SIS – Developing a National Profile of Irish Community Need

SIS is a computerised information system which collects data on users’ of Irish welfare services; personal details, inequality issues and services provided. In operation since 1994, SIS is probably the best barometer of welfare need on the Irish community in contemporary Britain. SIS plays an important role:

- As a monitoring tool for different agencies
- Collective data offers an understanding of the Irish community’s needs
- Highlights gaps in service provision

SIS is managed and developed by the Action Group for Irish Youth and the Federation of Irish Societies.

Action Group for Irish Youth
‘Promoting Irish Inclusion; tackling Irish exclusion’

The Action Group for Irish Youth (AGIY) is a registered charity which aims to promote an improved quality of life and equal life chances through the provision of high quality information, policy development and action research.

Federation of Irish Societies

The Federation of Irish Societies exists to promote the interests and welfare of the Irish community in Britain through the media of culture, welfare, education and youth activities. Through its Community Care Committee and its Development Co-ordinator it aims to co-ordinate the work of front-line services within the voluntary sector in Britain, to assist them in enhancing the quality of their services, and to raise awareness of the needs of the Irish community throughout the British statutory and voluntary sectors.

The SIS Management Group are: Brian McCarthy, Dónal McKinney and Sarah Morgan (Action Group for Irish Youth). Séan Hutton, Sister Joan Kane (Federation of Irish Societies).

The SIS Management would like to thank all who gave their time and support to the research, in particular participating agencies, and the workers who recorded the information. We thank the Dion Committee (Irish Government), the Irish Youth Foundation and the Ireland Funds for Great Britain for supporting the development of SIS.

Special thanks to Ute Kowarzik for compiling this report and Laurie Davidson, the SIS Programmer.

SIS Reports include:

2. Irish Community Services – Meeting Diverse Needs (1997)
Introduction

This report outlines the services provided by Irish agencies participating in the Standardised Information System (SIS) for the period January 1998 to December 1998. This summary of the SIS data aims to illustrate two aspects of SIS usefulness:

- SIS has proved to be an effective monitoring tool for agencies
- SIS has highlighted issues facing Irish service users and those providing services

A recent evaluation of the SIS (September 1999) confirmed that agencies have been able to use SIS data for management reports, applications to funders and the monitoring of service provision.

‘Enables us to recognise trends in user profile, demands for particular services, ensuring we meet our target’
(London Irish Women’s Centre)

‘It has been useful for research purposes’
(Haringey Irish Cultural and Community Centre)

In the context of a changing welfare benefit system and housing market the SIS data has identified some of the effects this has had on Irish people. This has alerted agencies to growing service needs as well as providing essential evidence to argue with statutory providers for adequate responses towards Irish people’s right to benefits and services. Information supporting advocacy and campaigning work is ‘hidden’ in the SIS data – ‘hidden’ because as with any quantitative data set it draws attention to an issue, but does not necessarily show processes in operation nor the actual experience of people concerned. This can only be brought alive by the case study materials held and shared by agencies. It is this process of sharing information, which enhances SIS potential for highlighting problems. The possibility of identifying changing service needs and outcomes as well as reiterating continuing problems faced by Irish people constitute the value of SIS data.

Who are the Service Users in 1998?

Together participating agencies offered their services to over 4,000 individuals who visited an Irish agency at least once in 1998. Some 60% of these users came for the first time, the remainder had previous contact with the agency. About 40% returned subsequently to get further assistance with the same or other issues. Many of the users participated in group activities organised by agencies. However, these figures do not reflect the totality of services provided. The recent evaluation suggests that SIS captures about 80% of agencies’ service provisions. This means some of the services provided to users such as ringing or dropping in for information or help will not be reflected in the SIS data.

What are the characteristics of Irish service users? Services provided are accessible to the wider community, however 87% of users describe themselves as Irish or Irish Travellers, which is the group we focus on in this report. We can say something about their age and gender, their sexual orientation, how long they have been living in Britain and where they find themselves in the labour and housing market. Irish service users described here are part of a larger Irish community in Britain, yet only those who come to agencies for advice and support are included in the analysis. They have expressed needs for services that may not be available or accessible in any other way. These needs mirror changes in their lives and the environment in which they face day to day experiences and pressures.

Irish users include the young as well as the ageing Irish population. Most users captured by the SIS data live in London, a smaller proportion live in the North West of England, while others are just visiting Britain when contacting agencies. The majority coming to the agencies for the first time fall into the middle 25 to 44 aged group, some 40% of users; they may be actively involved in the labour market, experience a spell of unemployment or care for children or older people in the home. Then there are those in the 45 to 64 age bracket making up 26% of users. The older 65 plus group as well as the under 25 age group represent 17% of users each. Slightly more men (54%) than women (46%) come for help.
Many are single (52%) with some 23% of users with children describing their status as single parent.

The SIS data suggests that the proportion of the 65 plus age group has been increasing since 1994, when SIS first started, while the under 25 age group tends to fluctuate in the uptake of services. The increase of older service users may partly be explained by the growing number of users participating in activities aimed at older Irish people including luncheon clubs. However, they are also the users who are more likely to be affected by the changes in the welfare benefit system, often with devastating results such as withdrawal of incapacity or housing benefits.

**Chart 1: Length of time in GB**

The changes reflected in the age pattern are also visible in the figures describing the length of time Irish users have lived in Britain. There is a considerable shift towards service users from the longer established community. Over half of the users - 51% compared with the previous 47% - have been living in Britain for over 10 years, another 10% have lived in Britain all their lives. Together these two groups form 61% of service users compared with 57% in the previous year showing an increasing trend towards users who have settled in Britain for a considerable time or indeed have been born here. However, this is not to ignore the fact that some 21% of users arrived in the previous six months or were just visiting at the point of interview, a figure that changed little over the previous year. This suggests a continuing flow of Irish people arriving or visiting Britain who require assistance and support.

**What are the experiences?**

We can use the SIS data to describe Irish users’ experiences in terms of their employment and housing status and have access to data which tells us something about the inequalities they face.

**Employment**

A large proportion, that is 45%, describe themselves as unemployed, a description more likely to be used by men than women; some 12% are in paid work or on training schemes, another 9% are full-time at home or describe themselves as carers, a description predominately used by women. 16% of users are retired and some 15% are long-term sick. Both the retired group and the long term sick have increased proportionally over the previous year. While the increase in the retired group mirrors the rise in the over 65 age group, the rise in the long term sick group is likely to reflect the support needs required by those struggling to retain their entitlement to welfare benefits as indicated below in reference to the ‘All Work Test’ (see health section).

**Housing**

Homelessness is a situation faced by 24% of users, the majority (70%) being men; another 6% of users live in B&B places. Others have tenancies with local authorities (23%), are in private (19%) or housing association accommodation (8%). Some 9% live in owner occupied housing and 1% of users live in caravans or mobile homes. The noticeable shift towards homelessness and the reduction in the proportion of users living in private tenancies over the previous year can be explained by changes in the housing market or, more precisely, in the housing benefit system affecting private tenancies.

As the changed housing benefit rules (1996/97) affecting private tenancies require tenants to meet a proportion of the rent, many, in particular those on income support or other state benefits, find it impossible to pay this difference. The increased demand for private accommodation means landlords manage to attract tenants, who can afford higher rents; some terminate tenancies with those who can’t meet the housing costs, who have few
Responding to Change

housing options but to face homelessness. The housing market is such that opportunistic landlords have greater choice, and in some cases it means offering accommodation to asylum seekers whose housing costs are met in total by social services leaving those who can’t afford market rents in a precarious situation.

The more recent changes in October 1999 introduced a range of measures described as ‘verification framework’, which applies more stringent checks on claimants’ identity before either housing or council tax benefits are being issued. For Irish people entitled to benefits, providing evidence of their identification has long been an issue, amounting at times to discrimination. Many Irish claimants were asked to present original identification documents such as birth certificates, which for some meant obtaining relevant documents from Ireland with subsequent delays in obtaining benefits. Such evidence of identification is now required of all claimants regardless of their ethnic origin alongside proof of residency, earnings, other income and capital, and is only accepted if original documents are presented. The new verification procedure often leads to long delays in receiving benefits which in some local authorities is aggravated by an inefficient processing system.

The proportion of women experiencing domestic violence is 11%, a figure that has been constant over the past years of SIS data collection. Support for women has increased amongst Irish service providers, for example Sólás Anois services. This has increased women’s choices, but it has not stopped violence against women. The SIS data itself may not reflect the true extent of the domestic violence experienced, but draws attention to the fact that domestic violence remains a serious issue.

While racial harassment is experienced by both women and men with 4% of Irish users reporting having been racially harassed, the SIS data suggests that police harassment although continuing, is declining; still 2% of men report facing police or PTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) harassment.

Another form of harassment that is being reported frequently is harassment from neighbours; 4% of Irish users experience neighbour harassment. This is an example where SIS data needs to be substantiated by agencies’ case material. An incident
of harassment from neighbours may be racially motivated reflecting the often indirect discrimination faced by Irish people. SIS data together with agencies’ case material strengthens decisive action.

Brian approached the agency in June 1999 and reported that his wife had been arrested for an assault on a neighbour. The couple had been known to the service for a few years. Following a discussion with Brian it emerged that the couple had been experiencing racial harassment from their neighbours for some time. Social services had been brought in to mediate between the neighbours without success. Both families had brought complaints to the housing association and police about each other. The advice worker immediately wrote to the housing officer at the housing association and it was agreed that independent mediators would be brought in to attempt to resolve the situation. Subsequently, the couple completed a housing transfer application on medical grounds with the help of the advice worker. The racial harassment issue and its impact on health were stressed on the form. In October 1999 the housing transfer application was accepted and the couple are currently awaiting rehousing.

Another area of harassment SIS captures relates to homophobia affecting many gay men and lesbians in their daily lives. The SIS data suggests that 24% of the gay population in the sample faced homophobic harassment. However, the non disclosure of users’ sexuality by some 11% tends to weaken the data on this important equality issues.

Health

SIS recording of health data has helped to identify the extent to which Irish users are affected by health issues: people report physical disabilities, mental health issues, alcohol and/or drug use and other limiting physical health problems. Some 41% of users have some health concerns. Physical health problems that limit people’s activity was mentioned by 18% of users, a proportion that has increased over the previous year. Mental health was an issue for 17% of users; 10% of users reported alcohol misuse, more likely to be mentioned by men (13%) than women (4%). It should be noted that disclosure of health information is voluntary and therefore SIS data may undercount some health issues. For example, agencies report that service use of alcohol users has been fairly constant, yet the SIS data showed a decline over the previous year. Thus, the input of agencies in clarifying SIS data is vital in measuring the changes that take place.

The increase in reported physical ill health compared with the previous year partly reflects the greater number of users affected by changes in the welfare benefit system. The government’s ‘New Deal’ policy aimed at encouraging people into the labour market seems to put pressure on those with serious physical health problems resulting in withdrawal of benefit entitlement for some. The effects of the ‘All Work Test’ conducted under the new deal scheme has resulted in inadequate assessment of individuals’ ability to work with the consequence of a cut in benefits as the following case of an incapacity benefit appeal illustrates.
John, a vulnerable man with a number of physical and mental health problems, approached the advice service in June 1999 requesting representation at an Incapacity Benefit Appeal at the independent tribunal in 5 days time. The advice worker suggested applying for a postponement in order to gather medical evidence and prepare for the case. John agreed and the request was granted. The advice worker gathered medical information from John’s Hospital Consultant and also his GP. The GP’s letter had to be completed a second time due to insufficient information. The advice worker represented John at his appeal in July 1999. The appeal was won and John’s benefit reinstated.

What kind of advice and support is needed?

SIS data distinguishes between advice, service support and material support to enable us to analyse the multiple service needs of Irish users. The service support category in particular reflects services specific to Irish agencies and includes help with repatriation, identification issues, counselling and group support.

As suggested in previous reports advice on welfare benefits, housing and health remain the most important areas of advice, making up 78% of all advice given. However, the trend towards increased welfare benefit advice is continuing with 36% of all advice relating to this category, an increase, which is more visible amongst women. 28% of advice relates to housing issues, in most cases users seeking accommodation, but also advice on problems experienced with private landlords or neighbours. This represents an increase over the previous year especially amongst advice given to women. Advice on health issues makes up 15% of advice including issues concerning mental health.

Welfare benefit advice

As some 27% of users come for advice on welfare benefit issues, it is useful to look more closely at the benefit queries. The largest single category amongst welfare benefit advice relates to general welfare rights and income support. 18% and 17% of welfare benefit advice relates to these two categories respectively. Housing benefit enquiries and queries on disability allowance make up 12% each. This is followed by advice on the social fund and incapacity benefit with 7% each. The ‘other’ benefit category, which makes up 27% includes advice on council tax, job seekers allowance, child benefit and others.
Amongst the support services the group support is the largest single category with 75% of support relating to group activities. This should not deflect from the fact that repatriation and identification issues as well as counselling services remain important areas of support. The identification issue which has been highlighted in previous SIS reports as another form of indirect discrimination against Irish people, appears to be receding; however recently it has become a renewed issue of concern. The changes in welfare benefit resulted in offices requesting identification documentation as a rule. For Irish people this may mean requesting documentation from Ireland for which they receive help from Irish service providers. The proportion of users coming for identification service support is 3% rising to 5% for men.

Concluding Comment

This report briefly outlines some of the issues arising from SIS data and highlights the need for continued and consistent data collection. Both the changes involved in the ‘All Work Test’ and those relating to the housing benefit system make increased demands on the advocacy services of front line agencies as reflected by the SIS data. However, there are some groups amongst service users, which are not adequately represented in this report because of the weakness in the data. For example, Irish gay men and lesbians are under represented in SIS despite evidence of continuing inequality experienced. It may assist data collection, if agencies create an environment where users feel comfortable about disclosing personal information such as their sexual orientation. In this way data on equality issues could be highlighted more effectively and service support be developed more appropriately.

Another group exposed to harassment and discrimination are Irish Travellers who make up 7% of service users in the 1998 SIS. While SIS data can distinguish Irish Travellers from other service users, data input on this section of the community needs strengthening. For example, there is concern about the extent of disability and ill health in the Irish Travelling community. Haringey Irish Community Care Centre reports the higher proportion of people with a disability amongst Irish Travellers in Haringey who do not receive the support from mainstream services. Improved data collection could highlight such shortcoming in service provisions, an aspect that needs developing.

Agencies participating in SIS have the opportunity to draw on a wider data set in supporting their arguments with other service providers and policy makers. The regular update of SIS statistics on service needs and provisions has contributed to current discussions on the economic and social conditions and in particular inequality issues affecting Irish people in Britain. This potential of SIS can be further developed and enhance the debate on issues important to the Irish community in Britain.
Appendix

Thanks for the cooperation which agencies participating in SIS have shown in providing information and case study materials for this report.

List of agencies represented in the SIS report:

- Haringey Irish Community Care Centre
- Haringey Irish Cultural and Community Centre
- Irish Community Care Manchester
- Irish in Greenwich Project
- Irish Support and Advice Centre (Hammersmith)
- London Irish Centre
- London Irish Women’s Centre

Current SIS users also include:

- An Teach Housing Association
- BIAS (Brent Irish Advisory Service)
- BIAS Travellers’ Project
- Brent Community Alcohol Project (Arlington Care Association)
- Cairde na nGael
- Cara Irish Housing Association
- Cricklewood Homeless Concern
- Irish Community Care Merseyside
- Job Powerhouse
- Leeds Irish Health and Homes
- Lewisham Irish Community Centre
This report illustrates the continuing necessity of data collection on the service needs of the Irish community. Based on 1998 SIS (Standardised Information System) data, the report reflects changes in the welfare benefit system and housing market – evaluating their impact on Irish agencies and their service users.

Homelessness, threat of benefit cuts and anti-Irish harassment are issues for which many seek assistance, advice and advocacy. The data shows that Irish agencies provide the support needed and delineates the changing context in which they have to work.

*Irish Service Needs – Responding to Change* provides an up-date on services provided by Irish agencies and demonstrates that SIS data is a much needed monitoring tool; contributing to important debates on issues of concern for the Irish community in Britain.