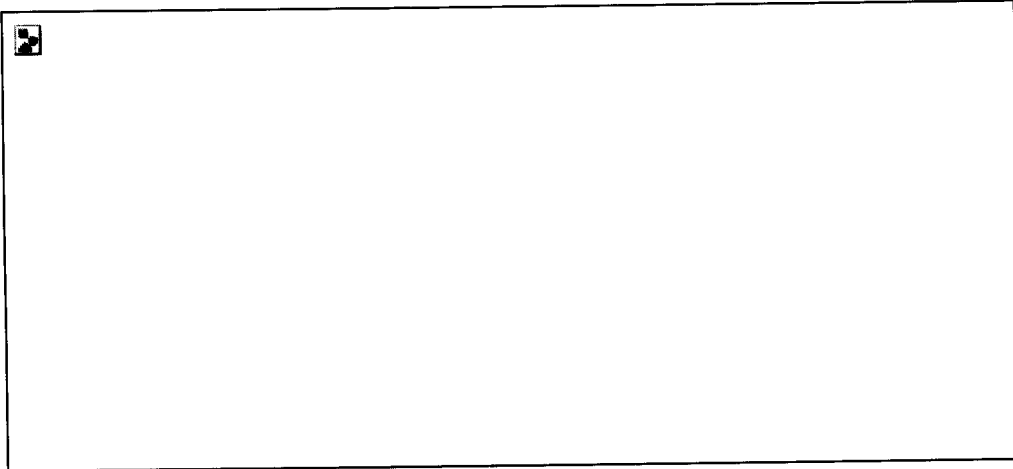


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**Review of
Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2004:**

**A Response by
Citizens Advice
October 2004**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice is the largest advice charity in Northern Ireland working against poverty, and meeting the information and advice needs of some 200,000 people per year. The Association has formal links to CAB in England & Wales and close working relationships with Citizens Advice Scotland. Together the three Associations constitute the biggest advice network in Europe with 60 years experience of giving advice and information to the public.

1.1 Access, Inclusiveness and Principles

Advice is provided on a wide range of issues by trained, specialist advisers across both main communities and to minority groupings, from 28 main offices and from some 100 other outlets within the framework of 4 principles. The advice given is:-

- Free at the point of use;
- Impartial;
- Confidential; *and*
Independent.

1.2 Casework Profile

The total enquiries received by Citizens Advice between April 2003 and March 2004 was 206791. Of these, 56% of the enquiries were benefit related from those who are often the most vulnerable in the community and who experience a complex range of needs often compounded by literacy difficulties. A further 19,333 enquiries dealt with a range of employment enquiries. The CAB service is in a unique position to comment on poverty issues through access to detailed case evidence. The case evidence takes into account the multiple identities of many of those affected by policies. This system is underpinned by quality standards of information recording, comprehensive and accredited training for all advisers, IT infrastructures which allow the sharing of up to date information across Northern Ireland, and a recognised membership scheme which guarantees the quality of advice given.

Citizens Advice in Northern Ireland works under enormous pressure of public demand, and deals in a large part with a very vulnerable section of the community. With debt now estimated to have reached the trillion pounds level and five interest rate rises in the past 10 months there is increasing pressure on household incomes. Between April 2003 and March 2004 CABx received 20,631 enquiries about consumer debt. This represents an increase of 19.12% on the previous year. In the first quarter April 2004-June 2004 of this year, CABx has dealt with over 6,800 debt queries and the projected figure for the year is set to be in the region of 27200 a further 31.8% for this year, if the trend continues.

Recent announcements regarding adjustments to the rating system and the introduction of water charges will continue to place further financial demands on local households and disproportionately affect those with the lowest income levels.

1.3 New Technology

Within the UK, Citizens Advice has pioneered the development of electronic information and advice, and retains a very clear vision of how new technology can be used to help those in social need.

Citizens Advice administers a wide area network across Northern Ireland. This provides each CAB office with an electronic version of the CAB information system, a case recording and case management system, a discussion database, and an e-mail facility. The system uses broadband to connect each bureau to all the others and to the Regional Office via a single central server. Computers are used in interview rooms with clients, information is updated by phone, and laptop computers are used for home visits.

The Association is building on this work with the development of specialist databases for frontline advisers, the continuing development of its web site, www.citizensadvice.co.uk, the use of standard specifications across the network, and the use of specialist software for money advice and benefit calculations. Adviceguide (www.adviceguide.org.uk) is a UK wide self service website for the public developed by citizens advice in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It provides information and advice on a 24/7 basis on a wide range of subjects and contains Northern Ireland specific information. The website is being translated into 6 different languages.

2 RESPONSE TO THE SINGLE EQUALITY BILL NORTHERN IRELAND

Citizens Advice welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Single Equality Bill Northern Ireland consultation Review. This paper responds on behalf of Citizens Advice to the discussion paper (the document) issued by the Minister of State (Right Honourable John Spellar MP) in June 2004.

Citizens Advice supports the concept of equality:

- We support fair treatment of all and recognise the need for action to comply with commitments reflected in the Good Friday Agreement and the obligations which flow from EU Directives
- We support in principle the complex range of equality legislation being brought together within a single statute which is sufficient to meet local needs and international obligations and which is inherently rational, consistent, comprehensive and effective

Citizens Advice Recommendations:

- Special provision should be made to cover needs specific to particular areas of discrimination where the case for action is particularly strong
- Decisions on what should be within the scope of the legislation and what grounds and measures should be included within it should be governed by the tests of EU requirements and demonstrable need
- It is unfortunate that the SEB does not fully encompass EU directives as this would avoid the need for a separate series of legislation
- The Green paper often tries to explain difficult concepts but is weak on providing examples and scenarios to help decision-making. It would be useful to include hypothetical case studies through the different stages from discrimination to potential remedy which would help illustrate the key issues for debate.
- The SEB must be written in clear, understandable language
- The SEB should promote a proactive and progressive approach to equality
- The Fair Employment and Treatment Order should be legislative model adopted for the SEB
- The EU Race Directive does not cover colour and nationality (including Irish Travellers) and this should be included in the SEB.
- Northern Ireland is increasing becoming a multicultural society and provision should be made for non-nationals including asylum seekers, migrant workers and refugees.

3. CONCLUSION

Citizens Advice is content with the principles but have concern that the current differences in existing legislation appear to create a "hierarchy of rights". The SEB should provide a mechanism to redress these inconsistencies. However, the SEB will only be useful if it is enforceable, if there is money to take cases and if representative claims are allowed. Organisations such as Citizens Advice should be able to represent claimants in tribunals and courts.

The paper points out that legal aid is outside the remit of an SEB because it is a reserved matter, but access to legal aid is necessary to ensure full and effective promotion of equality. The legislation should also allow for class and group action. It is also important that large awards of damages can be set to encourage a culture of diversity.

For further information or clarification of any issue raised
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