



Quality Delivery of Social Services

Forum Report No. 6

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■ indicates where recommendations occur in the Report.

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

1. This Report is focused on quality improvements in the delivery of a number of social services. But it is of direct concern to everybody, as most of its recommendations are also of general application to the provision of **all** public services. What is proposed will essentially involve the more efficient and effective deployment of existing resources to ensure that the client gets a better and more accessible service.

Main Deficiencies

2. These apply generally across all public services and relate to:
 - lack of client participation in policy-making and implementation;
 - lack of administrative coherence;
 - lack of integrated delivery of services;
 - lack of clear information; and
 - lack of independent appeals procedures.

Recommendations on Rights and Operating Principles

3. These recommendations, which are rooted in a strategic mix of a number of different conceptual approaches viz social rights, classical liberalism, consumer rights and total quality approaches, cover rights to:

Greater Consultation and Participation

- on a structured basis, between clients and providers of services, and early on before policy decisions are taken; and
- extending this to the point of services delivery and with local mechanisms established for this purpose.

Better Information and Advice

- Good-practice guidelines on information, with the emphasis on clarity, simplicity and accessibility for marginalised groups;
- pro-active information targeted at particular client groups;
- access by user groups to all relevant guidelines, circulars etc.; and joint pilot projects between the statutory and non-statutory sectors; and

- a system of consultation and proof-reading of official information, with the involvement of clients.

More Choice and Simplicity

- choice in areas such as payment methods, timing and location of contact with local offices;
- providing a range of options and progressions, including a range of routes for the unemployed to find jobs; and
- simplicity in rules, qualifying conditions and application procedures.

Improved Access

- more client-friendly reception areas, with more flexible opening hours and access to offices eased for the disabled, elderly, and mothers with children; and
- greater use of free/or reduced cost phone lines – it should be possible for clients to contact public services from anywhere in the country for the price of a one-unit local call – and setting waiting periods and maximum times for replies to correspondence.

Redress

- the right to be presumed to be honest;
- the right to appeal decisions and for an independent hearing; and
- the right to an independent, well-advertised and easily accessible grievance procedure.

Integrated Planning at National Level

- greater medium-term planning and co-ordination, with monitoring of targets set for improved quality delivery standards;
- services delivery in a consistent and equitable manner throughout the country, with all statutory bodies examining their roles to identify areas of overlap and areas of joint activity monitored and better co-ordinated;
- customer-service advisory groups, as agreed in the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, should be established as soon as possible; and
- charter of rights for consumers; a “*model*” charter on the main elements is outlined.

Integrated Delivery at Local Level

- all local offices of the Department of Social Welfare should have staff trained to help the client with the full range of its own schemes and those of other complementary official agencies; and
- “*pilot models*” at local level should be established on a basis similar to the area-based approach to local development initiated under the PESP.

Recommended Improvements in Individual Services

4. The recommendations on **Social Welfare**, relate to:
 - Signing-on and Payment Arrangements.
 - Information and Staff Training.
 - Complaints and Appeals Systems.
 - Office Facilities.
5. In the case of **An Post**, the recommendations cover:
 - Closure of Rural Post Offices.
 - Staff Training and Information.
 - Payment Arrangements.
 - Complaints System.
6. The recommendations on the **Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) Scheme** cover :
 - Its greater integration with the mainstream Social Welfare system.
 - Publication of Guidelines.
 - Complaints and Appeals Systems.
 - Abolition of the segregated venue in Dublin for Travellers.
 - A Charter of Rights.
7. The recommendations on **Health Services** deal with:
 - Women.
 - Community Services.
 - The Disabled.
 - Travellers.

- Emergencies.
 - Information and an Appeals System.
8. It is recommended that **Health Boards** should:
- Promote and develop appropriate voluntary organisations.
 - Standardise criteria for core community services.
 - Develop service agreements.
9. In relation to **Housing**, the recommendations cover:
- Quality of Provision.
 - Housing Lists and Allocations.
 - Special Groups (the homeless, Travellers, the elderly and the disabled).
 - Management and Maintenance.
 - Rent Collection.
 - Rent Subsidies.
 - Private Rented Accommodation.
10. A number of recommendations are also made for improvements in the delivery of all other Local Authority services.
11. Complementing the package of proposals in Forum Report No. 4, additional improvements recommended in the present Report on the delivery of **FÁS services** cover:
- Possible Advisory Committees (with trade union, employer and community representatives) to oversee delivery at regional level.
 - Greater access for Travellers and the disabled.
 - Grievance and Complaints Systems.
 - Greater participation by the voluntary and community sector.
 - Review incentives to encourage greater take-up of training and employment schemes.
 - FÁS offices should be more locally-based.
 - More flexibility in opening hours to facilitate women's participation.
 - Childcare facilities.

Recommendations on the Voluntary and Community Sector

12. The recommendations address:
- The earlier recommendations above on rights and operating principles in respect of State services should also apply to services provided by this sector.
 - Partnership structures to integrate the sector's input in policy-making and streamline services delivery.
 - Accountability.
 - Criteria for State-funding.

Recommendations on Public Service Reform

13. Central to the successful implementation of the recommendations is that of a joint commitment by management and unions to major and radical reforms in the public services and, to this end, the Forum recommends action on:

Quality of Communications

- formal consultation processes should be established, such as customer-service advisory groups; the membership and role of these groups are outlined;
- regular surveys of customer perceptions and expectations; and
- clients should be informed of their rights and entitlements, the procedures involved, the standards required for service providers and the mechanisms for complaint and appeal, with use of paid-reply cards and free-phones.

Quality of Specifications and Delivery

- a quality service should cover issues such as definition of objectives and priorities, speed of response, accessibility, office environment and staffing issues;
- quantified Performance Indicators and Reviews, and also Value for Money Reviews, should be set in consultation with staff representative organisations and customer-service advisory groups; and
- quality of delivery should be monitored and action taken when standards are not met.

Quality of Staff

- strategies on recruitment, motivation, internal communication, training, industrial relations and organisational development;
- staff training should cover the two levels of interaction with the client, be comprehensive and on-going, with an involvement by the voluntary and community sector; and
- major policy changes should be communicated by means of staff instructions and staff-training workshops; all staff should also have some basic training on complementary services provided by other statutory bodies.

Conclusion

14. Implementation of the recommendations and related reforms in the management of the public service will require political leadership, commitment by the Government and on-going consultation with and support from the staff involved. The Taoiseach should take the lead co-ordinating role in initiating, directing and monitoring these changes. These dovetail with the Strategic Management Initiative now underway in the public service as well as the commitments in the new Government's Programme for Renewal to wide-ranging reforms in the delivery of public services.

Section I

Introduction

Introduction

- 1.1 This Report is focused on improvements in the **quality** of and in the **standard** of delivery of social services in the areas of social welfare, An Post, health, housing, other Local Authority services and FÁS training. It is of direct concern to everyone as most of its recommendations are not limited solely to the social services area alone but are of general application also to raising quality and delivery standards throughout the entire public service. The Report does not address more substantive policy questions or budgetary issues and allocations – which, of course, have a decisive bearing on the delivery of services – as these will be dealt with in other Forum Reports.
- 1.2 The recommendations are centrally aimed at the provision of quality services and which would be more integrated in their delivery. A particular focus has been to make these services more user-friendly, more appropriate to the distinct needs of different communities and to addressing also the variety of relationships and interactions between clients and the staff who operate these services. The weight of the recommendations is, of course, all the more reinforced by the fact that they are based on direct experience on the ground by many Forum Members of the inadequacies of the present system.
- 1.3 The Report does not contain any specific recommendations to increase public expenditure. In fact, in many cases what the Forum is proposing will involve simply the more efficient and effective deployment of existing resources, so that both the client and the citizen get a better and a more efficient service. Indeed, the general approach which has been adopted in OECD countries is that initiatives to improve the quality of public services delivery have tended to be at least neutral in their budgetary effects.
- 1.4 If acted on and implemented, these recommendations would bring about real improvements in lessening the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups and in improving the quality of life and self-esteem of so many of our people who are living in poverty to-day, particularly women, Travellers, people with a disability and the elderly. Problems faced by people with limited education or those with literacy difficulties in coping with official documentation in bureaucratic language are also adverted to in the Report.

- 1.5 In drawing up these recommendations, the Forum paid particular attention to the needs of women in their different roles as clients, workers and more generally as citizens and participants in the political process. The Combat Poverty Agency has identified in its studies that it is lack of access to key services and opportunities that makes and keeps people poor. In many cases, women have less access and choice in these key areas than men with the result that they suffer much more from disadvantage, exclusion and poverty.
- 1.6 As the Report highlights, many OECD countries have over the last decade restructured and reformed their public services to make them more responsive to the needs and preferences of their citizens. At EU level, the European Commission has commissioned a number of studies, on the basis of the new provisions on consumer protection in the Maastricht Treaty, and may initiate action this year in proposing a European Charter for citizens who use public services.
- 1.7 The Forum **recommends** that the Government should strongly encourage and support these EU initiatives, representing as they would a further strengthening of the concept of European Citizenship. This would be in-keeping with this country's consistent and strong support for further EU integration. It may be necessary in due course to have these issues discussed at the Inter-Governmental Conference planned for 1996 to review the Maastricht Treaty.
- 1.8 Many of the specific criticisms and recommendations in this Report have been made in the past, are well documented, are widely acknowledged by the Departments and State Agencies concerned and have strong support from the staff and trade unions involved. Despite this, however, and with the exception of a limited number of Departments (notably that of Social Welfare), there have been very few changes of real significance introduced over the years. What has been achieved has tended to be by and large on a piecemeal basis and devoid of any real and lasting commitment to initiating major reforms.
- 1.9 Acceptance by the Government of the Forum's views and recommendations, together with a phased time-table for their implementation, will not, however, be sufficient in itself. Providing a quality service will require fundamental changes at all levels in the ethos, culture and management of Departments and State Agencies. Changes in the delivery system will not, however, alleviate criticism if:
- the system delivered is itself inherently flawed through absence of representation and participation;
 - there is a continuing lack of information and transparency; and
 - independent review of decision-making remains inadequate.

- 1.10 Each of these problems stems from a reactive, suspicious and over-defensive approach at all levels within the system – which is only partially explained by the need to check against fraud. Other contributing factors have been the constraints of official attitudes, most notably the excessive use of the Official Secrets Act, and the prevailing culture, work practices and procedures of public servants. In the circumstances, attempts to improve public services will require an acceptance of the need for change and a willingness to tackle these constraints.
- 1.11 In short, implementation of the Forum's recommendations will require major reforms in the culture and ethos underlying the present system of public services delivery as well as on detailed aspects of employment practices. In this context, the Forum recognises the need for a joint management and union approach which is sensitive to current work practices and gives the staff, who currently bear the brunt of public complaint, an opportunity to contribute to any changes in a meaningful way.
- 1.12 More specifically, the Forum **recommends** that any changes to current work practices should be developed through consultation with the trade unions and include trade union representation and involvement at all stages of planning and implementation. In addition, the Forum **recommends** that any grievance procedure, or complaints or appeals systems should be developed in consultation with trade unions and include trade union representation to safeguard the position of the employee involved, in the event of a complaint.
- 1.13 The support and commitment of all the staff involved, and particularly front-line staff who bear the brunt of public complaints, is, of course, crucial and it is essential to ensure that they are consulted and provided with an opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the process of reform. Equally, the full and on-going commitment, support and leadership of management is also indispensable. Unless senior managers at both national and local levels are serious about improving the quality of services on a consistent and regular basis, there will be little encouragement for other managers and staff to do likewise.
- 1.14 But as experience has shown, reform on the scale required must be directed and monitored at the most senior political level. The Forum **recommends** that this role should be undertaken by the Taoiseach himself, given that the delivery of social services spans a number of Ministers. Moreover, many of the recommendations made in this Report dovetail very closely with the initiative on Strategic Management in the public service, which is being centrally coordinated by his Department, and to the commitments on the delivery of public services in the new Government's Programme for Renewal. It is significant to note that policy initiatives in this area are in some countries abroad being led and directed also at Prime Ministerial level.

1.15 Finally, the Forum wishes to record its fullest appreciation and thanks to all those who presented papers, gave so generously of their time and whose contributions were very valuable in the preparation of this Report. A special word of thanks is also due to the officials from the Departments of Social Welfare, Health and the Environment and from An Post, FÁS, the Eastern Health Board and Dublin Corporation for their help and co-operation. A full list of all those involved is given in the Annex.

Section II

**Developments
Abroad**

Developments Abroad

Introduction

2.1 Over the last decade many OECD countries have begun to examine and re-structure the public services they provide in response to:

- economic pressures and the desire to increase efficiency through better use of often shrinking resources; and
- the need to make these services more responsive to the needs and preferences of their users ("*consumer-oriented*" delivery).

2.2 This shift in the focus of public services, while varied between countries, can be summarised broadly as having concentrated on the following core issues:

- Service delivery and customer satisfaction.
- Budgeting for results.
- Staff as a key resource.
- Increased use of information technology.
- Monitoring progress and evaluation of results.

2.3 Areas such as social welfare, health and housing have received particular attention. However, the revised structures that have been put in place have in some cases been criticised as being more a response to specific problems rather than representing a more structured attempt to overhaul the service.

Recent International Trends

2.4 Studies¹ by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions have underlined the introduction of more user-friendly services in lessening the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups and in improving social and economic cohesion.

2.5 More recent research by the Foundation has examined the area of consumer-oriented action in the public services, particularly social welfare and personal social services. This research points to a substantial variation in service provision between the countries studied, both in the share of provision between the different categories of providers (central government, local government,

¹ "*Providing Information about Urban Services*", (European Foundation 1987) and "*Public Services: Working for the Consumer*" (European Foundation 1990).

voluntary agencies, private sector contractors and self-help groups) and the method of financing these services. This has an important influence on the relationship between providers and clients and has significant implications for developing consumer-oriented initiatives. Responsibility for funding may also be separate from responsibility for service delivery. In short, these variations have to be taken into account in looking at the potential for the transfer of innovation and good practice across countries and the need to tailor successful initiatives to national and local needs and conditions.

- 2.6 Another important dimension, highlighted in the Foundation's research, has been the implications for staff employed in the public services who are faced with important challenges as a result of the changes that are taking place. This has involved consultation and recognition of the importance of staff morale but greater provision is needed for a more dynamic role for staff and of the vital role played by front-line staff.
- 2.7 In general, the trade unions have made an important contribution to the adoption of new working methods and also in terms of staff support for the changes involved. The need for adequate training in the use of new technologies and in promoting positive attitudes towards clients is also a clear lesson. So is the development of networks to facilitate more effective collaboration to support new initiatives.
- 2.8 In most cases it is the statutory authorities, whether at central or local level, who have initiated change. This may have been at Prime Ministerial level e.g. in the United Kingdom and Portugal, through local government initiatives and public service unions e.g. in Germany (where the role of central government is not so dominant) or through increasing consumer pressure e.g. Denmark and in Italy where citizens' organisations and professional bodies have had a significant influence.
- 2.9 Countries have adopted a wide variety of approaches in improving their public services. The four main types of approach, which have been pursued in OECD countries, are in the areas of: choice, voice, competition/decentralisation and control, (see Box 1).
- 2.10 In general, OECD countries have introduced changes to improve their public services through increased flexibility, privacy, targeting, accessibility, speed and quality.
- in **Greece** there have been improvements in information and advice services and the establishment of complaint procedures;
 - in **Portugal** the emphasis has been on improving service quality and user-provider relationships;

- in **Germany** efforts have concentrated on the improved provision of advice and information; and
- in **France** the Government launched in 1988 a “*Renewal of the Public Sector*” and, as part of this initiative, user committees were set up both at local and regional level; in addition, each Government Department drew up “*golden-rules*” for their public service; these rules set out the rights and obligations of both users and the administration.

BOX 1

The four main types of approach to the improvement of public services in OECD countries are:

Choice – empowering the client to choose their service provider e.g. choice of doctor or school.

Voice – providing the client with rights and a well-publicised and easy to use complaints and appeals procedures and independent review if necessary; it is also concerned with taking clients’ views into account in decision-making.

Competition/decentralisation – involving non-statutory agencies in the provision of services and providing local access to these services.

Control – giving responsibility for the management and delivery of the service to the clients themselves e.g. tenant management in social housing, self-help groups for the elderly, unemployed etc.

2.11 In a review of how public service organisations in Europe have been responding to the “*consumer-oriented*” approach, the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions identified fourteen categories of quality developments which are taking place in varying degrees throughout Europe². These categories are listed in Table 2.1. They comprise both “*internal pull*” and “*external push*” initiatives. The former covers measures to encourage staff to be self-motivating and self-directing in the pursuit and maintenance of high quality services; the latter involves pressure from service users through complaints procedures, consumer groups and other forms of direct customer feedback.³

2 Joyce Epstein, *Public Services: “Working for the Consumer”*. Dublin. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1990.

3 Evelyn Blennerhasset, “*Quality Improvement in the Irish Civil Service, Experience of a Pilot Programme*”. Institute of Public Administration, 1992.

TABLE 2.1
Categories of Quality Developments in
European Public Services Organisations

Reception:	improving the conditions of direct client/provider contact
Information:	improving the availability and nature of information for clients about public services
Simplification:	reducing complexities related to rules, procedures and official forms
Co-ordination:	cutting across administrative divisions or departments to promote more co-ordinated delivery of services to clients
Marketing approach:	conducting surveys of consumers to find out their opinions, needs and preferences
Complaints procedures:	setting up agreed and publicised mechanisms to provide for customer redress
Culture change:	ensuring that there is a commitment throughout the organisation to consumer-service quality values
Setting standards:	developing quantifiable performance measures and targets
Decentralisation:	breaking down large, centralised services into smaller, more accessible units, to be closer and more responsive to clients
Personnel practices:	introducing training and incentive schemes specifically to promote consumer responsive services
Two-way staff communication:	setting up mechanisms to encourage staff to communicate more effectively 'up the line' to management
Accountability and autonomy:	giving staff in closest contact with the consumer greater influence in decision making
Competition:	enabling consumers to exercise some choice in the services they receive
Consumer participation and representation:	involving customers directly in decisions that affect them.

Source: Joyce Epstein, *op. cit.*

2.12 Since the election in 1993 of President Clinton, the U.S. bureaucracy at federal level has come under the attention of the Vice-President's National Performance Review (NPR). The NPR has recommended that Federal Agencies apply Quality Management Principles to "re-invent government". The four key themes of the NPR are:

- Putting customers first.
- Cutting red tape.
- Empowering employees to get results.
- Getting back to basics.

2.13 The main thrust of this process of re-inventing government is defined as "changing the culture of the national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative. It is about exerting leadership and empowering people to get results. It is about putting customers first to achieve the goal of a customer – centered government that works better and costs less".⁴

Citizen Charters

2.14 In the case of the United Kingdom, the provision of certain public services has been transferred to private and voluntary sector organisations. Decentralisation and user participation have also been developed. In addition, a Citizen's Charter was launched in 1991 to raise the standards of public services by making them more responsive to the wishes and needs of users. The Charter sets out a number of principles which every citizen is entitled to expect, (see Box 2).

2.15 The Charter recognises that citizens are entitled to expect high-quality services which are responsive to their needs and at the same time are provided efficiently and at reasonable cost. The Charter applies to all public services, central and local government, schools, hospitals, etc. and to-date forty charters have been published. However, publishing a charter is not the end but instead is seen as the start of a dynamic process. Performance is monitored against set standards and results are published. Once standards are met the aim is to raise them even higher.

⁴ "Can bureaucracies be responsive to Total Quality Management"? Joyce R. Jarrett, Federal Quality Institute Washington, D.C. USA.

BOX 2
Principles of Public Service

Standards – setting, monitoring and publication of explicit standards that customers can expect, with publication of actual performance achieved.

Information and openness – full and accurate information readily available in plain language on how services are run, what they cost, how well they perform and who is in charge.

Choice and consultation – choice where practical with regular and systematic consultation with those who use the services on their views and priorities for improvements.

Courtesy and helpfulness – courteous and helpful public service staff should be available equally to all and the service run to suit the convenience of customers.

Putting things right – well publicised and easy to use complaints procedures with independent review where possible; if things go wrong there should be an apology, a full explanation and an effective remedy for failure.

Value for money – efficient and economical delivery of public services within resources the nation can afford, with independent validation of performance against standards.

Source: Citizen's Charter First Report: 1992

2.16 As part of the drive to make public services more customer oriented, the Charter favours a single point of contact for the customer stating that “*where people have to deal with a large organisation or more than one part of it, a single named individual should be responsible for making sure that customers receive all the help they need*”.⁵ The goal of the U.K. Benefits Agency is to offer “*a single contact point which customers can, if they wish, use as a comprehensive gateway to the full range of the Benefit Agency's services*”.⁶

2.17 However, critics of the Charter see it as “*an expensive irrelevance which plays no part in delivering quality in our public services*”.⁷ While others⁸ point out that customer choice is a different matter from citizen rights.⁹ This argument likens the Charter to that of “*shoppers' guarantees*” which, while important, only empower the user and not the citizen.

5 The Citizen's Charter First Report: 1992

6 Benefits Agency Service Delivery – a Discussion Paper, 1992.

7 Mr. John Monks, TUC General Secretary, Financial Times, 17th October, 1994.

8 Paper presented to the Forum by the Institute for Public Policy Research, London, October, 1994.

9 The issue of citizen rights is discussed in Section IV of the Report

2.18 The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), while acknowledging the “*useful consciousness-raising effect*” that the Charter has had, has highlighted a number of problems associated with it. The more significant of these problems, as seen by the IPPR, are as follows:

- Lack of Choice – the Charter is a “*top down initiative*”, drawn up without any prior public consultation.
- It offers customer guarantees not citizen rights. Members of the public have a dual relationship with public services:- as user/customers and as citizens.
- The rights that are offered are seldom enforceable.
- Complaints procedures, while useful, may come too late and do not give citizens or customers other rights.

2.19 Developments in Northern Ireland have run in parallel to those in the U.K., with the result that major changes have taken place there also in the development of the social services and community care. The Charter and its principles apply to all public services and privatised utilities. Since 1992, nineteen separate Charters have been published in Northern Ireland, seeking to achieve demanding but realistic standards of delivery for the public services involved.

2.20 In general, initiatives in many European countries to improve the delivery of public services pinpoint a number of problems in implementation such as:

- exclusion or barriers to participation by those most in need (“*the weakest users*”);
- failure to support or sustain innovation for more than a short experimental period;
- inadequate training of both staff and service providers; the role of front-line staff is crucial and issues of qualifications and training (both in customer relations as well as maximising the potential of new technology), wages and career development all need particular attention;
- ensuring that the benefits of innovation are available and enjoyed by all users;
- measurements of productivity and efficiency need to be improved; economic analyses and cost-benefit studies are useful but insufficient, given the need of some service users for emotional, practical and social support as well as financial assistance; and
- little evidence to show that social cohesion and equal opportunities have formed part of improvement strategies, despite their obvious relevance.

European Union

- 2.21 The European Union is now showing increasing interest in public services from a number of different perspectives. The Economic and Social Committee in an Own Initiative Opinion in 1993, emphasised that an effective public service is a vital requirement to strengthen economic and social cohesion. The Committee highlighted, in particular, the need for better staff training, promotion of innovation and regular joint consultation between public authorities, trade unions and consumer organisations.
- 2.22 Up to now, action by the European Union in this area has been mainly concerned with the application of Treaty rules on competition in the case of public utilities. Traditionally, this was limited to seeking a balance so that a healthy inter-action between supply and demand would resolve problems and force efficiency and competitiveness. However, the move towards privatisation in the delivery of public services and the strengthening of consumer protection in the Maastricht Treaty to protect the health, safety and economic interests of consumers and provide them with adequate information, provide a basis for increased competence and action at EU level.
- 2.23 The European Commission has recently launched a major study on public services in the Member States. This study will analyse the legal forms of public services, especially the specific rules which concern service users, the development of citizen charters and similar initiatives and the Commission may in time, through the initial publication this year of a Green Paper, seek to develop a European Charter for Citizens who use public services. The Commission has also undertaken research to examine the question of a citizen's "*passport to services as a means of combating social exclusion and poverty*".
- 2.24 The new Regulations governing the EU Structural Funds, the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment and the White Paper on European Social Policy are all likely to have implications for the further improvement of public services.

Section III

**Main
Deficiencies**

Main Deficiencies

Introduction

- 3.1 Before examining in detail the individual social services, the Forum presents in this Section its overall views on the main deficiencies of our present system. These deficiencies exist generally throughout all these services and, as such, these need to be addressed across a range of Departments and State Agencies.

Lack of Participation in Policy-Making and Implementation

- 3.2 Public services delivery is a point of direct contact between the citizen and State. In the case of some social services, this relationship tends to be weighted against the citizen with the result that people may have a sense of dependency, vulnerability and a mistrust of the system at large. These perceptions, in turn, stem from lack of choice, information and consultation in the provision of these services and of little or no involvement by the client in their design and delivery.
- 3.3 The relationship between the citizen and the State raises a fundamental issue concerning the rights of citizenship. Under the social rights approach,¹ full citizenship is seen by its advocates as not simply about political rights such as the right to vote but is also about other rights such as the right to adequate income, to meaningful work and to full participation in society. These aspects of citizenship, which tend to be overlooked when assessing proposed policy initiatives, are of central concern to the Forum.

Limited Access by Certain Groups

Women

- 3.4 Lack of access to key services and opportunities prolongs poverty. In many cases, women have less access and choice in these matters than men. Very often women are the direct family contact with the time-consuming, rigid and bureaucratic procedures of social service agencies. Women are handicapped by heavy reliance on public transport and very often need to be accompanied by children and have associated problems of time-scheduling. Although women are strongly represented in public service employment, notably at the user/provider inter-face, there is a marked absence of women, however, in policy-making and management areas.

¹ See Section IV of the Report.

- 3.5 A shift of emphasis in the management and delivery of public services to one that values and validates the strengths and skills of women, a move from seeing women as passive consumers to working with them actively as users and providers of services, presents a considerable challenge in a number of areas of our system such as:

Social Welfare: the system is planned, mainly by men, with the traditional life patterns of men in mind; aspects of the social welfare payments system reinforce women's dependency over time; this has major effects on women as individuals and on women's role in society; in general, the system operates to perpetuate their role as dependants and prolongs the traditional home-making role for women; in its Reports Nos. 3 and 5, the Forum has already recommended that discrimination in the operation of the social welfare system should be abolished.

Housing and related facilities: access to housing is especially important to women as they usually spend more time in the home than any other family member; problems include inadequate and often inappropriate housing, poor maintenance, lack of emergency shelter and of longer-term provision for women in difficulties; there is also a lack of shopping and recreational facilities in public housing estates, which are often remote and far from sources of services in general.

Development planning and control: the location and quality of housing and other urban facilities is of crucial importance to women who are much less mobile than men; they are less likely to have the use of a car and are more reliant on public transport; this often constrains their options in terms of employment and access to services.

Health: locally-based health services can be a crucial part of a comprehensive health care programme for women and children, e.g. general maternity services, preventive health programmes, family planning services; women are also heavily involved in and concerned with community health care, and as informal and family carers of the elderly, disabled, sick and of children in general.

Community development: women play an important role in providing local informal networks of support for friends and families and in initiating and participating in grass-root self-help projects rooted in the local community; these projects and groups often have services as their main focus – housing, health, unemployment, transport, education and training; these provide support and assistance for women to gain more control over their own lives, and to identify causes and solutions to their problems; these groups can also assist the local public service providers in developing appropriate responses to poverty and disadvantage in urban neighbourhoods.

Travellers

- 3.6 The Traveller community experiences significant disadvantage with regard to accommodation, health, education and social welfare services. For example, the Department of the Environment calculates that 1,176 Traveller families live on the roadside without access to serviced accommodation. The Health Research Board's research on Traveller Health Status found that "*male Travellers have over twice the risk of dying in a given year than settled males, whereas for female Travellers the risk is increased threefold*". There is widespread concern also at the virtually complete absence of Travellers participating in second-level education.
- 3.7 Travellers often feel very alienated from the social services they are entitled to and particularly alienated from the procedures and practices relating to their delivery. It is essential that their dignity and rights to their own culture are upheld in the ways that services are delivered to them rather than these becoming methods of assimilation into settled society. Upholding their dignity does not, however, mean isolating Travellers from other sections of society. The practice of having a separate signing-on for Travellers at exchanges throughout the country was recently abandoned and this the Forum welcomes. From now on, they will receive the same service in relation to their unemployment payments as other unemployed people.
- 3.8 The Department of Social Welfare's comprehensive payments system should facilitate appropriate and speedy payments to Travellers who are moving from one place to another. Delays and the interim use of emergency payments should not be necessary and can only be viewed as a sanction on Travellers' rights to pursue their own way of life. Health services need also to be appropriate, with the inclusion of primary health care measures delivered to Travellers.
- 3.9 Delivering services of any nature to Travellers requires that those involved are sensitive to their needs and conditions which affect them and that they are respectful of the right of Travellers to their way of life. Given the widespread and institutionalised discrimination involved, deliverers and designers of services in this country (as is the practice among our European partners) require training in inter-cultural and anti-discrimination skills and support and monitoring systems to facilitate their responses to the needs of Travellers and other minority groups. A code of practice with standards based on equality, rights and respect for diversity should be developed and implemented for all services.
- 3.10 In short, the delivery of public services needs to be anti-discriminatory, appropriate to the collective needs of the Traveller community and should involve the participation of Travellers at all levels, as employees, as service organisations and in particular as partners on policy and procedural developments.

The Disabled

- 3.11 Many people with disabilities are permanent users of various social services, unlike most of the rest of the population. Many representative groups of people with disabilities have for many years long advocated that the payment of the Disabled Persons Maintenance Allowance or equivalent Disabled Persons Allowance should be made by the Department of Social Welfare, rather than by the Department of Health, as currently happens. This has also been recommended by the National Rehabilitation Board in its submission to the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. Payment by the Department of Health reinforces the medical aspects of disability (which may be unfounded; for some disabilities there are no medical aspects, no cures!) instead of the socially functional aspects i.e. abilities.
- 3.12 In general, many offices throughout all the public services are still not accessible by people with disabilities. For example, many health centres have no wheelchair access for the disabled. This is unacceptable and needs to be more decisively addressed with a planned work programme as a matter of top priority.
- 3.13 In addition, greater attention and priority needs to be given to the particular needs and circumstances of the disabled across a whole range of areas such as the appropriateness and the design of accommodation provided by the Local Authorities, providing increased opportunities for people with disabilities to participate on mainstream FÁS courses and their rights of mobility and access to adequate income maintenance payments, to physical and mental health care and to equality of opportunity in all aspects of social and economic life.
- 3.14 In the Forum's view, some of the areas which should be addressed in the context of improvements to social services from the perspective of these marginalised groups are outlined in Box 3.

Lack of Involvement by the Voluntary and Community Sector²

- 3.15 This sector seeks greater involvement with Departments and State Agencies but has largely failed up to now to receive recognition and has in the main been excluded from policy-making and development. Existing consultation processes are limited, reactive and unsatisfactory. To-date, involvement by the sector has been mainly through advisory or information exchange groups that focus on the delivery of services. But there are no established structures for the effective integration of voluntary and community organisations into the policy-making process and to its role of articulating the interests of excluded communities.

² This is discussed more fully in Section VII.

BOX 3

**Social services improvement from the perspective
of marginalised groups**

- the creation of better data on usage of public services by these groups;
- more attention to the needs of these groups and what they want from services e.g. by surveys, group discussions;
- greater co-ordination of services, e.g. information and referral services, one-stop shops, inter-agency collaboration to facilitate access and quality of services;
- more decentralisation of services delivery and decision-making, enhancing local autonomy and facilitating ease of access;
- improvement of user/provider inter-face e.g. opening hours, quality of premises, physical access, staff training, removal of anonymity;
- institution of complaints procedures and the setting of quality and performance standards which take into account the needs of these groups;
- development of user representation and participation through consultation with representative groups, use of advocates etc.; and
- improvement of personnel and management practices which would incorporate equal opportunities principles, and positive action in a context of building a user-oriented approach to public services.

Lack of Administrative Coherence

3.16 Social services are administered by and through different bodies and there is little, if any, inter-Departmental or inter-Agency communication or planning. Unemployment and other forms of social exclusion give rise to financial, housing, educational and social needs which are addressed by a disparate array of services. Yet the users of each of these discrete services are mainly the same people.

Lack of Integrated Delivery (“One-stop Shops”)³

3.17 Until recently, different services provided by the same Department or Agency were not available in a single location. The concept of the “one-stop shop” – which has been devised to address this deficiency – entails having a local office unit to serve as a single contact point to deal with **all** of the services provided by the same Department/Agency. This approach, which has been initiated by the

³ This issue is discussed in Section V.

Department of Social Welfare in some of its local offices, represents an important improvement. But as against this, the services of some other Departments/Agencies have been developed in direct opposition to this approach.

3.18 Table 3.1 provides a good example of the lack of inter-Departmental planning and co-ordination in a number of related Schemes, where there is no uniformity or attempts to standardise age, eligibility and payments to participants. The different rates of payment under these Schemes have serious drawbacks and encourage people to choose Schemes on the basis of maximising their incomes, rather than those which would be of more long-term benefit in enhancing their job prospects.

TABLE 3.1
Age criteria, categories of eligibility and duration of payments
of various schemes

Scheme	Age	Eligibility	Payment Duration
Back to Work Allowance	Over 23	£40 single £62 married	Lone Parents' Allowance/ Long-term Unemployed (12 months)
Part-Time Job Incentive	Over 18	£37.80 single £62.10 married	LTU (12 months)
Community Employment	Over 18 Over 21	£1 £1	LPA/UB (12 months) 1 week U.A.
Third Level Allowance (TIA)	Over 23	£1	LTU (12 months)
Second Level Education Allowance	Over 21	Signing Credits	Unemployment Assistance/ Unemployment Benefit/ Credits/LPA
Job Training Scheme	Over 18	Live Register	8 weeks unemployed
FÁS Enterprise	Over 18	Live Register	1 week unemployed

Source: Paper presented to the Plenary Session of the Forum on 24th May, 1994 by the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed; the eligibility rates (up-dated) are those applicable in January, 1995.

3.19 There is also a lack of consistency in policy formulation, in the rationale for day-to-day decisions and certain guidelines are inconsistent with their underlying stated policies. Moreover, schemes are often announced by Ministers, without the necessary guidelines on how they are to be delivered being then available. There is a confusing range of schemes, entry points, eligibility criteria and assessment procedures which involve a variety of administrative tiers. Numerous distinct schemes set out to respond to a single basic need but many of these operate external to the main welfare system, despite the fact that most are targeted at welfare-dependent households. This leads to inconsistencies in and between schemes and to variable amounts and quality of information.

3.20 Table 3.2 highlights the **functional** approach to providing social services and one which frequently involves a variety of administrative tiers. This example relates to welfare provision for low-income families with school-going children. It will be noted that there are four different Schemes to assist with this basic need, yet each Scheme involves different criteria and application procedures as well as more than one tier of administration.

TABLE 3.2
Assistance Schemes for low-income families with school-going children

Tier of Administration	School books	School meals	School clothing/ footwear	First Communion/ Confirmation
National	Dept. of Education	Dept. of Social Welfare	Dept. of Social Welfare	Dept. of Social Welfare
Regional	–	–	Health Boards	Health Boards
Local	School	Local Authority, School and Dept. of Social Welfare	Community Welfare Officer and Dept. of Social Welfare	Community Welfare Officer School and Dept. of Social Welfare

Source: Paper presented to the Plenary Session of the Forum on 24th May, 1994 by Mr. J. Walsh, Paul Partnership, Limerick.

3.21 In general, the entire system involves lengthy, repetitious applications, information-gathering and travel to claim due entitlements. This involves costs for people who, by the very fact that they are claiming assistance, are not in a position to pay. The effect is often to deny people access to information and entitlements. In particular, people living in rural areas find transport and access to the social services a serious problem.

3.22 Application for benefits typically comes at a transition, and sometimes a crisis stage of life. The perceived stigma of applying for social welfare payments is worsened by vagueness of the criteria and by application procedures which discriminate against people. Anomalies or minor delays in the system cause genuine hardship and distress. This leads to confusion, anger and anxiety.

Lack of Clear Information

3.23 The amount of information available in user-friendly format is frequently inadequate, confusing or non-existent. There is also a lack of pro-active information, i.e. targeting people who might benefit from services or advice. For example, pensioners who collect their payments weekly from the post office could be told there about the easier conditions for pensioners aged 75+ to qualify for fringe benefits. In some instances, genuine attempts are being made to increase access to information. However, people are not informed of their entitlements as of right. People can remain unaware of additional assistance or of possible alternative assistance because they are not informed of their options or are given contradictory or incorrect information. Moreover, people are sometimes or often not given information on passage from one scheme to another. Nor are they always informed of how to present their case in their initial application or in case of appeals. Information on many schemes may not be available in local offices and may have to be obtained from the larger offices, necessitating extra travel.

3.24 The standard of information provided by the statutory bodies is variable and is sometimes presented in excessively complicated language. People who use information booklets are not always involved in their preparation. This results in many voluntary and community agencies having to provide a “translation” service to help people make informed choices. This emphasises the need for an adequately-resourced, independent and confidential information and advice service. Information given in an environment in which people feel comfortable can encourage people to better avail of opportunities and of their entitlements. This is evidenced from the results of a survey⁴ which showed that a considerable number of people did not take up services available to them (mainly Supplementary Welfare Allowance payments) for precisely the reason that they were unaware of what they were entitled to and nobody in authority made them aware of their entitlements.

4 Report of the Welfare Rights Take-up Campaign in Dublin's Inner City (July, 1994). Prepared jointly by the Inner City Renewal Group and Ringsend Action Project.

Lack of Independent Appeal Procedures

- 3.25 There is typically no means of independent redress and no sense that a decision is explained on rational grounds. Schemes which are flexible are often seen to be unaccountable. Appeals are often too slow for people who require support or services.

Problems with Payment Types

(i) Means-testing

- 3.26 The Department of Social Welfare, the Health Boards and Local Authorities operate a complex system of means-testing with different rules and requirements in each case. Eligibility under one scheme does not imply eligibility under other schemes. Means-testing of entitlements has become more common in recent years in an effort to concentrate resources to where they are most needed. However, this has numerous negative effects, including non-take up of benefit, stigmatisation of claimants, waste of resources on administration and increased use of political representation and clientelism. Good information on means-tested payments is lacking. Calculation procedures are complex, leading to rumours and misunderstandings. Means-tested payments inevitably deny some people assistance.
- 3.27 As an example of the problems associated with means-tested payments, Table 3.3 sets out the various steps that a person on Unemployment Assistance has to follow when deciding whether to take up casual earnings. Depending on the level of casual earnings and the loss of allowances incurred, an individual could be financially worse off from taking up employment.

(ii) Discretionary Payments

- 3.28 For most social welfare schemes, there is little discretion in eligibility. Discretionary payments, which are made under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme, attempt to give flexibility and discretion at a local level through Community Welfare Officers. However, with discretion comes the perception that the system is arbitrary in nature. To combat this perception, guidelines are issued which often have the effect of fettering discretion and take on the force of law. In addition, these guidelines are not generally available to the public and there are substantial differences in the criteria and in the operation of discretionary schemes between individuals and different locations throughout the country. These schemes are under considerable pressure coming near the end of the year when budgetary allocations are nearly exhausted and this causes other services administered by the Community Welfare Officers to be neglected.

TABLE 3.3
Means-tested Payments: Calculations for Means Testing Casual Earnings

<i>Step-by-Step</i>	<i>Calculations</i>
1. To get the daily rate – Divide present payment by the number of days you are signing (normally 6).	1. Divide the weeks payment by six days Daily Rate = £61.00 ÷ 6 = £10.15
2. To find out how much you can earn for the week you:- (i) Multiply your daily rate by the number of days you have worked in the week. (ii) Calculate your income disregard (£15 per day). (iii) Add the disregard for every day worked this week and the daily rate.	2. Give yourself: (i) Two days payment £10.15 x 2 = £20.30 (ii) Two days income disregards £15 x 2 = £30.00 (iii) Add these together: £30.00 + £20.30 = £50.30 £50.30 is the sum you are allowed to earn in two days.
3. Subtract this figure from total net earnings to find out how much of your earnings will be considered. (Assume net earnings of £60).	3. Subtract this from your earnings: £60.00 – £50.30 = £9.70 £9.70 is your means from casual earnings
4. To find your new, revised daily rate take the “penalty” figure from you weekly payment.	4. Subtract your means from your present unemployment assistance: £61.00 – £9.70 = £51.30 £51.30 is your new weekly unemployment assistance
5. Divide the remainder by the number of signing days to get the new daily rate.	5. Divide the new rate by six to get your new daily rate: £51.30 ÷ 6 = £8.55
6. To calculate your actual payment you multiply your daily rate by the number of days you do not work.	6. Multiply the daily rate by four – this is what you get: £8.55 x 4 = £34.20
Your new earnings are:	£60.00
Your new dole is:	£34.20
Total new weekly earnings:	(1) £94.20
Deductions:	
You lose your rent allowance:	£27.90
You lose your medical card:	£5.00
You lose your fuel allowance:	£2.50
You pay travel each day (£2 per day):	£4.00
You eat lunch each day (£2 per day):	£4.00
	(2) £43.40
Actual net weekly earnings (1)-(2)	£50.80
Net loss £10.20	

Source: Paper presented by the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed at the Plenary Session of the Forum on 25th January, 1994; the rates (up-dated) are those applicable in January, 1995.

- 3.29 For the payment to be discretionary, the operation of the Scheme must be flexible. However, this creates a situation which is open to criticism because, when discretion is applied, two individuals in overtly similar situations may not obtain similar payments. The question of discretion is difficult for people using the service and also for the people who are delivering the service. The arbitrary nature of the system is compounded by the absence of a credible system of appeals.
- 3.30 Furthermore a discretionary approach to payments and a consumer rights-based approach could be seen as in contradiction with each other. In any case, some discretionary payments exist because the basic payment is inadequate. Payments in these cases should cease to be discretionary and should be fully integrated instead as part of the mainstream basic payment. The Forum's recommendations on a number of key issues and deficiencies in the operation of the SWA Scheme are outlined in Section VI.
- 3.31 Another major source of discretion at present is that certain Local Authorities do not operate any points system in their housing allocations. The Forum's recommendations on this matter are set out in Section VI.

Other Issues

Office Facilities

- 3.32 Significant improvements have been made to some main public offices in the past number of years. However, much more remains to be done. Other main offices and the sub-offices, particularly in rural areas, remain unacceptable. In rural areas the use of Garda stations for signing-on purposes continues, despite poor conditions for queuing and perceived "*criminalisation*" of the unemployed. The closure of post offices in outlying rural areas, combined with the absence of public transport, is also a problem.
- 3.33 Queuing is a continuing unnecessary feature. People often queue for lengthy periods merely for payment. Queuing outdoors is common. Hatches continue to be used. These are demeaning, limit effective communication and destroy any notion of privacy. Security considerations and lack of privacy mean that people literally have to shout personal details at officials. Waiting rooms and interviewing facilities are typically non-existent. There is an absence of facilities for children such as toilet and care arrangements (toys, books etc.). Many offices are not accessible to people with disabilities. Offices typically have no basic facilities.

Staff

- 3.34 Front-line staff are the direct contact point between the client and the service provider. Given that the relationship between staff and clients is an unequal one – and in essence is one of dependency – this interaction can lead to problems between staff and the public. Some service users have reported a lack of empathy and an absence of trust on the part of some front-line staff. Inappropriate staff attitudes and responses can degrade claimants and invoke concepts of power and powerlessness.
- 3.35 Many staff feel under pressure and are aware of the limitations of the environment in which they work, such as poor accommodation and lack of privacy. Staff are particularly aware of the emotional pressure which some claimants are under and the absence of a satisfactory environment in these instances. However, staff consider that they are not trained to deal with clients who are distressed or angry and they can feel at the brunt of people's reactions.
- 3.36 Staff training is typically focused on accessing information, how to use the latest technology and on the application and interpretation of existing schemes. Training in personal and counselling skills as well as pro-active information skills are not widely available.
- 3.37 Addressing the deficiencies outlined in this Section of the Report will have major implications for the staff involved not only in relation to training but also in terms of employment practices and working conditions. As the research on European experience by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has shown – which has already been cited in Section II – such a process of change if it is to be successfully undertaken must involve staff consultation at all stages in the planning and implementation process, given the crucial role played by staff in the delivery of public services.

Section IV

**Conceptual
Approaches**

Conceptual Approaches

Introduction¹

- 4.1 As a society, we do not have a well developed sense of entitlement as of right to social services. Such entitlements and rights can be viewed from a number of different perspectives and these in turn raise a number of fundamental issues as regards the relationship between the citizen and the State.
- 4.2 This Section outlines a number of different perspectives or conceptual approaches which can provide a policy framework or model in considering improvements in the quality and the delivery of social services. These are:
- a social rights approach;
 - a classical liberalism approach;
 - a consumer rights approach;
 - a citizen's charter approach; and
 - a total quality approach.

Social Rights Approach

- 4.3 This approach focuses on the rights of the individual within the social fabric and within their particular collective or communal context and identity, based on assumed notions of justice, fairness and equality. Individuals are seen as having inviolable rights based on their citizenship, not on their role in society. The aim of social organisation, within this model, is to achieve universal good, viewed as equality of personal liberties, opportunities, income and wealth. A core concept is the entitlement of each individual to adequacy of income. The concept of dependency is anathema.
- 4.4 A central tenet of the social rights approach is that poverty and its principal cause, unemployment, are social evils, implying social causes for them and social responsibility to eradicate them. Individuals who are poor and/or unemployed have little personal power over their positions. Individual responsibilities are coalesced in social duties to participate in society so as to ensure that all members are given access and entitlements to an adequate way of life, in terms of employment and income.

¹ This Section is largely based on presentations and discussions which the Forum had with Ms. A. Coote, (Institute for Public Research, London) and Mr. B. Harvey.

- 4.5 Under this model, people have the right to participate in the development and implementation of systems which affect their lives. This means that people availing of their entitlements must be consulted at all stages of policy formation and implementation. This includes a full voice in terms of the levels of payments and the nature and location of services. In addition, the actual mechanisms of delivery must comply with provisions to maximise and protect self-respect and the individual dignity of all claimants. The enforcement of rights and entitlements is obtained through legislation, rather than the model being merely a series of high-minded ideals and difficult to operationalise.
- 4.6 In essence, the social rights approach is grounded on the concept of a society committed to wealth redistribution policies. One of the main arguments against the social rights approach is that these rights are far more expensive to enforce than civil political rights. While it costs money to uphold the latter rights, these costs are much more modest, more controllable and more predictable than the costs of enforcing social rights.
- 4.7 However, it is important to note that social rights can be expressed in different ways and with different resource implications. For example, they can be expressed as duties (without implying specific entitlements) which are imposed on public authorities or as entitlements held by individuals but without individual rights of enforcement. Such enforcement, when it exists, can also vary through, for example, judicial review and through designated complaints and appeals procedures, which may or may not involve a final approach to the Courts. Where there are no means of enforcement, rights can be expressed either in aspirational terms or as a declaration of purpose in terms of setting goals to be achieved within given timetables.
- 4.8 The flexibility of the concept is probably one of its greatest strengths. A social rights approach can at worst act as a cynical camouflage by public authorities while, at best, it can play a useful role in raising public expectations and creating a climate of opinion favourable to equal citizenship.
- 4.9 A further important distinction has to be drawn between substantive and procedural rights. Substantive rights are rights to actual benefits such as a hospital bed, a school place etc. while procedural rights involve rights to fair treatment of the individual by service providers. Although the latter cost money, they do not have the unpredictable and open-ended demands on public funds as do substantive rights.

4.10 Procedural rights are based on principles of fairness which are already well established in law. These involve empowering the individual with rights to:

- A fair hearing;
- Equal and consistent treatment;
- Unbiased decisions;
- Structured discretion: where a decision involves an element of discretion, it should follow explicit guidelines;
- When a decision is reached, reasons should be given freely; and
- An appeal and complaint procedure.

4.11 Broadly speaking, these principles may be applied to all aspects of public services, not rigidly or uniformly, but tailored to suit the particular circumstances in which different services are provided.

Classical Liberalism Approach

4.12 This approach, which is at the opposite extreme to that of the social rights approach, views personal liberty as paramount and individuals are considered to have both the right and the responsibility to affect their own destiny by work and by creating personal opportunities. Those who are not productive members of society are dependants and as such cannot reasonably expect to obtain the same standard of living as others. Unemployment is a phenomenon which affects individuals who, as responsible citizens, should use their own resources to obtain work. People do not have entitlements per se to assistance by the State, rather these are given by the charitable goodwill of governments and the taxpayer.

4.13 The State's role in this model is limited to that of protecting individuals in their lawful activities and their possessions. The minimal role of the State is to maximise opportunities to exercise personal freedoms. This means, in particular, a minimum of constraints on economic activity, giving rise to the "free market". Aspects of the current UK approach including privatisation of public services, policies of home and share ownership, restriction of the social welfare codes and of strict financial accounting within State services all derive from this perspective.

Consumer Rights Approach

- 4.14 This approach is designed to make the delivery of public services more customer driven and is based on the transfer to the public sector of the principles of consumer rights which have increasingly been applied and to good effect in the private sector. In the past, the public service did not regard its clients as customers and the tradition was that the main function of the public service was to guard the public purse, as clients would defraud the system if they were not watched very carefully.
- 4.15 However, the trend nowadays in many OECD countries is to bring public services closer to the customer, involving much closer co-operation and involvement by the users in the design and the delivery of these services and the introduction of a consumer rights approach. This has involved greater empowerment of the customer in having access to adequacy, a quality service delivery and rights to minimum standards and to appropriate redress.
- 4.16 For many public services, however, the relationship of the user to the provider goes substantially beyond the consumer-producer relationship. People are not merely consumers, they are also citizens with entitlements and a consumer rights approach may act to restrict rights or to focus merely on the responsibilities of social services providers. However, this approach is a well-developed concept in our society and has created expectations of access to adequacy and of consistency in the delivery of goods and services and of the rights of the individual to minimum standards and to appropriate, often legal redress. Viewing social service users as consumers confers on them a set of well-delineated expectations and, as such, acts to empower the individual user.

Citizen Charters

- 4.17 Citizen Charters provide a further example of how to respond to the rights of users. This approach has been followed extensively in the U.K. (see Section II of the Report) and has been introduced in this country with the Revenue Commissioners Charter of Rights and the Department of Health's Charter of Rights for Hospital Patients. In both these instances, the Citizen Charter approach has been operationalised as a Consumers Rights Charter which may, in part, be due to and reflect the fact that a large body of existing consumer legislation already provides a ready-made framework.
- 4.18 Citizen charters do, however, run the risk of being merely a series of high-minded ideals, or as is frequently the case, consumer codes under a different name. More specific criticisms of the charter approach have already been outlined in Section II of the Report.

4.19 As against these criticisms, charters do serve a useful purpose, however, in acting as a catalyst for change and in raising public expectations on the quality of service to which users are entitled, but too often the successful delivery of that entitlement goes unnoticed. Moreover, charters can win and sustain support from users and providers and have real impact. They can include different kinds of rights and, as a dynamic and flexible instrument, respond to the interests of both citizens and consumers which may change over time.

Total Quality Approach

4.20 Another private sector influence has been that of the Total Quality Approach, the ISO 9000 Series of Standards and the Quality Mark. This involves the use of a range of techniques and concepts such as performance measurement, setting targets, measuring outputs, meeting users' needs and being more responsive to the views and suggestions from the public (see Box 4 and Section VIII of the Report).

BOX 4 Quality Approach

Quality is defined as:

“a way of managing the organisation at all levels, top management to front-line, to achieve customer satisfaction by involving all employees in continuously improving the work processes of the organisation”.

The quality approach is one which adopts a consumer-oriented philosophy. Quality management is essentially about “good practice”, that is setting performance or service delivery standards, ensuring that these are met and if possible exceeded.

The Principles of Total Quality Management (TQM), in a public sector context, have been summarised as:

- (i) a focus on achieving customer satisfaction;
- (ii) a drive towards continuous and long-term improvement in all of the organisational processes and output; and
- (iii) full staff involvement in improving Quality of Service.

Source: Federal Quality Institute, Introduction to Total Quality Management in the Federal Government, U.S. 1991.

- 4.21 A number of organisations such as the Galway Country Association for Mentally Handicapped Children and Áras Attracta in Swinford, Co. Mayo have already received accreditation under the ISO 9000 Series of Standards and the Quality Mark. An example of the stages involved in the development of a quality approach are outlined in Box 5.

BOX 5

Stages in the Development of a Quality Approach

Stage 1 – consult and involve staff to formulate quality management documents consisting of four separate elements:

- a quality manual – the reference book for a quality management system (based on I.S.O. standards);
- quality operating procedures – written statements which specify the purpose of activities within the various areas to meet service users' needs;
- work instructions – documented steps to define how specific activities are carried out; and
- records – documentation regarding audits, health and safety matters etc.

Stage 2 – establish Quality Action Groups to:

- look at and improve the quality of the services being provided from the service user's point of view;
- involve the service users within the Group; and
- collect information and keep other people/groups informed of developments.

Stage 3 – use a six-step programme to achieve quality action:

- bring people together;
- agree how the service should be;
- look at what is happening now;
- choose something that can and should be made better;
- decide on and put a plan into action; and
- see how things have changed and decide what to do next.

Stage 4 – make changes as appropriate on the basis of:

- an audit and review of findings;
- and a survey of customers.

Source: Galway County Association for Mentally Handicapped Children

- 4.22 This idea of “*excellence*” evolved from advancements made in both organisational development theories and statistical process-control theories. Studies² in the USA have shown that the “*excellent*” companies and organisations are those that are “*close to the customer*”. This approach was transmitted to Europe and to public service organisations during the 1980s, in response to cost-cutting and value for money initiatives. The promise that a more consumer-oriented approach could result in not only financial savings but also higher quality and more responsive services was very attractive.
- 4.23 A Quality Improvement Programme (QUIP)³ was initiated by the Department of Social Welfare in 1989 to investigate the feasibility and usefulness of a quality initiative in a civil service context. The guiding principles of this approach were known as the ‘*3Rs*’, Respect, Research and Responsibility. QUIP emphasised the importance of respect for people, both as clients and staff. It relied heavily on research-data, with teams carrying out thorough analysis of the problem. The third guiding principle of the QUIP process was responsibility, with each team member taking personal responsibility for success or failure of their projects.
- 4.24 The QUIP initiative was successful in improving quality of service to disability benefit clients by streamlining internal work procedures and processes and improving communications, teamwork and co-ordination in the disability benefit area. It also achieved its objective of developing problem-solving and analytical skills of the staff. QUIP showed that planned quality improvement programmes are as relevant and useful in the public service as they are in other sectors of the economy. “*A quality approach is necessary for the civil service; it can be made to work but to do so will require tremendous enthusiasm, patience and persistence*”⁴.

Conclusions

- 4.25 This Section has outlined a number of different approaches or models as a basis to the Forum’s evaluation and its recommended improvements to our present system of delivering social services. It will be noted that each approach has its own distinct advantages but that there are also potential difficulties with each. In the circumstances, the Forum’s view is that a strategic mix of these different approaches is the most effective approach and this is the one which has been followed in this Report.

² “*In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best Run Companies*,” T. Peters and R. Waterman, USA 1982.

³ “*Quality Improvement in the Irish Civil Service, Experience of a Pilot Programme*” Evelyn Blennerhassett, Institute of Public Administration, 1992.

⁴ “*Implementing Quality in the Civil Service*”, Paper presented to the IQA/IPA Conference on Public Service Quality, by Mr. E. McCumiskey, Secretary, Department of Social Welfare.

- 4.26 Legislation, statutory regulations and codes of practice are all options. Citizen charters and consumer rights are also possible ways forward. The effectiveness of charters is very much dependent on general political and public support for their aims, the rights provided for in terms of entitlement and standards of services and the degree to which these rights are enforceable.
- 4.27 The classical liberalism approach has been used for illustrative purposes only. The Forum's own philosophy is that of seeking to ensure a more caring and equitable society in this country in the future.
- 4.28 In its earlier Reports, the Forum has already considered the usefulness of the social rights approach in providing a framework for policy-making in the social services area. The present Report is, however, more limited in its scope to considering the principles emanating from the social rights approach as they relate, for example, to rights to avail of quality public services with privacy, dignity and confidentiality, without fear of harassment and with an adequate right of redress.
- 4.29 In short, the above conceptual approaches are not ends in themselves and, using the analogy of the social provisions contained in this country's Constitution and that of the EU Social Charter, the crucial issue of concern to the Forum is more the extent to which these provide the basis for the establishment and implementation in practice of a more comprehensive, coherent and interacting set of rights and operating principles for the users of the social services. These are dealt with in the next Section of the Report.

Section v

**Rights and
Operating
Principles**

Rights and Operating Principles

Introduction

- 5.1 This Section outlines the Forum's views and recommendations on the rights and principles which it considers should underpin the delivery of social services, on the basis of its consideration and evaluation of the different conceptual approaches which were considered in the previous Section of the Report. These rights and principles are specifically related to social services. However, the Forum considers that these are of more general application and should, therefore, be introduced as the basis for raising quality and standards throughout the public service, including the State-sponsored bodies, with a view to making these services more answerable and responsive to the needs of the customer.
- 5.2 The Forum is encouraged by the cross-party political support for improvements as evidenced by the former Taoiseach's remarks at the launch of the Strategic Management Initiative, when he said, "I want to see a customer relations culture develop – and strengthen – in the public service";¹ the Leader of the Labour Party's call² for a Strategy for Renewal embracing, inter alia, a major campaign "*with proper, adequately staffed, and fully accessible community information centres – one-stop shops that would enable every citizen to secure his or her entitlements without fear or favour*"; and the commitments in the new Government's Programme for Renewal to reforms in the delivery of public services and the appointment of a Minister of State with a specific remit in this area.

Customer Needs

- 5.3 In the Forum's view, with a customer-oriented service, regardless of its nature and who it is provided by in the public sector, the customer should have a right to:
- Consultation and Participation;
 - Information and Advice;
 - Choice;
 - Simplicity;
 - Access; and
 - Redress.

¹ "Developing Strategic Management in the Irish Public Service". Speech by the former Taoiseach Mr. Albert Reynolds, T.D. on 22nd February, 1994.

² Speech by Mr. Dick Spring T.D. to a Labour Party meeting at the Riverview Centre on 21st November, 1994.

i) Consultation and Participation

5.4 There is nothing new in the concept of meeting the client's actual needs rather than perceived needs as seen by officials and being generally more responsive to the public. However, in order to find out what clients want and what their needs are, a process of continued dialogue and discussion should be entered into between clients and the providers of services. To this end, the Forum recommends:

- greater participation and partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors to promote representativity and service responsiveness;
- consultation between the two sectors should be on a structured basis and take place from an early stage, before decisions are taken;
- transparency, including open access to all necessary documentation;
- such consultation should also be extended to the point of delivery of services and local mechanisms and structures should be established for this purpose; this would permit flexibility of approach and allow a direct link with local economic and social development;
- local representative organisations should also be involved in decision-making and implementation; and
- where there is a question regarding how representative local groups are, statutory agencies should work with them to reinforce their representativity.

5.5 Terms such as involvement, advocacy, consultation, participation and partnership can be employed to define the relationship between the different bodies involved. But for this to be effective, the rights, role and responsibilities of each side in these processes need to be defined. The promised Government White Paper, under the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, on a partnership framework between the State and the voluntary sector should be a helpful step in this direction. The commitment of all statutory bodies to the support of an independent information, advice and advocacy sector is central to the process of promoting full access to the social services.

5.6 Consultation involves listening to different views and responding constructively to them. Participation on an individual and group basis should include an input to policy-making to enable people to influence the outcome. Partnership may be a formalised relationship where the partners are on an equal footing. The term partnership has definitional outcomes, including also the need for adequate resourcing of all partners. The voluntary and community sector seeks partnership with statutory agencies, not only on how services are delivered but

also on policy-making and that impact studies should be carried out by Departments and State Agencies before new policies are introduced. A central tenet of the sector³ is that policy decisions and arrangements for delivery of services can never be successful unless there is adequate consultation with customers prior to decisions being made.

ii) **Information and Advice**

- 5.7 Information is the key to entitlements and open access to information is essential. Right of access to information is a fundamental one for public service users. Without this, the relationship between the citizen and the State is by definition a skewed one, heavily in favour of the State. The level of distress, frustration, anger and inconvenience caused to people because basic information is not satisfactorily provided at their initial point of contact with the system is a constant complaint at Citizen Information Centres and Unemployed Centres. These Centres, as well as the National Social Service Board, play an important role in providing an independent and confidential information and advice service to the public.
- 5.8 In a submission to the Forum, the former Ombudsman Mr M. Mills stated that his experience had convinced him *“that control of and access to information is one of the most important but yet unappreciated influences on public service consumer rights”*. He went on to say that he was *“convinced that significant reductions in complaints and improved public relations could be achieved by public bodies generally if there were a greater awareness of the power of information and a more flexible approach to its disclosure”*⁴.
- 5.9 It is understood that the proposed Freedom of Information Bill will include provision for full right of access to information on all State services in respect of a person’s own case. This will be a major change in the relationship between the citizen and the State. However, for this legislation to be effective, it must be complemented with a fundamental change of existing administrative culture by statutory agencies so that the importance of volunteering information is recognised and appreciated as a right. Staff within the public service have in the past been encouraged not to disclose information. This has created a climate which will take time to overcome. The potential abuse of the Official Secrets Act to block access to information on an individual or group level has also to be addressed.

³ The role of the voluntary and community sector is discussed in more detail in Section VII.

⁴ Background Paper – presented at the Plenary Session of the Forum on 24th May, 1994.

5.10 The Forum **recommends** that all State and State-funded agencies in the voluntary and community sector should have a responsibility to;

- provide clear and accurate information and advice to their customers, as a pre-requisite to effective delivery of services;
- pursue a pro-active approach to information provision;
- identify and target particular service users and disadvantaged groups; and
- consult and involve user groups by providing them with full access to all documents, guidelines, circulars, memos and correspondence relevant to their concerns.

5.11 When targeting particular groups, the Forum also **recommends** that:

- the voluntary and community sector should be involved in organising joint training courses and information packs;
- a joint production team of statutory and non-statutory agencies should, on a pilot basis, prepare and publish information on a given scheme;
- independent information and advice centres should be adequately funded by Government and receive formal recognition through joint information initiatives with the public sector; and
- schools and colleges should also have a role in providing both information and basic education about public services.

5.12 The Forum's **recommendations** on the main elements of a code of practice on information are set out in Box 6. Availability of clear, simple and accurate information is essential for the delivery of any public service, with a particular focus on:

- clear information can only come from clear schemes;
- clear advertising of opening times and signposting of the location of services;
- a speedy response, with targets set for replies to correspondence;
- precise detailed information on all schemes should be available at local offices to all claimants and all potential claimants should be given an information pack on the full range of services and options available; research should also be undertaken on the most effective ways of communicating information to customers;
- use of language in all written communication should be clear, consistent and indicate further routes of correspondence or appeal;
- all information should avoid contradiction; and

- all decisions should be explained in clear non-legalistic language; for this purpose, a system of consultation and proof-reading of official information leaflets and brochures should be initiated, with the involvement of customers and representative organisations.

BOX 6

Good Practice Guidelines on Information

Information should be:

clear, simple and easily **accessible** to particular targeted and disadvantaged groups and with different literacy levels taken into account.

available where the “*at risk*” groups are.

pro-active with advice on the full range of services and options available.

comprehensive – this involves the concept of “*one-stop shops*” where people can find out information on the full range of schemes and options available in one specific location, e.g. UK Citizens Advice Bureau or the Stichting de Ombudsman in The Netherlands and Citizen Information and Unemployed Centres in this country.

timely – the effectiveness of leaflets is considerably improved by ensuring that the information is received by the target group.

accurate, reliable and **well-resourced** – accuracy must not lead to lack of clarity; no matter how complex an issue is, the information should be provided in an understandable format to the target group.

user-friendly – to achieve this, many countries have involved the target group in the preparation and delivery of information.

interesting – use of modern technology such as video/computer graphics has made it easier to hold the interest of the target group.

(iii) Choice

5.13 Clients are likely to be more satisfied when they are well informed and can exercise choice. In the provision of public services, choice has, however, often meant “*take it or leave it*”. Up to now, clients of these services in this country have had little or none of the protection which is afforded to consumers in the private sector. Indeed, the client has become almost by design a very unimportant aspect of the system – a person to be circumvented rather than a customer to be served. But this will change under the impact of deregulation and the EU Single Market.

5.14 The increasing effects of EU competition policies, along with other developments both at national and international levels will erode the monopoly position of the State in the provision of certain services. In some countries, practices have been introduced such as contracting out of social services delivery, self-help groups and various partnership arrangements.

5.15 While recognising that the scope for competition may be limited – but this would need to be explored – this in no way means, however, that the consumer's right to choice should be diminished. Choice can take many forms and, in this respect, the Forum **recommends** that:

- the client should have a say in the way the service is received;
- the client should have choices between receiving benefits in cash or through some form of electronic transfer;
- the client should have options regarding the timing and location of his/her contact with the service; and
- of more importance still for the client, choice should also mean providing a range of options and opportunities for progression; in the case of the unemployed, this should involve a range of routes to facilitate them to find jobs.

- 5.16 However, it must be accepted that some citizens have more power to choose than others and that for many marginalised and excluded groups the concept of choice is not a meaningful one. In this respect, the Forum **recommends** that the degree of choice, in terms of timing and contact with the social services, should be balanced by an acceptance of the need to provide a cost-effective and efficient service.

5.17 Developments in information technology have a role to play in enhancing the customer's ability to avail of choice. The moves in recent years, most notably by the Department of Social Welfare in this area are to be commended and further use of such technology should be encouraged.

iv) **Simplicity**

5.18 Closely related to information-giving and choice is the issue of simplifying the underlying rules and procedures, so that information can be provided in a comprehensible fashion. Improvements in the range of services over the years, the variety of means tests and of qualifying conditions have, however, exacerbated the situation. A survey⁵ in Germany found that 90% of application forms for unemployment benefit had to be returned to applicants, as the forms were so complex that the applicants filled them in incorrectly.

5 "Public Services; Working for the Consumer". Booklet Series Number 15 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.

5.19 Research on the effects of form simplification has shown that more “*user friendly*” forms are preferred by the consumer and are more effective in communicating information. Consumer demand for simplification is, of course, readily understandable. There are also savings to be made as simple and clear forms lead to less errors and less administrative time spent on checking while at the same time ensuring that appropriate controls are in place to check against fraud. This does not mean a choice between complex information guides to these systems or no information at all and, in this context, the Forum **recommends** that:

- complex rules and decision-making processes which cause barriers to a quality and efficient service should be removed; and
- in all aspects of public services delivery, there should be a recognition of who the user of the service is i.e. “*customer needs*”.

v) **Access**

5.20 The issue of access to public services covers a variety of problems of a physical, social and institutional nature.

5.21 Physical access – quite often public services are situated at great distances from consumers. Many services suffer from both “*unfriendly*” locations and opening hours. This can cause both added stress and expense to the client, particularly for women in rural areas with poor public transport facilities.

5.22 A quality service must incorporate the concept of easier access for the client. For this to be achieved, the Forum **recommends** that:

- offices should, as far as possible, be more localised or local payment agents should be established, as is the case with An Post’s role in the delivery of social welfare payments;
- use of the “*one-stop shop*”⁶ and more flexible opening hours;
- providing easy physical access to services for the disabled, the elderly, mothers with young children etc.;
- clients should be the central focus of service delivery and service quality; a fundamental requirement is the right of clients to be treated with dignity, to be informed whenever claims are being investigated, told the name of the official deciding the claim and how to make a case directly, where possible, to that official;

⁶ The concept of a “*one-stop shop*” is discussed more fully later on in this Section

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⁶ The concept of a “*one-stop shop*” is discussed more fully later on in this Section

- greater availability of free/or reduced cost phone lines (these are already available in some areas of the public service); it should be possible for a customer to contact public services from anywhere in the country for the price of a one-unit local call;
- maximum waiting periods and replies to correspondence should be set, both in respect of initial applications for services as well as in any subsequent appeals; and
- customer-friendly reception areas with queries dealt with in a courteous, private and expeditious fashion; use of many social services comes at times of crisis in people's lives and a personalised delivery, involving one-to-one confidentiality, is required; the former Minister for Finance summed up what a quality service should aim for:

*“Overall, the aim in service quality should be to make the transaction as pleasant and simple as possible for the customer and to produce an acceptable response in line with current policies”.*⁷

vi) **Redress**

5.23 Closely allied to access is the need for transparency or openness and the right of complaint or redress when things go wrong. People must know how to complain, to whom they should complain and they must have confidence that their complaint will be dealt with. For these purposes, the Forum **recommends** that:

- clients should have the right to be presumed to be honest, unless there is a reason to believe otherwise;
- clients should have the right to appeal decisions and to receive a fair third party independent hearing; this means that reasons for refusals should be given and eventual access to the courts made possible;
- clients should also have the right to be informed about such an appeals process as well as the right to appropriate representation at oral appeals;
- clients should also have the right to an independent, well-advertised and easily – accessible grievance and/or complaints procedure when they feel unfairly treated on issues such as quality of service, treatment by staff, information etc.; in many cases, these could be dealt with on the spot by the local manager, as quite often a quick, clear and unbiased response can prevent costly delays;

⁷ Address by the former Minister for Finance, Mr Bertie Ahern, T.D., to a Seminar on Quality of Public Services, organised by ICTU on 20th October, 1994.

- a comprehensive staff training programme is required to engender the necessary changes in staff attitudes and a code of practice on standards of communication and on the rights and means of redress available to clients is needed; staff at present are not sufficiently trained in listening and interview skills, with many seeing their role as simply dispensing payments and not having to deal with queries;⁸
- the facilities at most offices need to be improved; giving people the right to redress while at the same time not providing the required facilities is of little advance; cubicles in offices where personal matters are being discussed should be sound-proofed; discussion of personal and often stressful matters in the full glare of the public is not acceptable and should be discontinued;
- service providers, in consultation with customer-service advisory groups,⁹ should monitor delivery and take action when standards are not met; and
- data on different clients' usage of public services and of their needs and preferences should be collected and acted upon.

Integrated Planning and Policy Co-ordination at National Level

5.24 The Forum recommends that:

- there should be greater medium-term planning and co-ordination in the provision and the development of all social services;
- these services should be delivered in a consistent and equitable manner throughout the country, on the basis of clear minimum levels of services and benefits to be provided to the customer;
- general tenets of social service development should be applied including the principles advocated by the Commission on Social Welfare in relation to adequacy of services, redistribution of resources, comprehensiveness, consistency, simplicity and integrated delivery;
- the impact on individuals and families of current services should also be researched to promote better planning and provision; and
- clear aims and targets should be set out and there should be on-going monitoring on the effectiveness of policies to attain these targets.

⁸ See Box 5, Section IV for a discussion of a quality approach to delivery.

⁹ See Section VIII

5.25 The Government approved last year a framework for the development of an Integrated Social Service System (ISSS) to provide a more integrated approach to the administration, delivery and management of statutory income support services. The Forum particularly welcomes this initiative and understands that a high-level Inter-Departmental Group has been set up to bring forward specific proposals in this area. In this context, the Forum specifically **recommends** that, following consultations with the staff involved, improved national standards should be set for the quality delivery of services to the public which would cover:

- the availability, accessibility, efficiency and transparency of services;
- the environment in which these services are delivered, including staffing levels, qualifications and training;
- the method and style of delivery and speed of response;
- integration in services delivery; and
- monitoring the implementation of these standards.

5.26 To achieve more effective policy integration and co-ordination at national level, the Forum **recommends** that:

- each Department and State Agency should examine its role to identify areas of overlap and where responsibility rests and devolves; the Strategic Management Initiative which requires all Departments and Agencies to look at their objectives, programmes and methods should provide an opportunity to address these issues;
- an Inter-Departmental Working Group should be set up to monitor areas of joint activity and of policy and procedural developments and how this interacts with or impacts on policies and procedures in other Departments; for these purposes, such a Group might use as a basis and take into account the new Co-ordinating Group of Secretaries (under the Strategic Management Initiative) which has, as one of its tasks, to recommend ways in which interacting Departmental strategies should be co-ordinated;
- customer-service advisory groups, as agreed in the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, should be established as soon as possible;
- each Department and State Agency should set out its commitment to rights and entitlements; and
- a charter of rights for consumers, embracing a code of practice and a complaints procedure that reflects the right to a quality service should be developed and published.

Integrated Delivery at Local Level

- 5.27 But the effectiveness of the above recommendations relating to measures at national level need to be complemented and strengthened with parallel measures and initiatives – and again on the basis of staff consultations and involvement – to achieve greater integration in the delivery of all social services at local level. For this purpose, and as an interim step pending the ultimate establishment in the long-term of a fully-integrated system of “one-stop shops” throughout the country, the Forum **recommends** that all local offices of the Department of Social Welfare should have staff trained to help the client not only with the full range of its own schemes but also those of other official agencies which complement that Department’s services.
- 5.28 This would enable the client to become aware of the full range of entitlements available from all State Agencies and thus the client would be empowered to take better-informed decisions on what option suited him/her best.
- 5.29 Furthermore, the Forum **recommends** that the role and capacity of local offices should be enhanced to enable them to liaise with other agencies on the other benefits which a client is entitled to, without the necessity for the client having to travel from one local office to another. Over time, such a system could, in effect, eventually progress into a one-stop shop network of local offices for the delivery of all social services.
- 5.30 This would require detailed consideration and examination of a whole range of key issues such as staffing, training, inter-agency structures and relationships and would have to be carefully thought out and planned by all the Departments and Agencies involved. Such an important departure from the present system would obviously take some time to achieve and could well meet with resistance from some of the interests involved.
- 5.31 To facilitate this assessment, the Forum **recommends** that “*pilot models*” for the integrated planning and delivery of all social services at local level should be explored and adopted, on a basis similar to the area-based approach to local development which was initiated under the Programme for Economic and Social Progress. In this respect, the possibility should be explored for clients to be assigned a particular official who they would deal with initially for all social services.
- 5.32 In this context, the Forum supports the specific proposal which was made by the National Social Service Board at its Plenary Session on 24th May 1994. What this proposal envisaged was that a pilot scheme should be established which would combine the application processes for a number of State services (such as claims for social welfare, Health Board schemes, income tax, FÁS schemes, housing and education grants) into a single application transacted at one location.

- 5.33 This would have a number of advantages both for the providers and the customers in terms of delivering services which would be better co-ordinated, simpler to understand, more efficient in serving the customer and easier to manage.
- 5.34 All communications regarding claims would be made through this one local office but, in some instances, decisions may have to be made at the relevant offices of the particular services. The pilot scheme would promote its services widely in its catchment area and would be pro-active in approach, targeting individuals and families who would have been identified as potentially qualifying for services. Information technology could play an important role in driving this service.
- 5.35 This pilot scheme would be managed by a management group consisting of representatives from each service and customer-service advisory groups would have an input in the development of the service and would have representatives on the management group. The scheme would operate in an urban and a rural area with population areas similar in size to the PESP areas. The scheme would run for a period of two years and would be subject to on-going evaluation.
- 5.36 The Forum would see other advantages also in such a pilot scheme in providing a testing ground for the work of the Inter-Departmental Group mentioned in paragraph 5.25 above.

Elements of a “*Model*” Charter

- 5.37 A charter to be effective, should be more than a wish list. It must have general support from citizens, consumers and providers of services. It must make real, practical, improvements to delivery of services. It can include different kinds of rights (see Section IV) provided that the differences are clearly delineated and that false promises are not made. It should not be a fixed statement but instead be a dynamic and flexible instrument and part of a continuing process of development. The Forum’s recommendations on the main elements which should be covered in a charter are outlined in Box 7.

5.38 A charter cannot exist in a vacuum. In other words, it will not work unless the desire is there to make it work and unless the mechanisms, backed up by strengthened equality legislation, exist to make it effective. Consideration should, therefore, be given to establishing formal procedures for implementation and enforcement of different kinds of rights, as well as how information is gathered, processed and disseminated.

5.39 Finally, the attitude of staff, their consultation, motivation, training, pay and working conditions is of crucial importance for the successful implementation of the rights and operating principles recommended in this Section. These issues are referred to again and further developed in Section VIII of the Report.

BOX 7

Main Elements of a Charter

- (i) **Rights to specific forms of provision.** Not as individually enforceable rights but as statements of intent; as such they should be implemented by duties imposed on public authorities, with goals, time-tables and procedures for review.
- (ii) **Quality standards.** A framework for quality assurance which clearly establishes the broad purposes for which services are intended is required with;
 - The public having a role in designing standards and measuring and assessing performance.
 - Reconciling, as far as possible, the interests of individual consumers with those of citizens in general, given budgetary resource limitations.
 - Consumers having rights to participate in defining and assessing quality.
 - Service providers pursuing specific quality standards and procedures for reviewing progress towards clear objectives.
 - The availability of options to ensure that a particular service meets the actual needs of the clients.
- (ii) **Enforceable consumer rights.** Based on the principles of procedural fairness with respect to:
 - Rights of access and information.
 - Fair and equal treatment and respect for cultural diversity.
 - Reasons for decisions.
 - Confidentiality.
 - Complaint and appeal procedures.
 - Discretion, by reference to explicit guidelines.
 - Effective enforcement procedures.

Section VI

**Recomended
Improvements
in Individual
Services**

Recommended Improvements in Individual Services

Introduction

6.1 The Forum's views and recommendations on rights and operating principles, as outlined in the previous Section, are of general application to the delivery of all public services. These are not, therefore, repeated in this Section which is devoted to considering deficiencies particular to some individual services and to outlining the Forum's recommendations on how these should be addressed. The services involved are:

- Social Welfare.
- An Post.
- Health.
- Housing.
- Other Local Authority Services.
- FÁS.

Social Welfare

6.2 The Department of Social Welfare has made a number of improvements in recent years, with the establishment of an executive agency, the Social Welfare Services (SWS), to provide a better focus for the delivery of its services. The SWS has now been reorganised on a regional basis, with each region being responsible for all aspects of social welfare services in its area. Local offices are gradually becoming more general purpose offices – the goal is to develop a network of one-stop-shops dealing with the complete range of services. Over time, it is envisaged that these offices will also act as referral centres for other State Agencies.

6.3 Substantial investments have been made in information technology and integrated computer systems, currently being developed, will enable more and better information and advice to be given to customers. Significant investments have also taken place in providing new offices and refurbishing others.

- 6.4 New payment methods have been introduced and some customers are now offered a choice e.g. pension or child benefit payments can now be credited to a bank account. Cash payments are being transferred from local offices to An Post and the introduction of magnetic cards opens up possibilities for streamlining and integrating payments for the client in the medium-term in areas such as Social Welfare, FÁS, Health Boards etc..
- 6.5 Weekly signing-on is being phased out for the unemployed; over 200,000 people now sign once monthly, some sign only quarterly. In addition, revised arrangements have recently been introduced whereby Travellers are no longer required to sign-on at segregated times and venues.
- 6.6 Closer links have also been established between the Department of Social Welfare and other State Agencies, principally FÁS and the Health Boards, and relationships have also been developed with voluntary and community groups at regional and local levels.
- 6.7 The range and quality of information has been improved, forms/notifications to customers have been simplified to better explain decisions, customer requirements are emphasised in staff training and surveys are used to get feedback from customers. Finally, Job Facilitators have now been appointed to advise unemployed customers on the range of schemes and employment support options open to them.

Comments on Social Welfare

- 6.8 While noting and welcoming the above improvements, the consensus view among customers and organisations involved is that the system is not working as well as it should be and the Forum's views on a number of areas where further improvements are necessary are as follows¹.

Signing-on Arrangements

- weekly signing-on arrangements, while being phased out, continue to operate for some claimants; abolishing this requirement, and the removal of cash payments, would further help in the development of a more integrated service of income support;
- Garda stations continue to be used in rural areas for signing-on purposes; however, for initial signing-on and where difficulties arise, this requires attendance at the main Social Welfare offices; and

¹ The latest (1993) Annual Report of the Ombudsman showed that nearly 60% of complaints against Civil Service Departments and Offices related to social welfare.

- any change in procedures or payment methods should be explained to people collecting social welfare payments.

Information

- this may be confusing or in conflict with other information previously available;
- the interaction of schemes is frequently not alluded to or explained;
- clients need to be involved in devising information publications;
- information is not always accurate or user-friendly;
- there are information gaps which affect people's ability to move seamlessly from one entitlement to another;
- some schemes e.g. the Family Income Supplement Scheme, may be under-utilised due in part to poor promotion and internal anomalies;
- insufficient account is taken when preparing information leaflets of the fact that many welfare recipients have low levels of literacy;
- the amount of paper work the customer is required to complete and furnish can be prohibitive and costly;
- information is not always provided on a pro-active basis;
- information on particular schemes may not be available at local offices and this may necessitate extra travel and inconvenience; and
- staff may not be familiar with or aware of new information and may not be in a position to provide clarification or assistance on the spot.

Complaints and Appeals Systems

- there is no formal and well-advertised complaints procedure for people who are dissatisfied with the way their claim has been handled;
- despite improvements, the appeal procedure is still lengthy and is perceived by many as not being independent and lacking transparency;
- people are not always given access to the reasons why a claim has failed and to an independent review of these decisions; and
- people may have no access to representation, where an appeal is oral.

Office Facilities

- while improvements and refurbishments have been achieved, and this is on-going, the general standard of the majority of offices remains unacceptable; and
- lack of privacy for clients is still a major problem; cubicles are available in some offices but these are usually not sound-proof; use of counter hatches continues, even in modern and cashless offices.

Staff Training

- some front-line staff in the Department of Social Welfare are not sufficiently trained in listening and interview skills and do not always use a pro-active approach with clients; and
- the Department has so far not sufficiently brought representative of service users into its training process.

Recommendations on Social Welfare

6.9 The Forum's recommendations on social welfare services are as follows:

Signing-on and Payment Arrangements

- more staggered signing-on and the phasing out of weekly signing-on should be accelerated;
- as already recommended in Forum Reports Nos. 3 and 5, the use of Garda stations for signing-on should be phased out; and
- the option of payment by cheque through the post or by direct payment to charge-free bank accounts, which is now available in certain cases, should be extended to all clients.

Information

- general guidelines for good practice in relation to information requirements have already been outlined in Section V, Box 6; these guidelines are particularly applicable to the information provided on social welfare services.

Complaints and Appeals Systems

- a simple, clear, effective and non-bureaucratic complaints procedure should be introduced; clients should be more actively informed of their right to use this procedure as an alternative to the existing appeals procedure; and
- clients should be advised as to why a claim has been refused and there should be a system whereby decisions made by the Social Welfare Appeals Office can be independently reviewed.

Office Facilities

- confidential consulting rooms should be provided, where possible, in every office;
- the use of counter hatches should be phased out as quickly as possible;
- the momentum of upgrading social welfare offices should be maintained; this should involve consultation with the staff and clients using the offices; and
- particular steps should be taken to upgrade and ensure uniform standards throughout the country in agency offices used by the Department of Social Welfare.

Staff Training²

- staff dealing directly with clients should receive improved training in communication and interview skills;
- staff should be briefed on new information leaflets, amended guidelines, extended schemes etc. on a pro-active basis to ensure that this information is made available to clients at the earliest opportunity;
- staff should be consulted on a regular basis to determine how service delivery can be further improved; and
- customer-service advisory groups should be established as part of the on-going review of quality and standards in service delivery and with a consultative role also in staff training.

² See also Section VIII of the Report.

An Post

- 6.10 An Post now plays a major role in the supply of social welfare payment services, with the transfer of a greater range of payments to post offices. This was designed to deal more effectively with client requirements at local level (there are nearly 2,000 post offices, compared to only 130 social welfare offices) and to this end An Post currently offers a number of alternative payment methods:
- Personal Payment Orders.
 - Postdrafts.
 - Electronic Information Transfers.
 - Electronic Fund Transfers.
- 6.11 The provision of an Electronic Benefit Transfer facility is also being considered, in co-operation with the Associated Banks. Post offices are open for 7 and a half hours a day for 5 and a half days a week, enabling increased flexibility in the collection of payments. An Post has an on-going plan to refurbish its offices throughout the country and streamline counter operations to improve speed of service.
- 6.12 An Post also operates the Household Budget Scheme on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare. This enables recipients of unemployment payments to pay regular contributions towards various household bills by direct deduction from their payments. Utilities for whom deductions can be made are the ESB, An Bord Gais, Telecom Éireann and many of the Local Authorities.
- 6.13 As part of its plans to improve services to its customers An Post, in co-operation with the Department of Social Welfare, has formulated plans to develop a computer system linking 1,000 post offices nationwide. The first phase of this project will see the automation of the 600 busiest offices. This system, which will support a wide range of products and services, has as its principal function the upgrading of the quality and effectiveness of the social welfare payments system. In the unlikely event of total computer failure, the post office can resort to manual records to provide social welfare payments.
- 6.14 The Forum fully appreciates the importance of the issues that arise from the closure of rural post offices. It notes that, under present arrangements operated by An Post, an office is considered for closure when the incumbent postmaster retires or dies, when no family member wants to continue to run the office, where the turnover in the office is too low to give a long-term sustainable living from the job and where there is, within a reasonable distance, another post office to which the business can be transferred. An Post has calculated that the travelling distance to the nearest post office in these circumstances is, on average, 2.8 miles.

Comments on An Post

6.15 The Forum considers that An Post's services should be further improved in the following respects:

- careful consideration needs to be given to any proposal to close a rural post office, in view of the effects this will have on rural viability and local development, as well as the elderly, the disabled and those on low incomes, including social welfare recipients; recent closures have raised fears that An Post's 1991 Viability Plan is being resurrected;
- counter staff in post offices are sometimes found to be unhelpful or dismissive of social welfare clients;
- there can be a lack of flexibility in collection times; while earlier opening times have been used to convenience customers, some claimants are instructed when to go to receive their payments; this is effectively a doubling of the signing-on requirement;
- there is a lack of information on the procedures that apply for the collection of payments in the case of computer failure or robbery and there is a lack of clarity on how to obtain emergency payments;
- confusion can arise in relation to changes in the method of payment or the introduction of new procedures; and
- there is no formal complaints procedure for clients who are dissatisfied with the service.

Recommendations on An Post

6.16 The Forum's recommendations in relation to An Post are:

- the local community should be consulted and its views taken into account before any decisions are taken by An Post to close rural post offices;
- discussions should take place with the Department of Social Welfare prior to any such decision being taken to ensure that acceptable arrangements are put in place for the provision of social welfare payments;
- counter staff should be trained in customer relations, particularly in relation to social welfare clients;
- adequate staff should be assigned on payment days to reduce delays; an alternative approach would be to further stagger payment days as a means of spreading the workload;
- in situations where An Post is providing services on behalf of social service agencies it should ensure that its post offices have sufficient capacity to cater for the extra customers involved;
- staff of An Post should not be involved in the policing role by proxy on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare;

- information should be made available at each post office on the procedures which would apply in relation to the collection of payments in the event of computer failure or robbery;
- any changes in procedures or payment methods should be explained to people collecting social welfare payments; and
- a formal and easily accessible complaints procedure should be established and details of how to use this procedure should be on display in all post offices.

Health

6.17 The Forum's main comments and recommendations in this area are outlined beneath under the following headings:

- Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme.
- Other Health Board Services.
- Health Boards and Voluntary Organisations.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) Scheme

6.18 The SWA Scheme, which is a discretionary payment administered by the Health Boards, plays a vital role in the lives of those who have an immediate need caused by exceptional circumstances. It will be recalled from Section III, that there are two distinct perspectives on discretionary payments – one view is that the rationale behind discretionary payments needs to be carefully re-evaluated, as it is contrary to a rights-based approach to social service entitlement and to the concept of adequacy of core payments. This, however, raises the more general question of the adequacy of all income payments, which is beyond the scope of the present Report, and this issue will be addressed by the Forum in a later Report.

6.19 The alternative perspective, which is the focus of this Report, is that discretionary payments will always be required as it is not possible to legislate for every contingency and, on this basis, the following are the Forum's main comments on the SWA Scheme as it operates at present.

Comments on the SWA Scheme

Absence of transparency

- the Scheme lacks transparency; there is a perception that Community Welfare Officers make payments to individuals and families whom they favour; this can lead to confusion and anger;
- there is a lack of clear user-friendly information on what to apply for, how to apply or of the grounds for success or failure as there are no feedback mechanisms for users of the service; this can lead to low take-up, which has been identified in a number of recent surveys, or can lead to people approaching the service with unreal expectations;
- there is inconsistency from one Health Board area to another – and within Health Boards – in relation to the level and type of payments made under the Scheme e.g. some Health Boards rarely make payments for mortgage interest relief, whereas in other areas this is standard; and
- clients are often not aware that payments under the SWA will be recouped out of the eventual social welfare payment when this is settled.

Lack of Complaints and Appeals Systems

- there is no formal complaints procedure and no set procedure for appealing a decision in some of the Health Boards;
- the appeals procedure, where it exists, is lengthy and not perceived as independent – in fact the present system of appeals is conducted by members of the same board which refused the original application;
- there is lack of access to evidence; most people would like to make their case in person, but in practice oral hearings are not available; even when available, people do not have the wherewithal to obtain representation;
- as people are not given the reason for the original decision or access to records, an appeal is difficult; and
- as the scheme of “*last resort*”, it is of vital importance that access to the appeals system be operated in a manner that is fair and independent.

Discrimination Against Specific Groups

- Travellers: the continued practice in Dublin of a separate centre for emergency Supplementary Welfare payments to Travellers cannot be defended.

Poor Delivery

- the deficiencies outlined in Section III of the Report regarding the standard of offices and staff attitudes apply particularly in the delivery of the SWA;
- while some computerisation is taking place, much of the recording and retrieval of information relating to clients is done manually; this slows up the process and can be highly inconvenient to users of the service who may have to call to several offices to have information verified; the manual handwriting of cheques limits the payment options available to claimants;
- there are often long queues in health centres for people waiting to see the Community Welfare Officer; in some instances, people may have to wait several hours – in many instances, they are queuing simply to collect a payment;
- waiting rooms and interviewing facilities are very inadequate in many health centres, especially in older buildings; it is not possible frequently to discuss matters with sufficient privacy – this is demeaning, both for the client and the staff;
- clients often feel that they are not treated with the courtesy and respect they are entitled to, or that their problems are not listened to; and

- other duties carried out by Community Welfare Officers relating to information, advice, advocacy, referral etc. are often neglected due to the pressure of work in operating the SWA Scheme.

Recommendations on the SWA Scheme

6.20 The Forum's **recommendations** for improvements are as follows:

- there should be greater integration between the SWA Scheme and the mainstream Social Welfare system as already agreed under the PESF; this would be facilitated through the proposed integration of the payment methods and the data-bases for SWA and Short-term Social Welfare Schemes and through the further development of "one-stop shops";
- guidelines on how the Scheme operates should be published to give greater transparency to its operation;
- a fast, transparent and efficient independent complaints and appeals procedure should be introduced as soon as possible³; this should be integrated into the formal social welfare appeals system;
- the segregated venue in Dublin for Travellers in respect of emergency Supplementary Welfare payments should be abolished forthwith for the majority of trailer-based Travellers; if some special arrangements for transient groups are required, these should be provided in appropriate conditions and circumstances, such as the establishment of a special unit by the Health Boards to deal with the emergency Supplementary Welfare payment needs of Travellers who are on unofficial halting sites.
- regular payments under the SWA should be integrated with other regular social welfare payments; in cases where recoupment is required, it should be possible for clawbacks to be made at a lower rate which would not result in financial hardship or indebtedness for the claimant; and
- finally, a proposed outline charter of rights under the SWA Scheme is set out in Box 8.

³ The former Minister for Social Welfare Dr. Michael Woods, T.D. announced his intention in September, 1994 to introduce new regulations for the SWA appeals system.

BOX 8

**Proposed Charter of Rights under the
Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme**

Access: the right to have applications dealt with in decent comfortable surroundings; access for disabled people, women with children etc.; prompt service; clear advertising of times and locations of service.

Courtesy: the right to be treated with courtesy and respect; the right to be listened to.

Honesty: the right to be presumed to be honest, unless there is reason to believe to the contrary.

Information: the right to full information on the Scheme – the procedures, policies and standards; the right to have this information readily available in plain and simple language.

Non discrimination: the right to full access to services and fair treatment irrespective of political, religious, cultural or sexual beliefs or behaviour.

Privacy: the right to have all personal dealings with the service conducted in a manner and place that is conducive to total privacy.

Confidentiality: the right to ensure that all information supplied by the client is not transmitted to a third party without the client's explicit consent; the client's right to have access to all information contained on his/her file.

Refusals: the client's right to full and written reasons for the refusal of any application.

Appeals: the right to have appeals heard in a speedy manner consistent with the principles of natural justice.

Complaints: the right to an explicit and transparent system for making complaints and the right to a speedy response to such complaints.

Representation: the right to make comments and suggestions in relation to the quality of the service received; the right to client representation on bodies which are considering proposals in relation to the nature of the service or the delivery of the service.

Other Health Services

6.21 The Forum's comments and recommendations on other health services cover a number of distinct areas.

Women

6.22 Women are generally treated poorly throughout the health system. It is **recommended** that the issues outlined below should be given priority attention:

- long waiting times for appointments in out-patient or ante-natal clinics;
- patients do not have direct and complete access to written medical records; this is of particular importance to women, because of the continuing nature of gynaecological and obstetrical care over a lifetime;
- the need for locally-based health services is a crucial part of a health care programme for women and children; many core services are not available locally, such as dental, optical and speech therapy; and
- many health centres have no wheelchair access and many have no facilities for women with babies who may need attention or feeding; some centres are particularly decrepit and in need of renovation.

Community Services

6.23 The provision of community-based core services for the elderly is central to the development of community care. Despite the crucial importance of services such as home-help, meals-on-wheels and day-care in caring for the elderly in a non-institutionalised environment, many of these services are in short supply at present. In addition, the range and quality of services varies greatly between Health Boards.

6.24 The Forum **recommends** that voluntary bodies should be actively encouraged to become involved in the provision of core services for the elderly. This should involve a pro-active approach by official agencies in terms of:

- agreeing on what these services should be;
- ensuring uniform and consistent standards of eligibility, accessibility and delivery throughout the country;
- rationalisation of administrative arrangements and levels of funding for voluntary bodies willing to provide these services; these should be based on criteria and norms defined at national level;
- the fostering of an ethos of statutory – voluntary partnership at both national and local levels; and
- the creation of a context and a structure for the planned development of the voluntary sector (see Section VII of the Report).

The Disabled

- 6.25 The Health Boards administer the Disabled Persons Maintenance Allowance (DPMA) Scheme. This is a weekly allowance paid to people who, following a medical examination and a means test, are considered to be substantially handicapped in undertaking work.
- 6.26 A significant problem with the DPMA is the difficulties which arise when a person leaves the Scheme and then returns to it at a later date. However, it is understood that new regulations introduced recently have addressed this problem. This should now make it easier for people to risk leaving the DPMA and then rejoining it at a later date without a lengthy re-application process.
- 6.27 The Forum's **recommendations** in this area are:
- the DPMA Scheme should be transferred from the Department of Health to the Department of Social Welfare; and
 - other allowances such as the Mobility Allowance, which is provided to severely disabled people, fall well short of making any meaningful contribution to the quality of life of people with disabilities; these should be reviewed, as it is essential that schemes are adequately funded to achieve their purpose.

Travellers

- 6.28 The Forum **recommends** that a special programme of initiatives should be drawn up to tackle the unique health needs of the Traveller community with particular reference to:
- regular published reports by the Health Boards on Traveller accommodation and how this affects the health status of Travellers;
 - simplified application procedures by Travellers for medical cards;
 - a primary health-care programme, employing suitably-trained Travellers;
 - replication, with modifications, of the Eastern Health Board's mobile clinic; and
 - development of culturally appropriate materials for health education, services for the disabled and for women's health needs.

Emergencies

- 6.29 The system seems incapable of responding satisfactorily to emergencies. In fact people with certain serious medical conditions requiring hospitalisation may, on occasions, encounter unacceptable delays in admission; this needs to be given top priority attention.

Information

- 6.30 The provision of information is very varied and, in some instances, is very difficult to access. Moreover, Health Boards do not have clear statutory obligations in relation to most personal services. It is difficult to find out how to access and who is eligible for home nursing, meals-on-wheels, home-help service, a pre-school nursery place or what happens if a child needs to be taken into care by a Health Board. It is **recommended** that all these deficiencies should be addressed as soon as possible, with the publication of a user-friendly booklet outlining all the services and payments provided by the Health Boards.

No Appeals System

- 6.31 No independent appeals system exists for payments and services provided by the Health Boards. The Commission on Health Funding, which reported in 1989, recommended the appointment of an independent Appeals Officer for health and personal social services while the medical card appeal system was promised under the PESP in 1991, but to-date this has not been provided. The new nursing home appeal system is a positive development and the promised review of the Patients Charter is an opportunity to publish information on the numbers and types of complaints received, the manner these were dealt with and the outcomes. The Annual Report of the Ombudsman could serve as a model for this.

Health Boards and Voluntary Organisations

- 6.32 Health services to many groups are provided by voluntary organisations. In many cases these organisations are contracted by the State through the Health Boards to provide a range of services to a specific group. The voluntary sector is an essential resource in the community care system and must be regarded and developed as such. To-date, the sector has, however, been under-resourced and under-consulted. Benefits of the voluntary sector include direct involvement by people in devising systems to meet their own needs and the promotion of social cohesion and community integration.

6.33 In the circumstances, the Forum recommends that the Health Boards should:

- actively promote the establishment and development of appropriate voluntary organisations; and
- as in the case of community care (see above), define “core” community care services and set down standard criteria for their provision and development.

6.34 The Forum notes that under the Minister for Health’s Strategy Document the larger voluntary organisations would have service agreements with the Health Boards, including accountability for public funds received. In this context, the Forum recommends the importance of ensuring that:

- all such contracts are negotiated fairly and that they reflect the true cost of the service; the UK experience of contracting out has not been a happy one and it is vital that we do not make the same mistakes;
- the voluntary sector should have a much greater role in the planning and development of policy than at present;
- this concept of partnership should involve the voluntary sector in a dialogue to decide what services may be provided, the required standard and how these services are to be evaluated; and
- Health Boards should assign staff to work with and facilitate the development and organisation of voluntary bodies and ensure more effective and representative involvement in service planning and provision.

6.35 Finally, in discussions which the Forum has had with the Department of Health, that Department has confirmed that practically all of the deficiencies outlined above by the Forum will be addressed within the framework of the Government’s Health Strategy Document. The main theme of this Document is the re-orientation of the system towards improving its effectiveness by reshaping the way that services are planned and delivered. The Strategy is underpinned by three important principles – equity, quality of service and accountability and is accompanied by a detailed Four-Year Action Plan which maps out what will be achieved up to 1997. An important element, in the context of this present Report, is the emphasis given to greater recognition of the rights of the consumer.

Housing

- 6.36 Over the last number of years, a number of improvements have been made in areas of concern to the Forum in the delivery of housing services. These include the 1991 Plan for Social Housing, the decline in the provision of Local Authority housing has been reversed over the last 2 years and new guidelines in 1993 require Local Authorities to ensure a good living environment and the rehabilitation of rundown areas.
- 6.37 Local Authorities are now required to put arrangements in place so that applicants are informed of their ranking on the housing waiting list; a range of measures have been put in place to mitigate the extent and effects of social segregation in housing and new housing proposals are to be subject to a formal consultation process with the public.
- 6.38 *Homeless People:* guidelines issued in 1991 require Local Authorities to consult, liaise and co-ordinate their responses with health agencies and the voluntary sector and to operate more flexible arrangements in funding of voluntary agencies; increased levels of funding have also been introduced, including the funding of a free telephone service by the Eastern Health Board outside normal hours.
- 6.39 *Travellers:* it has been made clear to Local Authorities that additional funds will be provided if required for the provision of housing and serviced caravan sites and that no project will be held up due to lack of finance; 35 Authorities have submitted proposals for at least one halting site each and it is intended to construct these as quickly as possible; the expanded housing programme will also benefit Travellers and some of the recommendations in the Interim Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community have already been implemented.
- 6.40 *Management and Maintenance:* initiatives taken in recent years to secure improvements in this area include devolution of responsibility to tenants, greater attention to planned rather than response maintenance, setting of standards and monitoring of effectiveness and efficiency, provision of more localised services and greater tenant involvement in the running of housing estates.
- 6.41 *Rent Collection:* Local Authorities are considering the feasibility of different collection options, including direct debit/standing order procedures and payment by transcash in post offices; the Authorities have been advised that the days and times of door-to-door or office collection and the opening and siting of offices should be geared as far as possible to the convenience of tenants; the

Household Budget Scheme operated by the Department of Social Welfare and An Post is expected to be extended to more tenants, as more post offices are computerised; and Dublin Corporation has introduced a new initiative to allow rent payments to be made through post offices.

Recommendations on Housing

6.42 The Forum welcomes the above improvements and initiatives taken by the Department of the Environment. However, given the level of discretion which is available to Local Authorities, implementation of these initiatives has not been applied uniformly throughout the country. Moreover, the Forum considers that the momentum for reform needs to be accelerated in any case and more widely enforced. Specific comments and **recommendations** in this respect are as follows:

Housing Provision

- recent initiatives to mitigate the extent and effects of social segregation in Local Authority housing and improve the quality of house design and scheme layout are to be welcomed; however, the effectiveness of these measures should be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that errors which were made in the past are not repeated;
- allocation policies of Local Authorities have failed to engineer a social mix – preferring to keep problem families in one area – and this should be reviewed;
- public transport access and other public service needs of people living in earlier-built large housing estates located on green-field sites on the edge of existing urban areas should be addressed as a priority;
- the design of housing should be more flexible to cater for the various needs of different users, in consultation with existing or prospective Local Authority tenants;
- more resources should be channelled to self-help housing co-operatives rather than the traditional Local Authority model;
- public housing should come fully under the planning code to ensure further improvements in layout and standards and permit greater public participation in the process; the new requirement for new house-building proposals by Local Authorities to be subject to a formal consultation process is not the same as the planning process as the latter has the advantage of ensuring a more integrated approach to the provision of such housing; and

- more choice should continue to be developed within the system to ensure an appropriate mix of housing and tenure options.

Housing Lists and Allocations

- the system of housing allocations should be made consistent and transparent throughout the Local Authority system;
- clear and uniform criteria should be drawn up and all Local Authorities should be required to adopt a “points system” to enhance the integrity and overcome deficiencies in the present arrangements; and
- each Local Authority should have information readily available for the varied categories of applicants on how to apply to get on a housing list, an applicant’s position on the list and the criteria whereby people gain or lose priority on a list.

Special Groups

Homeless People

- the voluntary sector’s involvement in the planning and delivery of services should be strengthened;
- better co-ordination and liaison arrangements should be developed between Local Authorities, Health Boards and the voluntary sector, at both national and local levels, to achieve more effective partnerships in the provision of suitable supports for those with particular needs;
- one particular area of concern is that of ex-psychiatric patients who need community-based residential services, with on-going elements of care and support, short of full institutional care; another area requiring joint action by the Departments of Health and the Environment is that of the housing needs of young people leaving care; and
- Local Authorities should face up more to their responsibilities in this area; the problem of homelessness is not confined to cities but exists also in rural areas; there is a serious under-representation of the numbers involved and the present method of defining homelessness needs to be reviewed; also, housing the homeless in low-demand areas tends only to exacerbate the problem.

Travellers

- the nomadic culture of Travellers and their special needs for space and facilities to accommodate caravans, visiting family members and economic activities should be more fully taken into account when planning accommodation and other services; quality of service must be a priority as well as the number of accommodation units required;

- Local Authority staff should consult with Travellers and Travellers' groups with regard to the type, quality and appropriateness of the services to be provided; maximum quotas on the number of Travellers living in an area are based on a racist mentality;
- elected representatives should exercise leadership and have a responsibility to effect change in the perception of Travellers in the community at large; this will involve an acceptance that the legitimate accommodation rights of Travellers will have to be met;
- while the record of some Local Authorities in providing Traveller sites is better than others, there is a need for more and better halting sites; the process of providing sites should be further improved on;
- the independent national body, proposed by the Task Force on the Travelling Community, to set annual targets with Local Authorities and to support the achievement of these targets, and with powers to oblige Local Authorities to meet those targets, should be speedily put in place; and
- consideration should be given to transferring responsibility for the provision of social work services from Local Authorities to the Health Boards.

The Elderly

- the housing needs of the elderly will increase in the future as the age profile of our population gets older and should be given greater attention and priority, in consultation with the voluntary sector; and
- there should be more effective combination and strengthening of housing and community care; this should involve a choice of options, including the option of sheltered housing for those living alone; other measures of support such as housing modifications, technological aids and equipment, and community care and social service support should be expanded and provided in a more focused and co-ordinated basis by the Departments of the Environment, Health, Social Welfare and other State Agencies.

The Disabled

- greater account needs to be taken of the particular requirements of disabled people; for this purpose, their representative organisations should be more fully consulted on the appropriateness and the design of the accommodation to be provided.

Management and Maintenance

- the potential for effective tenant participation, drawing on the work of the West Tallaght Resource Centre and the Ballymun Partnership, should be more fully exploited; and
- innovative tenant consultation and participation structures, which have been initiated by the voluntary and co-operative housing sector, should be extended, including provision made for education and training of both housing officials and tenants.

Rent Collection

- improvements such as those initiated by Dublin Corporation should be considered by all Local Authorities to ensure that tenants have as many options as possible available in relation to rent payments; these should be reviewed on an on-going basis;
- the current practice by most Local Authorities of rent collection taking place on the day before the majority of people receive their social welfare payments should be discontinued; collection days should take account of the days people receive these payments;
- the practice of only accepting full payment of the week's rent encourages people to fall into arrears; this should be modified to enable people make payments of less than a full week's rent; and
- the effects of the Household Budgeting Scheme on household spending should be monitored and evaluated to assess its effect on household budgets.

Rent Subsidies

- the significant anomalies as between the net rent payable by tenants in Local Authority housing, as compared with those on the same income but who are in private landlord or voluntary housing and qualifying for the Supplementary Welfare Allowance, should be rationalised to ensure that tenants with similar low incomes and family circumstances are treated consistently.

Private Rented Accommodation

- the poor record by Local Authorities in enforcing standards for private rented accommodation should be rectified; this particularly affects people on low incomes or on social welfare payments and who are not prioritised on housing lists such as single people, including unemployed women and some lone parents; this results in these people living in sub-standard accommodation;

- Local Authorities should be encouraged to use their powers to prosecute for non-compliance by landlords with the 1993 regulations on rent books and minimum standards of accommodation; these powers are not widely enforced at present; and
- further reforms are needed and action is required, in particular, to ensure a speedy resolution procedure.

Other Local Authority Services

6.43 The Forum's **recommendations** for general improvements in the delivery of **all** services provided by the Local Authorities are as follows:

- *Office Facilities:* Local Authority offices need to be refurbished to allow for the confidential discussion of individual circumstances; the vast majority of these offices have seen little improvement in appearance or in the range of services.
- *Access to Information:* clearer and more use-friendly information is needed; information leaflets and application forms should be available at all local offices; this is not generally the case at present, resulting in clients having to make time-consuming and costly travel to main offices, which they can ill afford; in particular, clear guidelines should be provided as to how participation by unemployed people on work experience/training schemes might affect Local Authority rent payments.
- *Participation, Consultation and Integration:* this should be a standard feature in the delivery of services, with a meaningful involvement by the voluntary and community sector to ensure that the views of people living in assisted housing are incorporated into the decision-making process; communication should also be improved between the Departments of Social Welfare, Environment and the Local Authorities to achieve a greater degree of service integration.
- *Complaints and Appeals Systems:* these should be available as a standard feature to all applicants for Local Authority services.
- *Staff Training:* all staff dealing directly with clients should receive customer-service training.

FÁS

- 6.44 FÁS views its role in terms of providing a quality service and respecting the rights of its clients and with clear information on the options available to them. It provides this service through a national network of locally-based offices and the possibility of extending the present opening hours is currently under review. In recent years, FÁS has developed a streamlined payments system which has further improved service delivery and operates an open-door policy to respond to client's requests or grievances and also develops links with local communities and businesses in order to improve service delivery.
- 6.45 As the National Training and Employment Authority, FÁS considers its work as being developmental at national, regional and local levels. Within regions, the organisation assists businesses in recruiting suitable staff, meeting regional skills needs and working with other bodies to develop a regional infrastructure. At local level, FÁS promotes and supports initiatives which help individuals and community groups to start businesses, and provide services to local communities.
- 6.46 Some critics of the organisation have suggested that FÁS has a restrictive view of its role, that it seeks to impose a narrow agenda for change, that it does not engage in genuine consultation with relevant interest groups and that it does not respond flexibly to suggestions or proposals.
- 6.47 The voluntary and community sector is particularly concerned that it provides a service for FÁS but that this is undertaken without its full participation or consultation in the ethos, policies, management and appraisal of schemes or a clear understanding of the accountability of both FÁS and the sector.
- 6.48 In responding to these criticisms, FÁS highlights the fact that its defined role is wide-ranging and that it interprets this flexibly and sensitively. As a statutory agency, funded from national and European sources, it is required to balance the manner of its response to client proposals with the need to demonstrate accountability for the financial and staff resources it provides.
- 6.49 FÁS also maintains that suggestions that it does not behave in a truly consultative and responsive manner are ill-founded. It points in particular to the co-operative relationships it has developed with local communities across the country, resulting in an extremely wide range of community-generated development programmes, and to the effective operation of partnership-based initiatives within the framework of the Programme for Economic and Social Progress and the Programme for Competitiveness and Work. To some extent,

FÁS considers that the extent of its support for local initiatives is under-recognised, perhaps due to the fact that it does not aggressively advertise the contribution it makes in each individual case.

- 6.50 FÁS accepts the need to make particular efforts to reduce real or perceived barriers to the participation of women in the workforce. To this end, it launched a Positive Action Programme for Women in 1990, with the particular aim of increasing women's participation in areas where they are traditionally under-represented. Under the Community Employment Programme, it funds the operation of crèches with the aim of enhancing opportunities for women to participate in a wide range of activities, including training and employment.
- 6.51 FÁS values its relationship with the voluntary sector which it feels is a positive and constructive one. FÁS training schemes have been useful to many voluntary organisations. It recognises the importance of providing clear, accurate and up-to-date information for all its clients. It publishes a wide range of generally available information material, seeks to answer queries speedily but it does acknowledge that there is scope for further improving its services in this area.

Comments on FÁS

- 6.52 The Forum considers that there is a basis for proposing greater consultation by FÁS with community interests in matters relating to the provision of its employment services and schemes.
- 6.53 There is a sharp contrast between the consultative mechanisms established within FÁS in respect of industrial training and those used in its employment services. This arises from the difference in policy and practice in this regard of the former AnCo and National Manpower Service. AnCo established a variety of formal consultation mechanisms in the area of industrial training and these include statutory Industrial Training Committees, representative of employers, trade unions and educational interests in respect of each industrial sector and for Advisory Committees, similarly constituted, for each of the Training Centres. These mechanisms continue to work well. When FÁS inherited the old National Manpower Service in 1988 no corresponding consultative mechanisms were, however, in place nor have they since been established.
- 6.54 Given that FÁS is now regionalised, the Forum believes that there is an argument for considering the establishment of Advisory Committees, within regions, to deal specifically with matters relating to its employment services role. These Committees should include representatives of trade unions, employers and community interests. Their role would be to oversee the delivery of FÁS services (other than direct industrial training services) within the region and to advise the Board of FÁS on relevant matters.

- 6.55 This approach would be preferable to the informal, and at times ad hoc, consultative arrangements that are currently in place, the effectiveness of which often depends on the commitment of FÁS local managers to their operation.
- 6.56 With regard to training of people with disabilities, there is a greater need for cohesion between FÁS and the National Rehabilitation Board to provide increased training opportunities for people with disabilities on **mainstream** FÁS courses.
- 6.57 With regard to the needs of the long-term unemployed, there is a need to develop further and strengthen the level of co-operation between FÁS and the educational sector. Many long-term unemployed people, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, cannot take full advantage of FÁS mainstream training programmes due to a lack of basic education. This further inhibits their prospects of entering the active labour market.
- 6.58 In its Report No. 4 “*Ending Long-term Unemployment*”, the Forum identified a number of major deficiencies in existing policies and in the range of training and employment programmes run by FÁS and other agencies. In addition to these, and the other issues already outlined above, the Forum considers that there are a number of further issues in the delivery of FÁS services which also need attention. These are:-
- there is no complaints procedure available to participants on Community Employment Programmes;
 - the need to improve meaningful participation and consultation with the voluntary and community sector, especially on policy development and programme appraisal in relation to service delivery;
 - the quality and availability of information needs to be further improved; written clarification can be difficult to obtain and there is concern with bureaucratic follow-up which causes frustration among clients;
 - FÁS offices generally tend to be situated at locations removed from the marginalised communities to which a considerable portion of its services are targeted; and
 - the need for suitable modules of basic education to be included on FÁS training programmes for the long-term unemployed (e.g. skill foundation programmes etc.); these could be provided by local VECs within the training centres as it has been found that people in this category will not return to a conventional school.

Recommendations on FÁS

6.59 The Forum's Report No. 4 recommended a package of proposals which would involve major changes in the nature and delivery of existing programmes for the long-term unemployed. In the context of the present Report and without prejudice to the implementation of its earlier proposals, the Forum now **recommends** the following additional improvements in the delivery of FÁS services:

- the possibility should be explored of establishing Advisory Committees, representative of trade union, employer and community interests to oversee the delivery of FÁS services (other than direct industrial training services) at regional level and to advise the Board of FÁS on relevant matters;
- a strengthening of efforts to promote increased access and opportunities for Travellers and people with a disability on mainstream training courses;
- suitable modules of basic education, to be provided by the VECs, should be included on FÁS training programmes for the long-term unemployed;
- a grievance procedure should be established to hear complaints about the treatment of participants on Community Employment Programmes and claims of compulsion;
- more generally, a complaints procedure for clients of all FÁS services should be established, with the involvement of representatives of trade union, employer and community interests;
- there should be greater participation and consultation with the voluntary and community sector on policy development and programme appraisal in relation to service delivery;
- financial incentives should be reviewed to encourage greater participation on training and employment schemes;
- information should be comprehensive, user-friendly, up-to-date and widely available; this should be provided pro-actively and should be given to all unemployed people; and
- FÁS offices should, where possible, be more locally-based in marginalised communities, with more flexibility in opening hours, and evening services should be available to facilitate women's participation.

6.60 Finally, and in line with the recommendations of the Second Commission on the Status of Women and EU legislation, the Forum recommends that FÁS should adopt a flexible and comprehensive approach to improving childcare

facilities. More specifically, the Forum **recommends** that childcare provision should be tailored to suit the needs of the individual, in relation to:

- the timetabling of vocational training courses i.e. modular, part-time and full-time attendance at courses;
- needs of urban vis-à-vis rural parents in relation to flexibility and accessible childcare, with availability of transport taken into consideration;
- how childcare is provided e.g. payment of an allowance, provision of a crèche on location or a partnership approach with the community and private sector; and
- choice and flexibility in childcare provision is necessary.

Section VII

**Role of the
Voluntary and
Community
Sector**

Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

Introduction

- 7.1 A notable feature of our society is the important role played by voluntary organisations and community resource centres in the provision of advice and advocacy and in the direct delivery of personal social services on the part of the State. The Forum acknowledges that the voluntary and community sector is an integral component of our democracy with community and special interest groups functioning in tandem with, but independent of, the State. This is an example of subsidiarity, with the encouragement of democratic participation at community level and the sector providing diverse and decentralised responses to group and individual needs.

Benefits of the Sector

- 7.2 Benefits of the voluntary and community sector are typically characterised as its pioneering and innovative flexibility in identifying and responding to needs. It has an advocacy role with, and on behalf of, marginalised groups. This implies constructive criticism of Government. The sector provides an array of services not currently supplied directly by the State, in areas of information and advocacy, housing and shelter, health and disability services, training and work. The trend to professionalism means that many of the sector's constituent organisations have become significant employers and are substantially involved in official training and employment schemes.

Size and Scale of the Sector

- 7.3 The exact number of active Irish voluntary and community sector organisations is not known, as there is no national system of registration. The constituent organisations of the sector vary in size, from small community-based groups to large service provider bodies. Size and scale affect the methods of operation and the need for and extent of funding sources. In addition, there are national sectoral umbrella bodies which represent, protect and develop the interests of constituent organisations.

The Voluntary Sector

7.4 In the course of preparing this Report, presentations to the Forum characterised the sector in terms of discrete sub-sections of a “*voluntary sector*” and a “*community sector*”. This reflects the history of the sector as a whole and the distinct philosophical ethos of the two facets. The voluntary side is the larger, with long historical roots, often with a foundation of religious involvement. Funding of the voluntary sector has greater reliance on charitable donations and fund-raising. The constituent organisations often place a premium on service delivery. Many of the very large organisations within the voluntary sector are major core and niche service providers, particularly in the field of health, disability, education and services for the elderly. Expenditure by the sector is substantial.¹ The service provision role of the sector is often combined with political lobbying and a drive for social change.

The Community Sector

7.5 The “*community sector*” is a term used to describe a range of organisations, generally smaller in scale than those of the voluntary side. These organisations have both an implicit and explicit political philosophy and a method of operation involving partnership and solidarity between people who experience social exclusion and those who do not. The sector views its position as independent and autonomous and considers that the State should resource the sector to carry out its role. It sees its task as politicisation, advocacy and innovation in response to issues within a given community.

7.6 The sector derives its mandate from the active participation of communities in goal-setting and work programmes for the sector. The term “*community*” in this context refers to a communal identity, which may come from residence in a geographical area, but equally may derive from common interests or beliefs, or common cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The rights of women, of Travellers and the experience of marginalised communities, both here and in Northern Ireland, are central themes. The community sector emphasises a collective view on policy concerns rather than a focus on individualised service delivery.

7.7 The Forum recognises the similarities and differences between these two areas of activity within the sector and values the perspectives of each. It recognises that the process of increased integration within the voluntary and community sector, with identification of common ground as its aim, should develop as an internal process within the sector, and should be facilitated, but not directed, by

¹ State funding of the voluntary sector is one measure of its size: the Department of Health estimates that such funding of voluntary organisations in the field of health and disability alone runs to almost £200 million per annum; this is supplemented by other sources of income received by these organisations.

statutory action. Equally, the Forum is aware that the present and future contribution of the sector, as a whole, may need to be addressed by a multi-faceted statutory approach.

State Policy on the Voluntary and Community Sector

7.8 The Forum considers that the relationship between the State and the voluntary and community sector remains underdeveloped. In this regard, areas of priority concern by the voluntary and community sector in terms of State policy for the sector include:

- lack of formal consultation and participation of the sector in planning and policy making;²
- methods of State funding of the sector; and
- the limited and limiting interpretation of the concept of accountability applied by statutory agencies to the sector.

Statutory Recognition of the Voluntary and Community Sector

7.9 Typically, statutory reaction to the voluntary and community sector has given limited formal recognition to the sector's role and importance. Government policies have implicitly promoted the establishment of numerous discrete organisations by piecemeal recognition and discretionary funding. This has had significant effects in terms of State resourcing of the sector and in the day-to-day relationship of the sector with the statutory agencies. However, there are few formal mechanisms in place to promote participation of the sector as an advocate and representative for its communities of interest or users. Despite this absence of representation or consultation, the sector has developed a role as a local deliverer of services for the State and is often a direct interface between marginalised groups and the State, for example, in the field of social housing.

Recent Developments

7.10 The Programme for Competitiveness and Work renewed the commitment of the Government to a White Paper setting out a clear framework for partnership between the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector, including a cohesive strategy for supporting voluntary activity. This is awaited by the Forum as a potential unified response to the voluntary and community sector agenda.

² See Section V of the Report.

- 7.11 The Government's 1991 Plan for Social Housing placed a duty on Local Authorities to assist voluntary groups in funding of schemes for social housing and accommodation. The Forum welcomes this document as providing an opportunity to widen housing choice.
- 7.12 The Health Strategy Document, published by the Government last year, accepted the voluntary sector as a vehicle of both core and niche service provision and accorded the sector a legitimate role in the future development of health services. The Forum looks forward to the development of structured dialogue and participation between the statutory and voluntary bodies to give substance to this role.
- 7.13 Recognition of the importance of the voluntary and community sector has led to its inclusion on the National Economic and Social Forum. This positive recognition of the legitimacy of the sector as a partner, promoting the common good, aids consensus in decision-making and should be extended to other areas.

Reciprocal Rights and Responsibilities

- 7.14 The relationship between the State and the voluntary and community sector is, in effect, three-sided, with reciprocal relationships between the statutory funders, the sectoral bodies and the groups and individuals availing of the services, with rights in respect of service entitlement, standards and service delivery. For the voluntary and community sector, further partnership roles with statutory agencies are needed. In this regard, the rights and responsibilities of the statutory and voluntary and community sectors need to be clearly defined and acknowledged. The entitlement of users of State-funded services within this sector should be the same as those for direct State-provided services. In particular, consumers of State-funded services provided by the voluntary and community sector must be given clear procedures for complaint and redress, perhaps through existing complaints mechanisms of the relevant State Agencies.

Role of the State Sector

- 7.15 In the view of the Forum, clarification of the voluntary and community sector's role in State service delivery is central to the sector's role and development. But this can only happen by addressing and defining the complex and evolving statutory – voluntary/ community relationship in order to create a context and structure for the development of the voluntary and community sector as a whole. In this context, the concept of provision of core and niche services may act as a framework for partnership structures with the statutory bodies and may assist in rectifying overlaps and gaps in services.

7.16 The Forum considers that the statutory sector should outline its role clearly as a provider of services to which individuals and groups are entitled. At the same time, State policies and procedures should also acknowledge, continue to resource and enhance the complementary and supplemental role of the voluntary and community sector. The Forum **recommends** that the basic requirements in this process should be:

- clarification of both sectors' roles in the delivery of State services to permit planned development, and to improve relationships between statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector; this clarification should involve participation by the voluntary and community sector;
- formal integration of the voluntary and community sector into the policy-making process, involving genuine participation and partnership with the statutory sector; the views of the representatives of the sector on their role and autonomy should be taken into account by the statutory sector;
- acknowledgement of the need for public, social, financial and organisational accountability by both sectors; accountability should be developed through an on-going dialogue; this should include State accountability to the voluntary and community sector and, in turn, accountability by that sector to the communities of interest it represents; and
- standards for State-funded services should be formalised and applied across the country;³ streamlining of existing services should also be initiated so to avoid gaps and overlaps.

Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

7.17 In the case of State-funded services provided through the voluntary and community sector, the Forum's **recommendations** on rights and operating principles, as outlined already in Section V, should also apply to this sector with particular reference to:

- clear, accurate and full information and advice;
- services should meet and be responsive to the needs of those availing of them, with consumer participation in decision-making, implementation and feedback and with accountability on a broad range;
- access to services should be simple and non-discriminatory;

³ See Section V of the Report.

- a right to redress should include an independent appeals system, open to public scrutiny; and
- freedom of information legislation should apply to all State-funded services, regardless of the sector delivering them.

Funding of the Voluntary and Community Sector

7.18 There are a number of main sources of funding for the voluntary and community sector. These are charitable fund-raising, funds from the European Union and State funding. The overall budget of the sector is unknown but is estimated to run to many hundreds of millions of pounds each year.

Charitable Fund-raising

7.19 Fund-raising activities are commonplace, particularly among the voluntary sector organisations, and contribute approximately half the income of voluntary sector organisations.⁴ Voluntary and community services are typically less costly than services supplied directly by the State. On the other hand, this may mean that standards are lower and staff may have poorer employment status and conditions than their statutory sector counterparts. The underlying rationale for charitable giving has not been publicly addressed to date. The problems of accountability of the ethics, agenda and actions of organisations providing services which are not State-funded is not a direct concern of this Report.

European Union Funding

7.20 European Union (EU) funding has assisted the voluntary and community sector since the early 1970s and has enabled a range of projects to be funded which might not have received funds otherwise. EU programmes are defined in detail at the outset, are not open to renegotiation and do not provide a mechanism for participation with those groups for whom the programmes are proposed. Requirements for matching funding present problems for small organisations, including lack of clear and timely information and minimal direct access to the EU and its funding mechanisms.

7.21 European funding has, however, also brought other advantages in terms of promoting notions of partnership between voluntary and community organisations, Local Authorities and national Government. The Forum values the involvement of the European Union funding programmes and sees this avenue as demonstrating possible partnership funding initiatives for the future.

⁴ See Faughnan, P., & Kelleher, P. (1992) *The Voluntary Sector and the State*, Dublin, Conference of Major Religious Superiors.

State Funding of the Sector

- 7.22 State funding of the voluntary and community sector accounts for approximately half of the financial resources going to the sector as a whole. Figures compiled by the Department of Social Welfare show that for the year 1993-4 State funding of the sector was in excess of £400 million. In addition, statutory agencies apportion some of the funds from the National Lottery for use by the sector. Individual organisations may receive all, most, little or none of their revenue from State funding. The proportion of State funding for different areas of the sector varies substantially. The main statutory funders of the voluntary and community sector are the Department of Health and the Health Boards, FÁS, the Department of Education, the Department of Social Welfare, the Department of the Environment and the Local Authorities.
- 7.23 The Forum accepts that State funding of the sector is largely discretionary, lacks transparency and long-term commitment and, as a result, there are a number of severe disadvantages associated with it. The precise criteria for receipt of funds are often complicated or obscure. Funding levels to different organisations for broadly similar projects can also be widely dissimilar, promoting a sense of arbitrariness in decisions. Funding is insecure, usually merely for one year at a time, which militates against forward planning and good management. As a result, deficit funding is common. Lack of resources can lead to limited planning, evaluation and accountability to both funders and to service users. There are seldom agreed criteria regarding the ethos of services, ensuing rights and responsibilities, levels of staff training, provision or supervision, or agreed cost-effectiveness measures.

State-funded Training and Employment Schemes

- 7.24 Submissions to the Forum have indicated that an area of concern to the voluntary and community sector is the increasing involvement of the sector in State-funded training and employment schemes. The sector is particularly concerned that the criteria and rationale of these schemes are not open to alteration through participation by the sector in their design. For example, training programmes may have compatibility with schemes and regulations as a primary concern and may ignore the requirements of those providing and availing of services. The turnover of staff on schemes may also have negative effects on the service and its users. Schemes may be used to provide cheap labour and the sector as a whole is at risk of being used as a limited safety net for the long-term unemployed. The process potentially erodes the sector's independent voice, a concern which is also endorsed in the EU White Paper on Social Policy (1994).

7.25 The Forum recommends that statutory funding of the voluntary and community sector should be based on the following criteria:

- involvement of the sector in planning and policy-making with agreed ranges and standards of services and agreed costings; there should be a commitment to spend and pay, in line with these agreements;
- alteration of the criteria of accountability to include a wider range than mere financial control and to include the social impact of programmes and views of participants;
- alteration from short-term annual funding to consideration of medium and long-term commitments;
- definition of levels and methods of grant payment, with standardised grant application procedures and criteria for grant eligibility;
- elimination of the practice of deficit funding;
- provision of core funding for voluntary and community development, including advocacy-related activities;
- special recognition to small groups and to policies to promote co-operation between organisations to avoid service gaps and overlaps; and
- acknowledgement by the statutory sector of the job creation potential of the sector, and the creation of real jobs with equitable working conditions.

7.26 Finally, the Forum acknowledges that the voluntary and community sector is an essential resource which promotes social cohesion and community integration. These are aims which the Forum has endorsed and committed itself to since its inception.

Section VIII

**Public Service
Reform**

Public Service Reform

Introduction

8.1 The Forum considers that the requirements for public service reforms to ensure the successful implementation of the recommendations proposed in earlier Sections of this Report should involve:

- top management commitment, support and leadership;
- focus on client/customer;
- recognition that quality is a moving target;
- staff consultation, involvement and support;
- commitment to staff training; and
- focus on work process improvement.

Strategic Management

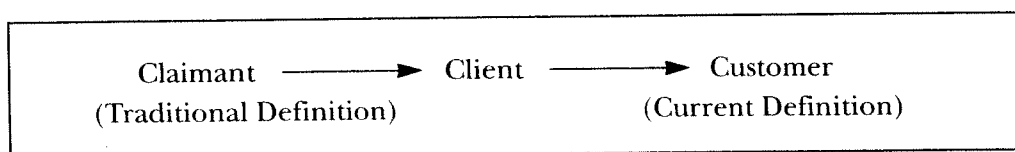
8.2 As already highlighted in Section I, wide-ranging reforms with the joint support of management and trade unions are needed throughout the public services. Our public sector has traditionally been regarded as having a strong bureaucratic focus on systems and procedures but this must now be complemented by greater attention to and interest in people, purpose, performance and value for money. This will require strategic management initiatives, staff consultation and integrated action on four main fronts:

- Quality of Communications.
- Quality of Specification, Performance Indicators and Value for Money.
- Quality of Delivery.
- Quality of Staff and Systems.

8.3 This Section of the Report outlines the Forum's views and recommendations under each of these fronts and which it hopes will, in turn, be viewed as an important input and taken on board in the Strategic Management Initiative now underway throughout the public service.

Quality of Communications

- 8.4 For the provider of social services this will entail informing customers as well as listening to and understanding their needs. The analogy of a client/customer and supplier itself confirms an approach recognising rights/duties within this relationship. This change in emphasis for the individual using the service is represented on a continuum as follows:



Customer-Service Advisory Groups

- 8.5 Involving customers in the design, monitoring and evaluation of services are important facets in improving service delivery. Surveys provide information on customer perceptions and expectations. Where perception falls short of expectation, the customer will be dissatisfied. Involving the customer is the surest way to assess shortfalls between perception and expectation and the most logical way to assess dissatisfaction and identify what needs to be done. But communication should be a continuing dialogue. This means listening as well as informing.
- 8.6 Services work more effectively where customers are well informed. Moreover, customers are likely to be more satisfied where they can exercise choice. The concept of choice or preference is important to the client/customer. It empowers the individual to “vote” with their feet and to choose the best option.
- 8.7 For example, in Sweden, recipients of employment insurance or assistance receive payment by cheque or directly to a bank account. Also, in the case of the elderly, choice is available to remain in hospitals, sheltered homes or other accommodation provided by municipal and central authorities. Sweden does not have a charter but legislation under its Social Services Acts clearly specify rights and responsibilities.
- 8.8 Customers in this country cannot currently choose between social welfare offices. However, the use of fee-free bank accounts/electronic fund transfers can give the customer an element of choice in payment methods, – e.g. the most convenient bank or building society. Similarly, the use of ATM cards would widen choice. Much work remains to be done, however, to make such schemes operational.

8.9 With a view to devising an effective communications strategy, the Forum recommends that:

- customers should be informed about entitlement to service, the procedures for obtaining service, the policies in place at any particular time, the standards required for service providers and the mechanisms for complaint and appeal;
- these mechanisms, where they exist, should be simplified and customers should be encouraged to comment and complain by use of paid reply cards and freephones;
- regular surveys of customers should be undertaken by service providers and their results should be published;
- consultations and enlisting the opinions of front-line staff should also have an important role to play as well as a careful consideration of clients' complaints;
- more formal consultation processes, through the establishment of customer-service advisory groups, as provided for under the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, should also be put in place now, the proposed membership and role of these advisory groups is outlined in Box 9; and
- these groups should have direct access to information and have a genuine role in commenting on and improving services.

BOX 9

Customer-Service Advisory Groups

- 1. Membership** – should include customers, representatives of customer organisations (at national and local level as appropriate) as well as representatives of staff and management.
- 2. Role** – to examine and answer questions such as:
 - What type of services do customers want, expect and need?
 - Are there difference between different clients?
 - What is the customers' knowledge of the services provided?
 - What features of a service are significant to customers and their needs?
 - What, if any, deficiencies are there in these significant features of the services?
 - What are the good and bad experiences of the services?
 - What problems are caused by the way the service is delivered?
 - Who is not using the service and why? (based on surveys of non-users).

Quality of Specification

8.10 A quality service must be based on standards and defined priorities that are made clear to the staff providing the service and to the customers of the service. In other words a quality service should be clearly specified. The Forum's recommendations for a quality service are as follows:

- A definition of objectives and priorities.
- A definition of policies.
- Method and style of service delivery.
- Speed of response.
- Accessibility and availability of service.
- Environment in which service is delivered.
- Staffing levels and qualifications.
- Staff courtesy.

8.11 It is important that the specification be understood by staff as well as by the public. Staff manuals, training seminars and workshops are useful ways of informing staff. However, staff will also be influenced by the example of more senior people in the organisation. It is vital, therefore, that all staff in the organisation should show a commitment to the specification through their personal attitude, behaviour and performance.

Performance Indicators

- 8.12 As part of the specification for a quality service, the Forum recommends that Performance Indicators for the delivery of social services should be developed in consultation with staff representative groups and customer-service advisory groups. These Indicators would represent a clear and unambiguous link between activities and outcomes and should cover:

Provider needs:

- cost indicators; and
- indicators of value and service.

Customer needs:

- time taken to access service;
- nature of service provision; and
- secondary costs of accessing service.

8.13 These Indicators – which would provide important benefits in facilitating comparisons over time between providers and against budget/service provision targets – should be related to the objectives and be specific, credible and capable of quantification. With the introduction of these Indicators, consideration should be given to changes in the accounting systems and budgetary procedures currently in use by the public service. In this context, the use of multi-annual budgeting and accrual-based accounting systems should be explored.

- 8.14 As part of this process, the Forum **recommends** that Performance Reviews should also be initiated to provide a detailed and critical examination of existing activities in delivering services. It is envisaged that these Reviews would seek to establish within a service context answers to basic questions such as:
 - What are we currently doing?
 - Whose interests are we serving?
 - Why are we doing things this way?
 - How much does it cost?
 - Could it be done for less?

8.15 Performance Reviews should also be used as a motivating factor to improve the quality of service to the customer. Such Reviews would place the needs and interests of the user/customer at the centre and judge success in terms of servicing the user/customer interests in a least-cost manner and without compromising on quality. Quality of service targets can be used as a surrogate for customer choice where the organisation is a monopoly supplier.

8.16 Performance Reviews and the development of clear specific objectives for programmes would facilitate efficiency and Value for Money Reviews. These Reviews should also involve the active participation of management, staff representative organisations and customer-service advisory groups.

Value For Money

- 8.17 The Forum **recommends** that the concept of Value for Money in relation to service delivery should comprise four elements:
 - **Economy** concerned with minimising the cost of resources used in delivery of a service, having regard to appropriate quality;
 - **Efficiency** concerned with the relationship between resources used in providing service and the results/outputs obtained;

- **Effectiveness** concerned with the relationship between intended results and actual results; and
- **Equity** concerned with issues such as who should have access to public services and what social groups should be targeted.

8.18 Public service staff should have the specific responsibility to ensure that policies and procedures are in place so that both the customer and the taxpayer get the best value for money.

- 8.19 It is recommended that an efficiency review of systems, should include, in particular:
 - the accuracy, reliability and completeness of information;
 - communication of policy objectives;
 - the appropriateness of targets and priorities;
 - the information systems; and
 - monitoring and evaluation criteria.

8.20 The selection of criteria for assessing Value for Money poses difficulties if the objectives and targets for performance are not clearly specified. Measures of the effectiveness of medium-term policies should also involve intermediate targets for assessment, if the process is to work.

Quality of Delivery

- 8.21 A quality service should monitor the method of delivery and take action when standards are not met. The Forum recommends that this process should comprise the following six elements:
 - **People** ask staff and customers for their views of the service;
 - **Priorities** identify and concentrate on the priority issues – these are important to the customer;
 - **Process** in priority areas, find out how things are done at the moment;
 - **Potential** assess the capacity for improvement and set targets;
 - **Pilots** initiate change and make improvements through pilot schemes; and
 - **Performance** measure how well staff and customers think the service has performed.

- 8.22 Improving the quality of customer service as outlined above, is a continuous process of evaluation and improvement. Internal controls, good supervision and staff involvement and appraisal systems will all help ensure that standards are being achieved. However, service users are an important way of checking on service delivery. People may need to be facilitated and even encouraged to complain if complaints are to act as a means of quality control.
- 8.23 Correcting faults or failures are only first steps in the quality process. It is important also to identify the causes of problems and prevent future occurrences. This may involve changing methods of delivery, extra staff training etc. An example of one such framework for quality delivery is outlined in Box 10.

BOX 10

U.K. Benefit Agency's Quality Framework

The Benefits Agency was established in 1991 as part of the Department of Social Security. It is the largest Executive Agency in the UK. The Agency's role is to manage the delivery of social security benefits.

Its Quality Framework is the result of extensive consultation with managers and staff within the Agency and with external quality award and accreditation bodies. The framework provides staff and managers with a structure within which to work towards continuous improvement of service. The four core values of the framework are:

- customer service;
- caring for staff;
- pro-active approach; and
- value for money.

Use of the framework not only allows the organisation to establish an overview of its business from the customer perspective but will lead to:

- examining each of the key areas;
- identifying customer needs;
- researching the need for improvements from the customer perspective;
- planing for improvements; and
- measuring improvements and achievements on a continuous basis.

Quality of Staff and Systems

8.24 A quality service will only be delivered by suitably trained and motivated staff, supported by good management systems.

Staff

- 8.25 Social services depend on staff involvement for their delivery. The way they are led, consulted and motivated and their behaviour and skills are vital in achieving the required result. Having good quality people requires clear plans and policies for people management, and means devising strategies, involving on-going consultations with staff representatives. For these purposes, it is **recommended** that action be taken in the areas of:

- Recruitment.
- Motivation.
- Internal communication.
- Training.
- Health and safety.
- Industrial relations.
- Organisational development.

8.26 The attitude and support of staff is central to service delivery and all staff must be involved and prepared to correct faults by identifying the causes and through a preparedness to change. Positive staff attitudes should be encouraged through on-going training.

8.27 The nature of staff training and the perspective of the trainers is vital. Departmental and agency staff should be trained on the rights and operating principles, which were recommended earlier in Section V of the Report, so that concepts are internalised and reflected in communication with the clients.

8.28 In addition, staff need to be equipped to deal with the two levels of interaction – one being a service provider and the other being a guardian against fraud. Training needs to be carefully thought out in terms of who does the training and the approach taken. Representative groups from the voluntary and community sector should be involved in this and should have access to the training materials. Training for staff should be on-going and comprehensive and should include, in particular, pro-active information skills, counselling and active listening, interview skills, take-up techniques and anti-discrimination policies and practices.

- 8.29 One of the constant complaints of staff is that the tasks which they are often assigned and the subsequent outcome of their actions are not fully explained to them. This leads to frustration and can ultimately lead to a deterioration in services to the customer. Currently, the most usual method of staff training is by means of staff memos.
- 8.30 This is totally inappropriate when major changes are initiated and leads to incorrect and/or different interpretations by local offices and staff. This should be addressed by ensuring that there is adequate staff consultations and that any such changes are communicated by means of staff instructions and following this up through staff training workshops, prior to the changes being introduced. Once again, appropriate training in counselling skills are necessary for all staff who have to deal with customers, either face-to-face with the public at local offices or over the 'phone.
- 8.31 Appropriate training is also necessary to enable staff to deal effectively with their dual roles of giving accurate and comprehensive information to customers while at the same time ensuring that cases of fraud are detected. All staff require training on the use of clear and non-bureaucratic language that is comprehensible to the public and does not frustrate the customer. Finally, all staff should have some basic training on the services provided by complementary Departments and State Agencies.
- 8.32 The Forum notes and welcomes the support from staff trade union representatives that service users should be closely involved in monitoring and commenting on the levels of service and making recommendations on improvements. Staff representative organisations have emphasised that improvements can only come about through the development of modern work practices and improved working conditions.
- 8.33 Some of the benefits that derive from investing in staff are:
- **Better managers** able to deploy, develop and motivate their staff;
 - **Better staff** who will see that the organisation recognises their individual and collective abilities;
 - **Better teamwork**; and
 - **Better job satisfaction** and a higher quality service delivery.

Systems

8.34 Good staff will not be able to work effectively to deliver a high quality service unless they are effectively supported by the right facilities and equipment to deliver to the required standard, and by sound management systems and structures that are regularly monitored and kept up to date. These would enable the organisation to plan ahead for new services and also help to define how the organisation will monitor delivery, and how it will communicate with customers and staff.

Overall Conclusions

8.35 The focus of this Report is on improvements in both the quality and standards of delivery of social services. While many of the deficiencies in the present system are well known, they still continue despite the fact that their removal would, in many instances, not have any significant cost implications. But it is clear, and as experience has shown, this must involve reform of the public service and this will require political leadership and commitment by the Government who are ultimately responsible for the provision of these services.

8.36 Such reform of the public service should have the concept of a quality service as its central aim and must involve a more effective and structured partnership between management, staff and the consumer. A quality service cannot be imposed, it must evolve from meaningful consultation with and participation by both the providers and the customers of the service. As the goals of such a service change and will continue to change over time, this process of consultation and participation should be on-going.

8.37 The Forum welcomes the many improvements which have taken place in recent years at individual services level. However, there must be an acceptance of the need for further improvements and that the necessary reforms will have to be better co-ordinated and more fully integrated to achieve the most effective results throughout the entire public service. As quality improvements in the delivery of social services involve a range of Departments and State Agencies, the Taoiseach should take the lead co-ordinating role in initiating, directing and monitoring these reforms.

8.38 Finally, what the Forum is proposing will in the main simplify the system of delivery and will result in the more efficient and effective use of Exchequer resources. In short, implementation of its recommendations would ensure that the taxpayer gets better value for money while at the same time the customer would also get a better service.

Annex

List of Submissions

Apart from Forum Members themselves and their constituent organisations, the following is a list of all those who made submissions and/or presentations to the Forum during the course of its preparation of this Report:

- Mr. Charles Ramsden, U.K. Citizen's Charter Unit.
- Mr. John O'Dowd and Ms. Roselyn Glacken, Civil and Public Services Staff Union (CPSU).
- Ms. Margaret Barry, Combat Poverty Agency.
- Mr. Frank Fallon, Dublin Corporation.
- Mr. Frank Mills, Eastern Health Board.
- Mr. Seán O'Leary, Department of the Environment.
- Mr. Peter Prendergast, Consumer Policy Services, European Commission.
- Ms. Wendy O'Conghaile, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Mr. Pat O'Shea, FÁS.
- Ms. Mary Ruddy, Forum/Poverty III Group, Letterfrac, Co. Galway.
- Mr. Brian Harvey and Ms. Judith Kiernan, Research & Public Relations, Dublin.
- Mr. Tom O'Mahony, Department of Health.
- Dr. Jeremy Harbison, Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland.
- Mr. Terry Reynolds, An Post.
- Mr. Aidan Horan and Dr Michael Mulreany, Institute of Public Administration.
- Ms. Anna Coote, Institute for Public Policy Research, London.
- Irish Council for Social Housing.
- Ms. Leonie Lunny, National Social Service Board.
- Mr. Eddie Sullivan, Department of Social Welfare.
- Mr. Michael Mills, the then Ombudsman.
- Mr. Jim Walsh, Paul Partnership, Limerick.
- Senator Fergal Quinn.
- Ms. Mary Higgins, Threshold.

Terms of Reference and Constitution of the Forum

1. The Terms of Reference of the National Economic and Social Forum are to develop economic and social policy initiatives, particularly initiatives to combat unemployment, and to contribute to the formation of a national consensus on social and economic matters.

The Forum will:
 - (i) Have a specific focus on:-
 - job creation and obstacles to employment growth;
 - long term unemployment;
 - disadvantage;
 - equality and social justice in Irish society; and
 - policies and proposals in relation to these issues.
 - (ii) Make practical proposals on measures to meet these challenges.
 - (iii) Examine and make recommendations on other economic and social issues.
 - (iv) Review and monitor the implementation of the Forum's proposals and if necessary make further recommendations; and
 - (v) Examine and make recommendations on matters referred to it by Government.
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3. The Forum will work in two year cycles and will inform Government of its programme of work within three months of the beginning of each cycle.
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6. The Forum will publish and submit all its reports to Government, to the Houses of the Oireachtas and to other Government Departments and bodies as may be appropriate.
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8. The Forum will have an independent Chairperson appointed by Government.
9. The term of office of members will be two years during which term members may nominate alternates. Casual vacancies will be filled by the nominating body or the Government as appropriate and members so appointed shall hold office until the expiry of the current term of office of all members. The size of the membership may be varied by the Government.
10. The Forum is under the aegis of the Office of the Tánaiste and is funded through a Grant-in-Aid from that Office. This Grant-in-Aid is part of the overall estimate for the Office of the Tánaiste.

Membership of the Forum

Independent Chairperson:	Maureen Gaffney
Government Representative:	Eithne Fitzgerald, T.D. Minister of State at the Office of the Tánaiste and at the Department of Enterprise and Employment
Chair (Employment and Economic Policy Committee):	Prof. John O'Hagan
Chair (Social Policy Committee):	Tríona Nic Giolla Choille
Oireachtas	
<i>Fianna Fáil:</i>	Ned O'Keeffe, T.D. Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D. Chris Flood, T.D. Martin Cullen, T.D. Sen. Paschal Mooney Sen. Willie Farrell
<i>Fine Gael:</i>	Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. Paul Connaughton, T.D. Sen. Madeleine Taylor-Quinn Vacancy
<i>Labour:</i>	Joe Costello, T.D. Sen. Jan O'Sullivan
<i>Progressive Democrats:</i>	Máirín Quill, T.D.
<i>Technical Group:</i>	Kathleen Lynch, T.D.
<i>Independent Senators:</i>	Sen. Mary Henry
Social Partners	
<i>Trade Unions:</i>	Philip Flynn Paula Carey Tom Wall Mary-Ann McGlynn Manus O'Riordan

Employer/Business Interests:

Declan Madden
Karin MacArthur
Aebhric McGibney
David Croughan
Mirette Corboy

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Michael Slattery
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Mike Allen

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Joan Byrne
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Stasia Crickley

Secretariat

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Seán O’hÉigearthaigh

Secretary, Employment & Economic Policy Committee:

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