



Review of Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2004:

**A Response by
Citizens Advice
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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 REVIEW OF NORTHERN IRELAND MEASURES OF DEPRIVATION

Citizens Advice welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NISRA consultation Review. Citizens Advice recognises the concept of multiple deprivation and the value of having rigorous and robust measures to ensure effective targeting of resources to those most in need.

As indicated above CAB's services are very finely tuned to the targeting of social need via its caseload of 200,000 enquiries per year. Of these enquiries, 56% relate to social security. In addition the 28 offices are located across Northern Ireland, many of them in areas of social need.

2.1 Response to Questions

Citizens Advice will provide response to the sections which apply directly to our client base.

2.1.1 Domains

- Citizens Advice agrees with the seven domains proposed and accepts that they provide a comprehensive picture. However, by measuring deprived areas there is a danger that deprivation faced by isolated individuals will be missed. Often, pockets of deprivation exist but remain hidden in affluent areas. This situation existed in areas such as Taughmonagh, in south Belfast, and Short Strand or Tullycarnet in East Belfast.
- The introduction of a crime domain must be considered carefully and reflect the peculiarities of the local situation as a community emerging from 30 years of sectarian conflict. Crime cannot be considered without reflecting on the legacy of the conflict. Whilst recently research indicates a reduction in paramilitary activity, many communities still experience tension and a continuing threat of paramilitary violence. For many this continued tension can lead to mental anxiety. Often individuals can find it difficult to adjust to the new community circumstances that now exist as the period of conflict ends. Mental health issues present as individuals cope with new ways of life and deal with memories of past experiences.

2.2.Indicators

The criteria for inclusion in each domain are acceptable and will provide consistency.

2.2.1.Income Deprivation Domain

- The proposed indicators will reflect and illustrate those experiencing financial hardship as a key factor in deprivation. The indicators will capture those on a low wage and those availing of means tested benefits. It is important however, to note with caution that many do not avail of their entitlement and non-take up of benefits is a well documented issue that continues despite numerous agencies efforts to increase access and information. Therefore it can be assumed that many of those who do not receive their entitlement will be missing from these figures and are perhaps experiencing severe deprivation as a result.

- When considering other issues, Citizens Advice suggests that the Family Resources Survey should be made reliable below a Northern Ireland level. Non-take up of benefit is a crucial tool for highlighting failure of service delivery and targeting social need policy. Government departments, via the Family Resources Survey, can make available estimates of non-take up of benefit. These should be made available in order to provide a more accurate reflection of income deprivation.
- A further tool for identifying income deprivation would be achieved by considering issues of the National Minimum Wage. The Inland Revenue states that NI has received 7% of the total UK arrears (£1.3 million) already paid, whilst we only have 3% of the UK population. This would indicate that a widespread problem exists with a low wage economy and the figure may provide a general indicator of income deprivation. The Department of Trade and Industry have available statistics on the National Minimum Wage and estimate that each rate rise benefits over 60,000 individuals.
- The significant increase in consumer debt and an increasing number of individuals with benefit debt (Working Tax Credits in particular) presents a further area that could be measured to provide an indicator causing hardship for many individuals and that can have profound implications for those concerned, many of whom are often at risk of losing their home.

2.2.2. Employment Deprivation Domain

- Childcare costs can represent a significant outlay for parents seeking to combine work and raising a family. The availability, quality and cost of local provision can determine whether parents are able to combine these demands and remain in work. Despite the help with childcare costs through the Working Tax Credit, many on low incomes are just outside the levels eligible for support and these services are crucial therefore to enable them to remain in work. By measuring child care provision a profile can emerge that provides a more comprehensive correlation between employment levels, wage levels and levels of provision available. This may highlight barriers to employment in disadvantaged communities.
- The absence of an indicator that measures the financial resources of carers is significant. Citizens Advice would challenge the notion that carers are not 'involuntary' out of the labour market. Carers are often forced to make difficult choices and are forced to withdraw from the labour market in order to provide care. Carers make a significant economic contribution by the choices they make to provide informal care. This ultimately saves the government significant revenue as the care they provide would otherwise be funded by health and social services providers. Carers often experience significant reductions in income due to their responsibilities and consequently find themselves in a vulnerable and disadvantaged position. In addition, following a period of absence from the labour market carers find it more difficult to return to work if their circumstances change and may require assistance and support to retrain. The provision of unpaid care by individuals, has already been counted in the census and combined with statistics that indicate those in receipt of Carers Allowance a picture would emerge of their distribution throughout the population.
- Citizens Advice acknowledges the challenges of measuring those who are unemployed and the complexity of the range of measurement tools and recognises that it is impossible to measure all involuntary exclusion from the workforce in a consistent way

2.2.3. Health and Disability

- Citizens Advice questions the inclusion of prescribing patterns to measure individuals suffering from mood and anxiety disorders. It is questionable if this is an accurate measure as mood altering prescriptions can be given to treat a range of conditions not linked to mood and anxiety disorders and do not necessarily reflect health status with regard to mood or anxiety disorders. In addition, the reliability and uniformity of GP prescribing patterns could potentially compromise this data as a useful tool. Citizens Advice proposes that capturing available data regarding admissions to Mental Health hospitals, both voluntary and those under the Mental Health Order and mapping it by post code would provide a reliable indicator of health deprivation. As already stated, as our society emerges from conflict it is important to capture the increase in anxiety that has resulted and the mental health issues that are becoming apparent within communities.
- A measurement of the emergency ward admissions is restrictive in reflecting levels of deprivation. A hospital located in close proximity to sports facilities may be used by local grammar schools and have an increased number of sports injuries at the weekend, that does not reflect deprivation. A more accurate measurement may be the postcode of admissions, identifying areas at high risk of accidents. As the reduction of household accidents is a target of 'Investing for Health' strategy and a recognised measure for health inequalities it is reasonable to include an accurate figure of accidents in the home as a multiple deprivation measure.
- As many long term ill and disabled do not qualify for Incapacity Benefit, Citizens Advice would recommend that data available from the DSD regarding those registered for receiving 'credits' only due to incapacity would provide a clearer picture of the extent of illness and disability.
- Citizens Advice advocates the inclusion of a dental measure that reflects the level of dental decay in child. Dental records serve as a good predictor of health risk in the young and are an agreed tool for predicting future health status in adulthood. By failing to include a figure that reflects dental health, Citizens Advice suggests an opportunity will be missed to capture broader health determinants that indicate economic and social deprivation.

2.2.4. Education, Skill and Training Deprivation Domain

- The indicators proposed provide a comprehensive review of recognised, measurable indicators. Citizens Advice supports the value of measuring the proportions of children of year 11 and 12 who enter grammar schools. In addition Citizens Advice would suggest that data outlining success rates at 11+, by post code, would provide a further means of highlighting education deprivation
- Citizens Advice recommends that a measure of school exclusions by postcode would assist in identifying those at risk of educational underachievement.

2.2.5. Geographical Access to Services Domain

- The proposed indicator whilst relevant to access to necessary services fails to take account of the unique circumstance of Northern Ireland which has many small communities divided by peace lines and territorial boundaries. The road distance measure is therefore limited in its ability to substantially reflect some of the access difficulties in many areas most adversely effected by the 'troubles'

- Citizens Advice does not agree that all three transport measures are standardised and combined to form one indicator. Citizens Advice contests that 'the use of a car is not such an issue in urban areas where services are close by and public transport is usually satisfactory.' Within NI there is still a sizable minority of households which do not have access to a car who rely wholly on public transport and taxi provision. Car ownership in NI still lags behind Great Britain, with 307 cars per 1000 of the population, compared with 368 per 1000 in Great Britain and as consequence, improvements in public transport are essential if a cross section of communities are to benefit. We question the assertion that 'public transport' is usually satisfactory and consider that the Government's overt commitment to a transport strategy based on the private car and an underinvestment in rail is socially regressive.
- In addition to road distances to services, Citizens Advice therefore, advocates that a measure of public transport services available, in terms of choice and frequency of service, is important. This lack of private transport in disadvantaged communities places an increased reliance on public transport provision. It is essential that a reliable, quality service is made available to ensure communities can access, education, employment and services at a reasonable cost.

2.2.6.Living Environment Domain

- Citizens Advice supports the use of the local area problem score to indicate the negative aspects that exist in communities. However, access to services such as play areas and leisure provision offers a profile of the social infrastructure of an area and would provide a reliable indicator of deprivation, within the physical environment sub-domain. By mapping the availability of such provision, gaps in provision would be evident.
- Citizens Advice suggest that the number presenting as homeless to the NIHE would be a more favourable measure to use, than those accepted as homeless, in light of the criteria of 'ineligible for assistance' that now exists in legislation. Recent reports indicate the shortage of social housing is now at a crisis level, with an estimated 27,000 people seeking to be housed. Citizens Advice supports the inclusion of any available voluntary organisation statistics that could provide a comprehensive pattern of homelessness throughout NI.

2.2.7.Crime

- The legacy of the conflict must be considered in this domain to provide an accurate reflection on how the troubles have impacted those neighbourhoods that have experienced the most sectarian violence. A legacy of mental health issues is beginning to emerge relating to anxiety, stress and depression, as people adjust to the new situations within communities.
- Citizens Advice suggests that reported racist homophobic and domestic violence incidents should also be included.

2.3.Weighting

- The complexities of the weighting formula and the technicalities of statistical data are evident in this comprehensive review. Citizens Advice would favour the weighting formula, option B. The multifaceted nature of deprivation would be most fairly represented by this option.
- Citizens Advice believes that it is imperative any empirical weighting is objective to avoid inter community conflict. A sound objective, evidence base will ensure that future allocations of funding are fair and equitable.
- In parallel to the review and publication of the new measures, Citizens Advice would welcome the development of an education training/workshop programme to equip all sectors, (statutory voluntary community and funders) to correctly use the data and ensure the figures are being interpreted and utilised correctly.

2.4. Geography

- Consideration of the rural and urban dimension of Northern Ireland must be made explicit in the final measures.
- Citizens Advice agrees that the redefinition of the boundaries was essential to ensure the Measures are constructed on the smallest practicable spatial scale.
- Measures based on the 1992 administrative boundaries are supported.
- The new super output areas are important given the changes in District Council boundaries with the Review in Public Administration.

3. CONCLUSION

Citizens Advice supports the provision of reliable measures of deprivation which inform those determining the provision of services and the allocation of resources. Robust figures are essential if future action to address deprivation is to be effective. The figures also serve to identify those neighbourhoods and groups at risk of falling into deprivation and allow early prevention strategies to be implemented.

Citizens Advice advocates the adoption of option B for weights. Consideration must be given to the rural and urban weighting to adequately reflect the different circumstances.

The measures will be most effective for the future if they are agreed on a sound basis of consultation and the involvement of those who have first hand experience of living with deprivation. Citizens Advice acknowledges there are numerous ways to combine and interpret the information and believes the measures will be most valuable if all those access them have a clear understanding of how to use them effectively.

Citizens Advice is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the NISRA review, and looks forward to following the progress of the proposals outlined.

Appendix

Partnerships

Inland Revenue Citizens Advice is under contract to manage the National Minimum Wage Helpline for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Citizens Advice is under contract to provide money advice to NIHE tenants across Northern Ireland who are in arrears with rent.

Northern Ireland Electricity. Citizens Advice is under contract to promote NIE Codes of Practice and to provide statistical information to NIE on electricity queries dealt with by the CAB network.

Police Ombudsman. Citizens Advice is contracted to provide the Police Ombudsman's office with neutral local venues in which interviews with the public can take place.

Grant Thornton Accountants. Grant Thornton provides some financial support to Citizens Advice on an annual basis together with occasional training on aspects of insolvency.

Comhairle. Comhairle is a major statutory agency in the Republic of Ireland which also supports a network of advice centres. It is our partner under Peace II funding in an innovative cross border advice and information project which aligns with the North South Ministerial Council Report "Obstacles to Mobility".

Northern Bank. Three year sponsorship for work on financial literacy. This project has successfully placed financial literacy materials for young people, in the Northern Ireland G.C.S.E curriculum from September 2003. This is the first initiative of its kind in the UK

South East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust (SEBHSST). Strategic partnership linked to the Trust's construction of 3 Community Care and Treatment Centres within its area of responsibility. Citizens Advice has responded to the Trust's invitation to provide an advice and information service in each of the centres, linked to assisted internet access.

Health Promotion Agency and National Energy Action NI. Citizens Advice has been invited to join a steering group that will pilot a project that aims to raise awareness and develop resources to assist people experiencing fuel poverty. The project has been developed by the Health Promotion Agency Northern Ireland and National Energy Action NI and will focus on raising awareness of the links between fuel poverty and health amongst primary health care professionals.

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