



Submission by Comhairle
to the

National Economic and Social
Forum (NESF)
Project Team

on

**Improving the Delivery of Quality
Public Services**

March 2006

Improving the Delivery of Quality Public Services

Submission to National Economic and Social Forum

1. Introduction

Comhairle welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NESF deliberations on improving the delivery of quality public services.

The primary function of Comhairle is the provision of information, advice and advocacy in the broad area of social services. The agency has a statutory commitment to assist and support people, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social and civil services.

Comhairle also has a number of other functions including:

“To support, promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues which are of concern to users of those services”

In carrying out this function, Comhairle relies heavily on feedback on the needs and experiences of users of the Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS). In 2005 there were over 800,000 queries to these services. The most common type of query refers to Social Welfare (one-third of all queries, followed by Employment Rights (11%), Health Services (8%) and Family Matters (7%). Citizens Information Centres (CICs) indicate that 4% of queries have social policy feedback implications. CICs and CIPS report queries with a social policy dimension to Comhairle where they are analysed and used as the basis for policy submissions and reports.

Structure of this submission

In this submission Comhairle addresses key factors that need to be taken into account in the delivery of public services. Feedback from CISs, in the form of case studies, forms the basis of an analysis of issues for users in relation to the delivery of quality public services. The principles of quality customer service are examined in respect of the issues arising from social policy feedback. Finally, we examine the challenges service providers face in improving the quality of public services.

2. Key Factors

The following factors need to be taken into account in the delivery of public services:

Accessible, Integrated Information

Producing, publishing, disseminating and promoting the availability of high quality information on social and civil services for the public is a key consideration in quality service delivery and is Comhairle's key strategic priority.

Mainstreaming

The principle of mainstreaming should underpin all services and in particular services for people with disabilities and other marginalized groups and services for migrants. Mainstreaming of services means that all people can access their needs without difficulty through generalist services as their particular needs are provided for within these services. This requires that service providers have an increased awareness of and make provision for the needs of particular users including people with disabilities.

Community Care

There is a need to fully implement stated policy on community care. This means better integration of hospital and community care services and means making legislative provision for core community care services such as home help. Housing is also an essential element of community care and co-operation between community care services and local authorities is important in this regard.

Continuum of Provision

Consistency and equity in services and supports require that there is a continuum of provision to meet the wide range of individual needs. There continues to be a mismatch between general welfare provision policy and the ability of individual citizens, particularly those on the margins, to access services appropriate to their needs.

Three areas where the lack of adequate provision is evident are housing, respite care and affordable high quality residential care.

Family Care

In considering the question of quality service delivery, it is necessary to take full account of the role and contribution of family carers, both to the exchequer and to the broader society and to the implications of an evolving scenario where there will almost certainly be less family carers relative to need. Cognisance also needs to be taken of the long-term impact of caring on individuals and society in general in terms of people's health and well-being and, in some instances, career opportunities and income foregone.

Role of Voluntary/Community Organisations

The funding of the voluntary and community sector needs to be based on an acknowledgement of the necessary and integral role of the sector in a mixed system of welfare provision, with particular reference to the delivery of essential community services. Criteria for funding should be clearly stated and should take account of a wide range of factors, including

- capacity-building among voluntary and community organisations to engage in a partnership approach to planning and policy-making;
- the elimination of local and regional discrepancies in levels and methods of funding;
- a funding policy which minimises dysfunctional competition and eliminates the practice of re-focusing services to draw down funding;

Accessibility

It is important that public bodies regularly assess how accessible their services are to the broad range of customers, particularly those who have been socially excluded. While there has been much emphasis in recent years on the concept of inclusiveness, it is not clear that the position of people whose access to services has already been impaired by physical, psychological, educational, linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, geographical or technological factors has changed relative to the population as a whole. Sections 26, 27 and 28 of the Disability Act 2005 set out specific requirements regarding the accessibility of public information and services and goods purchased by public bodies so that they are accessible to people with disabilities as far as practicable.

Needs Assessment

Needs assessment should start from the lived experience of people requiring services as distinct from how need is conceptualised in policy and practice. Assessment of individual needs should take cognisance of choice, autonomy and the fact that needs change over time. The challenge is to move beyond a concern with meeting physical needs only towards addressing other equally important components of need based on social participation, control over one's life and equality of access.

Under the Disability Act 2005, people with disabilities will be entitled:

- to have their health and educational needs assessed;
- to have individual service statements drawn up setting out what services they will get;
- to access independent complaints and appeals machinery;
- to avail of the services of personal advocates.

In so far as possible, assessment of need for all vulnerable groups should take these factors into consideration.

3. Feedback from Citizen Information Centres

Queries to CICs indicate, that despite the various quality service initiatives introduced in recent years, some sections of the population do not have equality of access to social services. Some people do not have the same level of choice in accessing services as other members of the public because of a number of factors. These include the fact that the services available may be inadequate or inappropriate to meet their needs. They may find it difficult to access information and the information they receive may be inaccurate or inappropriate. Some people lack the skills to deal with officialdom and require help and support. There may also be anomalies in the system, complicated application processes, arbitrary or unclear entitlement, insufficient resources, inadequate income support, ongoing work and welfare traps and inadequate complaints and appeals systems.

The difficulties experienced by people in accessing services identified by CICs can be classified under four broad headings:

- (i) difficulties in accessing service/support;
- (ii) gaps in availability of service/ support;

- (iii) difficulties in interactions with state agencies; and
- (iv) information.

A number of cases are outlined under each of these headings which illustrate the range and type of issues that are identified. The cases presented are indicative of the type of issues identified in queries to CICs. They refer to the experience of individuals and families trying to access services. People's individual situations do not always fit easily into existing frameworks or eligibility criteria and the challenge for quality service delivery is to ensure that the mechanisms available have inbuilt provision to ensure equitable access to services and supports.

3.1 Difficulties in Accessing Services/Supports

Some queries to CICs refer to situations where there are significant difficulties in accessing a service/benefit and/or related delays. In some instances access is achieved only after significant representation/advocacy by the CIC. The examples included refer to difficulties in accessing social welfare payments/benefits, transport, community services and supports for people with disabilities.

3.1.1 Social Welfare Payments/Benefits

In some instances significant difficulties are encountered in respect of accessing or retaining a social welfare payment or benefit. Such difficulties are illustrated by the following cases:

Delay in Transfer of Household Benefits Package

A man in his 60s who was in receipt of Invalidity Pension moved from one Local Authority house to another within the same Local Authority area but had to re-apply for the Household Benefits Package. The application took over 5 months to process, during which time the initial application form was mislaid and he had to re-apply. In the interim period the man (on low income) had to pay his ESB and phone bills, which, he told the CIC, caused him financial strain and a high level of anxiety. During this period he was in regular contact with the CIC looking for advice and support and the CIC maintained regular contact with the Department of Social and Family Affairs on the matter. The CIC noted that this man lived on his own, had no form of transport and depended on the telephone as his means of contact with friends and family. He was without his benefits for five months and felt restricted in his use of both telephone and electricity during this period.

Delay in Processing Application for One Parent Family Payment

A woman, a non-EU national with 3 children, had to wait for 12 months to have her application for One Parent Family Payment processed. Her situation was complicated somewhat by the fact that there was a dispute about the amount of money being paid by her husband and the fact that during the year she had got a part-time job. The CIC involved stated that they contacted the DSFA "on numerous occasions" on the woman's behalf and were told that a decision would be made 'soon' but that this did not occur. The CIC commented that during all this time the reason for the delay was never stated clearly and that the woman found it very difficult to cope financially -- "her husband did not pay maintenance and the mortgage payments were two months in arrears".

3.1.2 Re-applying for a Social Welfare Payment

A poor level of co-ordination between services was highlighted by the case of a man who suffers from schizophrenia and was recently released from prison.

The man sought help from the CIC. He had to re-apply for Disability Allowance, which he was receiving prior to going to prison. His wife, who had been in receipt of the Carer's Allowance, prior to his going to prison also had to re-apply. Both have significant literacy problems. The re-application process was difficult and complex because of their difficulties in understanding and negotiating the system. The CIC took on an extensive advocacy role in this case once they had been contacted and noted that no co-ordinated supports were provided by the statutory agencies involved. "The man was discharged from prison without any support or help from any statutory agency in reclaiming the allowances – this couple were expected to be able to deal with a 'minefield' of forms".

3.1.3 Transport

The following cases illustrate the impact of lack of transport on people's ability to access services:

A 74 year old woman approached Community Welfare Officer to ask for assistance with the cost of attending an out patients appointment. Her sole income is a Old Age Non Contributory Pension and she is living alone. She was referred to hospital out-patients by her GP. However, she cannot board a bus because of her poor mobility and, therefore, could not use public transport. The Community Welfare Officer, however, would not give her the €15 to get a taxi to her appointment and, according to the woman, told her that her family should look after her. The woman explained that her family are living in England. The CIC noted "the woman was very distressed after her experience and felt she would not be happy to deal with her CWO again".

A man contacted the CIC to seek advice. Both he and his wife have severe medical conditions. Both are over 70 and medical card holders. They cannot get help with cost of transport to either the hospital or to the Hearing Aid Clinic which they need to attend regularly. They live in a rural area and it costs them €70 for taxi for each trip to the Hearing Aid Clinic. The CIC contacted the ambulance service, community care and the client's local Community Welfare Officer. The Community Welfare Officer indicated that because the couple's joint pensions bring them over the income levels for Supplementary Welfare, there would be no assistance available. The CIC noted "there is a huge gap in services as there is no point in patients getting access to specialists or other medical appointments (on medical card scheme) etc. if they cannot attend because of difficulties with transport".

3.1.4 Funding for special needs of a person with a disability

The following case illustrates particular problems experienced by people with disabilities:

A woman with a physical disability who was not eligible for a medical card incurred significant costs by having to purchase special footwear necessitated by her disability. She was told initially by the Health Board (HSE) that she was not entitled to any assistance from the HSE towards the purchase. She sought help from the CIC because she found the experience of dealing with the HSE about the matter difficult and stressful and felt that she was being seen as a nuisance. Following intervention by the CIC, a senior HSE official indicated that 'a way would be found' to provide financial assistance in this instance and the matter was resolved accordingly. The CIC commented that there was a need for more systematic provision for the needs of

people with disabilities in situations such as this. "The outcome in this instance may not have been achieved without the intervention of the CIC".

The people involved in the above cases sometimes did not have the confidence or the skill to deal with statutory agencies in the form of complaining about delays and/or following up on applications. The delays in processing applications seemed excessive, particularly in cases such as the transfer of the Household Benefits Package which does not require a means-test and where most of the relevant information is already on record. A somewhat disconcerting aspect of processing applications in some instances was the loss or mislaying of forms submitted and the necessity for the applicant to complete a second form.

3.2 Gaps in availability of Appropriate Services/Supports

Limited availability of some services and supports, a lack of coordination and deficiencies in the administrative system mean that some people fail to access a service appropriate to their needs or have great difficulty in doing so. While adequate support services are available in theory, the reality for some people is that they cannot get assistance commensurate with need.

A service or support which, in the view of the people involved and the information workers dealing with the case, might have been reasonably expected, was not available in the following cases identified by CICs.

The examples included refer to income/benefits, housing/accommodation and general access to services.

3.2.1 Income/Benefits

Carer's Allowance

Three cases are cited which indicate shortcomings with the Carer's Allowance provisions.

A woman in her 30s has a 3-year old child and has acquired a disability and is, therefore, no longer able to care for either herself or her child. A relative who provides care and support has been granted the Carer's Allowance. However, the relative is not entitled to any additional payment in respect of caring for the child even though the mother herself is unable to provide an adequate level of care. There is no provision in the Carer's Allowance for people who find themselves in such a situation.

A man has to stay at home full-time to care for his wife (who suffers from depression) and their 7 children (youngest 9 months old). His application for Carer's Allowance was turned down on the basis that his wife is not in need of full-time care. However, his wife is frequently unable to look after the children on her own. The man is in receipt of Unemployment Assistance but cannot meet the criteria of being available for and seeking work in that he is a full-time carer and cannot leave the house for any extended period of time.

The clients are a married couple with 3 severely disabled children. They applied for Carer's Allowance and were awarded the payment for the first two children, but

nothing for the third. The Department of Social and Family Affairs, when contacted by the CIC, confirmed that the regulations provide for payments for caring for up to two people but carers providing care for more than two people receive the same, regardless of means.

The CIC noted that “there is a level of inequality here. The parents are providing the same standard and level of care to all three children, and they are surely entitled to be treated equally. Obviously, their caring duties are much more onerous than if they were caring for just two children.

By caring for all three children at home, these parents are saving the State a very substantial sum in long-stay residential care costs”.

3.2.2 Housing/ Accommodation

The following case illustrates the non-availability of sheltered/supported accommodation:

A 19-year old man had great difficulties in finding and retaining appropriate accommodation – in effect he needed ‘half-way house’ accommodation because of his inability to cope on his own. This man had been taken into the care of the former Health Board when he was 12 (his parents had separated). Since leaving this care situation he had lived in different hostels (one temporary) and in private rented accommodation. He told the CIC that he is not ready/able to live in a flat on his own but would manage if he could share a house/flat. However, he was having difficulty finding such accommodation. Despite ongoing involvement by the HSE in his case and despite the fact that the man was participating in a FAS training programme, his special accommodation needs were not addressed.

The following case highlights the fragmentation of support services for homeless persons:

A middle-aged separated woman came to live in a provincial town. This woman had a history of homelessness and was referred to the CIC for help and advice on a number of fronts, including income, accommodation and medical assistance. The CIC initiated contact with and made referrals to a number of agencies. While all of the agencies contacted appeared to act efficiently and quickly within their own remit, no statutory agency took a lead role in the case and no comprehensive assessment of her complex needs was carried out. The CIC expressed the view that because the woman was not seen as the responsibility of any particular statutory agency, her situation was dealt with in a piecemeal and quite inadequate fashion.

3.2.3 Disabled Person’s Grant

Significant shortcomings of the Disabled Persons Grant are illustrated in the following case:

A difficulty with financing the adaptation of a home to provide accessible accommodation for a wheelchair user was identified in the case of a man in his 30s. The man works on a CE project and lives with his mother (an old age pensioner) in a house purchased from the Local Authority for which they are making loan repayments. The man applied for a Disabled Person’s Grant to provide downstairs accommodation but there was a shortfall of €19,000 between the cost of the adaptation and the maximum grant payable. There is no clearly stated provision for or clarity about how he would get the balance. He was told that his situation ‘will be looked at’ by the Health Board (HSE) in due course.

In a general way the issues arising from the cases outlined illustrate the difficulties in providing adequately and appropriately for all citizens. In some instances the problem identified could be dealt with by, for example, adjusting criteria for eligibility for particular payments. In other instances the difficulties are much more endemic in that they refer to broad policy issues, such as Traveller accommodation, accommodation for people with special needs or the availability of a range of community support services.

3.3 Difficulties in Interactions with State Agencies

Frontline staff in statutory agencies obviously have a key role to play in bridging the gap between individuals and the State. This applies to both the interface with individuals and the administrative system. An underlying issue in some cases is that people feel that frontline staff do not deal adequately or appropriately with their situation. This perception is sometimes associated with a feeling that an official did not appreciate the difficulty of the case, did not believe them, did not explain the matter clearly, was too intrusive or was over zealous in his/her assessment of a particular situation. Related matters are people being left for long periods waiting on the phone, application forms being lost or mislaid and people not being told of their right to have a matter dealt with in private.

The case examples included refer to difficulties encountered in having claims processed, difficulties in clarifying entitlements and problems with enforcing rights.

3.3.1 Difficulties in Application for Social Welfare Payments and other Supports

Difficulties in relation to the application process for Social Welfare payments arise from time to time and these difficulties are illustrated in the following cases.

Application by non-EU National for One Parent Family Payment

An EU non-national had her application for a One Parent Family Payment refused on the basis that she was not actually separated from her husband but simply living geographically apart on a temporary basis. The woman told the CIC that the latter most definitely was not the case and wondered whether she was obliged to get a divorce in her country of origin in order to be eligible for the payment. According to the CIC, the woman speaks very little English and because of this there may have been a lack of understanding in the situation. It was unclear whether or not a translator was present when the woman was interviewed initially by a DSFA official. The CIC assisted the woman with an appeal in relation to the One Parent Family Payment and engaged translation services to facilitate this process. The CIC noted: "This woman's case raises a basic issue about the adequacy of protocols and guidelines for dealing with people with poor English language skills in situations of marriage breakdown".

3.3.2 Clarifying Entitlement To Social Welfare Payments

The following case illustrates difficulties encountered by people in clarifying entitlement to social welfare payments.

A middle-aged widow did not understand the manner of assessment of her part-time earnings by DSFA in relation to entitlement to Unemployment Assistance (UA). The woman reported to the CIC that she had a very negative experience in the social welfare office and that when a dispute arose over the matter, “her private and confidential details were loudly broadcast” and that she found the experience upsetting and embarrassing. The woman complained that the business was conducted in public and the CIC noted that she was not told about her right to have the matter dealt with in private or offered this option. The main problem arose initially because the woman did not understand the basis on which the assessment was made and, as a result, she thought she was not being allowed her full entitlement. The CIC commented that the matter would have been dealt with more appropriately if it had been dealt with in private in the first instance. It would seem reasonable that additional pro-active procedures be put in place in all DSFA offices to ensure that people are offered this option.

3.3.3 Non-Compliance with Building Regulations

The case of a man with a disability who received a Disabled Person’s Grant for an adaptation that did not comply with Building Regulations raised an important concern about the responsibilities of the Local Authority involved.

A 73-year old wheelchair-bound man with bi-lateral amputations received a Disabled person’s Grant in respect of adaptations which included the installation of a ramp. However, the ramp was unsuitable and problematic from the outset and in effect could not be used. Various representations to the Local Authority confirmed that the ramp did not comply with current Building Regulations. However, the Local Authority took the view that since the dwelling was privately owned, the onus was on the owner to pursue the matter with the builder. While the Local Authority acknowledged that it had a role in seeing that the work complied with the building regulations, any costs incurred would have to be borne by the man himself.

The matter was pursued further with the Local Authority by the CIC on the basis that the engineer involved should have ensured that the ramp was correctly built and usable before approving the work. The Local Authority stated that it was their understanding that the ramp provided was an arrangement between the man and the builder and, therefore, maintained that it was not their responsibility to examine it when certifying payment of the grant. Eventually, a grant of 90% of the cost of providing an appropriate ramp and handrails was sanctioned by the Local Authority on the basis that “the case is now urgent and the omission of the ramp from the original grant application was obviously an oversight on the part of the Health Board”. While the intervention of the CIC eventually resulted in a satisfactory outcome, this did not happen without sustained pressure. The approval of the original application without provision for a proper ramp did not appear to make sense in the circumstances. The CIC involved stated that other similar cases had been brought to their attention.

The cases cited highlight the problems faced by individuals who have difficulties with or do not understand the administrative system or who find that the response of Government officials is unsatisfactory. People sometimes experience the system as inflexible, the information given to them as incomprehensible or feel that the manner in which they were dealt with was unsympathetic. People encounter difficulties in their dealings with statutory agencies due to various factors, including a lack of clarity about rights and entitlements, the approach taken by officials, a benefit/service being

discretionary and/or entitlement being dependent on the availability of funding at a particular point in time.

3.4 Information

CICs identify instances where the core issue is a significant information gap on the part of the State or where the information available is inaccurate or not clearly understood by the people involved. The following cases illustrate the problems identified.

3.4.1 Entitlement to Domiciliary Care Allowance

A woman sought help from the CIC about applying for Disability Allowance for her child (now 16) with a learning disability and applying for the Carer's Allowance for herself. During the process of the CIC assisting the woman to complete the application forms it emerged that she had been unaware of her possible entitlement to Domiciliary Care Allowance (and Carer's Allowance) for her child and that she had not been informed at any stage that this was a possibility. The CIC commented that professionals (such as GPs) and statutory agencies involved with children with special needs should have protocols for informing them of possible entitlement to the Domiciliary Care Allowance. "This did not happen in this case".

3.4.2 Entitlement to Invalidity Pension

The issue of entitlement to Invalidity Pension also arose in relation to a woman in receipt of Disability Allowance (DA) (means-tested) who came to the CIC to check her position in relation to taking up part-time work and the impact it would have on her DA payment. It emerged in discussions that she would have been entitled to Invalidity Pension (non-means tested) when she applied for and was granted Disability Allowance (means-tested) four years previously. (Invalidity Pension would have been a 'passport' to the Household Benefits Package (electricity allowance, telephone allowance and Free Television Allowance and to Free Travel.) However, she was not informed of her entitlement in this regard. When contacted by the CIC, the DSFA undertook to review the woman's position and to look at the possibility of awarding her Invalidity Pension retrospectively. The CIC observed that the woman's entitlement to Invalidity Pension should have been a very obvious one.

3.4.3 Entitlement to Widow's Pension

A man (70) and his wife (55) came to the centre in a very distressed state. The man, terminally ill, had called to the local Social Welfare Office to find out if his wife could claim widows contributory pension on his PRSI record or any other payment when he passed away. He was very concerned that because his wife had not paid PRSI herself that she would be left with no income. The person that he spoke to told him she would not have any entitlement. He told the CIC that this happened on three separate occasions. The man has been paying a class S contribution in Ireland since 1988. The CIC noted that "although he spoke with a foreign accent he holds an Irish passport and is an Irish citizen". The CIC helped him to get a written copy of his PRSI record and contacted DSFA Widow's Section to check eligibility. It emerged that that the man's wife would qualify for a pension when he passes away.

These cases show that people were not aware of or advised about entitlement to particular benefits. There is a *prima facie* question here as to whose responsibility it is to ensure that people are provided with all relevant information and that the information provided by statutory agencies is comprehensive and fully understood by those involved.

4. Key Points Arising from Queries to CICs

Although benefits are available in many instances, these can be disjointed and rely on a person knowing about availability rather than a more proactive approach on the part of the State. People suffering from various types of disabling conditions/illnesses and/or literacy difficulties may not always be in a position to make that first point of contact or seek out the relevant information. When an entitlement is 'obvious', as in some of the cases cited, it is difficult to understand why this option was not explored during contact with a state agency. The information gaps identified suggest a need for a still more proactive approach by officials engaging with the public in relation to entitlements and benefits. The availability of information through a wide range of channels and media cannot be assumed to reach all individuals.

While it is the responsibility of statutory agencies to ensure that appropriate information is available to all citizens, it is clear that CICs play an important role in picking up on gaps and deficits, as happened in the above cases. However, the reality is that there are people who do not use CICs or other similar information services and who may be losing out on entitlements. Where contact with a CIC was made this resulted in the provision or clarification of information and, in some instances, negotiation in respect of a particular service or benefit.

Some of the cases were extremely complex and did not neatly fit into an existing package or contingency provision. This is a matter which obviously presents enormous challenges to policy-makers and administrators, particularly in a climate where resource constraints are always an issue.

Both CIC users and information workers noted the complexity of the administrative system which frequently involved lack of clarity about allocation systems, repeat assessments, moving between the various DSFA sections and the DSFA and HSE Community Welfare Officers, delays in processing applications and little information on progress in particular instances. There were long delays, in some cases of almost one year, in the processing of applications for various social welfare benefits e.g. One Parent Family Payment.

Some of the people involved made the point that service administrators sometimes failed to fully understand the reality of daily living for people in difficult situations, viz. coping with disability, living on low income, unemployment and poor or inadequate housing.

A small number of CIC users indicate that they are unhappy about the manner in which they were dealt with by officials and, for example, were not aware of or told about their right to have their query/application dealt with in private by social welfare officials.

Families with multi-faceted problems obviously require an integrated package of supports, within HSE and between HSE and Local Authorities and between statutory agencies and voluntary/community organisations. While statutory

officials deal with people from the perspective of their own agency and within the resources available, there do not appear to be any co-ordinated packages of support available to ensure that people's overall problems are dealt with adequately, sensitively and fairly. This begs the question as to whose responsibility it is to ensure that appropriate integrated support systems are in place for families and individuals.

Some of the problems identified arise directly from the complexity of the Irish social welfare system, particularly in relation to different types of payments and related allowances and disregards. An equally important issue is the relationship between payments administered directly by the DSFA and the Supplementary Welfare Allowance payments administered by the HSE Community Welfare Officers. Many queries to CICs refer specifically to difficulties around the DSFA/Community Welfare Officer axis and to duplication of assessments and related means-testing. It was quite unclear in some instances as to whose responsibility it was to ensure that a person was not left without an income in cases, for example, where applications or appeals were being processed. A related matter was the long delay in some instances in processing applications for benefits.

The main issues identified can be summarised as follows:

- Service availability is in some cases experienced as 'arbitrary', i.e., dependent on a particular administrator or on the intervention of a politician. Some people feel they are not being treated equally or fairly by the State because people in similar circumstances seem to be able to get a service/benefit which they can not.
- Services can be dependent on resource availability and on area of residence, e.g. Disabled Person's Housing Grant, make it difficult for both the CIC and the applicant to establish either a timescale or the level of benefit available.
- In a small number of instances people endure both physical and mental trauma in trying to establish eligibility for a service to which they feel they are entitled.
- Some people only get a particular service/benefit because they 'kept after it' and/or that the CIC kept pushing their case.
- Service users are not always told about their right to have their query/application dealt with in private by social welfare officials.

5. Principles of Quality Customer Service¹: Issues Identified through Social Policy Feedback

1. Quality Service Standards

Because of the discretionary nature of some services and/or because they are dependent on resource availability at a particular point in time, people sometimes do not know in practice whether they qualify or not. This impinges

¹ A revised set of 12 Quality Customer Service Principles was approved by Government in July 2000 and Departments were asked to take them on board in developing Customer action Plans

on the principle of setting quality standards for particular services, e.g., home helps.

2. Equality/Diversity

People with disabilities, Non-EU nationals, Travellers, people living in isolated rural areas, experience particular difficulties in both accessing services and, in some instances, experience difficulties in dealing with public officials.

3. Physical Access

People are not always afforded privacy in having their cases dealt with by public bodies. Also, many people experience difficulties in reading and/or understanding forms.

4. Information

There are situations where the information provided by statutory agencies is incomplete and/or not understood by the service users. In some instances there is a lack of clarity about entitlement to particular services and supports.

5. Timeliness and Courtesy

Long delays (up to 12 months in some instances) are experienced in having applications or appeals processed.

6. Complaints

Some people are very reluctant to make complaints, particularly in respect of individual officials with whom they are likely to have to deal on an ongoing basis

7. Appeals

Appeal systems are an important element in quality customer service and need to be put in place and promoted. Many people require assistance and support from CICs in making appeals to statutory agencies and CICs are frequently involved in assisting people in this regard²

8. Consultation and Evaluation

While there are some customer consultation mechanisms in place, the reality is that many people feel strongly that their needs, experiences and perspectives are not taken into consideration when services are being put in place and resources allocated.

9. Choice

In some instances an adequate or appropriate service is not available to deal adequately with an identified need - the notion of 'choice' simply does not arise.

11. Better Co-ordination

² Of the 14,089 appeals disposed of by the Social welfare Appeals Office in 2004, almost half (46.6%) had a 'favourable' outcome for the appellant (Allowed, Partially Allowed and Revised Decision by a Deciding Officer).

The lack of inter and intra - agency co-ordination and non-integration of services is a regular feature in queries presented to CICs.

6. Issues and Challenges

Adequate Income

An underlying issue in many of the queries to CICs is the fact that the income available is simply inadequate to meet need. This is a factor in people 'making ends meet' on a week-to-week basis and/or in dealing with additional costs arising from disability (including, for example, making up the shortfall arising where a person receives a Disabled Person's Grant). This raises a fundamental question as to the adequacy of current basic social welfare payments vis a vis the costs of daily living. The question has other important nuances when principles of social inclusion and equity are applied which obviously need to be addressed in anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies.

Another aspect of the basic income issue is the fact that in a small number of cases people are left without any income for periods of time. This arises because of poor or inadequate liaison between DSFA and HSE Community Welfare Officers in particular instances. A key principle of the social welfare system should ensure that the right to an income should never be undermined by shortcomings in administrative processes.

Service Integration at the Point of Delivery

Services for people on the margins frequently depend on the performance of frontline staff and the extent to which services are integrated. The negative experiences of some users in this regard are a cause for concern. Administrative processes and procedures should reflect and support interactive and integrated provision. Services need to be adjusted and adapted to the situation and needs at the local and at the individual level. This may mean giving local administrators more autonomy in developing and implementing policies within a local partnership framework involving end users, frontline staff, managers and relevant representative organisations. It also means greater transparency in the way decisions are made and underpinning eligibility criteria for different services.

The Donegal Integrated Services Delivery Project is an example of public sector organisations changing their service delivery model in an attempt to deliver improved customer service. The objective of the Donegal Integrated Services Delivery Project provides a suite of integrated public services in a rural area based around de-centralised decision making and supported by information technology. The leading organisation, Donegal County Council, is working with a number of partner organisations, including Comhairle and Donegal Citizens information Service. Inter-service co-operation to reduce repeat assessments, central information provision and feedback on the effectiveness of services are all a feature of this pilot project. It is important that this innovative service is evaluated and mainstreamed.

Repeat Assessments

More inter-service co-operation to reduce repeat assessments should be instigated. More efficient use should be made of computerised records in order to minimise the amount of paperwork and duplication of applications and certificates required from social welfare clients. A clear example here is the requirement that people have to re-apply for the Household Benefits Package when they move house.

There should be more integration between the Social Welfare Offices and Health Boards and between the different sections of Social Welfare so that duplication and delays are minimised.

Delays in Processing Applications/Appeals

A delay in processing an application/appeal is a recurring theme in queries to CICs. While it is recognised that the Department of Social and Family Affairs and other state agencies makes every effort to minimise delays and have set targets for this purpose, it is clear that long delays continue to be a feature of the system. An aspect of the delays issue regularly identified and one that could probably be easily addressed was the lack of clear information to applicants about the status of their application and the target date for completion.

Arbitrary Entitlement

Some of the issues identified in the study arose because the criteria for accessing a particular service or benefit were not clear and transparent and the decision depended on prioritisation by a service administrator or manager. Also, small-scale changes in eligibility/needs assessment systems which may not be widely published or understood exacerbate this less than satisfactory situation.

Much more work is required in the area of identifying core supports and services which should be provided on the basis of an individual comprehensive assessment of need and their subsequent availability as a matter of right.

Codes of Practice Governing Relationships between Public Servants and Clients

All public service providers who deal directly with the public should have a comprehensive code of practice, which governs their dealings with service users. Areas where codes are needed include dealings between social welfare and Health Board officials and clients, in particular between Community Welfare Officers and their clients.

The codes should cover areas such as dealing with people in private and rights to information and appeals procedures. Copies of relevant codes should be readily available and given to service users. The Ombudsman's Guide to Good Practice should be used as the basis for these codes. Practices which impact on the service user such as, for example, asking users to contact different services/departments themselves, should be discontinued.

User Involvement

Initiatives such as the SMI, Customer Services Action Plans and various partnership mechanisms have created a better context for the public to engage in policy development. However, additional consultation and feedback mechanisms are required, particularly at local level, for service users to channel their views and experiences. Care must be taken to ensure that an approach to user involvement in service development based on the notion of a well informed and articulate public does not lead to the further exclusion of those citizens whose needs are least often articulated.

Information

Information is an absolute requirement for effective service delivery. Without good quality, accessible information, it is not possible for people to get the services they need, to vindicate their rights or to make valuable contributions to the policy-making processes. Some queries to CICs indicate a paucity of relevant and understandable information from statutory agency personnel working in the frontline of service delivery. Some of this information refers to internal processes which impact negatively on citizens, such as the timescale for processing of claims or appeals. Independent information, advice and advocacy services must be complementary to and not a substitute for an integrated public service delivery and information system.

Citizens Information Online

Producing and publishing high quality information on social and civil services for the public is a key consideration in quality service delivery. There are two ways in which Comhairle integrates information:

- Integrating information from a wide range of service providers so that the public can access comprehensive information about rights and entitlements.
- Integrating information across the various channels, i.e. web-based, telephone based, or face to face in a Citizens Information Centre or other organisation, so that the same level of service can be given to clients no matter which channel they use;

Comhairle recognises the value of the Internet as a channel for delivering information to people in a convenient manner and has developed the OASIS website and the Citizens Information Database (CID). These resources are now being integrated to combine and improve upon the best features of both systems. In addition to enhancing functionality, the new site will enable Comhairle to maximise use of its information expertise, and provide a truly integrated information resource.

The Role of Information Technology in Quality Service Delivery

The role of ICT in developing better public services, better information management and better collaboration across agencies is now widely endorsed. There is now a clearer understanding of the level of organisational change and unlearning involved in making this vision a reality. However, there are three aspects that present challenges:

1. It is generally acknowledged that the value of ICT is unlocked only when supported by substantial complementary investments in the form

of new work practices, new skills and new inter-organisational structures.

2. The delays in bringing into effect the Public Services Broker model for integrated and multi-channel service delivery is a cause for concern.
3. There is more to e-government than simply putting services online – it requires better public services, better information management and better collaboration across agencies.

e-Government

While the delivery of e-Government is obviously desirable, the multiplicity of public sector agencies and organisations and the large number of services they deliver call for greater integration of administrative processes and policy-making. The proliferation of e-Government initiatives and the lack of joined up e-Government mean that one of the most urgent tasks is to integrate and co-ordinate e-Government in Ireland. The key ongoing problem with a system of functionally organised delivery of services is their inability to deliver packages of related services and integrated information in response to an event or predicament in a person's life.

There is a need to put in place Intranets across the public service that would enable more effective internal communications and information sharing. The value of ICT is unlocked only when supported by substantial complementary investments in new work practices, new skills, and new organisational structures. Providing clients or citizens with a *seamless service* often requires much higher levels of co-operation between departments and other service providers in the private and voluntary sectors than now exist. While more and more government information is organised around life events and situations, e-government services are still mostly organised into vertical silos³.

Dealing with the Digital Divide

It is necessary to ensure that the benefits of ICT are made available to the widest possible range of citizens, including an emphasis on their accessibility to older people and people with disabilities. The reality is that significant numbers of people either cannot reap the benefits of ICT or are effectively cut off from them because of age or disabilities. Therefore, it is likely that without effective public policy intervention, the uptake of ICT is likely to have the effect of exacerbating existing social divisions.

Equality of access to new information technologies and the targeted provision of computer centres and training programmes in disadvantaged areas and for disadvantaged groups are required to minimise the threat of a growing digital divide. The Information Society Commission have called for a much stronger resource commitment to developing structured and sustainable community-led programmes to promote greater engagement with ICT among disadvantaged groups and individuals. Community-based programmes should build on existing local development structures and be aligned closely with wider social inclusion objectives.

³In practice, CICs and other independent information and advice services play a key role in bridging gaps in public service delivery integration

'Including Everybody in the Information Society' requires a much stronger resource commitment to developing structured and sustainable programmes to support engagement with ICT among disadvantaged groups and individuals.

Accessible Information

Comhairle published a guide⁴, *Access to Information for All: Guidelines on removing barriers and improving access to information for everyone*, which is aimed at organisations and individuals who are providing information to the public. It provides a checklist on how to make information accessible, under headings such as, Information in Alternative Formats, Telephone Services, Online Information, Face-to-Face Information and Making Offices Physically Accessible. The guide also includes some practical steps to promote equality and recognise diversity.

⁴ A copy of the Guide is enclosed