Citizens **Information** Board
information · advice · advocacy

How to become involved in Social Policy

in your Citizens Information Service

July 2019

Contents

What is social policy work?

Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) are well placed to identify instances where social services are **not** meeting the needs of citizens adequately or equitably because of their regular and direct contact with the public. They can help make these services better by feeding back evidence on the impact of policies and practices on people to policy makers and service providers. This is social policy work.

Your role in this work is essentially about:

- **identifying** situations where the service delivery system falls short, or where the policies in place don't meet needs or are not fairly or consistently applied

- **collecting** evidence of difficulties encountered by individuals and households as a result

- **recording** the details on Oyster

You may become aware of:

- administrative issues that prevent services working as they should
- information gaps
- gaps and inconsistencies in how services are provided that prevent individuals from accessing their rights and entitlements
- difficulties people are facing that result from policies that do not meet needs

If so, note down the facts that you obtain from the client/s in order to show the ways in which that policy or service is failing to respond to clients' needs and record on Oyster.

The Social Policy and Research team in the Citizens Information Board analyses the data and identifies trends. Briefing papers, submissions or reports may be written and communicated to relevant government departments or agencies highlighting the issues and making recommendations for change.
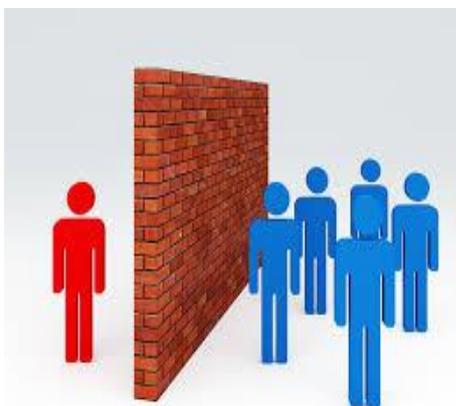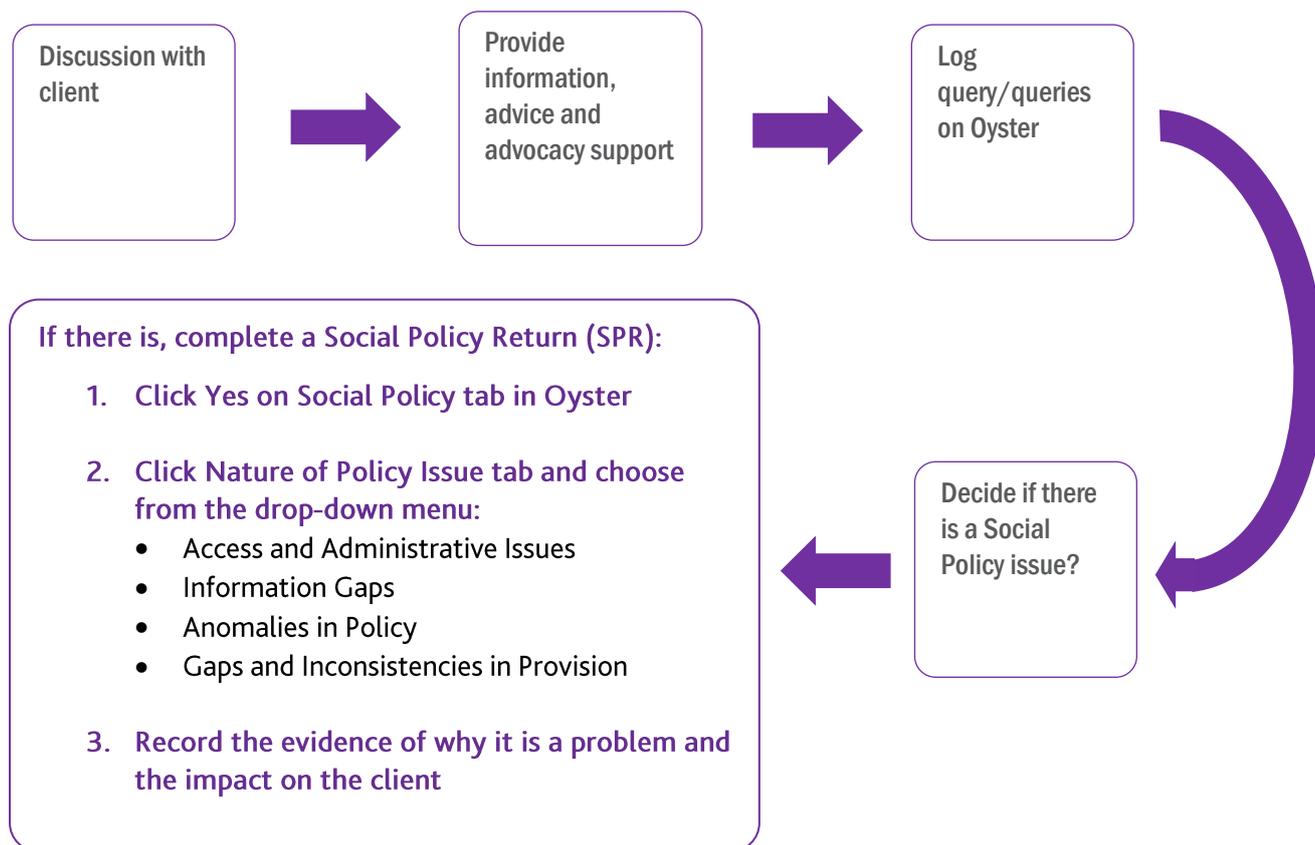

In short, social policy work is about highlighting the blocks and barriers experienced by people in accessing and using social services. It is concerned with tackling the root causes of the problem, not just dealing with the symptoms.

It is of benefit not only to people who call into the Citizens Information Centre (CIC) but also to others in similar circumstances.

Your role in social policy work

As well as giving information, part of your role as an Information Provider is to identify and then log social policy issues. Information Providers log Social Policy Returns (SPRs) on Oyster. A different system is in place in CIPS and is outlined further on in this document. Here is the process you should follow to log an SPR on Oyster:

| Discussion with client | → | Provide information, advice and advocacy support | → | Log query/queries on Oyster |

If there is, complete a Social Policy Return (SPR):

1. **Click Yes on Social Policy tab in Oyster**

2. **Click Nature of Policy Issue tab and choose from the drop-down menu:**
   - Access and Administrative Issues
   - Information Gaps
   - Anomalies in Policy
   - Gaps and Inconsistencies in Provision

3. **Record the evidence of why it is a problem and the impact on the client**

Decide if there is a Social Policy issue?

How to carry out social policy work

Decide if there is a social policy issue

Social policy work involves a number of components. It can seem challenging at the beginning but with practice it becomes part of your daily activities. Here are some questions you should ask to help you identify the policy issues in your work:

- Are there barriers or delays in accessing services?
- What is the nature of inaccurate or inadequate information? What are the gaps?
- Are there differences between policy aims and policy outcomes?
- Are there gaps or inconsistencies?

In short, is this person's welfare or life opportunities being adversely affected by a barrier, information gap, problem in the scheme or in how a policy is being rolled out? See if you can identify a trend. Is this an isolated case or have you noticed a number of people experiencing the same problem with the policy?

How to record your social policy issue on Oyster

The final section on the Oyster Data Collection page is for Social Policy Returns. When you are inputting your query information into Oyster, you are asked to indicate (on a yes or no basis) whether you have any social policy feedback to offer.

If you tick "yes", you are asked to choose from a drop-down list of categories under the heading "*Nature of Policy Issue*". There are four possible choices.

Administration-related:	Policy-related:
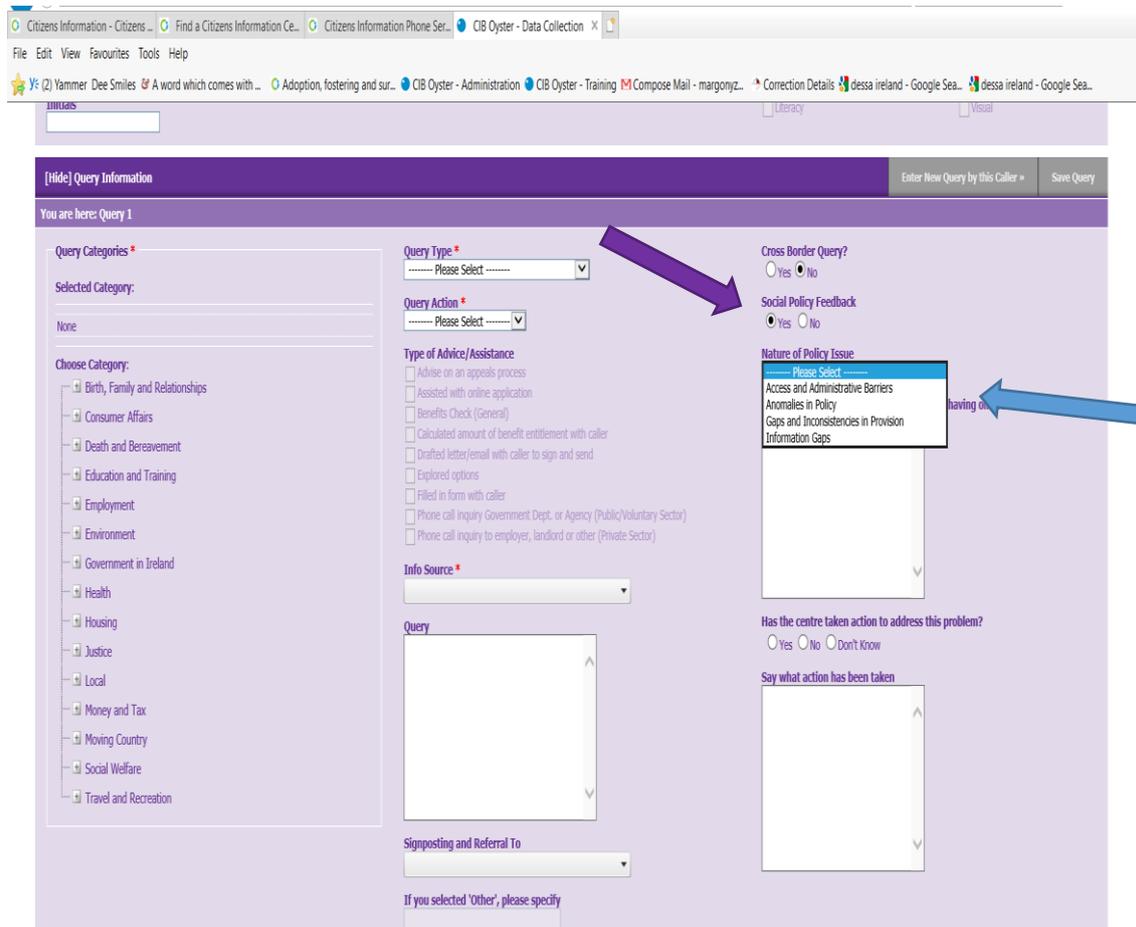
Administration-related:
1. Access and administrative barriers
2. Information gaps

Policy-related:
1. Anomalies in policy
2. Gaps and inconsistencies in provision

If you are just starting to log Social Policy Returns, begin by logging administrative issues as these are easier to identify. With more experience, you will become more confident at identifying and logging policy-related issues. Here are some examples of each of these four categories.

Nature of policy issue

1. **Access and Administrative Issues** - use this category when a person has:
   o experienced delays, backlogs and/or errors in applications and appeal processes
   o communication and 'gatekeeping' problems, such as being unable to contact a public service office by phone or email and therefore not being able to get the information needed
   o been treated discourteously by a member of staff delivering a public service.
   o found public offices are inaccessible because of their location or restricted opening hours or because they are not fully accessible to people with disabilities.
   o had access or admission issues such as long waiting lists for legal aid or public health care
   o experienced situations where services are only available online
   o has cultural and language barriers with no interpreter available
   o no computer skills but must apply online for services or information

2. **Information Gaps** - use this category when a person has
   o been given information in the wrong format
   o been given the wrong information
   o not been given any information
   o not been given enough information

3. **Anomalies in Policy** – use this category if you have evidence that a policy has been designed or is delivered in such a way that some people benefit from it while others in a very similar situation do not benefit. For example:
   o problems in primary or secondary legislation (including departmental guidelines) which means that the policy is working for some people but not for others with similar needs
   o cases of a service/scheme deficit that leaves some people without supports that they need or acts as a disincentive to accepting a job/taking up employment after PRSI and USC charges have been applied
   o if essential services or payments are withdrawn via primary or secondary legislation – for example the Mobility Allowance
   o adequate services and supports are not being legislated for in a timely manner and in response to an emerging social need (for example asylum seekers living indefinitely in direct provision).

4. **Gaps and Inconsistencies in Provision** – use this category where a service might have been legislated for nationally but is unavailable or not consistently available to those in need, for example:

   o services are available in some geographical areas but not in others (for example homeless hostels, services to young people, supports for people with mental health problems)
   o inconsistencies across housing authorities in applying differential rent or in their approach to housing needs assessment
   o inconsistent interpretation of policy in different geographical areas, for example different interpretations of the Habitual Residency Condition (HRC)
   o when discretion is not consistently applied in relation to the same payment or service

Examples of situations where you may choose to make a Social Policy Return

Deciding whether or not a query has social policy implications and describing the specific issue becomes easier with practice. Have a look at these examples:

1. You spend 50 minutes trying to get through to Working Family Payment (WFP) section on the telephone (**Access /Administrative Barrier**).

2. A client calls in to say they have been told by DEASP that they should apply for Jobseeker's Allowance even though they have a disability and are not in a position to take up full-time work (**Information Gaps**).

3. A client who applied for asylum and was granted refugee status is having difficulties in accessing services – there are liaison officers for programme refugees only (**Anomalies in Policy**).

4. A client says DEASP calculated his WFP so that he gets a lower payment than last year even though the figures are the same (**Gaps and Inconsistencies in Provision**).

How to write up a Social Policy Return

If you identify a social policy issue in the query you have dealt with, this is what you do:

Step 1: Click Yes on the Social Policy tab in Oyster

Step 2: Click Nature of Policy Issue tab and choose from the drop down menu

Step 3: Record the evidence of why it is a problem and the impact on the client

How to write up a Social Policy Return

Query	How you describe the social policy issue
	Step 1: Click Yes (there is a social policy issue)
A child needs a referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in their region but there is an 8-month waiting list for an appointment.	**Step 2: Access and Administrative Barriers** **Step 3: Mental health** The child needs an appointment as soon as possible as he is experiencing severe mental health difficulties. There is an 8 month waiting list so he cannot get a diagnosis and treatment. His condition is worsening. The family cannot afford to seek help in the private health care sector.
A client was looking for treatment under the National Treatment Purchase Fund. He looked for a telephone number on their website but there was none listed. He eventually found a contact number and was referred to an NTPF co-ordinator in the local hospital.	**Step 2: Information Gaps** **Step 3: NTPF** Client unable to contact NTPF as no contact information available on website. He eventually found a contact number and was referred to an NTPF co-ordinator in the local hospital. This information was not on their website.
Because the local hospital has closed, the client has to make a long journey each week for essential medical treatment.	**Step 2: Gaps and Inconsistencies in Provision** **Step 3: Lack of local treatment provision** Centralised services and hospital closures lead to reduced services for rural communities. This person has to travel a long distance to appointments and as there is no public transport available has to incur significant travel costs. The journey is very tiring and expensive and the family is on a low income.
A family has four children and the eldest is about to start college. The family is claiming long-term social welfare payments. Their annual family income is above the threshold for qualification for the grant. As a result, the young person is giving up his place at college as he can't afford to go.	**Step 2: Anomalies in policy** **Step 3 : Student grants** Disadvantaged students who meet a number of conditions can qualify for a special rate of maintenance grant. The threshold for the Special Rate Education Grant is €23,500 and the family income is above this as there are four children. The grant is established to help disadvantaged students therefore this is an anomaly as the rules as applied here are doing exactly the opposite.

Your Social Policy Return should:

- Be concise and use plain English
- Be specific (about service or entitlement)
- Avoid judgements
- Ensure the issue is obvious
- Include relevant details
- Ensure your facts are correct

Example of being concise

Client claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) has become unwell and is unable to work. His illness is not likely to be short-term. He is entitled to Illness Benefit but reluctant to claim as he is aware of the long processing time. This is one of a number of similar cases (reluctance to claim appropriate social welfare payment because of concern about processing delay).

Example of specific information

This 50-year-old woman has a progressive and serious illness that has had rapid onset. She is now unable to perform most household tasks and struggles with personal care. She lives alone. Her claim for Disability Allowance was made 16 weeks ago. No decision has been communicated. She is living on her savings which she says are nearly gone. She was assessed at around the same time by a Public Health Nurse for home help but is still waiting for a decision on that. She has been told that hours may not be available even though she is in obvious need. She is very distressed and feels unable to cope.

Note there are a number of issues in this example but you can only click on one category in Oyster, so the category for the main policy issue should be chosen. You can however mention the issues that fall under other categories in the body of the text box.

Please note also that there is no need to rename the Oyster category and sub-category in your description. This can be seen from the query record. For example, there is no need to state Social Welfare category/Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) claim. Instead please state what SWA claim was being applied for and how the application was dealt with.

Accuracy

Getting the facts right is essential for effective and credible social policy work. You need to check **citizensinformation.ie** and sometimes additional sources to ensure you are **clear** about the rules, procedures or legislation that applies.

Occasionally, a further check may be necessary to support the policy feedback being made.

In addition, it may be the policy in your CIC for someone with special responsibility for Social Policy Returns to look over what you are submitting. Different CICs have different systems for doing this. **Make sure you know what the system is in your** CIC.

Differences between opinion and facts

When you are recording a social policy return, it is not just a matter of identifying what **you think** is unfair or unjust. Your opinions do matter but the evidence presented must be objective and factual. If your CIS feels strongly about an issue, the best way to get something done about it is to keep gathering and documenting the evidence. You may make a recommendation as to how to deal with the policy issue if you wish but it should be based on evidence.

Here is an example of opinions rather than facts.

Issue	Opinion not facts
A mother of a 12-year-old child has been disallowed her Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) on appeal.	*"It's outrageous that the government does not recognise the contribution that carers make and then just comes along and takes all their money off them for no reason, just adding to all the difficulties they already have to live with. It's immoral. The client has lost DCA when she needs this payment and is definitely entitled to it in my book."*

There may be a social policy issue but unfortunately the personal opinions expressed here hide the issue instead of highlighting it.

Electronic Case Management System: logging SPRs in advocacy cases

Information Providers use Oyster to record SPRs. On occasion, experienced IPs may do advocacy work as part of their role. Information Providers get support when doing advocacy work from the Advocacy Support Worker (ASW) - there will shortly be one ASW per region.

If there is a need for advocacy casework on a client's behalf, the Information Provider transfers the case to a dedicated system called the Electronic Case Management System (ECMS) which is only used for advocacy casework. Advocacy casework involves working in more depth over a longer period of time with the client and provides a greater opportunity for identifying and fleshing out social policy issues related to the case. Social Policy Returns can be entered during or at the closing of a case. In a complex case, there may be a number of social policy issues.

Why is social policy work important?

The daily encounters that information and advocacy workers have with people provide an important insight into where and how policy and practices are failing to meet existing or emerging needs and point to where reform is needed. The CIC becomes the "voice" of the people by channelling feedback (evidence and comment) on people's lived experiences. Understanding what social policy means and actively building that knowledge into your work with callers in your CIC is part of your work as an Information Provider. Your ability to recognise a social policy issue when dealing with queries and then to log that issue in plain English on the Oyster system can help change people's lives for the better. It's a really important task. In the case of an advocacy client, social policy issues can be recorded on the Electronic Case Management System (ECSM).

It is important to answer a client's query accurately and speedily and resolve their particular issue. But there is a bigger picture.

When you identify the key factors that have caused the service delivery system to fail an individual, you and others add weight to a body of evidence which can result in the system being changed. As a result, many people will benefit, not just the one client you dealt with.

An administrative or policy change will not only be of benefit to the person who called in but also to the many people who do not know of the service or who are reluctant to come into the CIC.

Social policy work is slow and there is no quick fix. It takes time to analyse the data and submit the report. Government responses to submissions may take many months or even years. In spite of the slow rate of progress, social policy feedback does effect change and you will read more about this later.

Local social policy work

Individual CICs or CISs sometimes engage in local social policy work and in networking with other organisations. Local submissions can be made relating to specific local social policy issues.
The Citizens Information Board has a social policy grants scheme which can provide grants to CICs and CISs that wish to work on a specific issue, either alone or in collaboration with a local organisation. Many services carry out very effective work in this area.

Find out what local social policy work your Centre has engaged in. Here are some examples:

- Co Wicklow CIS noticed there was a lack of information on the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (also known as Fair Deal) in hard copy. The CIS produced a Step by Step Guide to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme and this publication was distributed via their network of CISs, the Older Person's Network and the HSE.

- Dublin City North Bay CIS produced a newsletter on the issue of half-rate Carer's Allowance as it had noticed that many people were unaware that they were able to apply for it. The newsletter was distributed widely to relevant groups in the catchment area - organisations working with older people and people with disabilities. It was also given out at information stands.

- West Cork CIS met with other local agencies which have a remit to work with vulnerable people in the area to explore social policy issues that arise. It is planned the forum will meet 3 – 4 times a year.

- Co Clare CIS participated in the Regional Discussion meetings facilitated by the INOU which provides a forum to meet with frontline Information Providers from Unemployed Centres. The meeting focused on the sharing of experiences of dealing with core issues affecting unemployed people which are then taken on board as policy formulation by INOU.

- In 2017, a local tax office closed. Locals were well used to having all services locally. As a result, there was an increase in callers to Tallaght CIS but Information Providers could not help as the issues were very specifically tax-related. The CIS created a template letter which outlined a case for the reopening of the tax office which they gave to every caller and asked them to send to Revenue. There was a great take-up and the tax office reopened at specified times.

Often, within an individual CIC, there are individuals who have a particular interest in social policy. Find out if there is one in your service or speak with the Development Manager or a more experienced Information Provider if you want clarification on a query which you think may have a social policy element.

You should take note of the Social Policy Returns you have logged on Oyster each month. If you see a trend, bring this up at a training meeting in your Centre. This is how local policy work starts!

CIPS can also apply for a social policy grant. Their system of raising social policy issues is dealt with later in this document.

Social policy feedback to CIB for submissions and reports

CIB asks services to submit material annually for its Pre-Budget Submission. CIB also requests feedback at times for other submissions.

Social Policy Alerts are issued to CISs and CIPS whenever the Social Policy and Research team is carrying out research based on Oyster topics. In a Social Policy Alert, CIB requests feedback on a very specific issue.

An example is the Social Policy Alert issued in July 2018 on a Consultation on the Total Contributions Approach. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection was managing a consultation process on behalf of the government on the forthcoming Total Contributions Approach (TCA) reform to the State pension system.

The Citizens Information Board prepared a submission in response to this consultation and asked for feedback from services in relation to priorities, issues and impacts of different policy approaches outlined in DEASP's Consultation Paper.

Managing social policy work in the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)

CIPS staff deal with all callers over the telephone. They do not use the Oyster system but have their own recording system. Given the large number of staff involved, social policy work is done differently, including how to record Social Policy Returns.

Social policy work in CIPS operates within a two-team structure, each team consisting of up to six staff including a Social Policy Co-ordinator. These teams engage with the broader staff body to maximise contributions to the data collected. During 2018, CIPS undertook a review of the social policy data collection methods and altered the initial recording method based on an analysis of work practices and feedback received. The changes have proved to be effective. The CIPS social policy methodology is outlined below.

Recording Social Policy Returns in CIPS
Step 1

CIPS staff devised an internal social policy recording system that allows staff to record issues as effectively as possible in the course of carrying out their other duties. The recording system is a Social Policy Capture Sheet which contains nine frequently occurring social policy issues for staff to select as they arise during phone calls. The sheet allows for the recording of further detail where available, as well as the date and the name of the Information Officer. The listing of these nine issues is a guideline to staff. The sheet also has a number of blank spaces where other social policy issues can be recorded. This sheet, printed on heavy yellow paper in order to be easily identifiable, is left at the workstation of each Information Officer and collected on a fortnightly basis. This initial capture method suits the work environment as each Information Officer sits at an assigned desk and always has a pen in hand.

Figure 1: Social Policy Capture Sheet

Step 2

Approximately half of CIPS staff are engaged in social policy work beyond the initial Social Policy Capture Sheet. These Information Officers are assigned to two social policy teams and a buddy system has been devised whereby each social policy team member is matched with a non-social policy team colleague and has the responsibility of collecting and recording their own and their colleague's Social Policy Capture Sheet onto a designated Excel document. This Excel document allows for the recording of each issue within standard CIB categories.

Roles of CIPS staff in social policy work

Staff	Activity	Frequency
All staff	Record social policy issues on Social Policy Capture Sheet as they arise during interactions with callers.	Ongoing
Social policy team members	Collect the Social Policy Capture Sheet from their social policy buddy and record this information on the Excel sheet, along with the information from their own Sheet.	Monthly
Social policy team members	Attend internal social policy meetings to monitor social policy issues arising, discuss any changes that might need to be made to the Social Policy Capture Sheet, organise social policy training for new staff, plan social policy work that is required for input to CIB reports or pre-budget submissions. This time is also useful to identify any trending social policy issues that may need immediate reaction and escalation to management and/or CIB.	Monthly
Social policy team members	All social policy team members contribute to creating an annual document to inform the CIB Pre-Budget Submission. This involves reviewing records to capture and highlight relevant data.	Annually
Social policy team members	One to two representatives attend the quarterly Social Policy Network meeting.	Quarterly
Social policy Co-ordinators	Prepare the Excel sheet for submission to CIB by confirming that all social policy issues are recorded correctly. Submit Excel sheet to CIB Social Policy and Research Executive.	Monthly
Social policy Co-ordinators	Provide induction training to new CIPS staff. This is usually a one-hour training session and uses a PowerPoint presentation, plus discussion of case studies which were developed in-house. This training is provided to staff after they have received training in social welfare and employment law and have developed some experience taking phone calls. Additionally, new staff are given an induction into how social policy issues are recorded.	As required

CIPS social policy organisational chart

Social Policy Co-ordinators

Review Excel document and submit to CIB

Social policy team

Transfer Information from Social Policy Capture Sheet into Excel document

All staff

Record social policy issues on Social Policy Capture Sheet

What does 'policy' mean?

Social Policy Returns and other social policy feedback to CIB highlight policy issues of concern. The next part of this document looks at the overall policy arena and how CIB and its delivery services fit into it.

Policies are statements of what a government or governing body wants or intends to do in a certain area under its remit. For example, the Department of Health wanted to reduce the number of deaths from lung cancer, in particular to protect employees working in smoke-filled environments from contracting the disease. A **No Smoking Policy** in public places was introduced, backed up by relevant legislation.

Another example of Government policy in action is a commitment to reduce road accidents through the use of a penalty points system which acts as a deterrent against speeding and drink driving as well as other dangerous driving behaviour. Again, this policy is backed up by legislation to enforce it.

Government policies are designed to ensure **consistent** responses to **similar** issues to bring about maximum effect.

Policy development is influenced by a wide range of factors including social and cultural ones and is generally a process of negotiation and consultation. It can take many years to agree a policy – for example the recent referendum and subsequent legislation on Marriage Equality is a case in point.

What is social policy?

Social policies impact on people's well-being or welfare. Many policies that are classified as "social" aim to protect the citizen against risk and insecurity, promote equal opportunity and reduce poverty. Examples of the effects of social policy on people's lives can include:

- The levels of income support or security in place for people (safety nets)
- Student grants allowing access to third level education
- The protection of the general health and welfare of citizens
- Looking after citizens in their old age
- Availability of social housing.

Examples of social policies

Area	Examples of policy in action
Health	Hospital services, free GP care for over 70s and under 7s, medical card, BreastCheck screening programme
Education	Funding of public education at primary, secondary and third level Maintenance grants for third level students Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) School Support Programme (SSP) under the DEIS action plan for educational inclusion
Housing	Social and affordable housing Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Rent caps Funding of voluntary organisations that work with the homeless
Transport	Free travel for certain categories of citizens Development of cycle paths Development of bus lanes Investment in rail stock
Taxation	Tax credits Levels of taxation Difference in treatment of married and co-habiting couples
Employment	Working Family Payment (WFP) Employment schemes – community employment, TÚS

You can probably think of many more social policies

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What influences public policy?

Policy is constantly evolving and can change overnight when a new government is put in place. It is influenced by a number of factors. Sometimes there can be a deliberate lack of action in a particular policy area if there are more pressing priorities.

Influencing factors	Example	Effect on policy
Social	Changes in population numbers ➡	Fair Deal developed to provide for nursing home care (Nursing Home Support Scheme) Free preschool year (Early Childhood Care and Education scheme) School building programmes
	Move from rural to urban centres ➡	Transport systems overhauled
	People seeking asylum ➡	Direct provision centres
	New technology ➡	Training grants
Cultural	Influence of the Catholic church in Ireland ➡	In the past, the church exerted political pressure on social issues. Changes in recent years include government policy on divestment of schools from Catholic church control
Economic	Health of the economy and funds available to support social services ➡	Cutbacks in social welfare payments during recession
Political	The extent of a government majority – governing in a coalition ➡	Policies can be implemented purely to satisfy minority members of a coalition
Ideological	Whether a government is left or right of centre in its views ➡	Levels of taxation imposed Encouragement of private health care

Can you see the relationship between the influencing factors and the subsequent effect on policy? For example, the change in population numbers (demographics) means there are more older people which results in greater need for supports to help older people to live at home or additional nursing home places and funding for these.

2019 Total Expenditure: **€76.3 billion**

Social Protection	Health	Education	Justice	Agriculture	Debt Servicing, EU Payments	Transport	Other
€20.6 billion	€17.1 billion	€10.8 billion	€2.8 billion	€1.6 billion	€9.6 billion	€2.3 billion	€11.6 billion

Figure 2: Taken from Department of Public Expenditure and Reform website

This graphic shows the huge amount of total expenditure - €76.3 billion - that the government has allocated in 2019 in an effort to meet the needs of its citizens. Note that social welfare is the biggest beneficiary of government spending.

CIS and CIPS activity in 2018

There was a significant increase in the number of Social Policy Returns in 2018, resulting in a combined total of 5,926 from the CIS network and CIPS. Here is a breakdown of the five areas where the vast majority of Social Policy Returns were made in 2018. You can see that issues relating to social welfare accounted for over half of the total number of Social Policy Returns submitted by Information Providers.

- Social Welfare
- Housing
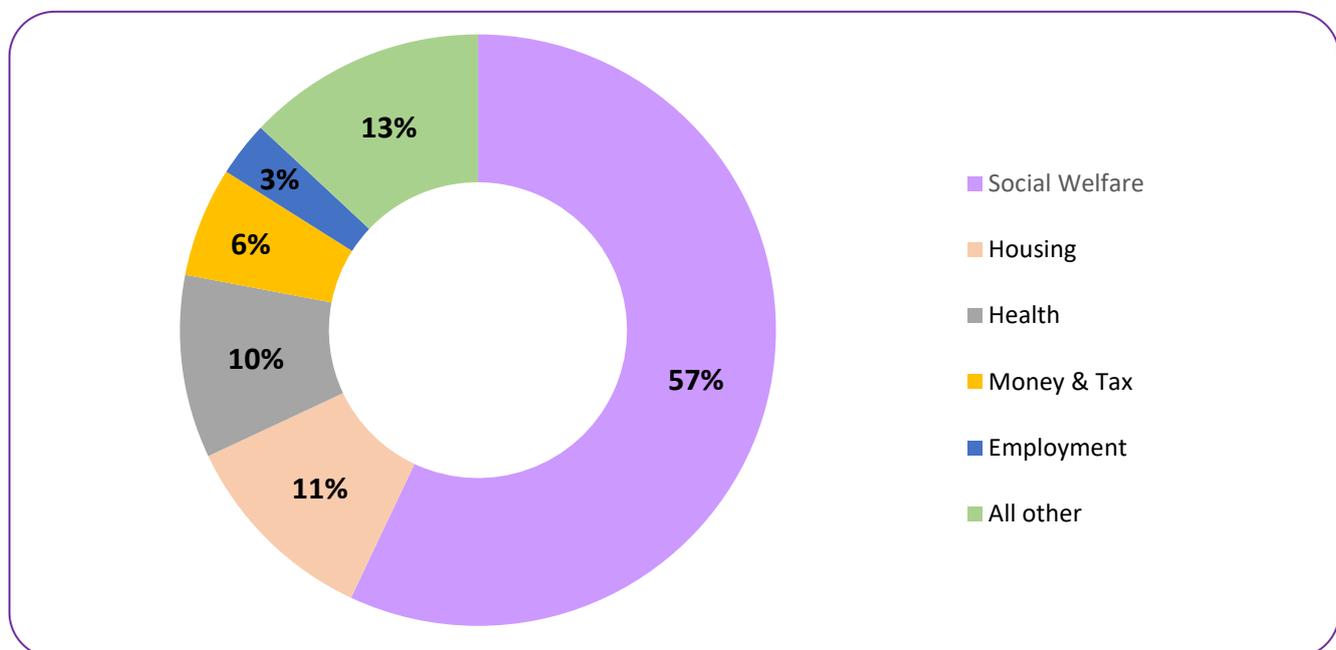- Health
- Money & Tax
- Employment
- All other

Figure 3: Social policy returns from CISs and CIPS 2018 by query category

It is interesting to note that housing-related queries have increased by 25% in the period 2016-2018 from a base of 37,596 in July 2016 to 47,007 in July 2018. This corresponds with the developing housing crisis and explains why Social Policy Returns related to housing are next in importance to those related to social welfare.

- 59% Access and adminsitration barriers
- 9% Information gaps
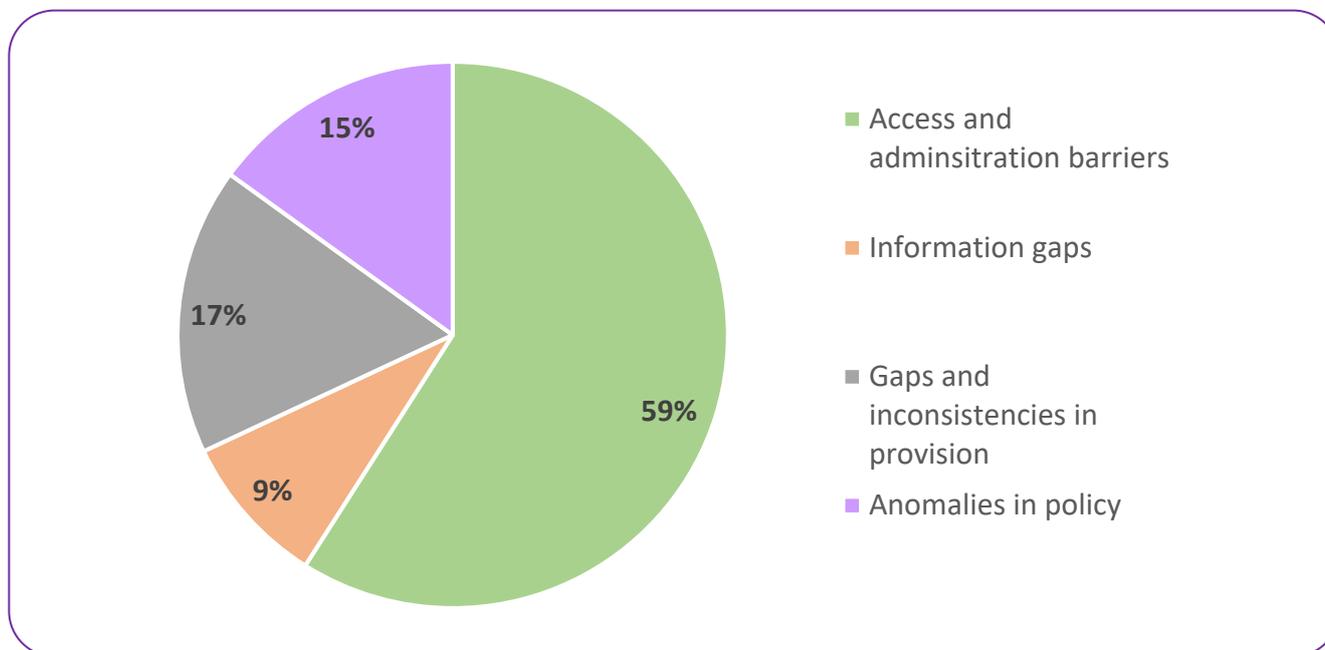- 17% Gaps and inconsistencies in provision
- 15% Anomalies in policy

Figure 4: Nature of policy issue 2018

The types of issues being reported by services indicate that the most common concerns with payments administered by DEASP during 2018 were communication difficulties with particular sections within the Department, and also delays in processing and information gaps, or deficits – specifically, 68% of feedback in relation to social welfare payments or schemes referenced these types of difficulties. This focus on operationally-based difficulties is also reflected in other policy arenas such as health (which is dominated by medical card queries) and housing.

Information Providers considered that the remainder of the cases (32%) were difficulties caused by the policies, legislation or guidelines that underpin the operation of schemes, benefits or services – that is, either '*anomalies in policy'* or '*gaps in provision'*.

While the level of reporting of operationally-focused issues or concerns has always been in the majority, there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis in recent years – in 2014, 57% of issues were classified by Information Providers as operational or administrative and, as noted above, this had risen to 68% in 2018.

The role of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the Social Policy and Research team

The Citizens Information Board is required under legislation to support, promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues which are of concern to users of those services - see (Section 7(d) of the **Comhairle Act 2000).**

Therefore, CIB has a **statutory responsibility** to feedback information and evidence to government on the ways in which its policies are impacting on people. To do this, CIB collects evidence from its delivery services. CIS evidence is channelled to CIB via Oyster and then the data is analysed by the Social Policy and Research team in CIB. Submissions, briefing papers or reports may be written using evidence from services that policies are not working or services could be improved. These are given to the government departments responsible for that particular policy or service.

The Social Policy and Research team also participates directly in working, consultative and advisory groups established by the government. It can collaborate with other agencies to highlight and gather evidence on issues of mutual interest.

The team also provide training and support to the CIS network on social policy. They produce an e-bulletin *Social Policy Update* every two months which provides information on the social policy work of CIB and its service delivery partners and on national social policy news and activity (including the social policy work of other organisations). It provides an analysis of recent social policy feedback submitted by services throughout the country.
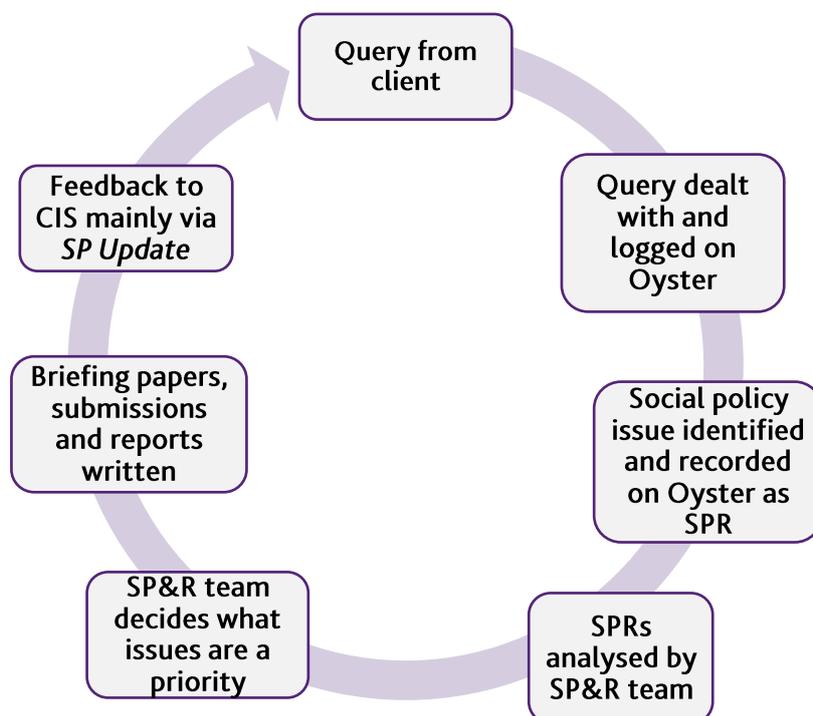
The role of the Citizens Information Services (CISs) and the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)

CISs are obliged to be involved in social policy work. This obligation is written into the service level agreement between CIB and each CIS where it states that the CIS:
'*will support CIB in data collection, the gathering of social policy information and evidence and in any research initiated by CIB*.'

The same service level agreement is in place between CIB and CIPS.

This obligation means that all Information Providers should engage in social policy work and record Social Policy Returns. Information Providers who have recently joined the service usually begin by logging Social Policy Returns in the administration category. More experienced staff should record more numerous Social Policy Returns, in particular ones in the policy-related categories. All staff should read *Social Policy Update*.

Social policy partnership between CIB, CISs and CIPS

Query from client

Query dealt with and logged on Oyster

Feedback to CIS mainly via *SP Update*

Social policy issue identified and recorded on Oyster as SPR

Briefing papers, submissions and reports written

SP&R team decides what issues are a priority

SPRs analysed by SP&R team

Policy submissions, consultations and outcomes

The extent to which policy has changed or has emerged in response to evidence from CIB varies over time and from issue to issue. As policy is constantly being shaped and re-shaped by a variety of interests and actors (both in the short-term and over a longer period), it can be difficult to measure or assess the impact of particular policy positions or recommendations that are routinely put forward by CIB.

Nonetheless, there have been a number of areas where the issues raised by CIB (typically in the form of recommendations made in submissions or reports) have been subsequently addressed in legislation, policy or administrative changes.

Informal submission to DEASP re PRSI contributions

In 2017, following significant feedback from services, CIB forwarded an informal, focussed submission to DEASP highlighting the difficulties caused by the changes in the processing of requests by DEASP from clients for their PRSI contribution statements (which had been switched to online access only). In response, DEASP put in place an alternative means by which clients could access their PRSI records (a dedicated telephone line).

Report on Self-Employed

A different type of policy process and outcome is evident in the broader area of the provision of social insurance for the self-employed. In 2012, CIB published a report called "Hard Times for the Self-Employed" which looked at the difficulties caused by the gaps in social insurance cover for self-employed people (based on feedback from CIS, CIPS and MABS staff). Following on from this, CIB was asked to sit on the Government's Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare, which went on to examine the provision of social insurance cover for self-employed people.

The ensuing report (published in 2013) went on to both reflect and reference many of the recommendations that had been made in the CIB publication in relation to extending social insurance coverage. Invalidity Pension was extended to self-employed workers in December 2017. In Budget 2019, it was announced that Jobseeker's Benefit would be extended to self-employed people in late 2019. This example shows how social policy work can take a long time to show results.

Here are three more examples of how submissions or briefings from the Social Policy team in CIB can have positive results:

CIB Pre-Budget Submission 2019 "Barely Getting By"

Budget 2019 provisions contained a number of measures that were raised in the CIB pre-Budget submission. There was a focus on more targeted measures as proposed by CIB which should help in the broader context of enabling people to combine welfare supports with work – a key element of CIB's pre-budget submission.

Successive CIB submissions have stressed the importance of accessible affordable childcare in enabling the transition from welfare to work and there were changes announced to the threshold of families in accessing the Affordable Childcare scheme in the Budget provisions.

The CIB Pre-Budget submission also highlighted the issue of fuel poverty – the Fuel Allowance was extended by one week.

The Minister also announced the intention to extend Jobseeker's Benefit to the self-employed in 2019. CIB has advocated for the extension of social insurance measures to the self-employed for many years now so this is an example of how policy recommendations can take many years to be implemented.

Note that budgetary provisions can be implemented as a result of many organisations making submissions on the same issue so it is difficult to attribute any particular change to CIB/CIS/CIPS specifically.

Liaison with National Medical Card Unit (NMCU)

Given how significant the medical card is, it is not surprising that it tops the list of individual benefits in terms of both queries to CISs and Social Policy Returns. A seminar was organised in March 2016 where CIS staff were able to air concerns. Many of the concerns that CIB raised in a submission to the National Medical Card Unit around the administrative and policy issues for Medical Card applicants were taken on board in the NMCU Strategic Plan 2016 – 2018.

During 2017, there were almost 60,000 queries to CICs nationwide related to medical cards, making it the most-queried individual issue or benefit. This increased to 64,931 queries in 2018.

CIB has continued to highlight medical card issues raised by CIS. In November 2018, staff from CIB's Social Policy and Research and Information Resources teams met with staff from the National Medical Card Unit (NCMU) to discuss social policy feedback from delivery services regarding the Medical Card and GP Visit Card. Staff from CIB highlighted the main policy concerns emerging from delivery services and the NMCU representatives noted the key initiatives that they are working on.

CIB submission to ComReg on improving the use of Non-Geographic Numbers (NGNs)

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) produced a Response and Consultation on Decision in 2018 following a public consultation in 2017 on Non-Geographic Numbers (NGNs). NGNs serve a valued purpose for which there is demand, but the NGN platform as currently structured is harming many Irish consumers. The majority of consumers cannot tell the various NGN ranges apart and do not know the retail charges for calling different NGNs. Consumers also know that some NGN calls are expensive but don't know which ones. As a consequence, many consumers avoid calling NGNs altogether or do so only when having no other option. This has clear knock-on effects for organisations that use NGNs in order to engage with those same consumers.

CIB prepared a submission as part of the consultation process noting that service user attitude to these numbers were negative and that the lack of transparency around costs seemed to discourage the use of NGN numbers.

The CIB submission was cited throughout the ComReg report regarding issues that were impacting on users. In particular, the report states that: "ComReg takes particular note of the views submitted by the Citizens Information Board (CIB). CIB submits that financially vulnerable people, living on very tight budgets, are particularly disadvantaged by the preponderance of NGNs."

ComReg is introducing two changes to these issues to improve the use of NGNs. These are:
Geo-Linking Condition: from 1 December 2019, a call to an 1850, 1890, 0818 or 076 NGN will cost no more than the cost of calling a landline number. This means that if landline calls are included in your "bundle of call minutes" then NGN calls will also be "in bundle". No separate charge will apply for any NGN call (unless you have used up your bundle of call minutes).

NGN Consolidation: From 1 January 2022, the five NGN ranges will be reduced to two. The 1850, 1890, and 076 ranges will be withdrawn and the 1800 (Freephone) and 0818 ranges will remain. This 3-year period is to allow organisations that use NGNs time to prepare.

Conclusion

Social policy work can be painstaking and slow. This is because:

- it takes time for the evidence to be gathered

- it takes time for the Social Policy and Research team to analyse all the Social Policy Returns that are made through Oyster and then write or commission submissions, briefing papers or reports.

- last but not least, it takes time for the relevant government department or agency to read and absorb the contents of these submissions and then make decisions to change the policy

Because there is no rapid feedback, sometimes Information Providers may become demotivated and wonder if logging the same Social Policy Return over and over again is worth the time it takes.

The answer is a resounding YES! The more evidence there is on a particular issue, the more powerful the case for change. It is true to say that the social policy work of CIB based on the returns of many individual Information Providers from across the country has led to change. Some of that change has been highlighted in the previous section.

By taking part in social policy work, you can be part of that change!