

3.4 Public Services

CORE POLICY OBJECTIVE: PUBLIC SERVICES

To ensure the provision of, and access to, a level of public services regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally

Increasingly Ireland is being identified as a country whose public services are underdeveloped. Given that Ireland is not a poor country, this is a situation that is far from acceptable. Because poorer people rely on public services more than those who are better off, it is they who are most acutely affected by this shortage.

This issue was examined by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). In its report entitled *Improving the Delivery of Quality Public Services* it recommended a series of developments (2006:112–117). *Social Justice Ireland* believes that Government should implement the approach for the delivery of public services outlined in the NESF report.

We address public services over this section and the next three sections on housing & accommodation, healthcare and education. This section assesses public transport, library services, financial services, information and communications technology, telecommunications, free legal aid, sports facilities and regulation.⁵⁸

Public transport

Transport remains a most problematic area. Bottlenecks throughout the country are adding to the difficulty and cost experienced by everybody in conducting their lives; although some of these have partially ‘improved’ in parallel with the recent recession. The rapid increase in the number of cars over the last decade has also added to problems of environmental destruction.⁵⁹

Transport policy should seek to combine easy access, affordable, integrated and high-quality public transport with the high costs of ownership and use of private vehicles. While it may be necessary to re-schedule some public transport initiatives that had been planned as part of the National Development Plan it is crucial that Government give priority to public transport over private transport in allocating capital funding.

⁵⁸ Issues specifically related to the provision of public services in rural areas are examined in section 3.11.

⁵⁹ The environmental impact of cars is discussed in 3.10(b).

Continued support is also required for the development of public transport schemes in rural Ireland. For such a policy to be credible it must be comprehensive, adequately resourced and enhance the current provision. These schemes significantly increase the quality of life of those living in remote rural areas, particularly older people. The Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) has been very successful to date. However, increased funding which has been promised, is required if the full potential of the RTI is to be realised.⁶⁰

It should also be recognised that public transport generally has a long way to go before it reaches the levels usually associated with a developed society. We urge Government to honour commitments already entered into and to implement a comprehensive, integrated and effective public transport strategy in consultation with stake-holders including the community and voluntary sector which has a vital contribution to make and role to play in local and rural transport services.

Library services

Libraries play an important role in Irish society. According to the Library Council there are over 14 million visits to public libraries annually. The Local Government Management Services Board (LGMSB) indicated that in 2007 on average 20.5 per cent of the population in each local authority area was a registered member of a public library; a figure corresponding to approximately 870,000 members (2008:29-30). They also reported that in 2008 there were on average 3.2 visits per person to libraries and an average of 3.13 books were issued per head of population (2009:29-32). These membership figures alone do not capture the increasing level of usage by adults of the reference, information and other services in public libraries, such as local history and exhibitions. Reflecting this, a 2003 survey by TNS (MRBI) found that 36 per cent of the adult population had used a public library recently. The same survey also found that 68 per cent of adults were or had been a member of a public library (Library Council, 2004). Clearly, public libraries play a strong and central role in Irish society. *Social Justice Ireland* believes that as part of our commitment to providing a continuum of education provision from early childhood to third level and throughout the life-cycle, Ireland needs to recognise the potential that the library service offers.

Central to such developments is information and easy access to this information. Coupled with information is the need for easy access to modern means of communication. Libraries are obvious centres with potential to support these objectives. To play this potential role, expansion of the library service is essential.

⁶⁰The RTI is addressed in more detail in section 3.11.

Recent budgetary policy has been neglectful of this important role with significant cuts in recent Budgets. We regret this move and call for a sustained substantial investment in these facilities. In the long-term a failure to resource this service properly is short-sighted.

Financial Services

Financial exclusion refers to a household's difficulty accessing and using financial services. A 2011 study by the ESRI examined four dimensions of financial exclusion: access to a bank current account, access to credit, ability to save, and access to housing insurance (Russell et al, 2011). Of these, access to a bank current account was considered the most fundamental, as exclusion from basic banking services means that households can face difficulties carrying out everyday transactions such as paying bills, receiving earnings or welfare benefits, transferring funds, and purchasing goods and services.

The results of the research highlighted some serious deficiencies in the ability of Irish households to access these basic financial services. In 2008 it was found that 20 per cent of Irish households did not have a bank current account a figure that is almost three times higher than the average for the EU15. The proportion without a bank current account rose to 40 per cent among those with low education qualifications, 38 per cent in households in the bottom 20 per cent of the income distribution, 50 per cent among local authority tenants, 52 per cent among those who are ill or disabled and 27 per cent among those aged over 55 years (2011:126-127).

The research highlights the need for policy to encourage financial institutions, such as the banks and the Post Office, to provide people with easy to access and affordable basic bank accounts and financial facilities. This is an area where targeted action by the Department for Social Protection could have a speedy and significant impact.

Information and communications technology

Increasingly the ability to use information and communications technology (ICT) is becoming a central requirement in modern society. The phenomenon of a technological divide is becoming evident. In particular it is of concern that a number of young people, including early school-leavers (many of whom are now unemployed), have little or no skill in ICT. Consequently initiatives are necessary to improve information technology provision in schools, as well as to further increase its availability in areas such as public libraries and community centres.

While progress has been made, particularly as regards public libraries, Government needs to show greater commitment to this area.

It also needs to address the issue of including everybody in the information society. In addressing this issue it is crucial that priority is given to ensuring access is available to those who currently cannot afford the market costs. Ignoring this will ensure that the “digital divide” will widen social exclusion. More, targeted, resources are needed.

Telecommunications

Three issues arise within the topic of telecommunications. First, we are concerned by a request in March 2003, and repeated on a number of occasions since, by Eircom, Ireland’s principal telecommunications company, that they be relieved of their universal public service obligation to provide a telephone for every house in the country. Instead they proposed sharing the annual cost of this obligation with other telecommunications companies and with consumers. The impact of such a change would be sizeable on the poor and on those living in rural areas. Both would experience an increase in the proportions of their incomes needed to be spent to ensure they had access at home to a telephone land line. We welcome the fact that this change was not introduced; however the fact that it was requested raises concerns that an attempt to revisit this issue may occur in the years ahead. Any such change which would impose additional costs on people who are already isolated from society, physically and financially, should be resisted. In considering any future decisions of this nature the Communications Regulator (ComReg) should take these societal points into account.

A second issue in the telecommunications area concerns one of the consequences of the growth in mobile phone usage over recent years. This has seen a decline in usage of public payphones. In response to this a large number of these payphones have been decommissioned. We urge care in any further decision to remove more payphones.

Finally, *Social Justice Ireland* believes it is important to explore technical options to address the requirements of people living in underserved areas, and remote rural areas. We believe that the use of technological advances offers a real method of addressing many of the inequities that exist in the allocation of, and access to, information and telecommunications resources. One obvious goal of public policy should be to ensure nationwide coverage for high-speed broadband and mobile phones. The ongoing failure in this context means that particular areas, especially in rural Ireland, are particularly disadvantaged.

Free legal aid

Citizens depend on the law and associated institutions to defend their rights and civic entitlements. A central element of this system, particularly for those with limited incomes, is the free legal aid system. The Legal Aid Board provides civic legal aid to people with incomes of less than €18,000 per annum; recipients contribute a nominal sum. In 2008 21,000 people availed of legal aid and the Board provided aid and advice in 17,900 cases. These figures include the Board's work on refugee legal services. The Board have also reported that waiting times to receive aid can be up to four months.

Social Justice Ireland believes that free legal aid is an important public service. In the current economic climate, with rising unemployment and decreasing income, it is likely that the demand on the Legal Aid Board will grow. The provision of, and adequate support for, this service is a basic requirement of governance. Government should continue to support and enhance this service.

Sports facilities

An insight into the role played by sport in Irish society was provided in an ESRI report entitled *The Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland* (Delaney and Fahey, 2005). Its findings indicated that: approximately 400,000 adults (15 per cent of the adult population) volunteer for sport in some way each year; 20 per cent of the adult population play sport; 30 per cent of adults are members of sports clubs; and the economic value of sport is between 1–2 per cent of GNP. In reaching its conclusions the report notes that current government policy commitments to promote social capital need to take account of the social aspects of sport and their potential contribution to the further development of social capital and volunteering in Ireland. Similarly it finds that there should be greater dialogue between those concerned with sports policy and those concerned with policy on social capital and volunteering; their common interest in sport should be recognised and explored; and their efforts to support social capital and volunteering should be co-coordinated.

However, recent studies have also indicated a declining level of participation by Irish people, and in particular young people, in sports activities. Long term this may have significant health consequences. There is a special case to be made for poor areas, most of which have limited, if any, sports facilities. The National Sports Council has developed a creative initiative of local sports partnerships. Some of these are working effectively and attempting to address this problem. Further funding for local sports partnerships should be made available. Given their huge potential such funding would be most worthwhile.

The national agreement, *Towards 2016*, contained a number of initiatives relating to sport and sports facilities which the new Government should implement. These include commitments to: (i) increasing support for sports infrastructure and sporting organisations recognising that sport has the potential to be a driver for social change and that targeting specific groups can address issues of exclusion and inequality; (ii) promoting sport in education settings; and (iii) achieving the Irish Sport Council target to increase by 3 per cent the numbers of children taking part in sport. *Social Justice Ireland* supports each of these commitments and looks forwards to seeing the implementation of various initiatives aimed at fulfilling them.

Consideration also needs to be given to the way in which exchequer funds are allocated towards sport. We note a recent ESRI study which concluded that public expenditure is skewed towards elite sport at the expense of grassroots activity, is too focused on new facilities and is biased towards traditional team games (Lunn, 2008). As we develop sports policy in the context of increasingly scarce public expenditure resources, *Social Justice Ireland* believes that more in-depth consideration needs to be given to how we maximise the returns to these investments. In many cases simple schemes to encourage participation and use of existing sports facilities are required; certainly these are currently lacking.

Regulation

Regulatory policy in Ireland has failed in many areas and requires significant reform over the next few years. This has been clearly demonstrated in the problems that have emerged in the financial services sector. A serious re-think is required to ensure that regulation plays a stronger and far more effective role to ensure there is no repetition of these huge failures.

Central to our opinion on how regulation should develop is the view that all regulators, be they currently in existence or established in the future, should be required to consider the societal impact of any reforms they propose before they are implemented. They should also have the capacity to monitor what is happening and to act effectively and quickly when negative impacts occur. There are a range of impacts that flow from decisions taken by people in the various areas where regulation applies. Regulation should be judged on how its outcome impacts on social, cultural and sustainability issues in society as well as on the economy. Implementing regulation with this as its central aim would certainly achieve better regulation for all. It would also ensure consistently better outcomes for consumers. Such an approach would have prevented the failure of the regulatory process in the current banking crisis.

We also believe that there should be solid and justifiable reasons for introducing regulation. It should not be introduced just to create choice/competition within the market. For example, to achieve competition in the electricity market the electricity regulator increased the price of electricity. While this may achieve competition we question the benefit to people. Furthermore assessment mechanisms should be established to allow an analysis of regulation pre and post its implementation. Central to such an assessment procedure should be an examination of its societal impacts. We also believe that, as part of the assessment procedure, inputs should be sought from interested parties including the community and voluntary sector.

A further important aspect is the need to consider the impact of regulation within the context of regional policy. Cross-subsidisation issues, in postal or electrical services, are important to retain equity between rural and urban dwellers. A further challenge for regulatory authorities must be to retain this inter-regional equity.

Regulation and regulatory law has profoundly failed Ireland in recent years. It should be framed in such a way as to ensure that it is effective, timely, accessible and interpretable. Currently regulatory law is complex and in many cases requires those being regulated to divert a considerable quantity of resources to keep up with it. Complex regulation will also make it difficult for interested parties to actively participate in the pre and post regulation assessment mechanisms. *Social Justice Ireland* believes it is important that where regulation has been judged to be a failure, government should reform it at the earliest opportunity.

Key Priorities for Public Services

- **Focus policy on ensuring that there is provision of, and access to, a level of public services regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally.**
- **Target funding strategies to ensure that far greater priority is given to providing an easy-access, affordable, integrated and high-quality public transport system. This should include adequate support for the Rural Transport Initiative which increases significantly the quality of life of those living in remote rural areas, particularly older people and women.**

- **Support the further development of library services throughout the country including provision of open-access information technology.**
- **Adopt policies to encourage financial institutions, such as the banks and the Post Office, to provide people with easy to access and affordable basic bank accounts and financial facilities.**
- **Give more in-depth consideration to how public funds are used to encourage sport and sporting activity. In many cases simple schemes to encourage participation and use of existing sports facilities are required; certainly these are currently lacking.**
- **Adopt further information-technology programmes to increase the skills of schoolchildren, early school-leavers, unemployed and older people.**
- **Take action to address the huge failures identified in the regulatory process as clearly identified by the crisis in banking and financial services. This process should ensure that all types of regulation are judged against how they impact on social, cultural and sustainability issues within society as well as on the economy. Implementing regulation with this balance as its central aim would achieve better regulation for all.**
- **Ensure equality of access across all public services.**