



Combat Poverty Agency

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A Case for an Independent Community Information Service

1987

1. Introduction

The recent Government decision to abolish the National Social Service Board (NSSB) has many implications that need to be considered. The Board's main activity has centred on the development and support of its network of 80 Community Information Centres throughout the country. As well as back-up information services to these, the NSSB also provides other support services, including training, group insurance schemes, organisational consultancy. The Board also has the statutory functions of advising the Minister for Health on the development of social services generally and promoting co-operation between statutory and voluntary social service organisations.

This paper concentrates on those services of the NSSB that most directly affect the poor: the local information centres and, at national level, the provision of central back-up and support and the promotion of public information on and accessibility to services. The insecure future of these services, in the light of the recent Government decision, raises issues that transcend health provision, issues that are of particular relevance to the Department of Social Welfare since it is the largest service provider.

Focusing mainly on information-based services, this paper sets out to quantify the need that exists for information, to draw out the benefits of public information services and to consider the implications of their withdrawal.

2. Evidence of Need for Information Services

Two types of evidence are available to indicate the need for a public information service. First, there is evidence that members of the public, and especially new claimants, have a poor knowledge of the services to which they are entitled. Secondly, and relatedly, there is some evidence of non take-up or under take-up of existing services.

(i) Evidence of Lack of Information

A study carried out in 1985 on a sample of over 800 new claimants for social assistance found widespread lack of information about the social welfare system.(1) There was particularly poor knowledge of entitlements and of the conditions attaching to the schemes for which people had applied. In many cases, lack of information was linked to negative attitudes towards the social welfare system - about 60% of all those studied felt that recipients are not treated fairly by the social welfare system. Relatedly, many were unclear about the role of social welfare officials, believing that the decision on their entitlement rested solely with the individual officers. The following findings are of most relevance:

- the majority of people did not have enough information to differentiate between social insurance and social assistance services. Applicants had a very limited knowledge of the details and conditions of the schemes for which they had applied;
- less than a fifth of all new applicants studied knew about the Department of Social Welfare Information Booklet and an even smaller proportion knew about the Department's special information leaflets. Those claimants who knew about the booklet and leaflets made little use of them;
- there was evidence of a widespread lack of information about those services that reduce hardship for the claimant, e.g. the right to claim unemployment assistance by post if one lives more than six miles from an Employment Exchange, the right to appeal the decision on one's claim;
- most of those who had any of the above information got it

not from official sources but from personal and family contacts and acquaintances.

One of the main conclusions of this study was the need for greater public access to information on the operation of the social welfare services - not only at the point of application but throughout the processing of claims. The Commission on Social Welfare also endorsed the need for greater public information on the social welfare system.(2)

The statistics available on the use of local information centres endorse the public's need for information. There is a high usage of NSSB sponsored services: in 1986 over 109,000 queries were dealt with in the 80 local information centres and 5,000 - 6,000 queries were handled by the Dublin-based NSSB Information Office. In addition, during the Welfare Rights Week in April this year, the local information centres handled over 23,000 queries.

Information available from one community services group also highlights the need that exists for information.(3) In one year, this local information centre handled 752 queries. Of these, 34% related to social welfare, 23% referred to health and the remainder were either general in nature or related to housing or taxation.

(ii) Evidence of Non or Under Take-Up

It is more difficult to obtain specific evidence on non or under take-up of services. However, some information is available.

The Report of the Commission on Social Welfare highlighted under take-up of some non-cash benefits.(4) In relation to the free electricity allowance, for instance, a considerable proportion of eligible claimants do not use their full

allowance each year. Other evidence of under-utilisation of allowances also exists. A study carried out on the elderly in rural areas in 1984 indicated that considerable numbers of the study population were unaware of their rights and entitlements.(5)

Another form of non or under take-up occurs when people do not claim immediately. The research on new claimants for social assistance showed that significant delays occur before some claimants apply for assistance.(6)

Information available about a Welfare Rights Information Week in Dublin in March 1986 also points to under take-up of services.(7) Of the 1,000 queries dealt with during the week, 16% were not receiving their full entitlements. The main areas of identified non take-up were Supplementary Welfare Allowance, (including Rent Allowances, Mortgage Subsidies and Exceptional Needs Payments), Medical Cards, Appeals and Free Electricity, Phone and Travel Allowances. Among the reasons given for non take-up were lack of information, and the complexity of the social welfare system which people felt intimidated by.

The Family Income Supplement is one scheme in which the take-up of entitlement has been far below official expectations. The Department of Social Welfare originally estimated a potential take-up of 35,000 families based on the Household Budget Survey, yet only 5,500 families currently avail of this scheme. The take-up figure has remained largely unchanged despite both revisions in the scheme and major publicity campaigns.

All of these data indicate that a problem of non and under take-up of services exists in Ireland. It is a problem experienced in other countries as well: in Great Britain, for example, the Government itself admits that the value of non take-up of benefits has reached over £1,000 million per year

(U.K. total). There, new measures are being introduced to improve the publicising of benefits in addition to continued support of local information services.(8)

3. Benefits of Information Provision

The provision of information services has identifiable spin-offs or benefits at a number of different levels: individual applicants, service provision and the state.

(a) Individual Applicants

Comprehensive information services for the individual applicant mean that he/she will be enabled to claim full entitlement to welfare benefits. This obviously reduces financial hardship. There are many psychological and social benefits as well, such as increased health and well-being and reduced isolation. Growth in self-confidence may result also and this in turn may lead to a reduced dependence on State provision.

(b) Service Provision

Although information services involve expenditure, they can improve significantly the efficiency of service provision. First, given that they provide an indirect monitoring mechanism for services, they act to pinpoint inefficiencies and inequities in services. This monitoring mechanism is even more important in view of the fact that few other channels exist to provide consumer feedback on social welfare services.

Secondly, lack of information increases the potential for inefficiency in that it may result in wrong claims or delayed claims. Both of these are costly since they take up valuable and, usually scarce, administrative resources. In addition, erroneous or delayed claims increase the incidence of emergency provision, thereby adding to the costs. Also, non take-up of welfare

information centres far outweigh the costs involved.

At a national level the NSSB provides services that are beneficial for both statutory and voluntary providers. The magazine Relate, for instance, is widely used and is valued by social workers and by statutory and voluntary workers as a way of keeping in touch with developments - providing information that is not readily available through an alternative single source. In addition, the central information service offered by the NSSB is valued for its clarity, accuracy and independence.

Overall, the implications of abolishing the NSSB, being particularly serious for the poor, are of concern to the Combat Poverty Agency. Without the services provided by the NSSB - local information centres and the necessary central back-up - access to state services is made more difficult for all. For the poor, for whom state services are a lifeline, curtailment of the information services has serious consequences.

References

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