the counter.

Pre-briefing was conducted prior to fieldwork and on the eve of the commencement of the fieldwork. Harmonisation and completion of interview schedules was conducted twice a day to ensure optimum similarity of recording of responses. The researchers were anxious not to disrupt the daily working of the services, which might be caused by having interviewers on the premises for a number of consecutive days, and took care to minimise any such interruptions using the space available in each of the services.

User Flows

One problem that emerged in preparing to operationalise the research was determining the flow of users through the four services. Choosing city-based services increased the likelihood of a higher flow through of users.

Interviews were conducted during opening hours of the services. Each of the four services had different opening times. Longer opening hours do not necessarily mean that a higher number of users visit the service. Very short opening hours may involve frequent visits during these hours.

Just as the opening hours of the services differ, the flow of users through the four services varies considerably. This is a significant factor influencing the likelihood of time taken in reaching the quota in any one service.

The SWLO opens for four hours in the morning, closes for lunch and opens again for two hours in the afternoon. The SWLO has the highest throughput of users, which is fairly continuous over a week. This large flow of users made it possible for the interviewers to reach the quota of 75 interviews quite easily.

In contrast, the opening hours of the CWO at the Health Centre included in the study are much shorter. Opening hours here are by far the shortest of the four participating services. Although the main doors of the Health Centre stay open from 9.00 to 5.00 each Monday to Friday, Community Welfare Officer 'clinics' run for a total of 15 hours over four days. The 'clinics' of the Community Welfare

Officers sitting in this Health Centre cover two different Community Care Areas. Because of this the clinics are not in fact open to each and every caller to the CWO Service. Furthermore, the Community Care Area is broken down into discrete districts, each of which is allocated to one Community Welfare Officer. In reality, the Community Welfare Service is available to the user for either 4 or 6 hours per week, depending on the district in which he/she lives. The Community Welfare Officers might hold clinics at other times but these would be in Health Centres other than the one included in the study.

In comparison to the two public services, the two independent information centres have longer opening hours. Neither closes during lunchtime. The flow through of users, however, is lower than the public services. Not all callers to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed visit to seek information about their benefit entitlements. Callers drop in for coffee or to avail of the wide variety of classes held at the centre. Because of this, distinguishing between those who were calling to see the Information and Welfare Rights Officer and those who were there to avail of the other facilities on offer was initially quite complicated. This was not the case for the CIC. The interviewers were careful to place themselves in a position where they could gauge the purpose of user visits to the services. In relation to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, it became apparent towards the end of the first week of the fieldwork that some callers were visiting the Information and Welfare Rights Officer for a second or third time in the course of one week. Callers were not asked to answer the survey twice.

Fieldwork Duration

A survey of the users was planned to take place in the four different services during the same reference week in September 1999. Despite complexities with respect to opening times and flow through of users, it was possible to reach the quota of respondents over a seven-day period.

Based on feedback from a pre-test of the questionnaire, interview rooms were not used to interview users as respondents indicated that they preferred this less formal option. Users were approached as they were leaving the service. The daily and weekly flow of users through the CWO, CIC and ICTU Centre for the Unemployed was much lower than at the SWLO. Community Welfare Officers, information officers in the CIC and welfare rights officers in the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed co-operated by notifying clients that the research was taking place and thus assisted in reaching the target set at the outset.

Questionnaire⁴

The questionnaire was carefully tested in a local SWLO in another city prior to September 1999 and evaluated for response rates, length of time taken to complete each questionnaire, order of questions and wording of questions, amongst others.

The questionnaire used to survey users consisted of short and mostly closed questions with a minority of open-ended questions. It took 5-10 minutes to administer. The questions were mostly pre-coded. The study did not seek to determine the personal circumstances or socio-economic background of users interviewed. Persons using the SWLO would in the main be receiving or seeking benefits. Users of the CWO are likely to be persons living at subsistence level of income. Furthermore, the Health Boards, which provide a range of services, are frequently the first statutory agency to come in contact with people in need. With respect to the independent information services, the most important area of enquiry are from users about social welfare entitlements (Nexus, 1998). By focusing on users visiting 'street level' services, this study does not address the question of how the information needs of people who are confined to the house, institutions or day centres are met. This is a gap which needs to be addressed in another context.

Exit Interviews

Users were requested to participate in the survey as they left the service. The rationale for conducting the surveys as users left the building was to produce a more complete picture of the user movements or pathways. A key emphasis in the research was on the question of 'where?' On leaving the building the user could indicate whether or not his/her search would involve a journey to another service and to where he/she was heading next as well as registering previous points of the information search. Questions around referrals, satisfaction levels and outcomes were also raised in the questionnaire. Satisfaction of users is a key measure of quality when considering services. Users were given the opportunity to comment on their experience of seeking information on their benefit entitlements.

Response Rate

In total, 334 people were asked to participate in completing the survey. Of these, 44 people declined to take part. In all, 290 completed questionnaires were used to extract data for analysis. Table 1 shows the response rate of 87 per cent. A small number of people were not requested to respond to the questionnaire because they left the building before the researchers had completed other interviews. Table 2 shows the breakdown of completed questionnaires by service.

⁴ A copy of the Study Questionnaire is available from Comhairle on request.

TABLE 1: RESPONSE RATE

	NUMBER	%
APPROACHED	334	100
REFUSALS	44	13
TOTAL SURVEYS COMPLETED	290	87

TABLE 2: SURVEYS COMPLETED PER SERVICE

SERVICE	NUMBER
SOCIAL WELFARE LOCAL OFFICE (SWLO)	75
COMMUNITY WELFARE OFFICE (CWO)	75
CITIZENS INFORMATION CENTRE (CIC)	75
CENTRE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED (CFU)	65
TOTAL	290

PART 2

The second part of the study involved researchers recording notes and observations during the same fieldwork duration. The notes and observations were based on a pre-prepared schedule, for the purposes of making a comparable assessment of accessibility to and standards of the four services participating in the study. The data was recorded during the visits of researchers to the four services. The data recorded by the researchers was based on the following nine factors:

- the location of the services in relation to other services
- identification of the building
- opening hours
- condition of the buildings
- reception areas

- use of hatches
- queuing and queuing systems
- physical accessibility
- organisation of information provision.

The complete schedule can be found in Appendix I.

PART 3

Part 3 involved obtaining the views of providers of the four participating services by way of face-to-face meetings with key informants from the provider services. The discussions aimed to:

- furnish providers with some initial results of the field work from the study;
- invite critical comments from providers on these results;
- provide a context for providers to offer their own interpretation of the most pertinent findings of the study, in particular in relation to obstacles reported by users;
- verify some factual aspects of the service.

Service Users⁵ Interviewed

A total of 290 questionnaires were completed in the study. In the vast number of cases, one user responded to the questionnaire. However, two people were involved in completing nine questionnaires. Of the 290 principal respondents completing the questionnaires there were 161 men (56%) and 129 women (44%).

Of the 290 principal respondents, 205 (71%) were in the age group 26-65 years, 73 (25%) were in the age group 18-25 years and 12 (4%) were over 65 years of age. The study excluded children.

Overall, 87% of users were visiting the services on their own behalf, 8% were visiting services on behalf of another person and 5% of users were visiting services on their own behalf and on behalf of another person. There were some slight variations when each of the four services is taken separately.

⁵ See Appendix II for a detailed background on service users interviewed.

As might be expected, there was quite a difference between the four services in relation to: (a) the proportion of users who were making their first visit to the service at which they were interviewed, (b) how respondents had come to know about/hear of the service they were visiting, (c) the reasons for visiting the service and (d) the reason for visiting the service in person rather than making contact by telephone.

3 USER PATHWAYS TO INFORMATION

Introduction

One of the objectives of the research was to identify and describe *actual* pathways to information and services. The concept of a pathway encompasses the idea of a journey *and* a route. As defined earlier in the study, a journey is an act of going from one place to another and a route or pathway is the way or course taken in getting from the starting point of that journey to the destination or end point.

Inter- and intra-agency referral methods and processes are also examined in this chapter.

The pathways identified in the study are the *actual* pathways of 290 users interviewed at four services – two public services and two community and voluntary services. At each service point of interview, respondents were asked as part of the interview if they had visited or contacted any other service *and* if they planned to visit any other service afterwards, in relation to the matter with which they were presenting.

Users were taking one of four possible routes:

- A: The user started and finished his/her journey at the service point at which he/she was interviewed.
- B: The user started his/her journey at the service point at which he/she was interviewed and was going on to one or more services afterwards.
- C: The user started his/her journey at a previous service point and ended his/her journey at the service point at which he/she was interviewed.
- D: The user started his/her journey at a previous service point at which he/she was interviewed and was going on to one or more services afterwards.

Based on interviews with the users visiting each of the four social and information service centres, the types of routes or pathways that users were actually following are presented below.

Pathways of Users Visiting the Social Welfare Local Office

The number of people interviewed at the SWLO was 75. The number of these users at the SWLO who were following routes A, B C and D is shown in Diagram 1.

DIAGRAM 1: Routes taken by users interviewed at SWLO

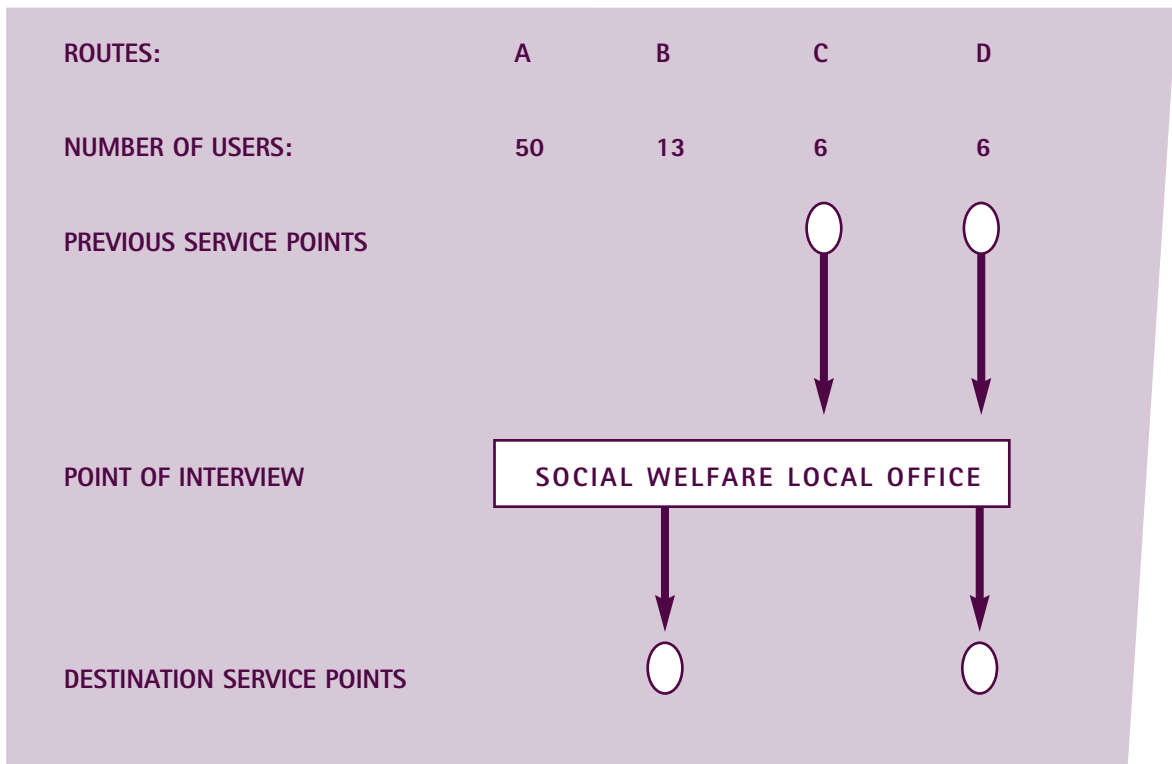


Diagram 1 shows that:

Route A: 50 people (67%) started and finished their journey at the SWLO.

Route B: 13 people (17%) started their journey at the SWLO and were going on to one or more services afterwards.

Route C: 6 people (8%) had started their journey at a previous service point and were now finishing their journey at the SWLO.

Route D: 6 people (8%) had started their journey at a previous starting point and were going on to visit one or more services after leaving the SWLO.

The journeys of 25 out of 75 people (33%) interviewed at the SWLO brought them to the SWLO and to at least one other service. The pathways of the 25 users are examined more closely below.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the SWLO on Route B

There were 13 users following Route B. The 13 users had all started their journey at the SWLO. They were planning to go on to 6 different destination service points, that is, the 13 users were following 6 different pathways:

- 5 users were going to FÁS

Users are obliged to inform the SWLO of any changes in their circumstances and this was the reason for some user visits to the SWLO. Some of these users were also going to visit FÁS to inform them of a change in circumstances. Some users who were 'signing off' social welfare were also going to FÁS. A number of users indicated that they were exploring their education and training options. The users had come to SWLO seeking information, which they received. Some of these users were also referred to FÁS, which offers training courses to unemployed people.

- 3 users were going to the CWO

One user 'signing on' at the SWLO was referred to the CWO to seek rent allowance. One user visited the SWLO seeking information about entitlement to rent allowance and was referred to the CWO.

- 2 users were going to the Local Authority

One user was visiting the SWLO to obtain a statement of income to accompany his son's application for a third level education grant from the local authority. There were delays in making the statement available at that time and the user was returning to the local authority office. A second user seeking a fuel allowance reported that he was going to the local authority office to obtain forms.

- 1 user was going to the Legal Aid Board.
- 1 user was going to the Registration Office.

Users can be requested by SWLO to provide personal identification.

- 1 user was going to the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

Unemployed people over 21 years and receiving unemployment payment can qualify for Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and users interviewed at the SWLO were exploring this educational opportunity.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the SWLO on Route C

There were 6 users interviewed at the SWLO following Route C. They had started their journey at a previous service point and were finishing their journey at the SWLO. Between them, they had previously visited 4 different service points, that is the 6 users were following 4 different pathways.

- FÁS was the previous service point for 2 users

One of these users had brought along forms from FÁS and required assistance completing the forms. Another user had visited FÁS to seek information about apprenticeship courses and was seeking benefit approval at the SWLO.

- College services was the previous service point for 2 users

One user was seeking information in relation to benefits for unemployed people returning to third level education. The user had visited the Students Union's office in college so as to be informed of entitlements before visiting the SWLO.

- The SWLO was the previous service point for 1 user

This user had to bring along forms from a SWLO in another area.

- The CWO was the previous service point for 1 user

One user was seeking to return to work. The users had come from the CWO to SWLO seeking information, which was received at the SWLO.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the SWLO on Route D

There were 6 users interviewed at the SWLO following Route D. They had started their journey at a previous service point before visiting the SWLO and were planning to go on to another service point. Between them, they had previously visited 4 different agencies and were planning to go to 3 different destination service points. The 6 users were following 4 different pathways.

- 2 users had previously visited FÁS and their destination point was also FÁS

One of the users who had been to and was returning to FÁS was in the process of 'signing off' social welfare. The user had to bring along forms to Social Welfare and got assistance completing the forms. The user was returning to FÁS.

- 2 users had previously visited the CWO and their destination point was also the CWO

One user had visited the CWO and was awaiting payment. Her circumstances had changed during this time and she was visiting SWLO to inform them of this change. She was also going back to the CWO. A second user had been to the CWO to get a benefit approved. The user was visiting SWLO to inform them of a change in address and was returning to CWO to inform them of the change of address.

- 1 user had previously visited another SWLO and the destination point was FÁS

The user who was making visits to more than one SWLO had recently moved from another locality. The user visited the SWLO in the location to inform Social Welfare of the move and was now visiting the SWLO in the area to which they had moved in order to continue the benefit claim. The user was referred to FÁS.

- 1 user had previously visited services in third level college and the destination service point was back to the third level college

The user had been offered a FÁS training course but there was a waiting list of one year. The user was now exploring other options of returning to education and had visited a third level college seeking information. The user then came to the SWLO, to seek further information. The user was referred to FÁS and was planning to return to the third level college to seek further information.

Overall

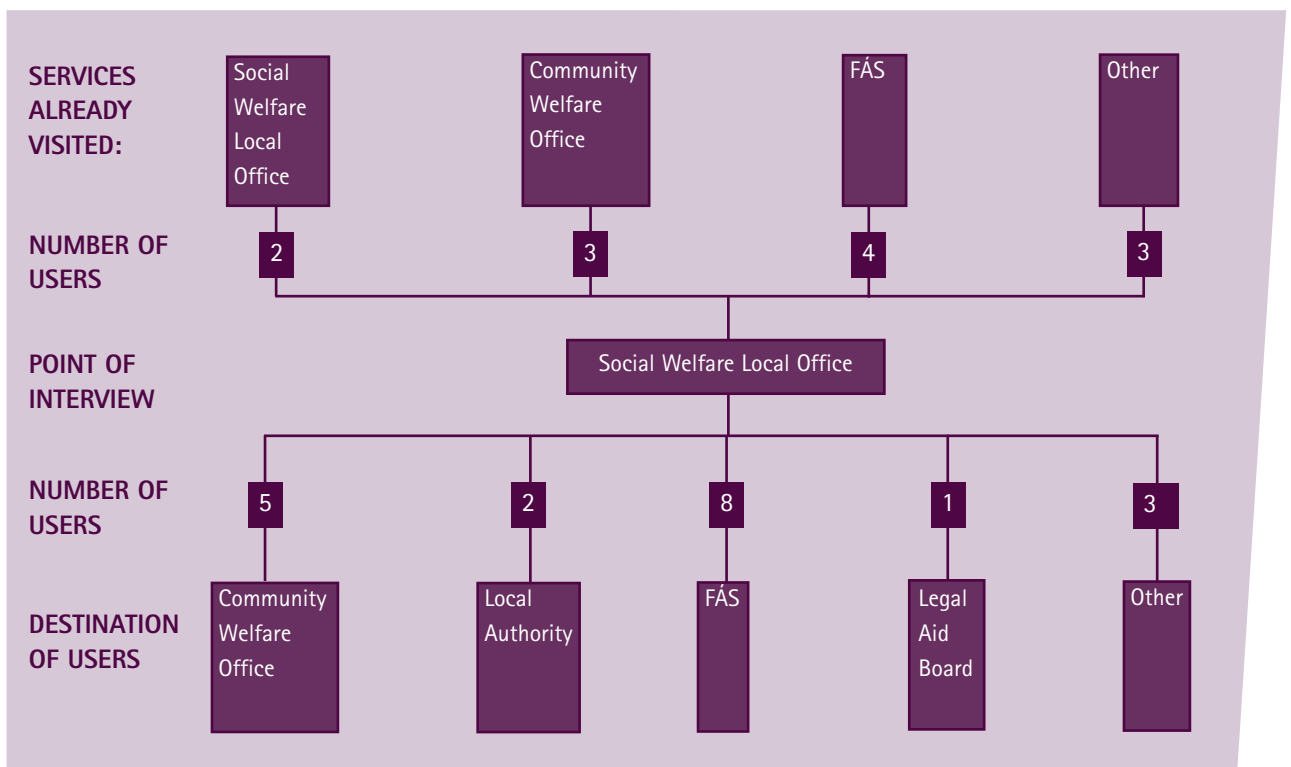
There were 25 users (see Diagram 1) who had not started and finished their journey at the SWLO. They had either started their journey at the SWLO and were going on to one or more services afterwards, started their journey at a previous service point and were now finishing their journey at the SWLO, started their journey at a previous starting point and were going on to visit one or more services after leaving the SWLO.

The 25 users were making their journeys by 14 different pathways.

None of the users interviewed responded that they had visited or were planning to visit independent information services.

DIAGRAM 2:

Pathway of users to and from the Social Welfare Local Office



Pathways of Users Visiting the Community Welfare Office

The number of people interviewed at the CWO was 75. The number of these users at the CWO who were following routes A, B C and D is shown in Diagram 3.

DIAGRAM 3: Routes taken by users interviewed at CWO

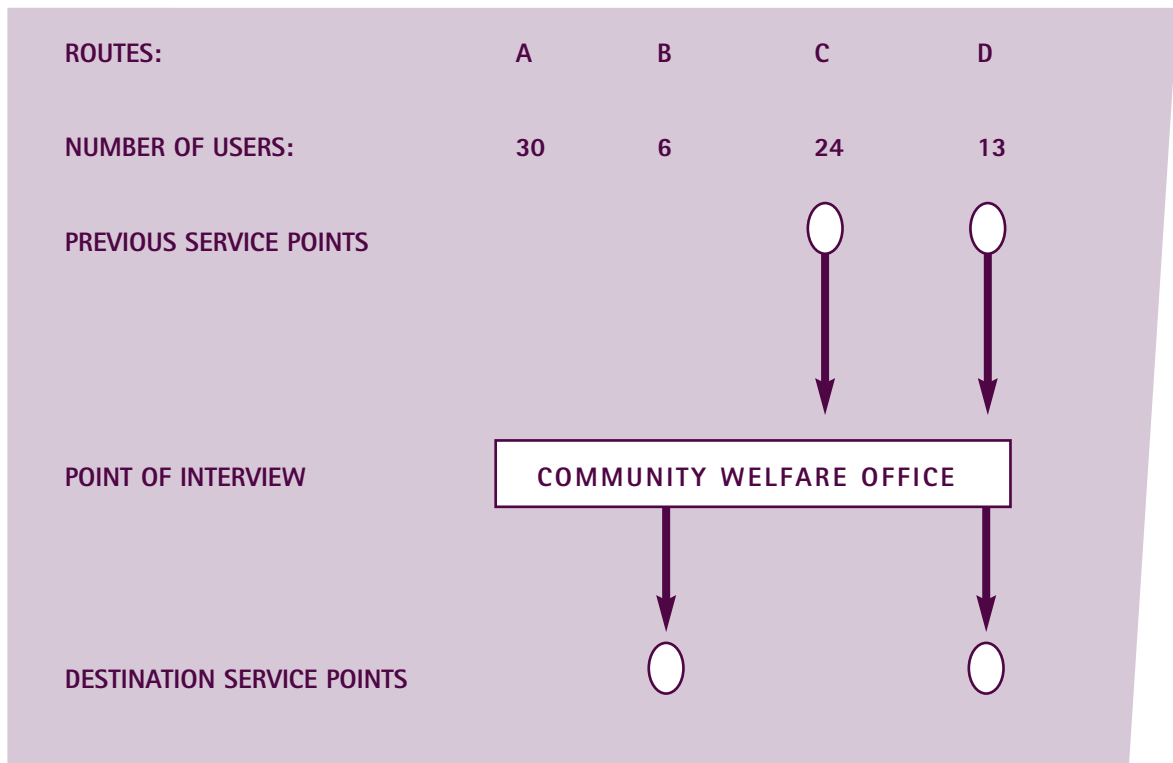


Diagram 3 shows that:

- Route A:** 30 people (40%) started and finished their journey at the CWO.
- Route B:** 6 people (8%) started their journey at the CWO and were going on to one or more services afterwards.
- Route C:** 24 people (32%) had started their journey at a previous service point and were now finishing their journey at the CWO.
- Route D:** 13 people (17%) had started their journey at a previous starting point and were going on to visit one or more services after leaving the CWO.

One user did not respond to the questions relating to pathways and one user did not know if he/she would visit another service.

The journeys of 43 out of 75 people (57%) interviewed at the CWO brought them to the CWO and at least one other service. The pathways of the 43 users are examined more closely below.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CWO on Route B

There were 6 users following Route B. They had all started their journey at the CWO and were planning to go on to another service point. They were following 4 different pathways and had previously visited 4 different service points:

- The destination service point was SWLO for 3 users, two of whom were planning to visit more than one other service point. One user was also planning to visit the local authority. The second user was also planning to visit the local authority, landlord and ex-employer.
- The destination service point was GP for 2 users.
- The destination service point was an employer for 1 user.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CWO on Route C

There were 24 users on Route C. They had started their journey at one or more previous service points and were finishing their journey at the CWO. Between them, they had previously visited 7 different types of service points, that is they were following 7 different pathways.

- The SWLO was the previous service point for 12 users.
- The Health Board was the previous service point for 10 users, three of whom had also visited other services: 1 user had also visited the SWLO, 1 user had also visited the local authority and 1 user had also visited the Local Employment Service

Users were moving between the CWO and the Health Board Head Office. Some users seeking Supplementary Welfare Allowance went directly to the Head Office of the Health Board and were then referred to the relevant Health Centre and CWO. Other users went to the Head Office of the Health Board to clarify and verify the information that they had received from the CWO. For example, one user said:

'The CWO told me that I was not entitled to the dole or rent allowance as I had my own flat. I went and inquired at the Health Board Head Office. They said she was incorrect. I went and got a letter from Social Welfare and brought it to the CWO.'

(User at Community Welfare Office);

- The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed was the previous service point for 1 user who had also visited the SWLO.
- Another CWO was the previous service point for 1 user.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CWO on Route D

There were 13 users following Route D. They had previously visited 4 different agencies and were planning to go to 3 different destination service points. The 13 users were following different pathways:

- 2 users had previously visited the Health Board Head Office and their destination service point was the local authority;
- 2 users had previously visited the SWLO and their destination service point was back to the SWLO;
- 2 users had previously visited SWLO and their destination point was the local authority;
- 1 user had previously visited the CWO and their destination point was the Homeless Persons Unit;
- 1 user had previously visited the CIC and their destination point was SWLO;
- 1 user had previously visited the Health Board Head Office as well as the local authority and their destination point was SWLO;
- 1 user had previously been to their landlord and their destination point was SWLO and the local authority;
- 1 user had previously visited the SWLO and their destination service point was FÁS;
- 1 user previously visited the VTOS and their destination service point was also the VTOS;
- 1 user previously visited the CWO and their destination service point was the SWLO.

Overall

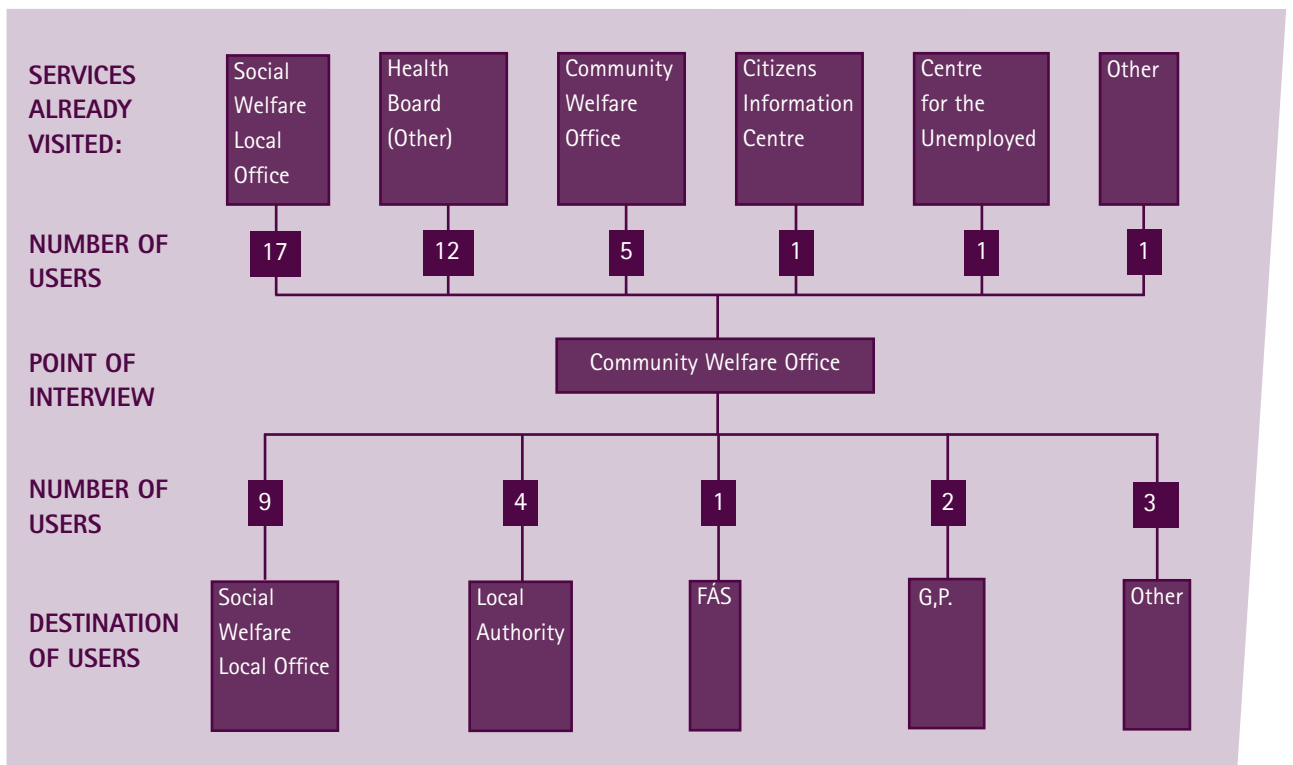
Forty-three users had not started and finished their journey at the CWO. They had started their journey at another service and/or were going on to one or more services afterwards.

Of the 43 users, 37 had already made 50 visits to services before arriving at the Community Welfare Office and 19 were planning to make 21 different visits to services after leaving the CWO.

Only 2 of the users interviewed responded that they had visited or were planning to visit independent information services.

DIAGRAM 4:

Pathway of users to and from the Community Welfare Office



Pathways of Users Visiting the Citizens Information Centre

The number of people interviewed at the CIC was 75. The number of these users at the CIC who were following routes A, B C and D is shown in Diagram 5:

DIAGRAM 5: Routes taken by users interviewed at CIC

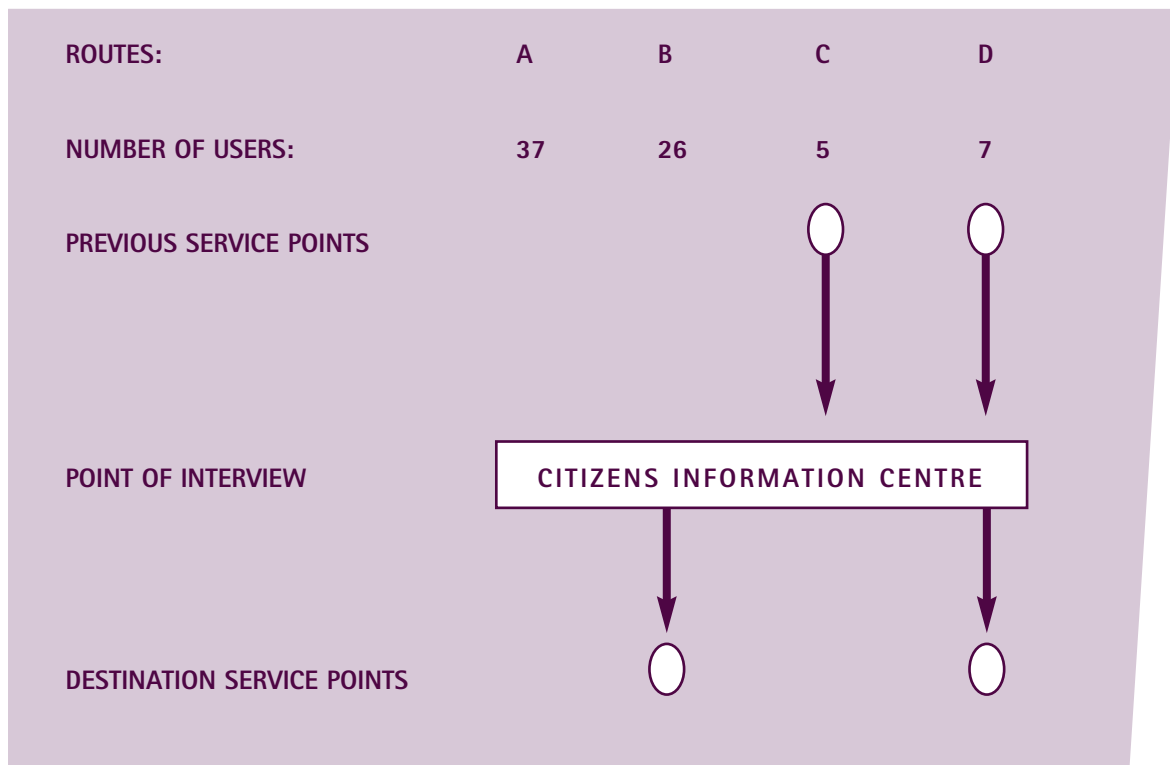


Diagram 5 shows that:

- Route A:** 37 people (49%) started and finished their journey at the CIC
- Route B:** 26 people (35%) started their journey at the CIC and were going on to one or more services afterwards
- Route C:** 5 people (7%) had started their journey at a previous service point and were now finishing their journey at the CIC
- Route D:** 7 people (9%) had started their journey at a previous starting point and were going on to visit one or more services after leaving the CIC

The journeys of 38 out of 75 people (51%) interviewed at the CIC brought them to the CIC and at least one other service.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CIC on Route B

There were 26 users following Route B. They had all started their journey at the CIC. Between them, they were planning to go to 14 different destination service points. The 26 users were following 14 different pathways. The destination services points for the users were public services, statutory, private and voluntary legal services, independent information services, college services and voluntary services as follows:

- 4 users were going to the SWLO;
- 3 users were going to the Health Board;
- 2 users were going to the local authority;
- 1 user was going to the police;
- 1 user was going to the Community Welfare Office;
- 1 user was going to the Adoption Society;
- 3 users were going to solicitors;
- 2 users were going to the Legal Aid Board;
- 1 user was going to the Small Claims Court;
- 1 user was going to Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC);
- 1 user was going to another CIC;
- 2 users were going to Money Advice and Budgeting Services (MABS);
- 1 user was going to visit College Services;
- 3 users were going to Threshold.

In the area under study, the voluntary organisation, Threshold, offers a specialised service providing information on standards, rights, entitlements and allowances in relation to housing. Thus, users seeking complex or detailed information on housing from the CIC were referred on to Threshold. Users, unaware of specialised information services in their locality, may be referred on from the first service visited.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CIC on Route C

There were 5 users interviewed at the CIC following Route C. They were following 4 different pathways and had previously visited 8 different service points:

- The SWLO was the previous service point for 2 users;
- The Family Adoption Centre was the previous service point for 1 user;
- An accountant was the previous service point for 1 user;
- 1 user had visited 6 different service points: St Vincent de Paul, GP, Legal Aid Board, MABS, CWO and SWLO.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at the CIC on Route D

The 7 users following Route D had started their journey at a previous service point before visiting the CIC and were planning to go on to another service point. Between them, they had previously visited 6 different types of agencies and were planning to go to 5 different types of destination services.

- 1 user had previously visited the CWO and their destination point was the SWLO;
- 1 user had previously visited the Health Board Head Office and the CWO and their destination point was back to the Health Board Head Office and the CWO

This user who was seeking information about benefit entitlements and rights for her disabled son experienced great difficulty in getting the information. She expected that the information would be available from the services of the Health Board. She first visited the Head Office of the Health Board and proceeded on to the CWO. Neither was able to give her the information and eventually she decided to call to the CIC to obtain the booklet on disability that she knew existed:

'Basically, it is hard to get information. I was at the Head Office of the Health Board and they looked at me blankly when I asked for information. Then I went to CWO and she didn't know anything. I came here to obtain booklets to read up about my rights and entitlements and will be going back to the Health Board and the CWO once I have read up on them'

(User at Citizens Information Centre);

- 1 user had previously visited the CWO and SWLO and the destination point was CWO;
- 1 user had previously visited the Health Board Head Office and the CWO and their destination point was the CWO;
- 1 user had previously visited the Legal Aid Board and their destination point was a solicitor;
- 1 user had previously visited the Legal Aid Board and their destination point was a Free Legal Advice Centre

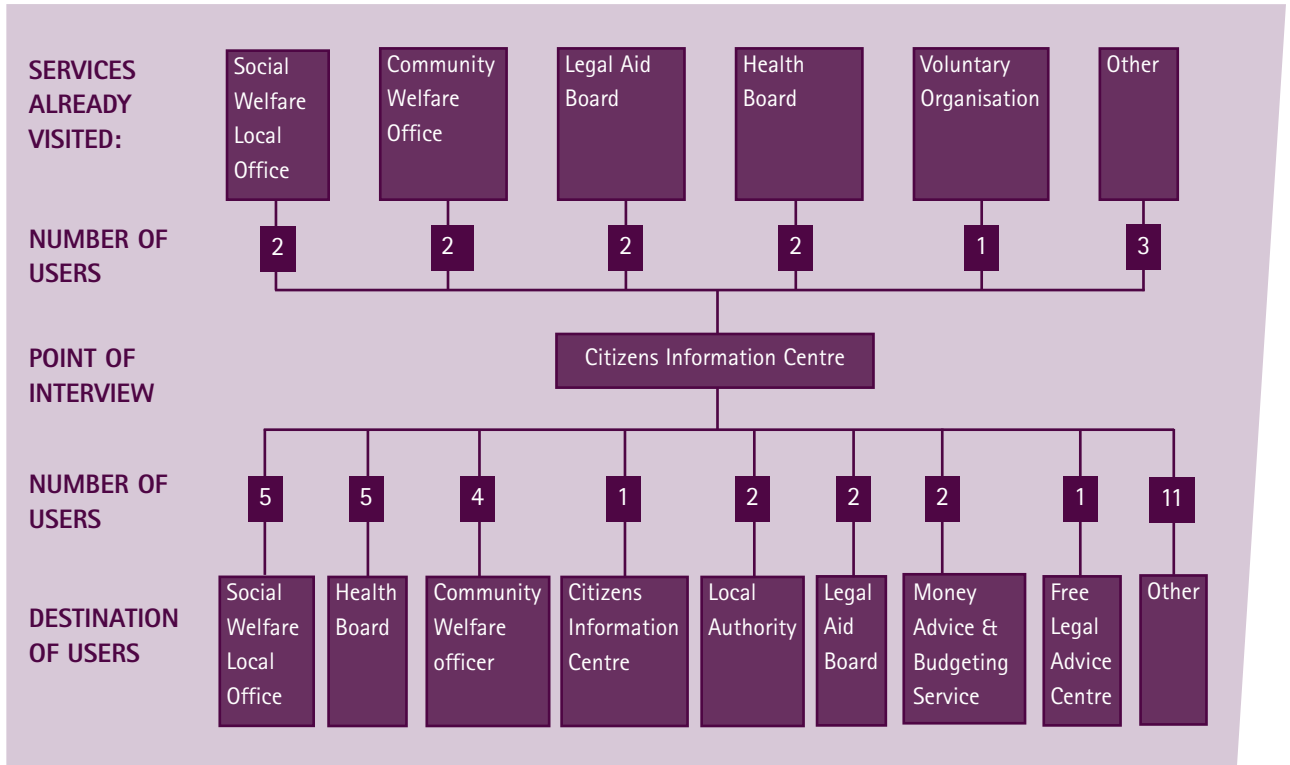
Two users had presented at the Legal Aid Board seeking information on legal matters. There, they were informed of the lengthy waiting lists and were referred to the CIC. The two offices are located in close proximity to each other. At the CIC, one user was advised to come back to the FLAC, which operates from the premises of the CIC and is open at specific times on specified evenings. The other user was referred on to a solicitor;

- 1 user had previously visited a solicitor and St. Vincent de Paul and the destination point was SWLO and the Health Board Head Office.

Overall

Users at the CIC had visited or were planning to visit a wide range of different service points. Users had already visited (12) or were planning to visit (33) public services, legal services, independent information services, college services and voluntary organisations.

DIAGRAM 6:
Pathway of users to and from the Citizens Information Centre



Pathways of Users Visiting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed

The number of people interviewed at the ICTU CfU was 65. The number of these users at the ICTU CfU taking routes A, B C and D is shown in Diagram 7.

DIAGRAM 7: Routes taken by users interviewed at the ICTU CfU

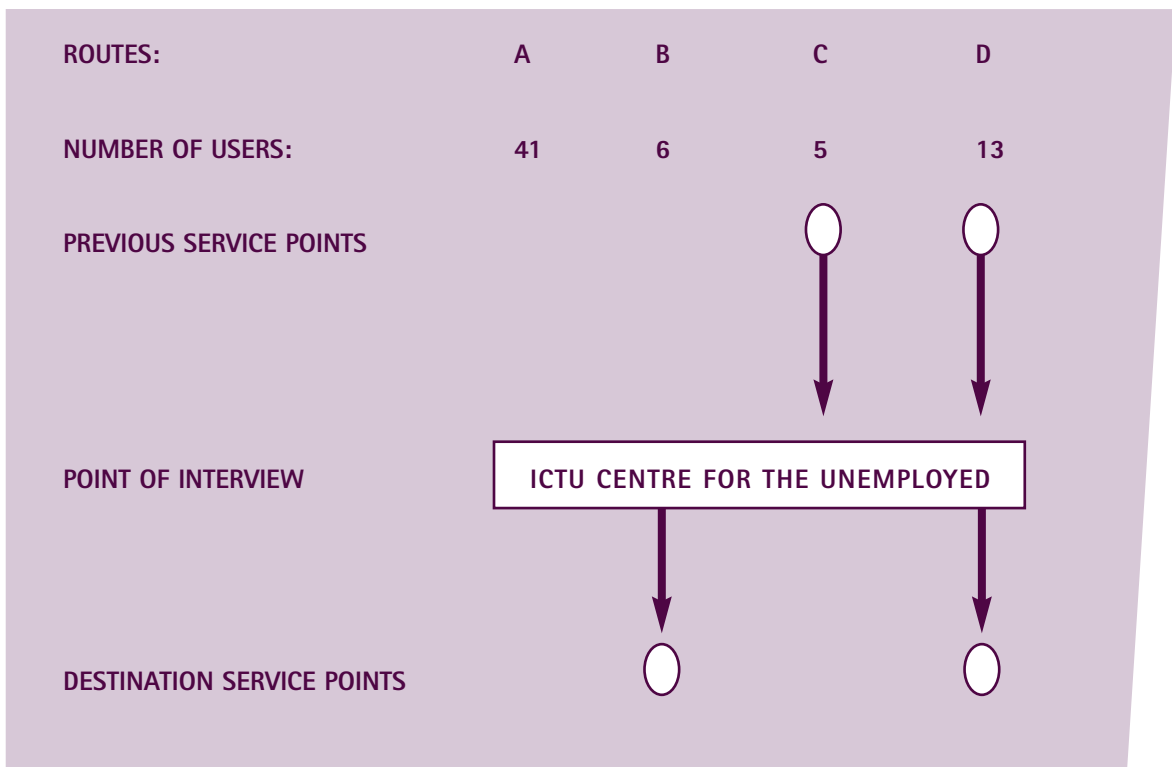


Diagram 7 shows that:

Route A: 41 people (63%) started and finished their journey at the ICTU CfU.

Route B: 6 people (9%) started their journey at the ICTU CfU were going on to one or more services afterwards.

Route C: 5 people (8%) had started their journey at a previous service point and were now finishing their journey at the ICTU CfU.

Route D: 13 people (20%) had started their journey at a previous starting point and were going on to visit one or more services after the ICTU CfU.

The journeys of 24 out of 65 people (37%) interviewed at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed entailed visiting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed and at least one other service.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at ICTU Centre for the Unemployed on Route B

There were 6 users interviewed at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed following Route B. The 6 users had started their journey at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

- 4 users were going to the SWLO

Some were seeking information at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed before going to Social Welfare, or seeking assistance with forms required by SWLO. Others were visiting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed to get information, clarification and advice when problems with a current claim, benefit or entitlement arose;

- 1 user was referred to the National Rehabilitation Board

The user had approached the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed with an enquiry relating to work and invalidity benefit. The user was referred to the NRB;

- 1 user was going to the CWO.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at ICTU Centre for the Unemployed on Route C

There were 5 users interviewed at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed following Route C. The 4 users had started their journey at a previous service point and were finishing their journey at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

- SWLO was the previous service point for 1 user;
- FÁS was the previous service point for 1 user

A number of users were visiting ICTU Centre for the Unemployed and/or other services seeking information about work options;

- A TD was the previous service point for 1 user

This user was seeking information about the Jobs Initiative from the TD and ICTU Centre for the Unemployed;

- A CIC was the previous service point for 1 user

The user was seeking help in relation to tax issues and was planning to visit the CIC after leaving the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed;

- The NRB was the previous service point for 1 user.

Pathways of Users Interviewed at ICTU Centre for the Unemployed on Route D

There were 13 users interviewed at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed following Route D. The 13 users had started their journey at a previous service point before visiting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. They were planning to go to one or more other destination service points after leaving the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

- 1 user had previously visited the Post Office and Threshold and the destination service point was the CWO

The user was seeking information on the widow's pension and had been referred by Threshold to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. The user was going to the CWO;

- 1 user had previously visited the Local Employment Service and their destination service point was FÁS;
- 1 user had come from prison and their destination service point was a youth organisation

The user was seeking information about job or course placements and was going to visit a youth organisation afterwards with the same query;

- 2 users had previously visited a TD (and others) and their destination point was Legal Aid Board/Free Legal Advice Centre;
- 1 user had previously visited FÁS and their destination point was an employment agency;
- 4 users had previously visited the SWLO and their destination point was SWLO/TD;
- 2 users had previously visited Health Board Head Office and their destination point was CWO

One user was seeking information on diet allowance and the second user was seeking information on the medical card. Both went to the Health Board Head

Office. The Health Board could not provide information on diet allowance and the person came to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed seeking the information. The second user received information on the medical card and came to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed for further explanation. Both users were referred to the CWO;

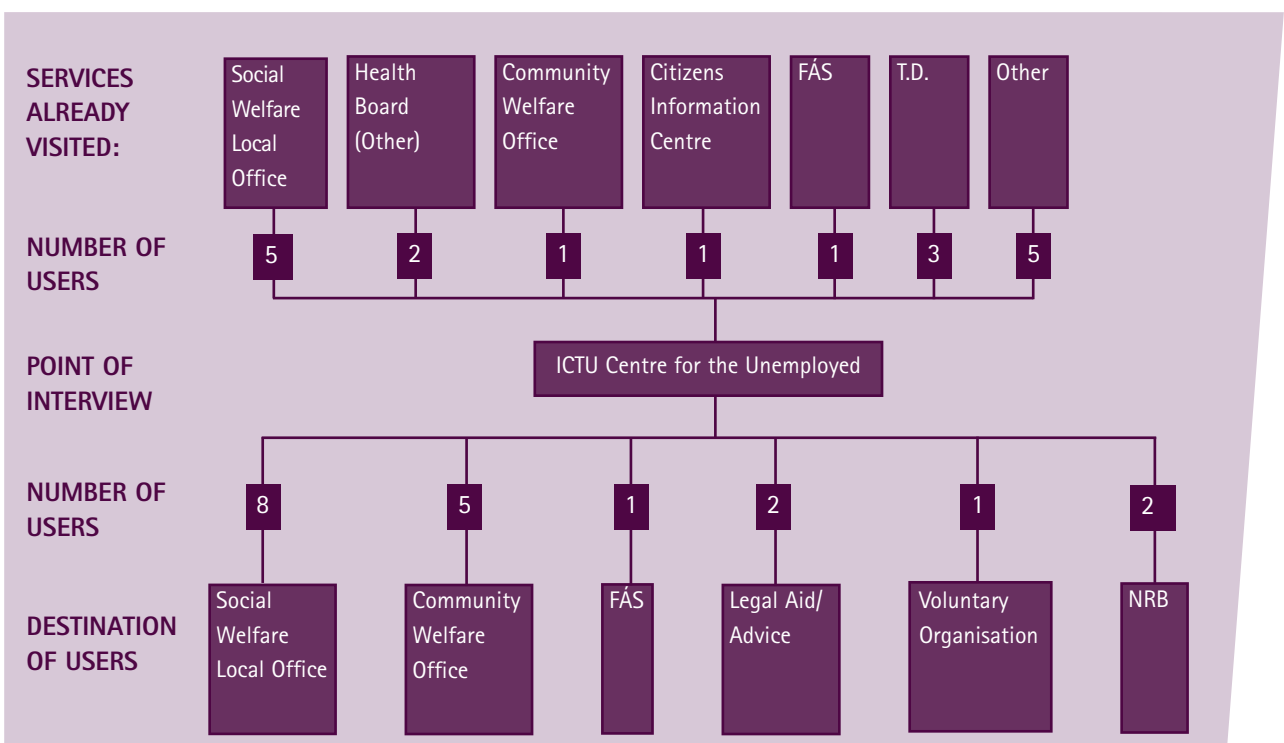
- 1 user had previously visited CWO and their destination point was the CWO

Having visited the CWO, the user came to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed to get verification of the information received from the CWO and was going back to the CWO.

Overall

There were 24 people whose journey entailed visiting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed and at least one other service. Eighteen people had already visited at least one other service and 19 planned to visit another service after leaving the Centre for the Unemployed.

DIAGRAM 8:
Pathway of users to and from the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed



Users' prior and intended visits to other services

Some 79 out of 290 users responded that they had already visited one or more services by the time they arrived at the point of interview. Of these users, 18 had visited more than one other service.

TABLE 3: Respondents' visits prior to service point of interview

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	RESPONDENTS WHO <i>HAD NOT</i> VISITED ANOTHER SERVICE PRIOR TO SERVICE POINT OF INTERVIEW		RESPONDENTS WHO <i>HAD</i> VISITED ANOTHER SERVICE PRIOR TO SERVICE POINT OF INTERVIEW		TOTAL (N)
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	
SWLO	63	84	12	16	75
CWO*	37	50	37	50	74
CIC	63	84	12	16	75
ICTU CfJ**	46	72	18	28	64
TOTAL	209	73	79	27	288

* 1 user at the CWO gave no answer to the question.

** 1 user at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed gave no answer to the question.

The services that these users had visited consisted of a wide range of public, independent and voluntary social and information services as well as professionals and politicians. Between them, the visits were as follows:

- the 79 users had made 129 visits to services other than the one where they were visiting at the point of the study;
- of the 129 visits, 97 were made to public services, 67 of which were made either to the SWLO, Health Board Head Office or CWO;
- The number of visits to the independent and voluntary services was much lower;
- Some 16 users had already visited more than one other agency.

TABLE 4: Respondents' intended visits after service point of interview

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	RESPONDENTS WHO <i>DID NOT INTEND VISITING ANOTHER SERVICE AFTER THE SERVICE POINT OF INTERVIEW</i>		RESPONDENTS WHO <i>INTENDED VISITING ANOTHER SERVICE AFTER THE SERVICE POINT OF INTERVIEW</i>		TOTAL (N)
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	
SWLO	56	75	19	25	75
CWO*	54	74	19	26	73
CIC**	36	52	33	48	69
ICTU CfU***	41	68	19	32	60
TOTAL	187	68	90	32	277

* 1 user at the CWO responded that they did not know if they would visit another service after leaving the CWO and 1 user gave no answer.

** 6 users at the CIC responded that they did not know if they would visit another service after the CIC

*** 5 users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed responded that they did not know if they would visit another service after the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

A total of 90 users stated that they intended going on to another agency. Many of these visits were to SWLO and CWO. Others included local authority, FÁS, CIC, MABS, ICTU Centre for the Unemployed and GP. The destinations of users have been detailed in the Diagrams above.

Some 16 users said that they were going to visit more than one other agency.

A total of 38 users, who were going on to visit another agency, had already visited at least one other agency. Seven of these users were going on to visit more than one other agency.

The retrospective and prospective plotting of users' past visits and forward plans reveals a high number of visits being made to social and information services. Over 500 visits have been made or were going to be made by the users interviewed at the four centres.

The pathways of users in the study are characterised by plurality. This can be explained by the diversity of users and the diverse needs with which they present (see Table A9) and by the differences between the four services. Users do not conform to a standard, regular, usual, typical route in their journey to obtain information.

As indicated in Table A7, visits to services were not all voluntary. Some 32 per cent of visits were obligatory in that the user had to present or obtain forms or documents to complete a claim.

The services that users come in contact with once they initiate a search for information does not always follow a logical sequence, from the user perspective. Following the user logic, the first service at which users seeking information present themselves is, to the user, the most appropriate service.

Inter- and Intra-Agency Referral Methods and Processes

In total, 37 users replied that contact was made with another agency on their behalf. Most of these replies (28) came from users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. A small number of users at both the SWLO and the CIC also gave this response. No users at the CWO responded that the Community Welfare Officer had contacted another agency on their behalf.

All agencies made referrals to other agencies. From the 290 visits by users to the four agencies, 33 referrals were generated. This means there was a referral to another agency for one in every nine users responding to the questionnaire. There was a greater level of referrals to other agencies for users of the CIC than users of any of the other three agencies.

A small number of users said that they were 'unsure' or 'didn't know' whether they had got the result they expected. A proportion of users proceeding to other offices gave this response and it appears that at this point in their search for information and/or benefit entitlements they were not in a position to assess the outcome of that single visit in the course of the study. As such, these users understood their transactions with services to be part of a larger process.

Of the 79 users who had already visited at least one other agency, 31 indicated that they had been referred to the agency at which they were being surveyed. More than half of the users who had visited at least one other service had not been referred to that service.

TABLE 5: Referral of respondents to participating services

REFERRED BY	Referred to				
	SWLO	CWO	CIC	ICTU CfU	TOTAL
SWLO	1	15	0	0	16
CWO/HEALTH CENTRE	1	2	0	0	3
HEALTH BOARD	0	9	0	0	9
LEGAL AID BOARD	0	0	1	0	1
VOLUNTARY ORG	0	0	0	1	1
LANDLORD	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	2	27	1	1	31

Note: Tracking of 79 users.

Table 5 shows that the majority of those who had been referred to the four participating agencies were to be found at the Community Welfare Office (27 of the 31). Referrals to the Social Welfare Local Office, the Citizens' Information Centre and the Centre for the Unemployed were low.

Referrals to the four participating agencies had generally been made by public services, that is either from a Social Welfare Local Office, the Head Office of Health Board or another CWO or Health Centre. There were two exceptions – one referral was from a landlord to the CWO and one from a voluntary agency to the Centre for the Unemployed.

The vast majority of users who had been referred thought that the referral they received was right for them. Only 2 respondents out of 31 indicated that the referral was not useful or right for them.

Referral from Services Included in the Study

The incidence of referral (10% of all users - see Table 5) can be considered high. None of the referring agencies provided users with referral cards. This is similar to findings of a previous study (Ralaheen 1999) on the user perspective in respect of social and information provision. The comments of the users illustrate their own feelings about moving from office to office:

'Fine, once you know the process. Finding out is very hard. Last time I did this a couple of years ago, I was referred and re-referred from one office to another.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'It's a nightmare. They don't tell you properly. They send you from pillar to post.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'People keep passing you on to someone else. You can never get a straight answer. If you are trying to get back to work no-one gives you a straight answer – they keep putting you off.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'All personal details are all computerised. Why all the running around? It should not be necessary to get new documents and forms signed.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

Inter- and Intra-Agency Communication Problems

Communication lines between some service providers and users were not always adequate from the user's perspective. They may have been adequate or sufficient from the provider point of view. For example, users of CWO reported difficulties in trying to make contact by telephone. The convergence of high numbers of users on the SWLO on *'Signing-On Day'* meant that staff were not available to answer telephone queries from either users or staff of other service providers, in the perception of other providers and some users themselves.

Users reported what they viewed as communication problems between Social Welfare Local Offices and offices of the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs located in other parts of the country, such as Sligo, Donegal or Longford. Information provided by the latter was perceived to be mistaken and inaccurate on occasions.

'I went for a job interview as told by social welfare. The employer did not inform social welfare that I attended the interview. Social Welfare doesn't believe that I attended the interview.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'The documents I gave social welfare were sent to head office in Letterkenny about five weeks ago. Today, they tell me I have to produce them all again because there was a backlog in Letterkenny. This is appalling'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Very uncertain service. Delays ... not sure what forms are wanted. Confusion as forms gone to Longford office. My wife has to get a statement of income from her employer. I did not know this.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'All services supposed to be tied in, Not so. Social Welfare says two-week wait. Here, they say 6 weeks wait. No link between services.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Daft that all services are split up such as social welfare and rent allowance. It means services are duplicated.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

Some users felt they were caught in unclear or contradictory situations as the following quotes suggest:

'Sometimes they (agencies) can be very vague and sometimes they contradict each other.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'They repeat the same questions and forms every few weeks, name address etc. that they already have on the file. CWOs contradict SW and visa versa, going around in a circle. They send you from one to the other.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Service always friendly, not always accurate, sometimes misleading, confusion with the system means you always have to be cautious.'
(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Seem to be all over the place. Very maddening and have to go to different places about simple things.'
(User at Community Welfare Office).

4 Standards of Service Delivery and Information Provision

Introduction

The findings on accessibility to, and standards of, the four services included in the study are set out in this chapter. The findings are based on:

- observations recorded by the researchers in relation to accessibility to and standards of service;
- user comments in relation to accessibility to and standards of service.

During their visits to the four services to interview users, the researchers recorded observations, based on a pre-prepared schedule, for the purposes of making a comparable assessment of accessibility to and standards of service delivery in the four services included in the study. The assessment was made according to 9 factors: the location of the services in relation to other services, identification of buildings, opening hours, conditions of buildings, reception areas, use of hatches, queuing and queuing systems, physical accessibility and information provision (see Appendix I for full schedule).

As part of the interview (see Chapter 2), users were invited to make comments about their experience in seeking information about their benefits/entitlements. Responding to this invitation, users expressed a range of views, many of which relate to the themes in the schedule such as the conditions of the buildings, opening hours, queuing and queuing systems and information provision. A selection of these comments is included.

Users raised other issues during interviews, which did not relate specifically to any of the themes in the schedule. Nevertheless, these issues impact on the user search for information and benefit entitlements and selected comments from users on these issues are included in this chapter under a number of headings.

Accessibility and Standards of Service at The Social Welfare Local Office (SWLO)

The SWLO included in this study is under the auspices of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. It is one of 58 main offices providing social welfare services to the public throughout the country. At this SWLO, as at other main offices, there are information officers to deal with queries on social welfare services including social welfare payments, social insurance and free schemes. The public can seek information on family payments and services, services for the unemployed, employment supports and education/training options as well as payments and services for the retired or elderly, sick or long term ill.

The findings based on observations recorded by the researchers in relation to accessibility to and standards of service at the SWLO included in the study are detailed below. At the SWLO, users commented on conditions of the building and queuing and queuing systems and a selection of these are included under the relevant heading. Users at the SWLO raised other issues concerning ‘signing on days’, requests for proof of identity and personal information, assistance with application forms and the absence of an appeals system at local level. A selection of their comments on these other issues is included in a separate section.

(i) Location of service

The SWLO is centrally located, close to both the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed and the Health Centre featured in the study.

(ii) Identification of building

The building is adequately identified.

(iii) Opening hours

The opening hours are clearly displayed.

(iv) Condition of building

The SWLO is based in a new building, which is modern, bright and sunny. It is very well kept, spotlessly clean, very well planned and suitable for its purpose. The good condition of the building and the quality of layout and planning of the SWLO as outlined above are reflected in the comments made by users during interviews. Users said:

*‘Vast improvements on what it used to be. More user-friendly.’
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)*

*‘Place itself is very clean, nice seats, numbering system very good.
Everything is excellent.’
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)*

(v) Reception area

On arriving at the building users enter into a large conservatory-like lobby. The conservatory area enhances the privacy of users by allowing them to gather themselves and their thoughts before entering the building and again before leaving. The entrance/exit does not lead directly onto the street. A second set of doors leads the user into a waiting area with a variety of hatches, including information hatches.

There is no reception desk greeting users as they enter the building.

Porters in the SWLO play an important role in assisting people to identify the right person to speak to, directing people to the right place to queue, and liaising with other staff. There are porters available to the public at all times in the SWLO.

(vi) Use of hatches

The hatches in use, common to many SWLOs nowadays, are well planned. Shields to the right and left and space between hatches and the waiting area give the user maximum privacy. There are two chairs available at each hatch.

There are separate hatches offering information and staffed by information officers.

(vii) Queuing and queuing systems

In general, users have to queue to avail of information and other services. There are separate electronic ticket systems in operation for each section. The seating is well thought out. The chairs face the hatches so that when people enter the building they are not faced with the waiting crowd but approach from the back.

Users commented that the system of queuing at the SWLO was well organised and had improved in recent years. However, users generally have to queue when seeking information and some users commented on the long waiting times in queues. Despite the separate electronic ticket systems in operation for each section, the queuing system posed a problem for some users who ended up in the wrong queue especially when they were 'new' to the SWLO. During the interviews, many users commented on the queuing and queuing systems. A selection of their comments follow:

'The queue can be long, you can queue in the wrong place.'
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Confusion for the first-time visitor. Signs not very clear. Sitting in wrong queue. Making a fresh claim. Took wrong ticket.'
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Queued for three-quarters of an hour at wrong place, then repeated three-quarters of an hour at another place to be told when I reached the hatch that 'the computer was down''
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Long wait. Didn't know where to go. Time wasted in wrong queue. When I got to the hatch the person was grand and quick.'
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

*'Queued for 1 hour. No help offered with the form ...
Very unsatisfactory ... I don't know if I will have to queue for another
hour the next time I come back with the form.'*
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Slow service, passed around to different sections but staff helpful.'
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

(viii) Physical accessibility

The building and all services inside the building are easily accessible to people with disabilities, older people or people with prams.

(ix) Information provision

Application forms and a range of information leaflets and booklets are on display in the SWLO, are easily accessible and can be taken away.

Selected Comments of Users at the SWLO on Other Issues

Besides the themes included in the schedule, users at the SWLO made comments concerning a range of other issues. A selection of their comments is included in this section under the following headings: 'signing on' days, requests for proof of identity and personal information, assistance with application forms and the absence of an appeals system at local level.

(i) 'Signing on' days

The SWLO receives a surge in numbers of people at its offices on certain days of the week. Some users, and indeed staff of other services, consider this phenomenon to be 'signing on' days. This was not the view of management of the SWLO (see p. 70). Some users and other service providers indicated that they avoided visiting or contacting SWLO on what they regarded as 'signing on' day. The users were of the opinion that 'simple' or 'urgent' information requests could not be dealt with on that day.

*'On signing-on days the services don't seem to be available for other
matters. Only enquiries open. Still 20 people queuing. Closing time has
arrived. Have to make another visit this afternoon.'*
(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

(ii) Application Forms

Some users were displeased with the amount of forms they were required to obtain and complete:

'Loads of forms to fill in and obtain.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

Some suggested that they were discouraged from enquiring about or taking up their benefit entitlements because of the amount of forms and paperwork they anticipated that this would entail:

'I'm not going to bother claiming for Carer's Allowance. Too much paperwork and the whole process is not worth it.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

(iii) Requests for proof of identity and personal information

Users of the SWLO can be asked for proof of identity when making a claim. A number of users interviewed at the SWLO commented on this. Users said that they had been requested by staff at the SWLO to provide proof of identity, despite the fact that they had been issued with a social welfare ID card. The cost of obtaining some forms of identification was also an issue for some users. They said:

'They issue you with a social welfare ID card. The card is then questioned by them and they want further ID such as a driver's licence, passport. Many people don't have these. They then require a 'long' birth cert. This costs £7.50 – a lot for someone unemployed. They need to change the way this works.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'I had a letter from FÁS to say I just finished a three month course and was signing on to get a grant to go to college. They would not accept the FÁS letter. I was asked for two forms of identification including 'long birth cert.' and any other such as a bankcard. They had all this information three months when I signed off to do the FÁS course. I think it is over the top.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

Other users were concerned about the amount of personal information they were being asked to provide:

'Much more information (personal) required than before. Lots more

required. I was asked for P45 and bank account. I don't know if this is optional or not.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

'Problem with address because of being homeless. I had to wait four months for a decision and during this time my payments were interrupted.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

(iv) Appeals system

Users mentioned the absence of a system of appeals in social welfare at local level as being unsatisfactory.

'In social welfare there is no appeals in the local office so I would have to go to Dublin and I don't have time for that.'

(Users at Centre for the Unemployed)

'Very slow service. Visited last Friday. Waited 2 hours, at fresh Claims Section. Had to go to CWO whose clinic had finished by the time I got out at 12.45. Couldn't get any payment. In again today (Monday) with change of address.'

(User at Social Welfare Local Office)

Accessibility and Standards of Service at the Community Welfare Office (CWO)

The regional Health Boards administer the highly decentralised CWO service. It is subject to the overall direction, regulation and funding by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. The Department of Health and Children is responsible for staffing and organisational aspects.

The Health Centre included in this study administers the CWO service to two different Community Care Areas. The two Community Care Areas of the regional Health Board are further broken down into discrete districts, which are allocated to different Community Welfare Officers. A different Superintendent Community Welfare Officer, each based in the Health Board's Head Office, supervises each of the two Community Care Areas. In the Health Centre, two Community Welfare Officers and one Rent Officer based there administer services to clients resident in one Community Care Area. There is a third Community Welfare Officer based in the Health Centre who administers services to clients resident in another Community Care Area. Thus, clinics are not open to each and every caller seeking the CWO service.

Other services administered from the Health Centre in the study include dental, chiropody, physiotherapy, public health nursing and home help services. Information is given on health and welfare services.

The findings based on observations recorded by the researchers in relation to accessibility and standards at the CWO service included in the study are detailed below. At the CWO most of the comments by users revolved around the themes included in the schedule and a selection of these are included under the relevant headings below. In addition, users remarked on the difficulty in making contact with the service by telephone and comments on this issue are included in a separate section.

(i) Location of service

The Health Centre is within walking distance of the SWLO and the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

(ii) Identification of building

Unlike the SWLO, the building is not adequately identified from the street and is difficult to find. In particular, the CWO is not clearly identifiable to the user. Within the building, there are two separate sections delivering community welfare services. One of these sections is entered through the main entrance. The other section, however, is entered through a separate door annexed to the main building. They are separated from users of the other CWO service and other Health Centre services. This entrance is not marked. Users commented on the inadequately identified building and services within the building as noted by the researchers. One user said:

'Directed to wrong building. Poorly sign-posted.'
(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Nobody knows where the services are. Buildings are bland. No signs for anything. Personnel are good but the general set up of the building is not good.'
(User at Community Welfare Office)

(iii) Opening hours

The Community Welfare Service is available to the user for either 4 or 6 hours per week, depending on the district in which the user lives. The CWO is virtually empty at other times. Users commented on the highly restricted hours of the CWO clinics as follows:

*'Sign says it is open from 10.30 –12.30. Nobody was at the desk.
Opening hours very inadequate...'*

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Better hours would improve the service.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

(iv) Condition of building

There are marked differences in the conditions of the premises in CWOs serving the two different Community Care Areas. On the one hand, the waiting and queuing areas for the CWO situated in the main part of the Health Centre are clean with adequate seating. On the other hand, the waiting and queuing areas in the section of the building serving the other Community Care Area are drab, unkempt and have no ventilation. The waiting room is regularly full. There are not enough seats and users were sitting on the floor. This area is regularly overcrowded and overflows into the corridor where there are no chairs. Signs for 'no smoking' are not visible and overcrowding is compounded by the fact that some users smoked in this small area. Users included elderly people, people who were ill and women with small babies.

The Health Centre has a baby clinic but there are no baby changing facilities. It appears that little effort has been made by the Health Board to improve the quality and conditions of services at this Health Centre in recent years.

Users commented on the poor conditions of the Community Welfare Office as described above, as well as on the poor layout and organisation of the service. One user said:

'Disgrace, look at the place, very degrading.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

(v) Reception area

There is a reception desk in the Health Centre for users who arrive by the main entrance. Users entering through the side door do not pass the reception desk. As in the SWLO, the porter played a pivotal role in assisting users.

(vi) Use of hatches

There are no hatches in use in the CWOs in this Health Centre. Community Welfare Officers see clients in their offices, with the door closed. Although the doors have frosted windows, notices of opening times obscure them.

(vii) Queuing and queuing systems

There is no formal queuing system for either of the Community Welfare Offices in this Health Centre. Often, users had to wait in line for one hour or more. People appear to be reluctant to leave the queue to use the toilet facilities, get fresh air or find a drink in case they lose their place. With no ticketing system in place, it is possible for users to skip the queue.

The lack of a formal queuing and ticketing system contributed to long queues, long waiting times, delays for users in trying to access information and get claims processed, as shown by user comments:

'Service OK, but queuing a problem. Always have to wait at least one hour.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Waiting time very long here. Over one hour.'

(Woman with 14 month old baby at Community Welfare Office)

'Very bad system in operation having everyone coming together and forming such a long queue. This is my second time here today. Very frustrated.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Understaffed, takes ages to be seen, good when you get there.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

'Last week I was here. Two people skipped the queue. Everyone else waited two hours. Should be a ticket system.'

(User at Community Welfare Office)

(viii) Physical accessibility

The main entrance to the Health Centre, but not all services inside the building, is easily accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people or people with prams. Within the Health Centre, the Community Welfare Offices delivering to separate Community Care Areas are located in two separate parts of the Health Centre. The Community Welfare Officer serving one Community Care Area is in the main part of the Health Centre, which is readily accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people or people with prams. The Community Welfare Officers and Rent Officer serving the other Community Care Area are in offices, which are annexed to the main building. The entrance to these offices is via a side door, which is not accessible to wheelchair users. People with disabilities, elderly people or people with prams entering through the main entrance would not be able to gain access to this part of the Health Centre.

(ix) Information provision

Information provision is not offered as a separate service in the Health Centre. There are no information officers to deal specifically with information requests from the public. All requests for information are made directly to the CWOs.

Relevant application forms, information leaflets or booklets are not displayed in this Health Centre. Notices giving information and contact details of other services were out of date at the time of the study.

On seeking information, users at the CWO commented as follows:

*‘Quite difficult here. Need to know what you are looking for.
(User at Community Welfare Office)*

*‘I am looking for information on Job Assist and rent allowance. Health Board had no knowledge of this. People left standing waiting for service. Had no information on Job Assist or rent allowance, only medical card information but not much of that either.’
(User at Community Welfare Office)*

Selected Comments of Users at the CWO on Other Issues

In addition to the comments on the themes included in the schedule, users remarked on one other issue: the difficulty in making contact with the service by telephone.

(i) On making contact by telephone

Users suggested that being able to make contact with services by telephone might help to alleviate some of the obstacles involved for the public and help to reduce queues.

*‘When phoning, no answer or just told to come in. Seems they don’t have time to deal with you over the phone. Need to improve this.’
(User at Community Welfare Office)*

*‘Payment of rent allowance stopped. No reason given despite many requests for same. I have phoned twice, they have put the phone down on both occasions. It is an ongoing problem.’
(User at Community Welfare Office)*

Accessibility and Standards at the Citizens Information Centre (CIC)

The Citizens Information Centre included in this study is one of 26 full-time CICs registered and supported by Comhairle. There is a full-time manager in the CIC. The CIC is solely dedicated to information provision to citizens seeking information and advice on their rights and entitlements.

The findings based on observations recorded by the researchers in relation to accessibility to and standards of service at the CIC included in the study are detailed below. Many users made comments on the provision of information by the CIC and a selection of these are included under the relevant heading below. In addition, users at the CIC stressed the importance of it being a free, accessible, independent information service and spoke about the empowering aspect of the experience in seeking information at the CIC. A selection of their comments on these issues is included in a separate section.

(i) Location of service

The CIC is centrally located but is not adjacent to the three other services included in the study. It is situated on a busy main street close to a Consumer Advice Shop, a Legal Aid Board office and a Youth Information Centre.

(ii) Identification of building

The CIC is very well sign-posted, opening times are clearly displayed and the user can easily identify the service.

Facing the user inside the main entrance, there is an information sign naming all services in the building and their respective opening times.

(iii) Opening hours

The CIC is open for longer hours than the SWLO and remains open through lunch, although in terms of numbers there are fewer people using the service.

(iv) Condition of building

The premises are new, bright, pleasant, spotlessly clean and tidy. The Centre is visually attractive, which is one of the principles set out by the Comhairle for the establishment and operation of CICs.

(v) Reception area

The CIC has a well-organised reception desk and waiting area. The waiting room is clean and pleasant. The reception desk is always staffed. Users are greeted and welcomed by a receptionist on arrival, who immediately informs the information officer and gives an indication of the length of waiting time. The receptionist plays an important role in distinguishing between users with simple and complex queries, imparting information to users and directing customers to information officers or other services.

(vi) Use of hatches

There are no hatches in use in the CIC. Information officers see clients in interview rooms. Information giving is central to the service.

(vii) Queuing and queuing systems

There is no formal queuing system or ticketing system. The queues are generally short and are well managed by the receptionist who keeps users informed of the waiting time and information officers informed of the number of people waiting.

(viii) Physical accessibility

The service is wheelchair accessible. The building, all services inside the building and toilets are easily accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people or people with prams.

(ix) Information provision

CICs are established by Comhairle with the principle of providing accurate, up-to-date information, advice and advocacy in relation to all social services.

This CIC stocks a wide range of relevant printed information such as leaflets and booklets in a well-organised, and managed display as well as a notice board with posters advertising other services. The display of printed information was well-received by users:

'I was interested to see the range of information available. I know that it is here now. I will come back if I need information about other matters.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

'Surprised to see books on display. I referred to these while I was waiting and was more informed going into the interview.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

Trained information officers are available during opening hours to answer queries from callers. The information officers are volunteers. Users at the CIC are assured by the fact that they could approach information officers if they did not fully understand or were unsure of their interpretation of printed material.

'I'll go home and read the leaflet and if I have any queries arising from that, I'll come back to the CIC. They always help me in getting my entitlements.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

However, some users expected the volunteer information officers themselves to be more knowledgeable without having to refer to books:

'Very pleased with reception, not so satisfied with information, not their fault.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

'It was much longer than expected. Volunteers kept having to leave the room to get information. I thought that the volunteers would have known the answers without having to do this.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

'Feel that they (information officers) should be more informed. They had to read it up themselves there and then.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

Selected Comments of Users at the CIC on Other Issues

In addition to the comments on the themes included in the schedule, users at the CIC remarked on other issues. They stressed the importance of it being a free, accessible, independent information service and spoke about the empowering aspect of the experience in seeking information at the CIC. A selection of their comments on these issues is included in this section.

(i) Free service

The principle of providing a free service underpins the operation of CICs. The availability of information free of charge and being able to walk in off the street without an appointment were mentioned by users as a factor assisting their access to information.

'Very beneficial in that I didn't have to spend money sitting in a solicitor's office to get the same information I got here.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

(ii) Accessible

Providing a service that is accessible to all is also a principle of the CICs. One user commented on the easy access:

'Great to be able to walk in without an appointment.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

(iii) Independence of service

CICs are established as independent bodies with local boards of management, representative of a wide range of community interests and concerns. CICs operate independently of other services. Users of the CIC included in the study commented on the importance of having access to an independent information service:

'Essential to have an information centre like this.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

(iv) Empowerment

One of the principles underlying the operation of CICs is that the service provided should be empowering by enabling people to exercise their rights and responsibilities. The comments showed that users were making use of this CIC in order to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Some users commented that they wanted to be aware of their entitlements before visiting public services and felt

that visiting the CIC assisted them in obtaining their rights and entitlements. Independent information centres and other agencies played an important role in equipping users with such knowledge.

'I signed on at social welfare. They were very helpful there, but didn't like to ask about my entitlements. Great to have somewhere like this to come and ask about my entitlements. Loads of information that I didn't know about.'

(65 year old man at Citizens Information Centre)

'Great to have someone to ask for the right information. I don't want to make any waves.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

'Great service for the public. You are armed with knowledge to go elsewhere such as Social Welfare.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

'Very pleased, put me on the right road.'

(User at Citizens Information Centre)

Accessibility and Standards at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed

The Centre for the Unemployed in the study is affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed. A Board of Management, which is made up of trade union and trades council representatives and other voluntary and community activists run the Centre. The Centre has a full-time supervisor. ICTU Centres for the Unemployed orient their services towards the unemployed and their families. Information provision is one of a number of services provided in this Centre. Other services include training and classes. The Centre also services as a drop-in service for the unemployed.

The findings based on observations recorded by the researchers in relation to accessibility to and standards of service at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed included in the study are detailed below. Comments from users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed show that assistance with forms, advice and advocacy are important aspects of its information service. Similarly to users of the CIC, users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed stressed the importance of it being an independent information service and spoke about the empowering aspect of the experience of seeking information there.

(i) Location of service

The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed is located in the city centre within walking distance of the SWLO, the Health Centre in the study and a FÁS office.

(ii) Identification of building

A large clear sign on the building informs the public of the service.

(iii) Opening hours

Opening hours are not displayed. However, the building is open all day and throughout lunchtime.

(iv) Condition of building

The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed is based in a new building, which is well laid out.

(v) Reception area

There is a reception desk, which is always staffed.

(vi) Use of hatches

Hatches are not in use in this service.

(vii) Queuing and queuing systems

Users sometimes have to queue. There is no formal queuing system, but queues and waiting times are generally short.

(viii) Information provision

The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed offers an information service to users. Information provision is one of a number of services provided in this Centre. Information giving is a primary function of the centre and is staffed by a number of information and welfare rights officers.

Information leaflets and booklets are displayed for the user to take. Users are seen on an individual basis in interview rooms and are provided with relevant information by the information and welfare rights officers.

Users remarked on the printed information available:

'The booklets in the CIC and here are helpful.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'They are very good here. The information you get is always clear and easy to understand.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'Sometimes the information you get is very hard to understand but here they are very easy to understand and they sort you out.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'This place is a fantastic resource. It's the best place to find information you need on any problems.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'It was enlightening to find out the services here. It's interesting to see what information is available.'

(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

(ix) Physical accessibility

The entrance to the building is accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people and people with prams, but wheelchair users and people with pushchairs would need assistance to enter the building.

Not all areas of the building are wheelchair accessible. An information office on the ground floor is accessible to people with disabilities. Information offices are also located upstairs.

Selected Comments of Users at ICTU Centre for the Unemployed on Other Issues

Users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed remarked on issues other than those themes included in the schedule. Comments from users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed show that assistance with forms, advice and advocacy are important aspects of its information service. A selection of their comments on these issues is included in this section under a number of headings.

(i) Assistance with forms

'Any problems I have with forms are sorted out here. You go down to social welfare and you might as well be talking to the moon.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'It is good to know that you have somewhere to fill out forms.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

(ii) Advice

'I always get what I ask for and more and really good advice. A brilliant service, more than helpful, outstanding.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

(iii) Advocacy

A number of users were seeking advocacy when approaching services. Information and welfare rights officers at the independent information centres represented a number of users. This was an important service offered to users.

'They represented me by making phone calls.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'He (information and welfare rights officer) does his best to get any problem sorted out and he pursues all avenues.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

(iv) Empowerment

Users found the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed particularly helpful in explaining their rights and entitlements to them. Comments from users show the Centre for the Unemployed was clearly an important resource in this respect for users.

'It helped walking in here. I found out all of my entitlements.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'I don't understand the system very well. That's why I come to a place like this.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'Public agencies often give you misleading or wrong information. You often have to come to a neutral party like here to get the information you want.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

'It is very hard to get information out of the 'dole'. There are schemes out there but they don't tell you. In here they are straight to the point.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

Users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were aware of the existence of various schemes and allowances, but found it difficult obtaining further information on them. Users commented on the problem of accessing information.

'I'm not fully aware of my entitlements. I came here to find out.'
(User at Centre for the Unemployed)

Some users remarked on the complexity of the system, which they found very confusing and difficult to understand. It seems that users have to follow pathways through a highly complex service delivery system, where there are little or no clues at first to get the user through the system. Many users were relying on the knowledge that they had built up on the way or knowledge that they had previously acquired on journeys to get the same or similar benefit entitlements.

5 The Service Providers' Views

Introduction

The service providers involved in this study are of two distinct types:

- public service providers delivering benefit payments in addition to information, advice and referral;
- independent or voluntary sector providers delivering services in the fields of information, advice, referral and, in some instances, representation and advocacy.

Social Welfare Local Offices and the CWO service delivered by the Health Boards provide, operate, manage and deliver services provided under statute law. The principles of operation are determined by law and by key considerations such as public accountability. The application or interpretation of these principles, however, can and do have some regional variations, which take account of differences in conditions of delivery. The responsibilities of personnel fall within a framework of delegated powers, guidelines of government departments and collective agreements.

The voluntary and independent services such as ICTU Centres for the Unemployed or Comhairle-supported CICs operate within a national framework and plan agreed by their elected or appointed governing bodies. Services are delivered by both salaried staff, persons enrolled in labour market integration programmes and volunteers.

The Provider Frame of Reference

The delivery of social and information services to users has been the subject of both discussion and some analysis during the 1990s at a range of levels. The Strategic Management Initiative in the public services focussed on modernising and improving public services in the general public interest. The more particular interests of less advantaged segments of the population were addressed in proposals for improvement developed by the National Economic and Social Forum (1995). The Report of the Commission on Social Welfare (1986) made a number of recommendations on improving the quality of delivery, which have been in the process of implementation over the last decade. Particular benefits such as rent allowance delivered by Community Welfare Offices have been the subject of separate study. A reappraisal of the general delivery of services can be found in the several documents and texts which address the problematic of integrated delivery of services. The NSSB, for example, commissioned a number of research studies during the 1990s on the delivery of information services by CICs and other bodies with a similar function.

The publications cited above illustrate the level of analysis available in this field of debate and discussion. However, themes of a different order bear on the user-provider relationship. User perception of services may be influenced by additional factors over which service providers have limited or no control. Negative historical images and practices associated with particular services may persist into contemporary thinking and operate as an obstacle in improving the user-provider relationship. The contemporary Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) system for example, has its origins in the old 'Outdoor Relief' system, which some users, or potential users, may continue to associate with the stigma of traditional poverty and destitution. Such a dynamic, where it exists, can deter potential users from availing of the service.

Under the heading of 'information', users may seek services from providers which do not yet exist or which providers do not have the power or resources to supply or are not provided in that geographical area or are in short supply or are limited in scale or are not available free at the point of consumption. Several examples arose in the course of the study. A first example is the case of users seeking information at their SWLO on benefits and claims made to Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs offices located in various parts of the country. The SWLO neither decides nor delivers such claims, but may nevertheless be perceived as doing so by users. A second example is the case of users seeking the services of the Legal Aid Board. Waiting lists to obtain an appointment to receive this service may be so long that the user seeks, or is advised to seek (what they believe to be) a similar service elsewhere, for example, the free legal advice service at their local CIC. These examples indicate that, for a range of reasons, service providers may not be in a position to meet the expectations of users of 'street level' services.

The Service Providers and the Research Study

From the outset of the study, it was decided to hold face-to-face meetings with the service providers prior to completing the analysis and preparing a report on the study. The aim of these discussions was to:

- furnish providers with some initial results of the field work from the study;
- invite comments from providers on these results, in particular in relation to obstacles reported by users;
- verify some factual aspects of the service.

Methodology

Service providers offered co-operation with the research at an early planning stage in the first fieldwork phase. All four services agreed to allow research to be conducted on the various service premises for which they were responsible. Service providers further agreed that researchers could interview users over a series of days in the same buildings in which their own staff were delivering services. This co-operation proved essential in achieving a high response rate in the study.

In the second phase following the fieldwork and the first analysis of results, contact was made with the service providers who had participated in the study. The services agreed to meetings to get initial feedback on the study. Discussions were held by pre-arranged appointment in the study locality with local management, in the case of independent services and regional/city management, in the case of public services. The results presented to the providers focussed on five themes:

- the ‘user’ as viewed by the provider;
- the handling by services of volumes of users in ‘street-level’ offices;
- the facilities for reception of users in the ‘street level’ offices;
- the movement (pathways) of users between ‘street-level’ services;
- selected comments of users on their current experience of the service.

The ‘User’ as Viewed by the Provider

How the user is conceptualised – citizen, customer, client, claimant, as discussed in Chapter 1 – may also contribute to forming the provider’s framework of views on the pertinence of user and related research. Where the user is appreciated within a framework of *solidarity*, the user as a separate subject of study may not make much sense to a service provider. If the users are understood as a segment of *customers* consuming a service, user-oriented studies will be of interest to many staff in a service, but primarily to customer service departments and specialised managers. In discussion, the supervisor of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed operated within what may be called a ‘solidarity’ framework and referred to a ‘fellow-feeling’ between user and provider.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs referred to many initiatives currently in operation related to customer or user service and which had

been explicitly developed in recent years. Department surveys provided feedback on customers. The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is involved in a whole range of initiatives relating to service users. These include pilot schemes of integrated service provision, a form of integrated case management, staff training to deal with the public, customer surveys and the improvement of computerised technology and data bases.

In the case of the Community Welfare Service, the service and its delivery had been almost exhaustively and critically reviewed over the years, according to management taking part in the discussion. A user perspective could add to, but not innovate, in relation to the need to provide a coherent delivery framework for all parties to the service.

For three out of four service providers therefore, a research study on the user's pathway in searching for information via street-level services was of some, but not central, importance to service delivery.

The Handling by Services of Volumes of Users in Street-level Offices

The SWLO received several hundreds of people at its offices in the early part of a week and faced logistical issues of scale not encountered by other services in the study. While some users, and indeed staff of other services, considered this phenomenon to be part of 'signing-on days', it was not viewed in this way by management. Factors that can prompt a surge in numbers are the outreach services of the office or situations of employee lay-offs. Uniquely, the SWLO has targets of processing 85% of unemployment benefit claims in one week and 70% of unemployment assistance claims in one week. Thus its target is related to preventing the build-up of backlogs of claims.

The Community Welfare Service described itself as 'demand-led' in terms of volumes of users or claimants availing of its services and was not in a position to forecast that demand exactly. The service was aware that a number of other services referred clients to the Community Welfare Service, but this could be unpredictable. It could be related to administrative changes in other services, including prison services, psychiatric hospital services or ambulance services, of which the Community Welfare Service was not informed.

The CIC receives a large number of phone queries within its total of daily contacts with the public. The manager was not surprised that 'street level' callers had rarely phoned in advance since phone queries and office callers may be distinct groups. Situated in the heart of the city, the service receives visits from users who have visited the nearby Office of Consumer Affairs, Offices of the Legal Aid Board or the

offices of the many solicitors in the area. The latter provide a service to the CIC twice a month.

The largest query base of the CIC is social welfare recipients. This concurs with the study findings. The CIC also carries out an advocacy role as appropriate to the needs of the client and provides social policy feedback based on the experience of clients.

The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed serves the whole city. People drop in for information or coffee or to enrol in classes. Few telephoned before arriving – they plan shopping trips and *'come when they shop'*.

The Facilities for Reception of Users in Street-Level Offices

Management of the SWLO would like to have a *'first point of contact'* in offices for the large number of users availing of services. A move to a reception job profile with training is something the Department would like to do on a wider scale and not just in some offices. This would address issues such as users being in the wrong queue for periods of time. It is not management policy to encourage fresh claims on a Monday or Tuesday, but large crowds do come on these days, often because they finished work on the previous Friday.

In the opinion of the CWO Service, users faced difficulties. Upgrading of facilities for the delivery of the CWO Service has not taken place in terms of offices, toilets, seating facilities or baby-changing facilities for clients. The need for an improved and coherent place and standing of the CWO had been extensively reviewed over the years in official and public documents by a number of commissions and agencies. All these reports had voiced difficulties with Supplementary Welfare, with conditions for delivery of the service and whether the Community Welfare Officer could fulfil a welfare function in current circumstances. The reports had articulated the difficulties for users and placed these views in the public domain for comment. Upgrading of facilities has not yet taken place to any significant extent.

In every CWO a trained porter should be available. This was the view of management. Community Welfare Officers are vulnerable, work in isolation and have not had training in handling some of the situations they will meet – which can contain elements of awkwardness, aggression and anti-social behaviour. The opening hours of the CWO are sufficient, according to management. There can be a rush of clients at the last minute or during particular periods of the year such as at the start of school-term.

The Movement (pathways) of Users between Street-level Services

In the view of the SWLO, there are some delays and repeat visits. There are also targets for the processing of Unemployment Benefit and Assistance over the course of a week. If the period was too short, there could be risks to accountabilities of public monies. During the waiting period, there are substitute payments, but also some claims can be difficult to process. This can all involve extra visits to CWOs and SWLOs.

SWLO do not issue referral cards, but many customers have forms for rent allowances or signing-on which they bring to and from the offices.

There are delays at local level due to backlogs in other parts of the service. A SWLO is like a big reception, a referral point to and from other parts of the welfare service, such as pensions or one-parent family payments, located in other parts of the country.

In relation to the multiplicity of user visits, the CIC considers that inter-service co-operation and new technology have the capacity to reduce this. The inter-service thrust to achieve this is only very slowly built-up, the pathways can be “mapped out very simply”.

‘This business of people starting anew, starting fresh every time – so many things can go wrong at so many points of call – the links (between services) are not there’. The CIC supports ‘when necessary clients’ information needs from other agencies – there is no formal agreement on this’.

According to the CWO service, clients are moving from office to office in search of substitute payments (Supplementary Welfare Allowance, rent allowances), while awaiting the outcome of their principal claim for various benefits. Payments from Social Welfare have speeded up in recent years but referrals to the CWO Service continue to arrive. Lone parents can be waiting quite a while on Supplementary Welfare, before their One-Parent Family Payment is approved.

Users visiting the CWO can present with many difficulties – patients discharged from psychiatric hospitals, convicted prisoners on parole or temporary release: the CWO is *‘their first point of call’* and they are advised in this direction by institutions such as psychiatric hospitals or prison services. Staff may need support and advice in deciding on claims for persons who have difficult life experiences.

Management considers that there should be greater sharing between State agencies. This is important for a demand-led service. Changes in other services impact very quickly on the CWO service, for example, hospital and prison discharge policies,

the cost of exam fees, schoolbooks or taxis, (if there are no ambulances), and evictions for anti-social behaviour.

According to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, contact in sorting out problems at the SWLO is excellent, not so much at the counter *'but behind the counter, you couldn't have a more helpful bunch of people ... it has changed over the last eight years'*.

The CIC observed that a number of clients visiting their offices had already been in contact with other services such as the SWLOs, Legal Aid Board, Consumer Affairs Office, and individual solicitors. This usually happened without telephone calls in advance from these services.

The CWO Service does refer people over to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed for help and support. ICTU Centre for the Unemployed staff visit other agencies, but generally with prior appointments and preparation in advance.

Selected Comments of Users on their Current Experience of the Service

The comments of some users in relation to the 'cost' of claiming and verifications and proofs of identity were discussed with the SWLO and the CWO.

Regional management of the SWLO considers that verification of claims is a duty. Benefits derive from public monies. A long birth certificate serves this purpose. A form is available to users to reduce the cost of obtaining a long birth certificate. A social services card with no photo does not serve as verification, although some users may believe that the possession of such a card is proof of identity. It merely shows a number and a name.

In relation to comments on identity documents, it was the view of the Community Welfare Service that identification documents are necessary. A social services card has no picture. While the service is immediate, local and flexible and uses discretion, it is also open to abuse and abuse of the system does occur.

Reaching Those Who Do Not Use Services

The SWLO organises outreach services to ensure take-up of benefits by those who do not know they are entitled to make claims. In situation of layoffs, staff go out to the workplaces and set up the claims on the spot.

The CWO service may not reach all those who are entitled to it. Not every user wishes to receive CWO services. Management has experience of people found living in sheds or destitute-looking conditions in both rural and urban areas, who, for various reasons, do not wish to claim Supplementary Welfare Allowance. There is no problem with dealing with advocates of those who are unable to formulate a claim though this happens only rarely. The number of cases where an entitled person is making no claim whatsoever is likely to be very small.

The CIC would welcome a formal referral system for its outreach service outside the city. The time to establish such co-operation is when a new service or branch of a service is being established. This would bring the service to those who at present do not or cannot avail of it.

Many users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed – as many as 75% – may be entitled to benefits they are not claiming. *'We do get involved'*, explained the manager, *'we make calls and appointments and brief the user'*. The question of referral cards had not yet been thought about. When the user arrives s/he may be already *'lost within the system'*.

The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed considered that 'benefits' and 'information' should be 'sold' to the public through advertising and campaigns. This is particularly true nowadays, given the number of asylum seekers, foreign nationals, foreign students and exchange students, in the country who do not understand how the system works.

The User Pathway Within the Provider Framework

Discussions with providers highlighted problems of a distinctive order. On the one hand, there were problems for users in formulating one or more claims for benefits, providing supporting documentation, awaiting the outcome and obtaining payments. On the other hand, users were moving between public and voluntary providers to complete the claims and/or to obtain information on the same or different benefits and services.

The *ad hoc* or informal referral of users from one service to another appears to take place as a normalised functioning of all services. This was not a subject that service providers viewed as particularly problematic.

6 Key Findings and Conclusions

The Conclusions in Context

The place of the citizen-user in the changing complex of welfare administration delivery is the subject of wide-ranging debate in Ireland. Much of this change originates at multiple levels and from very diverse terrains. Promoting public sector institutional change through reform of the civil service and the implementation of a Strategic Management Initiative has opened up discussion on the relationship between the State and its citizens and signalled moves towards a more consumer or customer oriented public service.⁶

The reviewing of the principles of management of public institutions to bring the public institutions closer to the citizen is not confined to Ireland, but is indeed a Europe-wide phenomena (Kleinman, M. and Piachaud, D., 1993, pp. 1-19). This has been described by Finn (2000):

In many countries in the OECD there is also a trend to integrate and co-ordinate the services of a whole range of agencies, from the vocational guidance and employment advice through to welfare and social assistance services, into what are described as 'one-stop' or 'one-counter' services. The aim is to improve effectiveness and individual and employer access through the creation of a more coherent and integrated gateway to benefits and services (p. 45).

Devolution, the local development process and the reform of local government in Ireland, have brought into being new local bodies such as European-supported local partnerships and County Development Boards, creating a new dynamic for a more modernised and co-ordinated delivery of social, employment and public services at local level.⁷ From these discussions have emanated experiments to construct local authority one-stop shops in selected county areas, as well as pilot projects in the Integrated Delivery of Services.

The impact of changes in the way services are delivered for less advantaged categories of citizens was a concern of the National Economic and Social Forum when they published their sixth report in 1995 (NESF, 1995). Their concerns are borne out in the wide-ranging study of 16 different consumer experiments across Europe by a team in the UK in 1994/5 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1995). The study recommended the adoption of a consumer perspective in future reforms and innovations.

⁶ See also: National Economic and Social Council (1996) *Strategy into the 21st Century*, Government Publications, Dublin, Chapter 12.

⁷ European Social Fund Evaluation Unit (1999) *Evaluation Report on ESF and the Local Urban and Rural Development Programme*, ESF Evaluation Unit, Dublin; Department of the Environment and Local Government (1996) *Better Local Government – a Programme for Change*; Department of the Environment and Local Government (1998) *Preparing the Ground: Guidelines for the Progress from Strategy to City/County Development Boards*.

The rapid pace of change in integrating, rationalising and devolving public administration can be a cause for anxiety among public employees charged with delivering and explaining complex changes and meeting the public face-to-face or voice-to-voice. For example, the UK plans the merger of 400 benefit agency offices with 1,000 jobs centres to create a single streamlined service of 105,000 employees offering a single point of access for advice, benefits and jobs.⁸ This is the scale of change in the public services that has been considered sufficiently serious to justify a European level study commissioned by the European Union of Public Service Employees in Brussels.⁹

The role of charitable bodies, the voluntary sector and local community associations in this process of reform has led to a plethora of initiatives and consultations in the second half of the nineties. Such a comprehensive dialogue with the voluntary sector contrasts with the sectoral approach, which marked the eighties and early nineties (O'Sullivan, 1994). The process has intensified with the launch of a National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997, the mobilisation which led to the publication of the report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996), the introduction of new employment equality legislation in 1999 and the passing of the Equal Status Act in 2000.

The nature of welfare provision and the manner of its delivery is altering in an astonishing form. In Lewisham, London, a prototype experiment with new forms of benefit delivery was studied which reveals the variety of modes, which might engage a citizen and the public services. The prototype involves joint customer social security visits involving different government departments, joint electronic claim forms, customer electronic kiosks, joint information and advice between Departments, tele-claiming, integrated working, data sharing and case management (Rose 1999).

Throughout this multi-faceted process of public policy change, the citizen or user of social services is not particularly visible. Many public service and government departments have established customer service units. However, little evidence has been advanced as to actual or real additional benefits which will accrue or have accrued to users, be they viewed as citizens, customers or clients in the field of social and information services.

This study builds on an earlier study to develop a user perspective on information provision at local level and conducted in 1998 (Ralaheen, 1999). In the course of that study, 93 street-level public and voluntary services were visited in three city, town and townland locations in Munster, Leinster and Connaught. The study enumerated a multiplicity of starting points for the user in the search for information and services.

⁸ The Guardian, March 17, 2000, p.15.

⁹ Unpublished as yet.

Difficulties of accessing information and services were identified for specific categories and minority groups as well as gaps in the range of provision.

The Methodology

Building on the 1998 research, this study refined the research methodology. The method developed to operationalise the research succeeded in catching the flow of users through services at a moment in time. Within the limits of this approach, the method adopted allowed the research to track the retrospective and prospective visits of users in detail. It enabled a quantification of elements of the problem of integrated provision from the user perspective.

A method for estimating the flows of users through social and information services over a week long period was not available to the researchers prior to undertaking the study. An outcome of the research is that parameters to be taken into account for making such a calculation have now been established.

The Background of the Users

There is a relatively even gender balance among the users of the four services in the study. Few retired or older people were interviewed using the four street level services. The highest proportion of older people (12%) was found at the CIC.

Advocacy

The majority of users visiting the street level services were calling on their own behalf. The highest proportion representing others was found at the CIC where 17% of users stated they were representing another person and were already, to an extent, in an advocate role.

In terms of expectations of their visits, the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed stands out in that more of their users expected advocacy than in the other three services. Almost 10% of users across all services expected help with filling out forms, indicating either a problem of literacy among users or weaknesses in the presentation of forms, or a combination of both factors.

User Communication Preferences

A preference for face-to-face contact rather than telephone contact was expressed by 29% of users as their reason for making a personal visit rather than

telephoning a service. A further 10% gave the expectation of getting a better service as a reason for making an on-the-spot visit. Few users claimed that they had been influenced by advertising or media in bringing them to the service at which they were interviewed. Word of mouth was the most frequently cited source of information about services.

Users' Visits to the Services

While the study included two public services where claims for monetary benefits and allowances are made, only a minority of users who were interviewed were actually seeking a benefit or receiving payment at the point of interview. Making an enquiry about their benefits or having problems with current benefits and entitlements was a significant source of visits which concerned 35% of users and impacted on all four services.

The Reception of the Street-Level User

The study noted that the SWLO, the CIC and the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed are all making substantial efforts to provide acceptable conditions for the public using their services including adequate opening hours, suitable queuing systems, and a reduction in waiting times.

The study highlights some of the factors assisting and hindering citizens in accessing social and information services. The reception of users at services was highly significant. The CIC provided a model of 'good practice' in terms of reception. A reception desk to direct users to the correct queue or to answer simple information requests could go some way to alleviate long and lengthy queuing problems where they exist.

Porters and receptionists have a number of very important customer service roles. They greet the public, direct them inside the premises and impart information. They can also have a part in mediating between staff/volunteers and the public, especially when information officers are busy or unavailable. A smaller, but no less important role, is keeping leaflets in stock, up-to-date and displayed.

A range of good quality printed information for the user to take away and study was made available in three of four participating agencies. This provision was highly regarded and valued by users.

The study raises the issue of health, safety and security for staff and users in social and information services.

The Pathways to Information and Services

The findings from the tracking of user pathways were categorised into four types of pathways or routes (see Chapter 3). This enabled the study to distinguish those users who were moving between services from those whose needs were satisfied at the service at which they were being interviewed.

In the case of the SWLO, one-third of those interviewed were moving between services. It is noteworthy that none of the SWLO respondents indicated having visited, intending to visit or having been referred to a service in the independent or voluntary sector. A number of users were moving back and forth between the same services, from FÁS to the SWLO and back to FÁS, from the CWO to SWLO and back to the CWO, making repeat or 'ping-pong' visits to the same service.

Some of the explanation for this may lie in the practice of users receiving substitute SWA payments while awaiting adjudication of their claim for a range of social welfare benefits. An important source of explanation lies in the change in circumstances of users moving towards education, training and jobs in the expanding labour market. A part of the explanation may lie in the practice of requiring claimants to furnish specific items of written evidence (of identity, tenancy) before a claim can proceed. This practice is not confined to Ireland and has been the subject of critical discussion by the Child Poverty Action Group (1997, p.7) in the UK.

The destination and routes of origin of 43 users of the CWO who were moving between services were examined in detail. These 43 users constituted 57% of users interviewed at the CWO. Between them, they had already made 50 visits to services and were planning a further 21 visits to services after visiting the CWO Service. Thus, including the visits to the CWO, these 43 users reported making/intending to make 114 different visits to services to resolve their needs. This would appear to show a very high consumption of services among persons who are at or below the poverty line. According to the provider view (see Chapter 5) these users are frequently persons with multiple and severe difficulties in everyday life.

Of the 114 visits made by users of the CWO, 111 (97%) were to public services such as local authorities, Health Board, FÁS, Social Welfare Local Office. Of the 111 visits, 15 were made, or intended to be made, to the same or other CWOs and the Health Board. In other words, 15% of multiple visiting by users was to different segments of the Health Board. Among the 111 visits to public services, 22 (20%) were reported from or to the SWLO. In total, one-third of the large number of service visits being made by users likely to have multiple difficulties, were in a triangle between the SWLO, the CWO and Health Board services.

It can take more than one visit to complete a transaction. Of the combined total of 68 users of the SWLO and CWO who were making/intended to make multiple visits, 9 users (13%) reported having made/planning to make, repeat visits to one or other service.

In contrast to the low level of movement of SWLO and CWO to or from independent services, the CIC were referring users across a broad range of public and independent services. The routes of 37 users who were moving between services was tracked. These 37 users had made or were planning to make a total of 88 visits to services across a variety of pathways. Of these 88 visits, 12 (14%) involved visits or repeat visits to the CWO, SWLO and Health Board.

The pathways of CIC users were more varied than the users of the SWLO and the CWO and included specialised service points not mentioned by other users. Examples are visits to or from the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Money Advice and Budgeting Services (MABS), family adoption services. The CIC was the only one of the four study services where users reported having visited private professionals (accountant, lawyer) prior to their CIC visit. This may reflect an awareness by some professionals that the CIC is adapted to handling specific queries.

Of note in the study is the finding that 13 CIC users were coming from or going to services with a legal or legal rights dimension. These included the Small Claims Court, solicitors, Legal Aid Board, Free Legal Advice Centre or the police. The question therefore arises as to whether more rights-conscious users presented themselves to the CIC, or whether a more rights-conscious CIC both attracted and referred users in these legal directions. Three users had been to the statutory Legal Aid Board prior to visiting the CIC. Two had been referred to the CIC, a referral arising from the lengthy waiting list to obtain an appointment. This provides an interesting example of users being referred from a public to the independent sector for services.

The pathways of 25 out of 65 users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were examined in detail for their origin and destination. These 25 users had made or were about to make 93 visits to various services. Of the 93 visits, 24% involved the SWLO, Health Board or CWO, which is a higher proportion compared with users of the CIC. This finding has to be set alongside the somewhat higher stated expectation of users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed in relation to advocacy compared with other service users.

As with the CIC, the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed users were following routes to and from a cross section of both public and independent services. Users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were alone among the four services in reporting visits to or from (2 users) a specialised disability service (the National Rehabilitation Board). Unique also was the fact that 4 users had made or intended to make contact with a TD.

Inter- and Intra-Agency Referral Methods

Retrospective and prospective tracking of users past visits and forward plans reveals that the 290 users interviewed at the four centres in the study were making over 500 visits to social and information services. Using the analogy of banking, 290 users were making 500 visits, not to choose between banks, but in search of products they personally needed.

The findings of the study show that the four services do not have their own discrete clientele. Users are moving between services, between public services in particular, and presenting themselves, and re-presenting themselves in a series of multiple visits to complete the transaction of a single service or benefit.

Of those who had visited other agencies or centres prior to interview, a majority had been referred. However, none of the referring agencies (such as the SWLO, Health Board, CWO or Health Centre) provided referral cards or referral literature (leaflets and brochures, for example). Users moving between services are not well informed as to the reason for the referral. Yet, the majority of users reported that they felt the referral was “right” for them.

Some 32% of these visits were not voluntary. For the user, they involved the obligatory presentation of forms or documents in the process of or prior to making a claim for a benefit. The views of service providers on this subject are that such documents are a necessary requirement to safeguard public monies, reduce fraud and abuse and ensure that public services are provided in an accountable fashion.

The study confirms the findings of earlier research (Ralaheen, 1999) that the pathways of users to social and information services range from 14-16 different routes across the public and independent sectors. While the services rely on quite different statutory bases, the triangle of Health Board, SWLO and CWO appear to present an immediate opportunity for inter-agency co-ordination from the user perspective.

This multiplicity of pathways followed by users has implications for any future integrated provision of services. The large number of pathways, from a user point of view, could be addressed by improved inter- and intra-agency administrative practices, by improved inter-agency co-ordination, referral protocols, and joint policies on distribution of information.

Despite the much-used concept of partnership between the public and voluntary sector, the evidence of this small-scale study does not substantiate it in practice. Referrals and movements of users emanating from the public services are in general towards other public services. An interesting exception is where these services are seriously blocked by lengthy waiting lists, as in the case of the Legal

Aid Board. In contrast, the independent services in the study were receiving and guiding users from and towards a mixed range of public, not-for-profit services and even private services. This may explain why there were few public and measurable examples of integrated service provision from the perspective of the users of services.

Providers do not share a single perspective on the user. The user is not necessarily a social category or stakeholder meriting particular study for all providers. The reasons for this position vary, however. For example, the user, as viewed by the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, may be subsumed inside customer services and customer studies. For the ICTU Centres for the Unemployed, the user is subsumed inside the representative category of unemployed on whose behalf, and in whose interests, the service is provided. Thus, perspectives on the user as a subject of study or recipient of services does not coincide neatly with the public/private divide in the provision of services, rather it crosses over the public services/independent services divide.

Users' Comments and Satisfaction with Services

Users showed satisfaction with services. In particular, they praised the tolerance and time given to them in the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. Users remarked on the range of information in CICs. Good service was commented upon in the SWLO despite difficulties involved in administering services to large numbers. The premises and conditions under which CWO services are delivered attracted negative comments from users.

The study confirms the user's interest and need for an independent information service, a point at which to find an explanation of systems of delivering social welfare, a place to gain understanding and knowledge of benefit entitlements and allowances and somewhere to turn when assistance with forms or advocacy is needed.

The length of time to acquire information, for benefits and queries to be processed, the complexity of the system, the dispersal of services across agencies, the difficulty in getting to understand entitlements and the absence of appeals systems at local level all proved to be unsatisfactory for the user.

Users at the SWLO expressed concern about continuous requests for identification, as well as the costs such a request incurred.

The availability of independent information services was viewed as an essential resource for the public in search of information, assistance and explanation of benefit entitlements. The fact that they were free and an appointment was not necessary was a bonus.

More Effective Information and Service Delivery at Local Level

- Policy and administrative changes may impact on services across the board and need to be communicated to the service providers to whom requests for services may be directed. Examples cited by providers are the discharge of prisoners or psychiatric patients with immediate and urgent needs into the community, the accumulation of long waiting lists for specialist services or the opening up of new educational and training opportunities for the unemployed.
- Co-operation across agencies, centres and services in the social field in relation to referral practices and protocols could be accelerated, given the 500 visits being made to street level services identified for the 290 users in this study. Of particular relevance to users is the pattern of cross-visiting of various offices of the Health Board and SWLOs.
- For the user, the conditions under which services are delivered, the quality of reception and the clarity of information provided, are of significant importance in their appreciation of the service as a whole.
- The expectation of advocacy on behalf of the user, or users acting as advocates on behalf of others is as yet a minority phenomenon, found mainly in the independent services. This will increase in the future and will require staff training and development.

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APPENDIX 1

RECORD OF NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS ON ACCESSIBILITY AND STANDARDS OF SERVICES TO BE COMPLETED BY RESEARCHERS

Agency: _____ Interviewer Initials: _____

Please record notes and observations about the social and information services from the perspective of the user as follows:

Location of the agency (in relation to other social services, transport)

Is the agency adequately identified? _____

Are opening hours displayed? _____

Is the service open at the advertised times? _____

Conditions of premises (layout, cleanliness, safety, etc.) _____

Is there a reception? _____

Are hatches in use? If yes, please describe. _____

Is information offered as a separate service? _____

Is there a separate information desk? _____

Is there an information officer? _____

Is there a range of information leaflets and booklets or application forms displayed and readily accessible? If so, do users refer to or take them? _____

Is the building and are all parts of the service easily accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people and people with prams? _____

Do users have to queue? Is there a queuing system? If so, is it organised and easy to follow? _____

Other observations in relation to supports to help users or barriers facing users trying to access the service and good and bad practices on the part of the agency.

APPENDIX II

Background Information on Users Interviewed

Introduction

This appendix sets out information on respondents at each service point (SWLO, CWO, CIC or ICTU Centre for the Unemployed). The findings are based on 290 completed surveys. Data on background information on users is presented under the following headings:

- the gender of users
- the age of users
- user representation
- how they came to hear about and be at the service
- first or repeat visits of users to the service
- whether users had phoned before visiting
- user reasons for making a personal call to services
- reason for user visits
- principal issue with which users presented
- their expectations of the visit
- the result of the visit.

Gender Breakdown of Respondents

Some 290 questionnaires were completed. In the vast number of cases, one user responded to the questionnaire. However, two people were involved in completing nine questionnaires. Of the 290 principal respondents completing the questionnaires there were 161 men (56%) and 129 women (44%) (see Table A1).

TABLE A1:
Gender of respondents by service point of interview

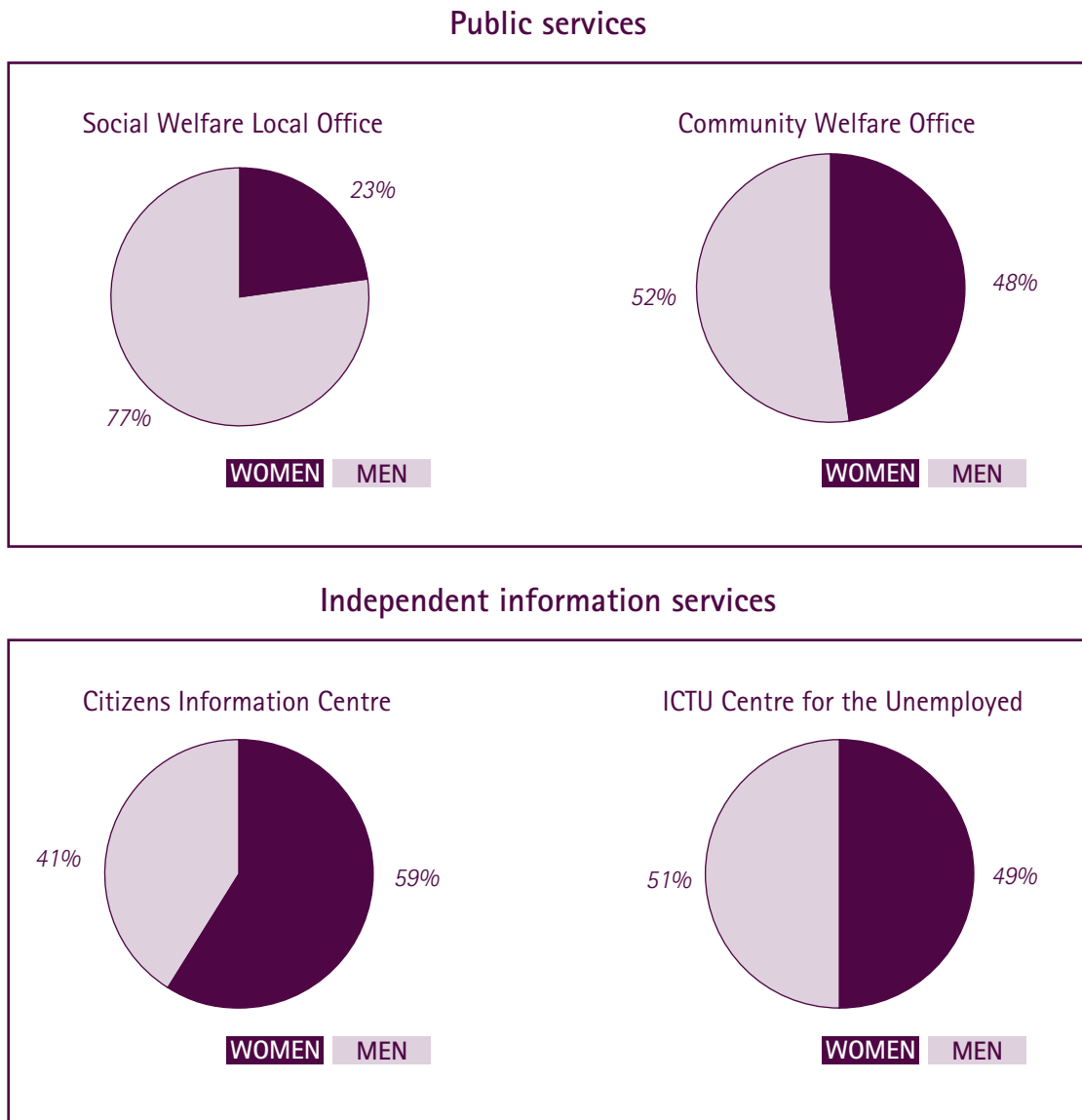
SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	GENDER				
	MEN (N)	WOMEN (N)	TOTAL (N)	MEN (%)	WOMEN (%)
SWLO	58	17	75	77	23
CWO	39	36	75	52	48
CIC	31	44	75	41	59
ICTU CfU	33	32	65	51	49
TOTAL	161	129	290	56	44

(n=290)

Taking each of the four services separately, the gender breakdown of users responding to the questionnaire, as shown in Table A1 and illustrated in Figure 1, was as follows:

- At the SWLO, 58 men (77%) responded to the questionnaire compared to 17 women (23%).
- At the CWO, 39 men (52%) and 36 women (48%) responded to the questionnaire.
- At the CIC, more women than men responded to the questionnaire. 44 women (59%) responded to the questionnaire compared to 31 men (41%).
- At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, there were almost equal numbers of men and women respondents, 33 and 32 respectively.

FIGURE 1:
Gender breakdown of respondents by service (point of interview)



The pie charts in Figure 1 above show that:

- the majority of callers to the SWLO were men;
- roughly an equal proportion of women and men called to the CWO;
- women made up the majority of callers to the CIC;
- similarly, there was roughly an equal proportion of men and women callers to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

Age Breakdown of Respondents

Table A2 shows that, of the 290 principal respondents, 205 (71%) were in the age group 26-65 years, 73 (25%) were in the age group 18-25 years and 12 (4%) were over 65 years of age. The study excluded children.

Taking each of the four services separately, the age breakdown of users responding to the questionnaire, as shown in Table A2 and illustrated in Figure 2, was as follows:

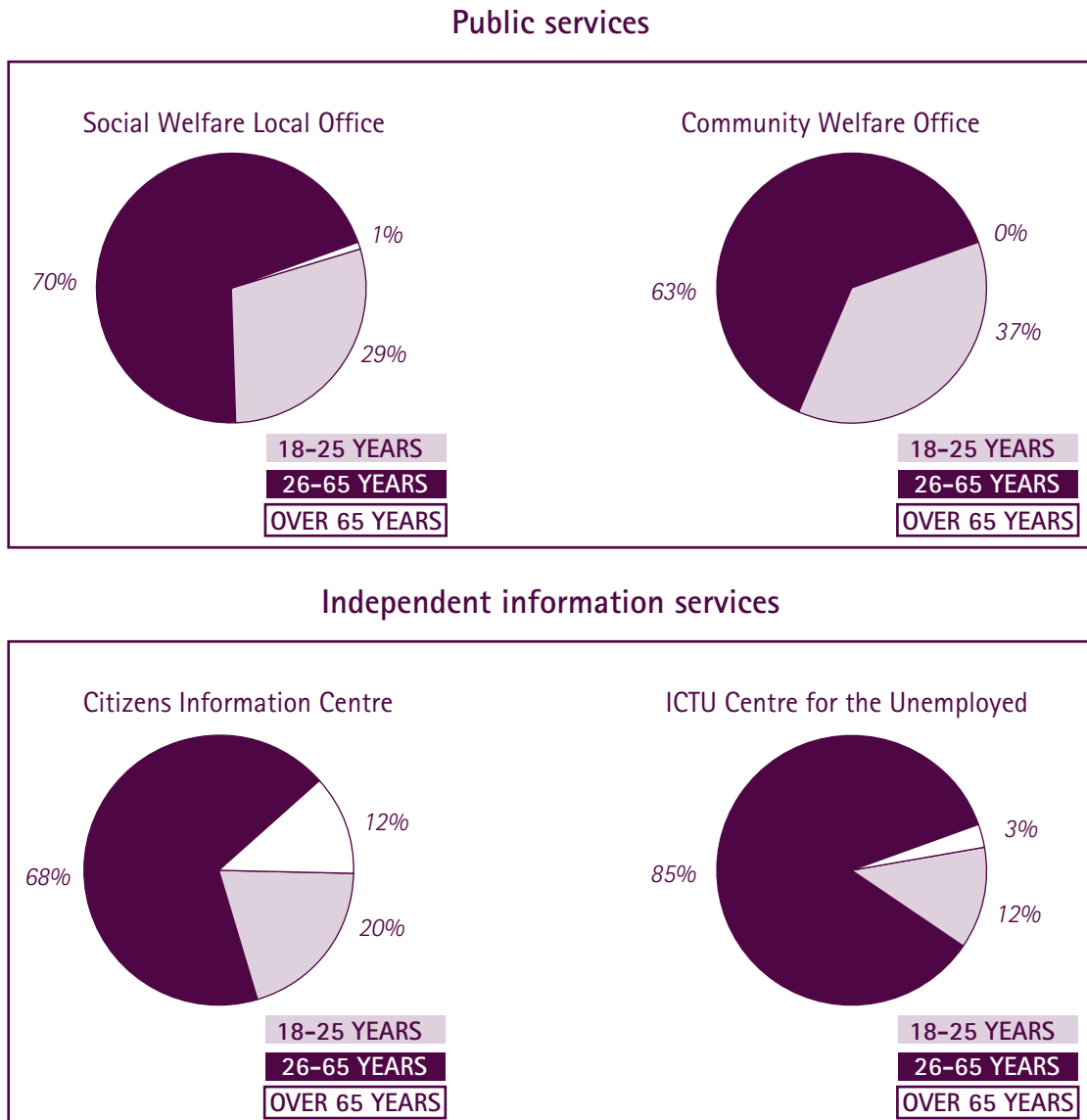
- At the SWLO, 22 users (29%) were in the age group 18-25 years, 52 users (70%) were in the age group 26-65 years and only one user (1%) was over 65 years.
- At the CWO, 28 respondents (37%) were in the age group 18-25 years, 47 respondents (63%) were in the age group 26-65 years and no-one over 65 years responded to the questionnaire.
- At the CIC, 15 respondents (20%) were in the age group 18-25 years, 51 respondents (68%) were in the age group 26-65 years and 9 respondents (12%) were over 65 years.
- At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, 8 (12%) respondents were in the age group 18-25 years, 55 respondents (85%) were in the age group 26-65 years and 2 respondents (3%) were over 65 years.

TABLE A2:
Age group of principal respondent by service (point of interview)

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	AGE GROUP					
	18-25 YEARS (N)	26-65 YEARS (N)	OVER 65 YEARS (N)	18-25 YEARS (%)	26-65 YEARS (%)	OVER 65 YEARS (%)
SWLO	22	52	1	29	70	1
CWO	28	47	0	37	63	0
CIC	15	51	9	20	68	12
ICTU CfU	8	55	2	12	85	3
TOTAL	73	205	12	25	71	4

(n=290)

FIGURE 2:
Age breakdown of respondents by service (point of interview)



The pie charts in Figure 2 above show that young people between 18 and 25 years were calling to all four services. The CWO was receiving the highest proportion of young people. Of all callers to the CWO, 37% were in this age group. The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed received the smallest number of users in this age group.

At all of the centres/offices, the majority of callers were in the age group 26-65 years (205). Between 60% and 70% of callers to the SWLO, CWO and CIC were aged 26-65 years and 85% of callers to the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were in this age group.

Older callers were in the minority. No one over 65 years called to the CWO. A small percentage of callers responding to the questionnaire in the SWLO and ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were over 65 years, 1% and 3% respectively. The CIC had the highest proportion of callers over 65 years. Twelve per cent of callers responding to the questionnaire in the CIC were over 65 years.

Users Representing Others

Overall, 87% of users were visiting the services on their own behalf, 8% were visiting services on behalf of another person and 5% of users were visiting services on their own behalf and on behalf of another person. There are some slight variations when each of the four services is taken separately. As Table A3 shows:

- At the SWLO, 97% of users were visiting the service on their own behalf and 3% were visiting on behalf of another person.
- At the CWO, 90% of users were visiting the service on their own behalf, 5% were visiting on behalf of another person and another 5% were visiting on their own behalf and on behalf of another person.
- At the CIC, 74% of respondents at the service were visiting on their own behalf. 17% of callers at the CIC were there on behalf of another person and 9% were visiting on their own behalf and on behalf of another person.
- At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, 86% of users were visiting the service on their own behalf, 6% were visiting on behalf of another person and 8% were visiting on their own behalf and on behalf of another person.

TABLE A3:
User representation at service (point of interview)

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	USER REPRESENTATION					
	OWN BEHALF (N)	ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER (N)	OWN BEHALF AND ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER (N)	OWN BEHALF (%)	ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER (%)	OWN BEHALF AND ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER (%)
SWLO	73	2	0	97	3	0
CWO	67	4	4	90	5	5
CIC	55	13	7	74	17	9
ICTU CfU	56	4	5	86	6	8
TOTAL	251	23	16	87	8	5

(n=290)

The results show that in all four services, there was a high proportion of users either representing themselves or representing themselves and another person. The higher proportion of users representing others was found at the CIC.

Users' Knowledge of Service

Users were asked how they had come to hear of/know about the service they were visiting. The results are shown in Table A4 and Figure 3.

At the SWLO, 50 out of 75 users interviewed responded that they had come to know about the SWLO through word of mouth and 18 had used the SWLO before. Only 2 users had been referred to the SWLO.

In contrast to the SWLO, 27 out of 75 users interviewed at the CWO responded that they were there because they had been referred, 24 users had used the CWO before and 20 users had come to know about the CWO through word of mouth.

At the CIC, 37 out of 75 users interviewed responded that they had heard about the centre through word of mouth. Ten users had used the centre before, ten were simply passing by and decided to call in. The CIC has a weekly radio slot on a local hospital radio station and ten users had heard about the CIC through this programme. Only one user had been referred to the CIC.

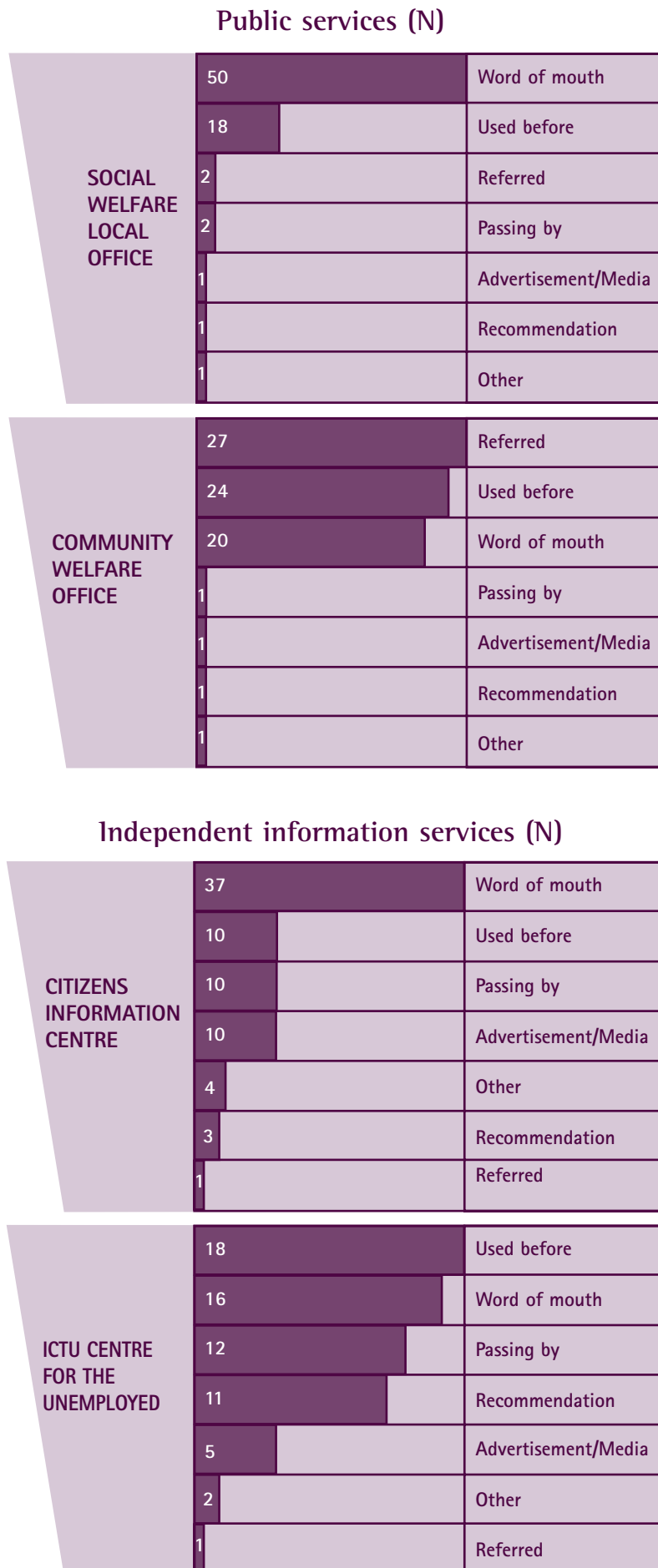
At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, 18 users had used the service before, 16 had come to know about the service through word of mouth and 12 users had been passing by. In comparison to the other three services, the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed had been recommended to 11 users.

TABLE A4:
How users came to know of service by service (point of interview)

KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICE	SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)				TOTAL (N)
	SWLO (N)	CWO (N)	CIC (N)	ICTU CfU (N)	
WORD OF MOUTH	50	20	37	16	123
USED BEFORE	18	24	10	18	70
REFERRED	2	27	1	1	31
PASSING BY	2	1	10	12	25
ADVERTISEMENT/MEDIA	1	1	10	5	17
RECOMMENDATION	1	1	3	11	16
OTHER	1	1	4	2	8
TOTAL	75	75	75	65	290

n=290

FIGURE 3:
How users came to know of service by service (point of interview)



First or Repeat Visits of User to Services

There is quite a difference between the four services in relation to the proportion of users who were making their first visit to the service at which they were interviewed as Table A5 and Figure 4 show:

Table A5 and the pie charts in Figure 4 show that:

At the SWLO, 8% of users interviewed were making their first visit to the service compared with 92% of users that had visited the SWLO before.

At the CWO, 24% of users interviewed were making their first visit to the service and 76% of users had visited the CWO before.

There was a different pattern for users at the CIC where 67% of users were making a first visit and 33% of users were making a repeat visit.

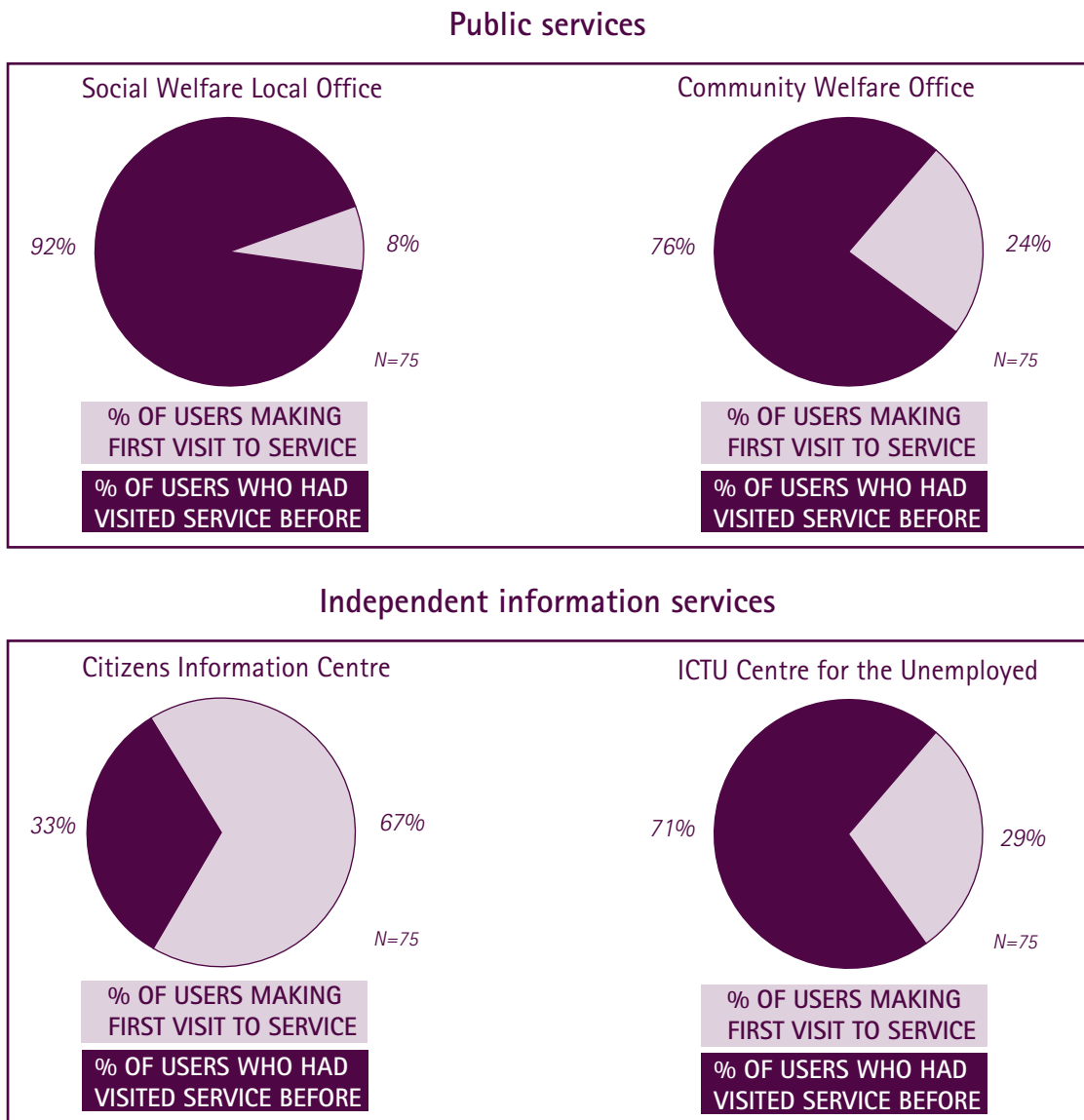
At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, the breakdown was 29% of users that had not visited the service before and 71% of users that had.

TABLE A5:
First visit to the service (point of interview)

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	FIRST VISIT TO THE SERVICE			
	NUMBER		%	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
SWLO	6	69	8	92
CWO	18	57	24	76
CIC	50	25	67	33
ICTU CfU	19	46	29	71

(n=290)

FIGURE 4:
Breakdown of users making their first visit/users who had visited the service before



Making Contact

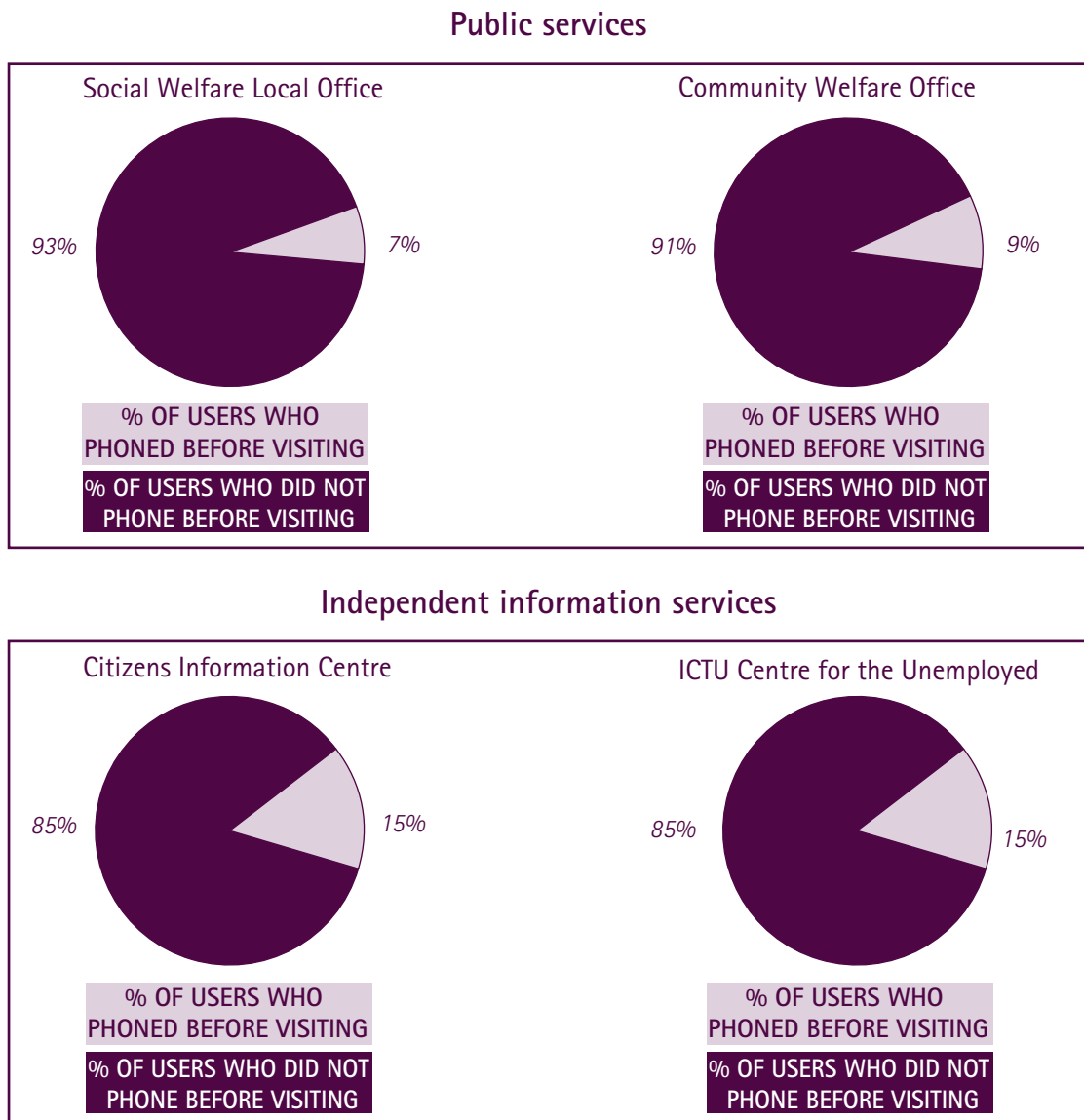
Table A6 and the pie charts in Figure 5 below show that proportion of users interviewed at the four services that had/had not phoned before visiting the service.

At the SWLO and the CWO, the two public services, the proportion of users that had phoned before visiting was 7% and 9% respectively. At both the CIC and the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, 15% of users had phoned prior to visiting the service.

TABLE A6:
Users who had phoned/not phoned before visiting service (point of interview)

SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)	PHONED BEFORE VISITING (N)	DID NOT PHONE BEFORE VISITING (N)	TOTAL (N)	PHONE BEFORE VISITING (%)	DID NOT PHONE BEFORE VISITING (%)
SWLO	5	70	75	7	93
CWO	7	68	75	9	91
CIC	11	64	75	15	85
ICTU CfU	10	55	65	15	85
TOTAL	33	257	290	11	89

FIGURE 5:
Users who had phoned/not phoned before visiting service (point of interview)



User Reasons for Making a Personal Call to Services

Users were asked to give reasons why they chose to make a personal visit to the service rather than contacting the service by telephone. The results are presented below in Table A7 and Figure 6.

At the SWLO, 29 users interviewed responded that they had to visit personally, 21 users were visiting because they had to bring along forms, documents or identification. There were 13 users who said that they preferred face-to-face

contact, 10 because they would get a better service and 4 users called because of convenience

At the CWO, 22 users interviewed said they were visiting because they were bringing along forms, documents or identification and 20 users said they were told they had to. There were 22 users who said that they preferred face-to-face contact, 10 who called because of convenience and 6 who said that they would get a better service.

The pattern of user responses at the independent services was quite different from users at the two public services. At the CIC, where 39 users were making a personal call because of convenience, 29 said that they preferred face-to-face contact and 9 users replied they would get a better service. Only one user was calling because they had to bring along forms, documents or identification and, as would be expected, no user was told they had to make a personal call.

At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, user responses were such that 26 users said that they preferred face-to-face contact, 19 responded that they were calling because of convenience and 8 users said that they would get a better service. Similarly to the CIC, only one user was calling because they had to bring along forms, documents or identification. Unusually, 2 users responded that they were told they had to call personally.

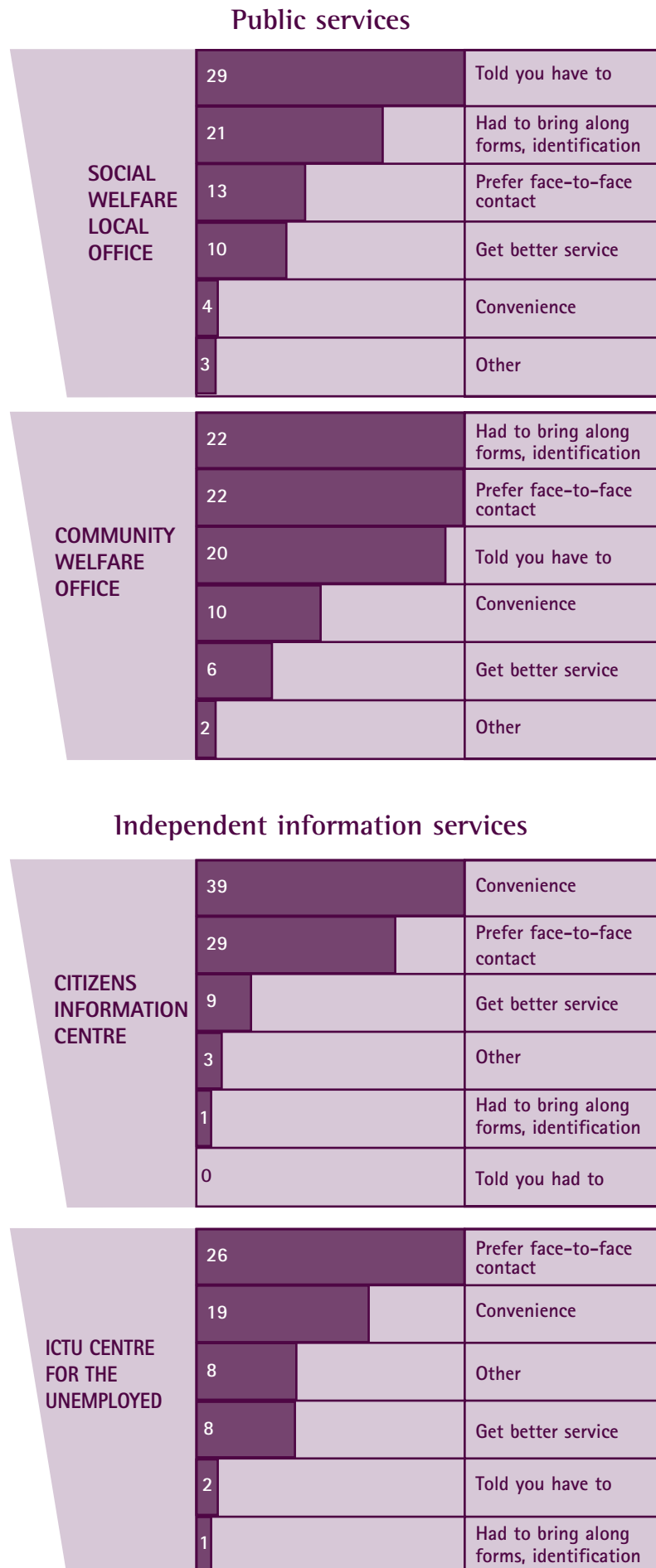
TABLE A7:
Reasons for preferring to make a personal call to service by service (point of interview)

	SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)					
	SWLO (N)	CWO (N)	CIC (N)	ICTU CFU (N)	TOTAL (N)	TOTAL (%)
PREFER FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT	13	22	29	26	89	29.0
CONVENIENCE	4	10	39	19	72	23.5
OBLIGATORY	29	20	0	2	52	16.9
HAD TO BRING ALONG FORMS, IDENTIFICATION	21	22	1	1	45	14.7
GET BETTER SERVICE	10	6	9	8	33	10.7
OTHER	3	2	3	8	16	5.2

n=290

Note: 23 respondents gave more than one answer;
8 respondents gave no answer

FIGURE 6:
User reasons for preferring to make a personal call to service (point of interview)



Reasons for User Visits

Users interviewed at the four services were asked to give the reason for their visit to the service at which they were interviewed. Table A8 and pie charts in Figure 7 below show the responses given to the question by service point at which users were interviewed.

At the SWLO, 28 out of 75 users interviewed were seeking a benefit. Four users were there to receive a payment. Of the remaining 37 users, 14 were seeking information in relation to a problem with a current benefit entitlement, 12 users were notifying a change in circumstances, and 11 users were making a query about a current benefit entitlement.

Compared to the SWLO, a higher number of users at the CWO (35 out of 75 users) were seeking a benefit and receiving a payment (11 users). Not dissimilar to the number of users at the SWLO, 10 users at the CWO were seeking information in relation to a problem with a current benefit entitlement, 11 users were notifying of a change in circumstances, and 14 users were making a query about a current benefit entitlement.

As would be expected, no users at the CIC were seeking a benefit or receiving a payment. The number of users seeking information in relation to current benefit entitlement was 45 compared with 14 who had a problem with a current benefit entitlement or a problem situation and 4 users who were seeking information because their circumstances had changed.

At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, surprisingly, 1 user stated the reason for the visit was to receive a payment.

TABLE A8:
Reason given by users for visiting service

REASON FOR VISIT	SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)				
	SWLO	CWO	CIC	ICTU CFU*	TOTAL
SEEK A BENEFIT	28	35	0	0	63
MAKE A QUERY ABOUT CURRENT BENEFIT ENTITLEMENT	11	14	45	26	96
PROBLEM WITH CURRENT BENEFIT ENTITLEMENT/PROBLEM SITUATION	14	10	14	15	53
CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCES	12	11	4	5	32
RECEIVE A PAYMENT	4	11	0	1	16
OTHER	6	1	12	17	36

n=290

Note: 6 respondents gave more than one reason.

*1 respondent gave no answer.

FIGURE 7:
Reason given by users for visiting service (point of interview)

Public services

SOCIAL WELFARE LOCAL OFFICE	28	Seek a benefit
	14	Problem with current benefit entitlement
	12	Change in circumstances
	11	Make a query about current benefit entitlement
	6	Other
	4	Receive a payment

COMMUNITY WELFARE OFFICE	35	Seek a benefit
	14	Make a query about current benefit entitlement
	11	Receive a payment
	11	Change in circumstances
	10	Problem with current benefit entitlement
	1	Other

Independent information services

CITIZENS INFORMATION CENTRE	45	Make a query about current benefit entitlement
	14	Problem with current benefit entitlement
	12	Other
	4	Change in circumstances
	0	Receive a payment
	0	Seek a benefit

ICTU CENTRE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED	26	Make a query about current benefit entitlement
	17	Other
	15	Problem with current benefit entitlement
	5	Change in circumstances
	1	Receive a payment
	0	Seek a benefit

Issues Presented by Users

Respondents were also asked to name the principal issue bringing them to the service at which they were interviewed on that day. Table A9 and Figure 8 show that in the case of each of the services social welfare was the principal issue with which a large number of users presented. This is broadly consistent with the study expectation.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs makes large numbers of weekly payments to the population under a range of services and, as would be expected, social welfare was the principal issue for 61 out of 75 users at the SWLO. Users also presented with issues under four other categories. Education and employment/training were the other main categories for users at the SWLO, 7 and 5 respectively. One user presented with a housing issue and one user presented with a family issue.

At the CWO, as well as the issue of social welfare, the other main issue that users presented with was medical card (10 users). The other categories that users presented with the CWO were education (2 users), health issues (2 users) and disability issues (2 users).

At the CIC users came with a wider range of issues. As well as social welfare, medical card, education, employment and training, and housing, users presented with legal issues, tax, debt, disability issues and consumer affairs. Thus the issues covered 11 of the 12 categories identified. The category of health issues was the exception.

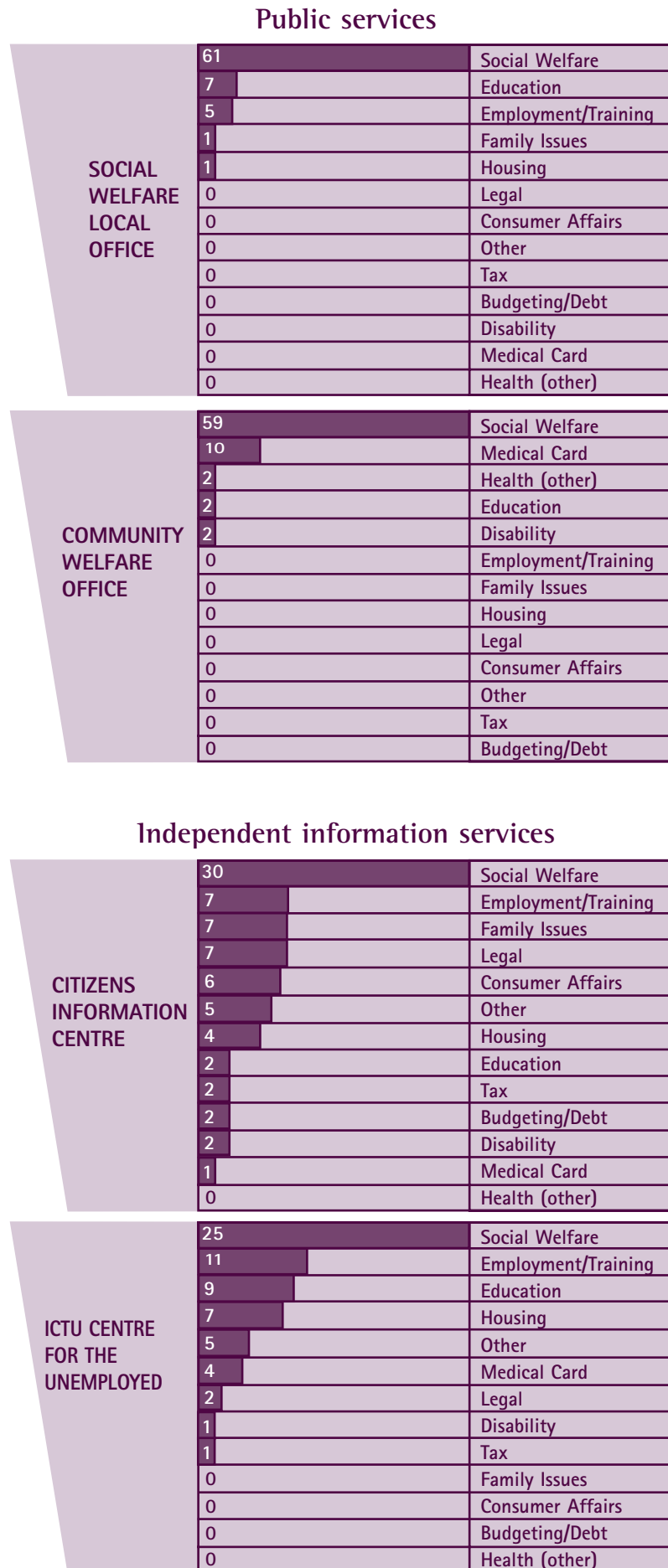
Users of the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed also came with a wide range of issues. As at the other services, social welfare (25 users) was the main issue. Other main issues were employment and training (11 users), education (9 users) and housing (7 users). The number of users who came with medical card, legal, tax and disability issues was 4, 2, 1 and 1 respectively.

TABLE A9:
Principal issue with which respondents presented at service (point of interview)

ISSUE PRESENTED	SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)					
	SWLO	CWO	CIC	ICTU CfU	NUMBER	%
SOCIAL WELFARE	61	59	30	25	175	60.3
MEDICAL CARD	0	10	1	4	15	5.2
HEALTH (OTHER)	0	2	0	0	2	0.7
EMPLOYMENT/TRAINING	5	0	7	11	23	7.9
EDUCATION	7	2	2	9	20	6.9
HOUSING	1	0	4	7	12	4.1
TAX	0	0	2	1	3	1.0
FAMILY ISSUES	1	0	7	0	8	2.8
BUDGETING/DEBT	0	0	2	0	2	0.7
LEGAL	0	0	7	2	9	3.1
DISABILITY	0	2	2	1	5	1.7
CONSUMER AFFAIRS	0	0	6	0	6	2.1
OTHER	0	0	5	5	10	3.4

(n=290)

FIGURE 8:
Principle issue with which respondents presented at service (point of interview)



It is of note that 5 users had Medical Card queries, which were brought to non-medical card services. This is consistent with the findings of other research of the NSSB. The CIC was the only centre receiving budgeting/debt and consumer queries during the study period. The ICTU Centre for the Unemployed received a higher number of queries described by users as employment and education related, than the other services.

User Expectation

Users were asked what did they expect from the visit to the service at which they were interviewed.

Table A10 and the bar charts in Figure 9 show that:

At the SWLO, 24 users expected to get the benefit they were seeking approved, 21 users expected to obtain information, 12 expected to receive a payment, 11 were expecting help with forms, 4 were expecting to get advice, and 2 users were expecting that the Social Welfare Office would act as advocates for them. The 13 users expecting other results from the visit were those signing on or off social welfare benefit, handing in forms or letters, giving information requested of them by social welfare or obtaining a letter, form or proof of payments from social welfare.

At the CWO, 35 users were expecting to get the benefit they were seeking approved, 24 users were expecting to obtain information, 19 users were expecting to receive payment, 8 users were expecting to get help with forms, 3 users were expecting to get advice and 1 user was expecting the CWO would be able to advocate on their behalf.

At the CIC, 56 of the 75 users were expecting to receive information, 28 users were expecting to get advice, 6 users were expecting help with forms, 3 users were expecting that the CIC would be able to advocate on their behalf. Surprisingly, 3 users were expecting to get their benefit approved.

At the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed, 49 users were expecting to get the benefit they were seeking approved, 41 users were expecting to get advice, 13 users were expecting to get help with forms, 13 users were expecting the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed would be able to advocate on their behalf, and 2 users were expecting to get their benefit approved.

Most of the users at the SWLO and the CWO were expecting to get the benefit they were seeking approved: 24 of the 75 users at the SWLO and 35 of the 75 users at the CWO. 'To obtain information' was the expectation of most users at the CIC and

the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. It is of note that 3 users at the CIC and 2 users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were expecting to get a benefit approved. This is a user's description of the expectation of the claim process and tells something of the users understanding of their transactions with services which is perceived in terms of being part of a larger process.

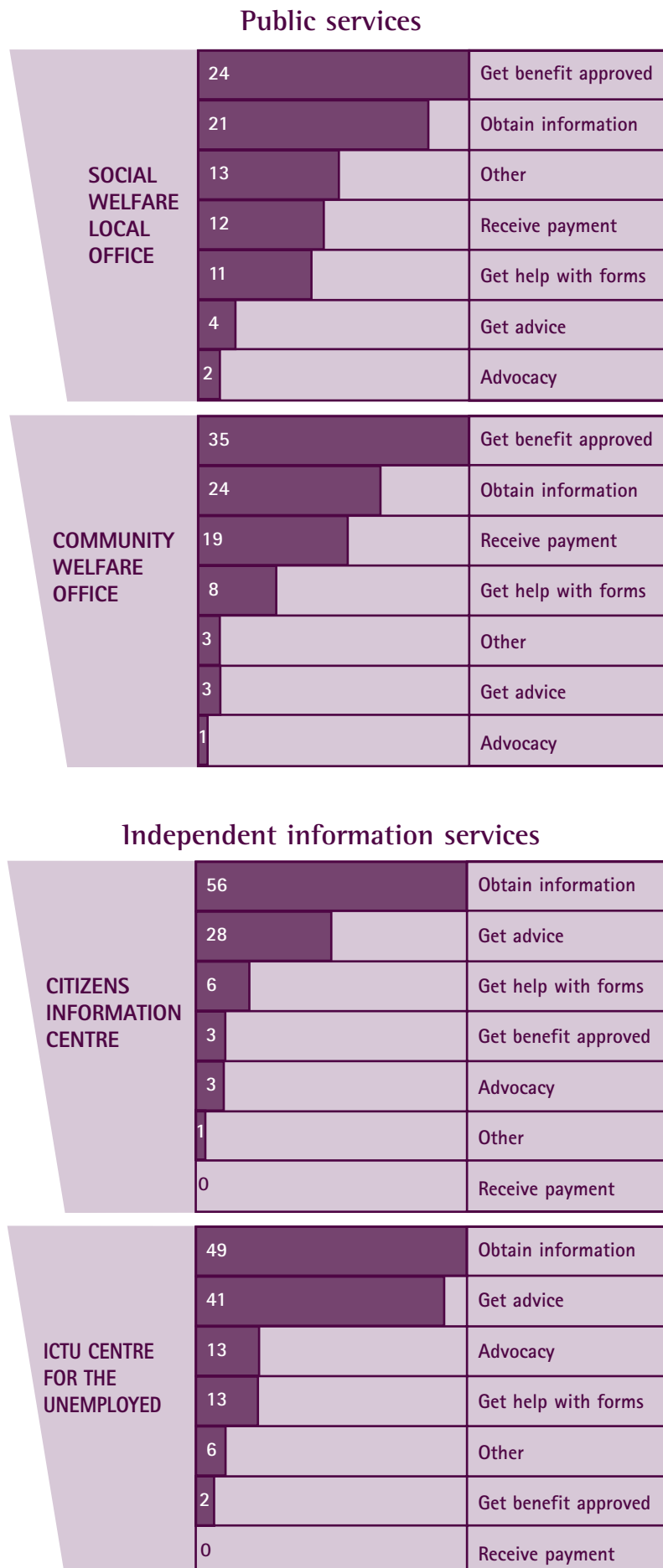
TABLE A10:
User expectation of visit

	SERVICE (POINT OF INTERVIEW)				
	SWLO (N)	CWO (N)	CIC (N)	ICTU CFU (N)	TOTAL (N)
OBTAIN INFORMATION	21	24	56	49	150
GET ADVICE	4	3	28	41	76
GET BENEFIT APPROVED	24	35	3	2	64
GET HELP WITH FORMS	11	8	6	13	38
RECEIVE PAYMENT	12	19	0	0	31
OTHER	13	3	1	6	23
ADVOCACY	2	1	3	13	19

n=290

Note: 80 respondents gave more than one answer.

FIGURE 9:
User expectation of visit to service point of interview



Result of the Visit

The vast majority of users said that they got the result that they expected (231) compared with users who said that they did not (36).

Over half (52%) of all respondents replied that they had received verbal information. A higher proportion of users at the CIC and the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed received verbal information than users at either SWLO or the CWO.

Over a quarter (79 out of 290 respondents) replied that they had obtained leaflets or other printed material. Users at the CIC and ICTU Centre for the Unemployed were more likely to receive leaflets and other printed material than users at the SWLO or the CWO.

Forty-one users reported that they got their benefit approved. Unexpectedly, this figure includes two users at the CIC, where Information Officers would not be in a position to approve a benefit.

In total, 37 users replied that contact was made with another agency on their behalf. Most of these replies (28) came from users at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed. A small number of users at both the SWLO and the CIC also gave this response. No users at the CWO responded that the Community Welfare Officer had contacted another agency on their behalf.

All agencies made referrals to other agencies. From the 290 visits by users to the four agencies, 33 referrals were generated. This means there was a referral to another agency for one in every nine users responding to the questionnaire. There was a greater level of referrals to other agencies for users of the CIC than users of any of the other three agencies.

A small number of users said that they were 'unsure' or 'didn't know' whether they had got the result they expected. A proportion of users proceeding to other offices gave this response and it appears that at this point in their search for information and/or benefit entitlements they were not in a position to assess the outcome of that single visit in the course of the study. As such, these users understood their transactions with services to be part of a larger process. The 2 users at the CIC who responded that they got their benefit and/or they received a payment as a result of the visit also understood their transactions with services in this way.

TABLE A11:
Result of the visit at service (point of interview)

	SWLO	CWO	CIC	ICTU CfU	TOTAL (N)
OBTAINED VERBAL INFORMATION	25	28	50	49	152
OBTAINED LEAFLETS OR OTHER PRINTED MATERIAL	10	15	33	21	79
BENEFIT APPROVED	16	23	2	0	41
ADVOCACY	6	0	3	28	37
ASSISTANCE WITH FORMS	9	4	5	17	35
REFERRED TO ANOTHER AGENCY	5	4	16	8	33
PAYMENT RECEIVED	7	16	2	0	25
OTHER	16	3	3	7	29
NOT SURE/DON'T KNOW	6	7	1	1	15
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES	100	100	115	131	446

Note: 104 respondents (36%) gave more than one answer, of which: 17 were respondents at the SWLO; 19 were respondents at the CWO; 30 were respondents at the CIC; 38 were respondents at the ICTU Centre for the Unemployed.

Appendix III

CHECKLIST FOR RECEPTION OF USERS IN STREET-LEVEL SERVICES ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH

- All social and information services including every entrance should be clearly identifiable from the street.
- The name of the service should be clearly displayed on the outside of the building. Consideration could be given to a Braille version.
- The opening hours should be clearly displayed. Consideration could be given to a Braille version.
- Every person coming to use services should have the right to enter through the same door.
- Upon entering social and information services the public should be met by one person.
- There could be a clearing desk with a receptionist or porter. It should be known who is on the premises and where they are at all times.
- The receptionist or porter should be able to distinguish between simple and complex queries.
- The reception can be a point for the handing out or receiving of forms, provision of information leaflets or booklets, visiting cards with contact details available, maps showing service location and jurisdiction.
- At the clearing desk, people would be directed to an appropriate member of staff.
- At the clearing desk users should be given an indication of the length of waiting and of where to queue.
- Public services should consider upgrading the position of 'porter' given the important role they play in customer service.
- There should be customer service training of all 'front-line' personnel including porters and receptionists in public services.

- Service providers should consider introducing a ticket system, where they are not in operation. This could be a simple system that does not require high costs or the installation of new technology. Such a system would eliminate the problem of queue skipping and would allow users to leave the queue to go outside for fresh air, to get a drink of water or use toilet facilities during long periods of waiting.
- All services should be easily accessible to people with disabilities, elderly people and people with young children. This includes main and secondary entrances to buildings as well as services inside the premises.
- Toilets and related baby changing facilities should be available to the public, including people with disabilities, the elderly and people with young children.
- The provision of seating in sufficient numbers should be available
- No smoking rules and legislation should be enforced.
- Users and other service providers should be able to make contact with social and information services either by telephone or in person between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. Monday to Friday. In their absence, users and other service providers should be able to leave a message for the information officer. A policy of returning phone calls should be adopted.
- Service providers should ensure that there is a display of up-to-date information and that relevant information leaflets and booklets are available.
- Service providers should check routinely with other service providers in the locality to ensure that information about their location, opening hours and contact details are made available to the public and that their own leaflets and posters are up-to-date and on display.



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