

SOCIAL POLICY UPDATE

Volume 16, Issue 1, February 2023



Introduction

Welcome to the February 2023 edition of Social Policy Update.

This is our final edition before we move to a quarterly publishing cycle and introduce some changes to the look and feel of the bulletin. But our aim will remain the same - keeping you informed about the social policy and research work that we are engaged in and how we use the data and evidence from our funded services - CISs, CIPS and MABS – to inform this policy work.

Our focus in this edition is a presentation of the data received from CISs and CIPS during 2022. We profile the Data Hub that is housed on our website (which captures national caller and query trends for users of Citizens Information Services) and we also present an overview of the key concerns highlighted by services in the 8,700 Social Policy Returns submitted during 2022. This is the highest-ever level of social policy feedback that we have received from services on an annual basis.

We also summarise our most recent responses to public policy consultations, which includes submissions on the Civil Legal Aid review, and the new strategy for the Department of Social Protection and we cover recent MABS research on financial services and young people. The national policy news section highlights some key developments in the provision of a statutory home care scheme and new research on migrants and work.

Thank you for your continued interest in the social policy aspect of CIB's mandate. We look forward to engaging further with our readership as we continue to use the data from services to inform our analysis and research work and to influence public policy.

This section provides information about CIB's social policy work and that of our funded services - focusing on recent submissions and reports.

- Civil Legal Aid Review submission;
- Department of Social Protection – Submission on Statement of Strategy 2023 - 2026;
- CIB Data Hub – Statistics and trends 2022;
- Joint Oireachtas Disability Matters Committee - CIB/ DFI research flagged;
- Global Money Week – MABS launch.



Civil Legal Aid Review submission

In February, CIB made a submission to the review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme. This review is part of the ongoing work of the Civil Legal Aid Review Group, chaired by former Chief Justice, Mr. Frank Clarke with membership from the Legal Aid Board, the Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC), the Irish Traveller Movement, academics, legal professionals and Government officials. The review will allow for an assessment of how well access to justice is facilitated by the Civil Legal Aid Scheme, particularly for those on low incomes.

Our submission noted CIB support for FLAC to run free legal advice clinics in CISs and the extent of the work being done by services in enabling clients to access justice. During 2022, CISs dealt

with almost 18,000 justice related queries - with the key focus of these being legal aid and advice. They assisted clients with 19,000 queries concerned with Birth, Family and Relationships - covering issues such as separation and divorce, custody and access to children, maintenance and domestic violence – and dealt with 39,000 employment rights queries.



We went on to identify the range of barriers to accessing the scheme, as identified by delivery services in their work with clients. These included:-

- Complex eligibility rules and out-of-date income thresholds (unchanged since 2006), which need to be ‘radically reconsidered’;
- Long waiting times, which can aggravate problems and dishearten applicants;
- Lack of awareness of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms (such as independent advocacy and mediation);
- Complex and technical terminology, processes and procedures for courts;
- Low awareness of legal rights, responsibilities and support services.

Recommending that the income threshold needs to be bench-marked at the Living Wage level (which would translate to €28,000/year as opposed to the current level of €18,000/year), the submission argued that the range and level of income disregards also needs to be adjusted, allowing for discretion, flexibility and transparency.

The submission also looked at the areas covered by the scheme and suggested that the necessary de facto focus on family law issues meant that there was minimal or no service being provided in many civil law areas. With this in mind, it argued for the extension of eligibility to cases that involved housing and homelessness, social welfare appeals, employment rights, and eviction and repossession proceedings. It also discussed the need to lift the blanket exclusion of group actions under the scheme.

The CIB submission can be accessed on our website.

The CE of CIB, Fiona Coyne, also participated in a recent conference organised by the **Chief Justice’s Working Group on Access to Justice**. The conference focussed on the development of a ‘model system’ in Ireland, within the context of the ongoing review of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme. The CIB contribution highlighted the role that CISs, MABS and NAS currently play in supporting clients to access justice, and looked forward to further collaboration with the Legal Aid Board (and other bodies) on these matters. Such collaboration would help to ensure that an improved, accessible and adequately resourced Civil Legal Aid Scheme delivers effective access to justice to people - especially to those who are least well able to seek redress and remedies when their legal and human rights are infringed.

Submission - Department of Social Protection Statement of Strategy 2023 - 2026



An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection

CIB has made a submission to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) in response to an invitation to contribute to the development of its new Statement of Strategy for 2023-2026.

The submission acknowledged the important role that CIB has in supporting and supplementing the work of the Department - by informing, enabling and facilitating people to access and benefit from DSP supports, with particular reference to income supports and pathways to education, training and employment.

We laid out the broad range of pressures that are likely to impact on the work of the Department over the coming three years. This includes general inflationary pressure, increasing energy costs, the need to support people seeking international protection (from Ukraine and other countries)

and difficulties for people in accessing and affording housing. The submission went on to acknowledge the important role that the work of the Department played in mitigating the economic and social shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic during the past three years.

The proposals put forward by the Commission on Taxation and Welfare in 2022 were also flagged in relation to the operations of the Department, with the report of the Commission recommending a range of targeted reforms and significant improvements to the welfare system. Reform of the social insurance system is seen as a vital component of this.

The key priorities for action identified in our submission include the elimination of child poverty, the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Pensions and the need to build on the findings of the cost of disability research (as published in 2021) - priorities which are consistent with what the query data and policy feedback from CIB funded services is telling us about clients' experiences.

While acknowledging the many merits of online access to services, we argued that this means of access should not be the only one, as there is a cohort of people who will continue to require hard copy benefit application forms and face-to-face interactions with DSP officials.

The submission concluded by noting the following strategic principles that could serve to inform the work of the Department over the coming years:-

- An integrated, personalised and across-Government approach to meeting individual's needs, with a move to a seamless benefits application process;
- Targeting of measures to combat poverty and over-indebtedness;
- Ensuring that nobody is left behind in the ongoing move to service digitalisation;
- The facilitation of supported decision-making in accordance with the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015;
- High quality professional service delivery to the public at each stage of engagement, ensuring the protection of people's right to be treated equally and fairly in the social welfare system.

[The submission can be accessed on the CIB website here.](#)

The Department of Social Protection is also currently engaging in a national consultation to examine the design and development of a **new pay-related benefit scheme for jobseekers** in Ireland. CIB is preparing a response to the consultation, using data and evidence from our services.

Key trends on CIB Data Hub 2022

The Data Hub on the CIB website has been updated to include full year (2022) data relating to Callers and Queries to the national network of Citizens Information Services (CISs). This resource features anonymised data on service users, queries and trends and it profiles a wide range of statistical information on the issues that services are assisting the public with across all aspects of rights and entitlements.

During 2022, there were 394,400 callers to CISs nationally (a 17% increase on 2021) with over 788,000 queries (14% increase). The Medical Card, Fuel Allowance and Carer's Allowance were the single payments or schemes with the highest number of queries.



An analysis of trends within the main query categories shows us that there were almost 372,000 social welfare queries logged in CISs (up 24% year-on-year), with over 70,000 of these relating to Extra Social Welfare Benefits. Other key areas queried by clients during 2022 included Housing at 75,414 queries (increase of 22%) and a 74% increase in queries concerning Moving Country – which mainly related to the arrival of Ukrainian citizens fleeing the Russian invasion.

[A more detailed analysis of the data for 2022 can be accessed on the Data Hub here.](#) See the 'On the Ground' section in this edition for a further look at caller, query and policy feedback from services during 2022.

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters

The findings in *'The Right Home: the Housing Needs of People with Disabilities'* - a joint Citizens Information Board and Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) report - informed discussion at the 9 February session of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters, which explored the lived experience of congregated settings. The report drew from National Advocacy Service (NAS) and Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) member case studies, identifying the barriers people face in accessing appropriate housing, and outlined a range of measures to address these issues. Representatives from NAS and DFI presented to the Committee making reference to the findings in the report in discussing the policy and implementation challenges in providing appropriate housing and achieving independent living for people who have a disability. The report has made, and will continue to make, a valuable contribution to housing and disability policy and, in particular, to informing the implementation of the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022–2027 - a contribution which was noted by the then Minister of State for Housing, Peter Burke at the launch in December 2022.

[The housing report can be accessed on the CIB website here.](#)

Global Money Week - MABS launch

On 10 February, MABS launched the findings of the 'Money Matters' Financial Education Survey, which was based on survey responses from over 1,400 young people (aged 12 – 20 years) during the international Global Money Week campaign in 2022. The survey sought insights on how young people think about, engage with and use financial services.



Some key findings of the survey include:-

- 40% of young people living in Ireland are learning about money via social media outlets.
- 61% are using a mobile phone/app to keep track of their money – and this is the most popular tool for tracking finances.
- Over 80% of young people report that they are shopping online.
- The vast majority (96%) of young people who took part in the survey report that they feel it is important to talk about money.

'Global Money Week' is an annual international campaign launched by the OECD and will take place from 20–26 March 2023. MABS is the leading national organisation in Ireland that supports its delivery and will carry out a similar survey as part of the 2023 initiative. The aim of this global campaign is to draw attention to the fundamental role of money management education (MME) for young people, and to support the lifelong development of positive personal financial behaviours and decision-making skills.

[See the MABS website for more details on the Money Matters survey here.](#)

[The Global Money Week website can be accessed here.](#)

In this section we provide an overview of the increased levels of Social Policy Returns that were submitted by CISs and CIPS during 2022. Not surprisingly, concerns relating to the cost of living and ongoing difficulties with housing availability and housing needs were central to much of this feedback.



Review of 2022 query trends and social policy data

Queries

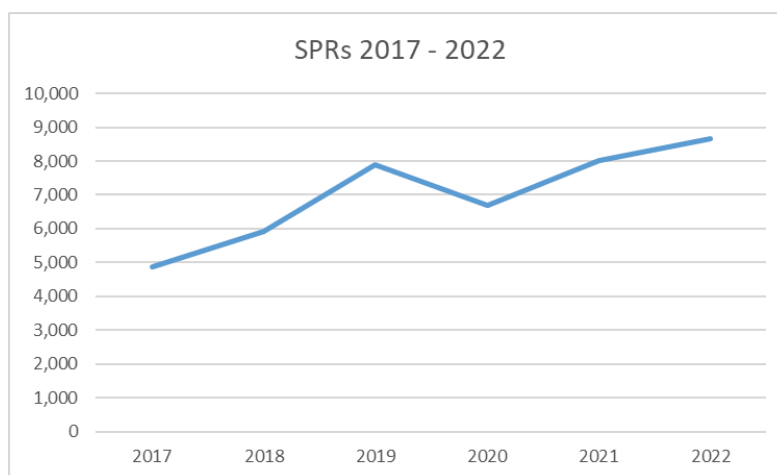
In 2022, over 394,000 people contacted Citizens Information Services (CISs) across the country with over three quarters of a million queries. In addition, CIPS, the national phone service, dealt with over 135,000 callers.

As the various public health restrictions began to be lifted in the early part of the year, overall caller numbers were significantly higher than in the previous two years. With the resumption of face-to-face services in CISs, there was a four-fold increase in personal callers to the network when compared with 2021 (with 42% calling into services and 55% making contact by telephone).

As is consistent with previous years, the majority of callers were seeking information on social welfare matters, which amounted to 47% of all queries recorded. The next most-queried topic was housing (at 10%) - which recorded 22% more queries than in 2021. The areas of health (7%) and employment (6%) were the next most-queried areas, with the Moving Country category also seeing an increase in queries following the invasion of Ukraine in March.

Social Policy Returns

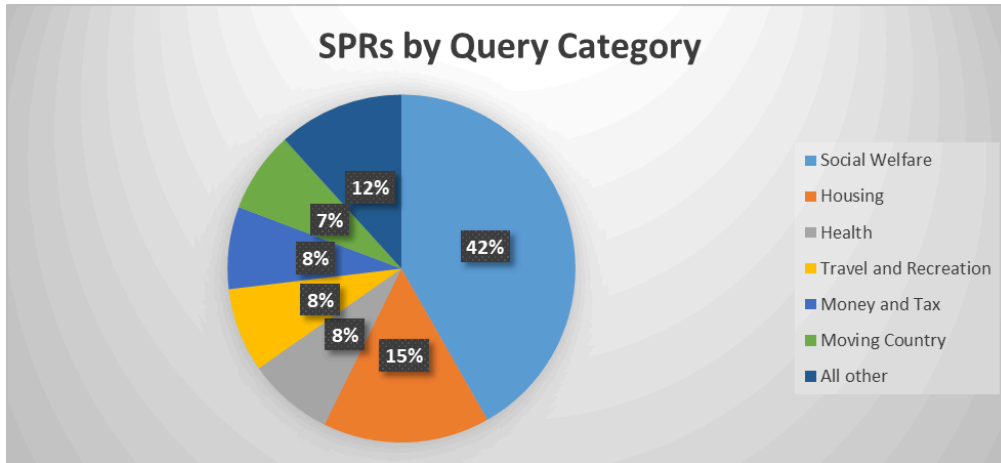
During 2022, information staff in CISs and CIPS submitted a record level of social policy feedback to CIB, highlighting particular cases of concern and recording these on a daily basis as anonymised data. The **CISs recorded 7,635 Social Policy Returns (SPRs)** relating to a broad range of subject and query areas. Information staff judge these specific problems that are experienced by callers as being indicative of broader and more widely-experienced difficulties with the operation or implementation of policy. The **Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)** also recorded an additional **1,035 SPRs** from their caller-base, bringing the total number of policy concerns submitted by all services in 2022 to **8,670** –an 8% increase on 2021 levels (which, in turn, represented a 20% increase on 2020 figures). This is the highest level of SPRs submitted by services on an annual basis and is above that recorded by services before the pandemic, when overall caller/query levels were at a higher number.



This social policy data is an essential element of the policy feedback loop between information services, CIB and the social and public services that clients encounter on a daily basis. This data continues to provide us with essential evidence of difficulties that clients experience when they are trying to access their entitlements, without which we would be unable to fulfil our legislative mandate to highlight issues of concern for service users.

Given the national trends that we see in the recording of queries – where almost half relate to social welfare - it is not surprising that social welfare-related concerns also dominate in the policy feedback from services (at 42%). Housing is the next most-logged concern (10%), with the

categories of 'health', 'travel and recreation', 'money and tax' and 'moving country' accounting for the majority of the remaining feedback during 2022.



In their feedback, information services referenced **administrative or operational issues** as being problematic for clients in two thirds of the cases reported, with the remainder of the cases identifying concerns with policies, legislation or guidelines that underpin the scope of schemes, benefits or services.

Data trends and changes

When compared with the data from 2021, there are a number of notable changes in the social policy concerns submitted by services. Key amongst these are:-

- An increase of 33% in the reports submitted in relation to housing;
- A 26% increase in reports concerning social welfare issues;
- A year-on-year increase of 21% in SPRs concerned with health - primarily related to health service eligibility;
- Housing and social welfare SPRs, when combined, accounted for almost 60% of the policy feedback from services.

The payments and schemes that were most frequently reported as being problematic for CIS and CIPS clients during 2022 are listed in the table below. These ten schemes or payments accounted for one third of all SPRs submitted during 2022.

Top Ten most-reported payments/ schemes - SPRs

	Scheme/ Benefit
1	Illness Benefit
2	Passports
3	Medical Card
4	Applying for Local Authority/Social Housing
5	Fuel Allowance
6	Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)
7	Carer's Allowance
8	Back to School Clothing & Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA)
9	Motoring
10	PPS Number

Social welfare concerns

As noted above, there was a year-on-year increase of over a quarter in the feedback submitted in relation to the broad social welfare query category – and within this, the number of SPRs concerning **Supplementary Welfare Schemes** and **Extra Social Welfare Benefits** more than doubled. Most of the feedback here related to Fuel Allowance, the Household Benefits Package, Basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance and the Additional Needs Payment.

It is clear that such a focus is reflective of the difficulties for many people in meeting the rising costs of living during the year. As noted in our bi-monthly analyses of policy feedback during 2022, the concerns highlighted by services in

relation to **Fuel Allowance** relate mainly to how some social welfare recipients can fall through the net of relatively complex eligibility requirements that govern the payment – that is, a combination of household circumstances, qualifying payments, means test criteria and income thresholds.

Services also pointed to specific difficulties for Carer's Allowance (CA) recipients (who are not eligible for the payment), those in receipt of Illness Benefit on a long-term basis and CE Scheme participants who lose their entitlement to FA upon

moving to another benefit (such as Illness Benefit, Maternity Benefit, Benefit for over-65s). It is expected that the January 2023 changes to the means assessment thresholds for Fuel Allowance (as announced in Budget 2023) will bring over 80,000 households into the scheme and we will continue to monitor the feedback to see the impact of these changes.



The **Additional Needs Payment** (ANP) reports highlighted difficulties for some clients affected by delays in processing applications during the latter part of the year and difficulties making contact with the local Community Welfare Service. Such access difficulties were also highlighted in relation to **Basic SWA**, as was a low level of awareness and information about the payment. In response to a Parliamentary Question on the processing of these payments in January 2023, Minister Heather Humphreys stated that her Department had assigned additional staff to the Community Welfare Service and that they were also working on the provision of an online Additional Needs Payment application process via the MyWelfare system – measures which she expects to have in place by the end of Q1 2023. Minister Humphreys noted that there were 97,224 ANPs issued in 2022 – a 75% increase on 2021. No doubt this significant increase reflects the cost of living pressures on households during 2022, and also the streamlining of the scheme (from its previous designation as Exceptional/ Urgent Needs Payment) and the advertising campaigns initiated by DSP during 2022 to increase awareness of the payments.

The rate of feedback in relation to **Illness Benefit** (IB) - which was the most reported scheme during 2022 - changed significantly over the year. The majority of SPRs were submitted in the first half of the year (peaking in March), with delays in processing applications being the key focus (in addition to difficulties in making contact with Departmental personnel by telephone). These processing delays for IB seem to have been caused by the increased levels of Enhanced Illness Benefit applications in the early part of the year, when there had been a surge in Covid19 infections. As these concerns passed, in the latter part of the year the predominant issue being reported by services concerned the situation that some self-employed workers find themselves in when they cannot work due to illness - they are not entitled to IB, and due to the shorter term nature of their illness will not be eligible for any other form of payment such as DA or Invalidity Pension (other than potentially for Supplementary Welfare Allowance). In addition, a number of reports referenced the low level of awareness amongst IB applicants of the option of applying for SWA safety net supports.

There was a year-on-year increase of 16% in the feedback in relation to 'Families and Children', with the majority of this increase being accounted for by two schemes – the **Working Family Payment** (WFP) and the **Back To School Clothing and Footwear Allowance** (BTSCFA).



Almost all of the BTSCFA feedback related to administrative difficulties for clients – specifically the online application process, as was the case in previous years. This was reported as being problematic for the many applicants for whom online access is difficult due to limitations with literacy, computer literacy, language, broadband, ICT, and affordability. Services noted that there were limited options for those seeking hardcopy forms – with no facility to download and print off application forms (either by the applicants themselves or by staff supporting them in CISs), no apparent or obvious option to seek forms by post from the Department and no option to get application forms in local Intreo offices.

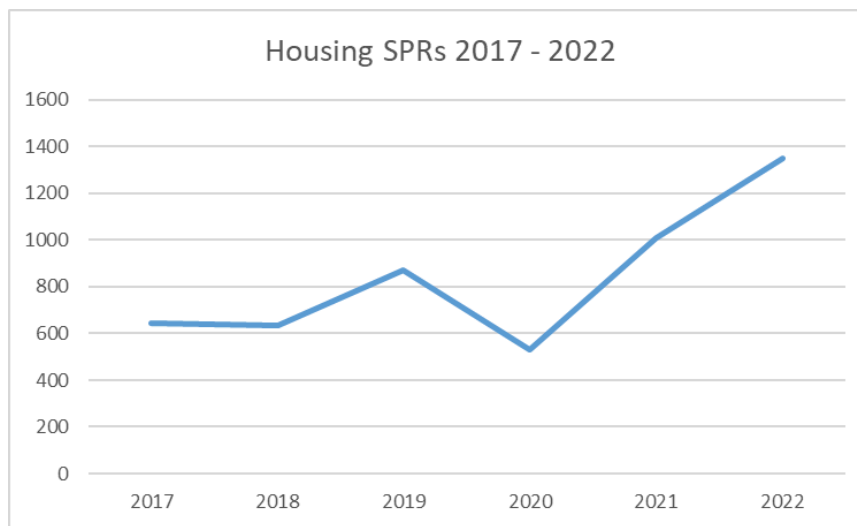
There were also issues for applicants who were not digitally enabled in accessing or using a myGovID account (which is necessary for the online application), as well as reports that applicants who were seeking advice or assistance with making an application could not get in contact with the Department by telephone.

The policy feedback provided by services in relation to this scheme could prove to be instructive as DSP seek to roll out online applications for the Additional Needs Payment (ANP) in the coming months. It is likely that these concerns may be repeated for some of the clients seeking to make an application for the payment. The default to online applications presented significant access barriers for many of the clients referenced in the BTSCFA reports, with the case details revealing that many applicants were living in households with limited access to broadband/ technology due to affordability issues and basic levels of literacy/digital literacy.

Access barriers and processing delays were also at the forefront of reports concerning the **Working Family Payment (WFP)** with a high level of cases identifying difficulties for applicants and recipients in making contact with the WFP section of the Department – either by telephone or email. Typically, these access difficulties can exacerbate the pressures and stresses being experienced by low income working households, when many are seeking to deal with a relatively straightforward administrative issue (such as checking the status of an application or renewal, or changing bank account details or an address). Services also pointed to the difficulties for low income self-employed households who are not eligible for the payment and also difficulties for lone parents who move from the One Parent Family Payment to the Jobseekers Transitional Payment who can no longer claim the WFP.

Housing issues

The ongoing pressures within the housing sector continue to be reflected in the level of feedback submitted by services in relation to housing concerns for clients, with the number of SPRs increasing by one third on 2021. A review of housing-related feedback during the past six years shows that housing-related SPRs now stand at their highest level - with the dip in 2020 reflecting the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the reporting of issues.



Of the housing SPRs submitted during 2022, 57% related to the sub category of **Local Authority and Social Housing** – in particular, the application process and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) – and another 18% were concerned with **Renting a Home**. Underlying all of these concerns is the shortage of affordable, secure, quality accommodation for those who are seeking rented accommodation and social housing – which is primarily within the private rented market, given the continued dependency on this sector to deliver social housing.



With one in five households now accommodated within the private rented sector, the feedback on housing need from CISs and CIPS continues to provide a clear sense of the difficulties for tenants in finding and retaining a place to live in all parts of the country. Key amongst these is the level at which the **social housing income thresholds** are set, with many services pointing to the need to review these thresholds. The data submitted by services provides us with a range of examples of low income working households that are earning above the income limits but are not earning enough to afford the universally high rents

in the private rented market. We will continue to monitor the housing data submitted by services in 2023 to ascertain the impact, if any, of the increase (€5,000) in baseline income thresholds from January 2023, which the Department expects will extend eligibility for social housing support to an estimated 16,000 additional households. We also look forward to the development by the Department of proposals for a new social housing income eligibility model in 2023.

Homelessness was referenced as being the key issue in 15% of the cases reported in relation to housing – not just the threat but the experience, with many cases citing the distress and anxiety experienced by tenants in a range of particularly vulnerable situations who are unable to secure housing. This includes parents with young children, older people, young people in vulnerable situations, lone parents, and people with disabilities.

These underlying issues are exacerbated for some clients by a range of **administrative difficulties** for those who are seeking housing support in Local Authorities, including unreasonable delays in processing social housing applications which, in turn, can impact an applicant's ability to access HAP rental properties. The SPRs also highlight the difficulties in accessing information, forms and support from Local Authorities, with particular reference to online-only application processes in some Housing Departments that are causing concerns for applicants.

Other specific concerns

Feedback concerning the **'Moving Country'** category increased by one third when compared with 2021, which can be explained by the arrival of Ukrainian citizens following the outbreak of war in February 2022. The level of queries in relation to Ukrainian refugees stood at over 10,700 for the year. Key issues raised in the feedback included difficulties with Letters of Temporary

Protection (amongst the early arrivals), and as the year progressed, there were reports of accommodation concerns and difficulties in making contact with International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS), and also issues with PPS numbers.



Not surprisingly, there was a noted reduction – over three quarters - in the feedback submitted in relation to **Covid-19** payments and schemes, which is consistent with the changed public health situation and the related drop in Covid-19 query levels (5,919 during the year). Almost half of the SPRs submitted under this category related to Enhanced Illness Benefit, and were reported as concerns in the first half of the year.

There was also a year-on-year reduction of 9% in the level of feedback on the Travel & Recreation category, with much of this reduction seen in the second half of 2022. The consistent concerns here for the past two years have been the application and renewal processes for both **passports and driving licences** – with reports during 2020 and 2021 detailing difficulties for NDLS clients in making online bookings at their local NDLS office. The introduction of a telephone booking line for appointments, coupled with the option for older people to apply by post, seems to have improved the situation for many people.

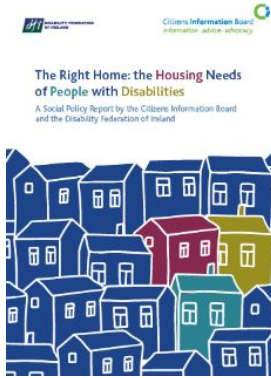
The main concerns in relation to passports were also focussed on operational difficulties – specifically backlogs in processing applications with many exceeding the advertised turnaround times (particularly for children’s applications) and also difficulties accessing customer service supports via telephone, web chat or email. In response to a Parliamentary Question on passport processing times in January 2023, Minister Micheál Martin stated that 1.085 million passports were issued during 2022 and that all passports are now being issued within the advertised turnaround times – that is, online adult renewal (10 working days); Online child/complex renewal (15 working days); and online first time application (20 working days), with processing times for applications via An Post standing at eight weeks.

Submissions and research

During 2022, we used this query, caller and social policy data to draft a range of submissions, relating to 14 public policy consultations. These covered a variety of topics such as the referendum on housing, the phasing-in of the Living Wage and a response to the Government’s Commission on Taxation and Welfare.

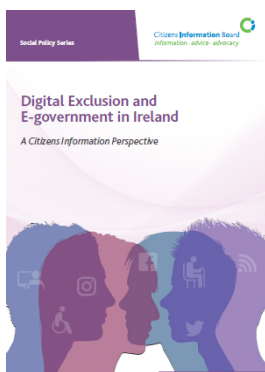
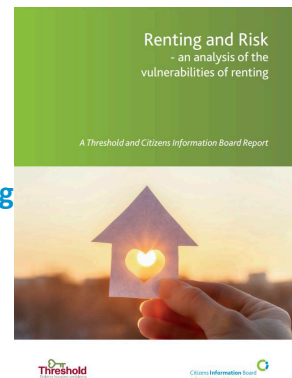
In addition, CIB’s Pre-Budget Submission (*‘Caught in a bind’: Targeted Supports Needed to Alleviate Cost of Living Pressures on Citizens’*) continued to be a central element of our policy work in 2022 and the submission was reflective of the data gathered in delivery services across the country during the year. It highlighted the pressures that people were facing with cost of living increases, as well as their experience of being ‘caught in a bind’ between eligibility requirements for a range of schemes involving different means tests, income thresholds and disregards. Our post-budget analysis (*Budget 2023 Outcomes*) confirmed that many of the concerns that were raised by services in their feedback to us featured in the Government’s budgetary provisions for 2023 and are indicative of the continuing relevance of the work of these services.

During 2022, we published four social policy research reports which focussed on many of the key concerns raised by services within their data. Two of these reports were developed in collaboration with CIB key partners in the voluntary sector – the Disability Federation of Ireland and Threshold. [The reports can be accessed on our website here.](#)



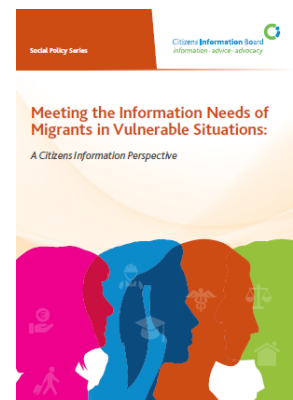
[The Right Home: The Housing Needs of People with Disabilities](#)

[Renting and Risk: An Analysis of the Vulnerabilities of Renting](#)



[Digital Exclusion and eGovernment in Ireland: A Citizens Information Perspective](#)

[Meeting the Information Needs of Migrants in Vulnerable Situations: A Citizens Information Perspective](#)



In this section, we cover recent policy-related Parliamentary Questions and debates in the Oireachtas that are relevant to concerns raised in feedback from our services.

- Over 70's Fuel Allowance applications;
- Social welfare benefit processing times;
- Child Maintenance Review Group reforms.

**In the
Oireachtas**

Fuel Allowance applications [PQ 6160/23; 9 February 2023]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan (*Cork North West, Fianna Fail*) asked the Minister for Social Protection “the measures being taken to deal with the delays in processing of applications for fuel allowance for the over-70s under the new income criteria under the cost-of-living measures introduced.”

Minister Heather Humphreys (*Cavan-Monaghan, Fine Gael*) responded that “as part of the overall social welfare Budget 2023 package of €2.2 billion, I was pleased to secure a major expansion of the Fuel Allowance scheme, expected to benefit up to 81,000 additional households during this fuel allowance season. The budget measures, of most benefit to those over age 70, are effective from January 2023.

Since the budget announcement, my officials have put additional measures in place so that Fuel Allowance applications are processed as efficiently as possible. A number of changes were made to the Department’s IT systems and additional staffing resources are in place to help process the increased number of applications received. A telephone service is also in place to support customers.

A new streamlined online application service was opened on 5 December 2022 to assist applicants, especially those over 70, to apply for the payment at a time and place that suits them. A new shorter paper application for those over 70 is also available to download from the Government’s website, gov.ie. In early December, an information campaign commenced to raise awareness about the payment and the new online service, particularly amongst those over age 70. I am informed that higher than normal levels of applications continue to be received from those aged 70 and over. The pensions areas are working through these applications as quickly as possible and expect to have processed the vast majority over the coming weeks.

I can assure the Deputy that where an application is awarded, there will be no loss in payment to the qualified households concerned as the payment will be backdated as appropriate.”

Social welfare schemes waiting times [PQ 6344/23; 9 February 2023]

Deputy Bernard Durkan (*Kildare North, Fine Gael*) asked the Minister for Social Protection “the extent to which the waiting time for a decision in respect of applications for various social welfare payments has been shortened.”

In response, **Minister Heather Humphreys** (*Cavan-Monaghan, Fine Gael*) stated that “the targets for each scheme are agreed by Management Board in consultation with the relevant scheme areas. In setting the individual scheme targets consideration is taken of the complexity of the schemes and the processes that are necessary to determine eligibility. As a result the processing times vary across schemes, depending on the differing qualification criteria....



There are two key metrics which help determine the targets associated with each scheme, namely the average number of weeks to award and the percentage of claims awarded within the target timeframe. These metrics, alongside other factors such as staffing levels, potential changes to eligibility criteria or changes to business processes, are taken into account when assessing the feasibility of a revision to the target for a given scheme. The processing times are reviewed annually. My Department understands the many pressures faced by customers and always seeks to ensure that claims are processed quickly and efficiently.

I am pleased to report that claim processing targets are currently being met for all schemes across the Disability and Caring Schemes. My department continues to ensure that customer service is maintained at a high level.

Processing times for all scheme areas at end of 2022 are set out below.

Scheme	Target Set	Achieved as of Dec 22	Average weeks to award Dec22
State Pension Contributory	90% by date of entitlement	95%	6
Widow(er)'s Contributory Pension	90% in 6 weeks	95%	1
Jobseeker's Benefit	90% in 3 weeks	96%	1
Maternity Benefit	90% by due date	93%	6
Paternity Benefit	90% by commencement of leave	94%	6
Parents Benefit	90% by commencement of leave	86%	1
Illness Benefit	90% in 1 week	95%	1
Carer's Benefit	90% in 12 weeks	Not Available	6
Invalidity Pension	90% in 10 weeks	90%	8
Occupational Injury Benefit	90% in 1 week	58%	1
Means tested Based Schemes			
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	75% in 12 weeks	87%	6
Jobseeker's Allowance	90% in 6 weeks	97%	1
One-Parent Family Payment	90% in 10 weeks	96%	3
Working Family Payment	90% in 6 weeks	-	5
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	90% in 1 week	85%	1
Disability Allowance	75% in 10 weeks	83%	8
Carer's Allowance	75% in 11 weeks	87%	7
Other Schemes			
Child Benefit	90% in 4 weeks	65%	2
Domiciliary Care Allowance	90% in 10 weeks	98%	5
Household Benefits	90% in 4 weeks	96%	1
Free Travel	90% in 2 weeks	98%	3

Child Maintenance Review Group [PQ 63195/22; 18 January 2023]

Deputy Josepha Madigan (*Dublin Rathdown, Fine Gael*) asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the recommendation from the review group on child maintenance to establish a child maintenance agency was ultimately rejected; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

In response, **Minister Heather Humphreys** (*Cavan-Monaghan, Fine Gael*) stated that "the Government established a Child Maintenance Review Group in 2020* to examine a number of issues regarding child maintenance in Ireland and to prepare a report for the Minister for Social Protection on:

(i) The current treatment within the Department of Social Protection of child maintenance payments,



(ii) The current provisions relating to the liable relatives regarding child maintenance, and

(iii) The establishment of a State Child Maintenance Agency.

The Government has accepted the Group's recommendations in relation to the social welfare system. These recommendations involve very significant reforms which will be of great benefit to lone parents.

As a result, child maintenance payments will be disregarded in the means test for social welfare payments. It is estimated that this measure will be of direct benefit to approximately 16,000 lone parents at a cost of approximately €10 million per year.

The requirement for lone parents to make efforts to seek maintenance as part of their claim will be removed. This requirement often involved the applicant having to go to Court and so it will remove an additional stress on lone parents and it will also help to reduce the burden on the Courts system.

In addition, the liable relative provisions will be discontinued. This means that my Department will no longer seek to recoup a portion of claim costs from the non-resident parent. I want to be very clear that removing these provisions does not replace or supersede the primary responsibility of parents to maintain their children.

There was no consensus among the Group members regarding the establishment of a Child Maintenance Agency. The Group examined the international position and after significant research found that different countries operate different arrangements. There is no one perfect solution. Even amongst those members of the Group who favoured the establishment of an Agency there were differing views about its role and remit, as well as important Constitutional concerns. Even where an agency were established, there would still be a significant role for the Courts in terms of the difficult issues of enforcement and arrears.

The Minister for Justice is planning significant reforms in the family justice area. I am particularly pleased that the Family Justice Strategy includes a commitment to undertake a review of the enforcement of maintenance orders in the first half of 2023. Proposals for reform will be made by the Department of Justice, if appropriate, including in relation to strengthening attachment orders and examining the feasibility of introducing guidelines on maintenance amounts....”

**NOTE: CIB made a submission to the Review Group in March 2021*

Here we feature research and recent policy developments at national level that are likely to be of interest to those engaged in policy work.

- Research report on home care workers – Health Research Board;
- Development of a statutory home care scheme;
- ESRI report on ‘migrant wage gap’.



The role, function and supply of home care workers – HRB Report

In January, the Health Research Board (HRB) published a report which looked at the supply, function and role of home care workers in four different European countries. The research was commissioned by the Department of Health with a view to providing evidence in the development of a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services. The scheme was proposed as a key element in Sláintecare – the 2017 reform plan for the health service – and in line with the Programme for Government commitment to “introduce a statutory



scheme to support people to live in their own homes, which will provide equitable access to high-quality, regulated home care.”

The research looked at the role that home care workers provide in Scotland, Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden and also at the challenges related to the recruitment and retention of these workers in the home care sector in these countries.

The research noted that, given a choice between care in an institution or at home, most people would prefer to stay in their own home – and it also acknowledged that home care can be more cost-effective than residential and hospital care, when organised and delivered effectively.

The research paper stressed the interaction between adequate and standardised training, good working conditions and good care. It argued that home care workers are unable to deliver high-quality care in the face of poor and stressful working conditions and inadequate training, but highlighted that the reality is that they are expected to do so in many countries. The research also noted the importance of migrant care workers in mitigating the effects of staff shortages - particularly in Germany, Scotland, and Sweden. Authorities in these countries have implemented targeted approaches to both increase international recruitment of care workers and improve working conditions for migrant workers.

It evidenced widespread issues in working conditions for home care workers within these countries, which it argued, are linked to broader sociocultural and economic factors that serve to undermine the value of homecare work and contribute to the perception of home care workers as low-skilled and replaceable.

The research highlighted two main findings:

- The challenges related to the recruitment of home care workers go beyond those presented as a result of increasing demand for home care owing to global sociodemographic change;
- The challenges related to the retention of home care workers in employment are most strongly related to unstandardised approaches to training, poor employment and working conditions, and lack of opportunities for care workers to learn, develop, and progress.

The country-specific reviews highlighted a number of ‘key facilitators’ which would enable an adequate number of home care workers to provide effective and safe home care. These included the provision of fit-for-purpose education, training and continued learning and development pathways, the establishment of a system of regulation and registration and the development of a well-defined career path for workers in the sector.

[The research report can be accessed here.](#)

Development of statutory home care scheme

In other developments related to the establishment of a statutory home care scheme, Minister Mary Butler stated in response to a **Parliamentary Question** in December 2022 that *“the continued expansion of home care hours and progressing development of a statutory scheme for the regulation and financing of home support services is a key priority in 2023. The Department of Health is currently developing a regulatory framework for home support providers with the aim of ensuring that all service users are provided with high quality care.... The Heads of Bill are currently being drafted by the Department with a view to bringing it through the Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest opportunity”*.

In addition, she also noted that testing of a reformed model of service delivery for home support is in progress in four pilot sites (with a final report expected by Q1 2023) and that the HSE has commenced recruitment for a number of key posts within the National Home Support Office (including Care Needs Facilitators).

In January 2023, the Department of Health published the findings of its 2022 **consultation on draft regulations for providers of home support services**. CIB made a submission to this consultation in August 2022 ([which can be accessed here](#)), that highlighted the need for strong regulation of education, training, pay and conditions in order to ensure carer progression and care staff retention – a key finding of

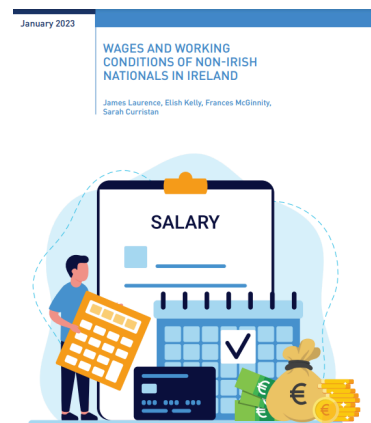
the HRB research noted above and also a key theme which emerged from this Department of Health consultation on the draft regulations.

[The overview can be accessed here.](#)

ESRI report on ‘migrant wage gap’

In January 2023, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) published a report, commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which looked at the wages and working conditions of non-Irish nationals in Ireland.

The research, which was based on a combination of Revenue earnings data and Labour Force Survey jobs data, found that while non-Irish nationals earned 22% less per hour than Irish nationals, East European workers earned, on average, 40% less than Irish workers in the period 2011-2018. Part of this wage gap can be explained by differences in the social and demographic characteristics of workers (e.g., education level), the kinds of jobs that they do, and firms for which they work – but even after accounting for these differences, a significant gap (20%) remains.



The research also found that:-

- Non-Irish nationals are more likely to work in lower quality jobs and much less likely to be members of trade unions or staff associations;
- Employment rates for African nationals are very low, and when in work, they earn on average 14% less than Irish nationals (even after accounting for background and job characteristics);
- Non-Irish women experience a double earnings penalty, in the context of being female and a migrant. Non-Irish women earn 11% less than non-Irish men, who in turn earn 18% less than Irish men, which means that non-Irish women earn 30% less than Irish men. This reflects, in part, their concentration in the care sector/economy.

Within the context of the implications for the development of policy across a range of areas, the report suggested a number of options for policy makers to consider:-

1. The recognition of qualifications may be more framed in the context of the Irish educational system - as opposed to the labour market. In light of this, greater efforts may be needed to improve qualification recognition among employers, along with awareness raising and more effective implementation of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) system;
2. Trade unions and staff associations may need to make greater efforts to raise awareness of their activities among migrants within organisations – and employers may need to facilitate the recognition of staff associations and trade unions to ensure all workers have the option of being represented.
3. The introduction of measures to improve English language skills are likely to reduce the wage gap. Current evidence points to a lack of coordinated approach to English language learning for adult learners in Ireland.
4. While there is robust anti-discrimination legislation in Ireland, specific measures to combat labour market discrimination may be required – and the current development of an anti-racism strategy in Ireland is very important in this context.
5. Wage subsidies in particular, if carefully targeted, can incentivise employers to hire migrants who have not been successful in obtaining work experience in their host country, in this case

Ireland.

[The report can be accessed on the ESRI website here.](#)

The “Social Policy Update” is a bi-monthly newsletter produced by CIB’s Data and Research Team.

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