Perceptions of the General Public on Guidance and Guidance Services

Consultative Process Report
Executive Summary

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GUIDANCE FOR LIFE

An Integrated Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland

2007 National Guidance Forum Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The National Guidance Forum was set up in April 2004 by the Minister for Education and Science and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to enable lifelong and lifewide guidance to become a reality through a seamless continuum of service provision by the various providers. It was chaired by Professor Joyce O'Connor and was composed of 33 members with representation from guidance policy makers, guidance practitioners in the education and labour market sectors, trainers of guidance counsellors, employers, trade unions, education managers, parents and consumers.

The NGF's agreed definition of guidance is that it:

> *Refers to the process of facilitating individuals or groups at any point throughout their lives to develop their capacity for the self-management of their personal, social, educational, training, occupational and life choices in order to grow towards their potential and thereby to contribute to the development of a better society.* (National Guidance Forum, 2005, p.4)

The Forum was managed by a steering group and undertook to engage in the following four tasks:

1. To set up a consultative process accessing the views of the general public on guidance.
2. To produce a scoping paper, containing the historical context of guidance in Ireland as well as the views of the stakeholders.
3. To identify the competencies required for guidance provision.
4. To set out the steps needed to ensure quality assurance in guidance.

This executive summary provides a brief overview of the consultative process along with a summary of its key findings and recommendations. A review of guidance in second level schools was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science in 2003. In order that this consultative process would complement rather than replicate that work, the decision was taken not to specifically include second level schools or parents of second level students in this consultative process. At the time of this study the Report was with the Minister for Education and Science. Therefore it was not possible to incorporate its findings in this report, but it is recommended that the two reports are read in conjunction with each other.

The report of another recent study into the availability and dissemination of careers information, carried out on behalf of the Expert Group in Future Skills Needs, was also not available at the time of the completion of the consultative process of the National Guidance Forum and is also recommended as complementary to this report.

Summary of the Key Points which Emerged from the Literature

» Guidance has contributed to Ireland becoming a knowledge economy (IDA, 2006);

» Guidance also has an important role to play in helping people cope with the rapid changes in Irish society (e.g. O'Neill, 2005);

» Definitions of guidance are broad and include the following activities: counselling, assessment, information, advice, and personal and social development programmes (e.g. Wannan & McCarthy, 2005; National Guidance Forum 2004, NCGE, 2004);

» There is wide recognition of guidance's key role in:

 (1) Promoting lifelong learning (e.g. Sultana, 2004a; Ireland, 2000a; McNamara, 1998);

 (2) Strengthening the labour market (Sultana, 2004a);

 (3) Developing society as well as the economy (e.g. Jarvis 2005; Unwin 2004; Wannan & Stavrou, 2004; Watts 2004; Watts & Sultana, 2004);

» Guidance is seen as a human rights issue (Sultana, 2004b);

» The Irish guidance counselling service in second level schools has been described as tending to be a 'compromise between the American model which emphasises personal counselling and the European model which almost exclusively focuses on the narrower concept of career guidance' (Ryan, 1993, p.63).;

» The Department of Education and Science (2005) noted that:

> The guidance and counselling process aims to help students to develop an awareness and acceptance of their talents and abilities; to explore possibilities and opportunities; to grow in independence and to take responsibility for themselves; to make informed choices about their lives and to follow through on these choices (p.5);

» The review of guidance in second level schools in Ireland has recently been carried out and that report has been presented to the Minster for Education and Science. As it was not available at the time of this report being completed, it is recommended as complementary reading to this report;

» The provision of guidance is a statutory requirement for schools under the 1998 Education Act. The Department of Education and Science (2005) have published guidelines for second level schools on the implications of Section 9(c) of the Act, relating to students' access to appropriate guidance;

» The 1998 report on 'Perceived Needs for Guidance, Counselling and Psychological Services in VEC Youthreach Centres, Community Training Workshops and Senior Traveller Centres' highlighted the need for training in guidance for all staff (NCGE, 2006);

» Many parents felt that the career guidance provision for their children was inadequate (NCGE, 1997);

» Gordon (2004) researched the particular needs of Travellers attending Youthreach/Senior Traveller Community Centres for Education and highlighted the factors affecting young people's access of supports (Gordon, 2004);

» Important differences exist between school and adult guidance (e.g. Brown, 2004; Clayton et al., 1999; Sampson et al., 1999);

» There have been developments in adult guidance provision following the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education (Ireland, 2000a), e.g. the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative;

» A recent report on students' perceptions of the careers service available in one Irish university (GTI, 2006) found that 42% of respondents reported never having used the service, in person or online. Reasons for this included the students not knowing it existed, thinking they did not need it at that time, and thinking that they did not need it at all. Recommendations included increased advertising and marketing;

» The GTI report (2006) found that students who used the services most were students who were motivated and successful and that despite advances in information technology the majority of respondents preferred to visit the careers service in person to access certain services;

» The results of the OECD survey showed that career guidance for adults within the EU and across Europe is narrowly focused on the unemployed (Sultana, 2004);

» There have been several important National and European policy documents on guidance e.g. the National Employment Action Plan, the National Development Plan (2000-2006), the FÁS Action Plan (1999), and the National Adult Learning Council (2002); 'The Lisbon Agreement' (2000); 'Increasing Labour Force Participation and Promoting Active Ageing' (2002), and 'The Paris 2001 Declaration on Educational, Vocational Guidance' (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005; McCarthy, 2002).;

» There are several European programmes in place to develop and strengthen guidance services including the European Employment Services (EURES) and Ploteus.

» Three key policy reviews of guidance have been recently carried out by the OECD (2004), the World Bank (Watts & Fretwell, 2004) and the European Union (Sultana, 2004);

» The Resolution adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Union on 'Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices in the field of Guidance throughout life' highlighted the need for the development of high quality guidance provision for all European citizens, accessible at all stages of their lives to enable them to manage their learning and work pathways and the transitions therein (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005);

» While it is recognised in Europe that there are not enough well trained guidance practitioners to meet demand (OECD, 2004), Ireland has been commended on the emphasis it places on improving qualifications and the training of guidance practitioners (Sultana, 2004);

» Key issues in guidance include:

  » Identifying client need (Clayton, 2000);

  » Making services flexible and responsive to client need (Whittaker et al 2004; Turner & McGill, 2002; Sampson, Palmer & Watts, 1999);

  » The willingness or otherwise of the individual to engage with formal guidance services (Gordon, 2004; Sultana, 2004; Turner & McGill, 2002);

  » Quality assurance in guidance (Plant, 2001);

  » Integrating career information and guidance at local level (Bezanson & Kellett, 2001);

» The changing nature of work has major implications for guidance policy and practice (Jarvis, 2005);

» ICT is seen as having a vital role in an integrated career information and guidance system (Watts, 2001);

» The potential contribution of parents remains untapped and that of employers is not broadly recognised and often under utilised (Bezanson & Kellett, 2001). Parents have the most influence, directly or indirectly on the choices made by young people (NCGE, 1997);

» Guidance was a major theme of Ireland's presidency of the European Commission in 2004, culminating with Minister Dempsey's announcement of setting up of the National Guidance Forum during the conference 'Life-long Guidance: Harmonising Policy and Practice';

» 'We are not living in an information age, but in an information dump, therefore we need to provide high quality information and help people to develop the skills to use it' (Sultana, 2004, p.4);

» An International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP) was established in 2005 as a resource for policy developers and researchers, in association with social partners and guidance practitioners, to improve career development systems that support lifelong learning and workforce development goals (The Guidance Council, 2006);

» Irish and European policy developments in guidance have often overlapped and it is significant that John McCarthy was detached by the Irish Department of Education and Science to establish the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP);

» Career information, guidance and counselling services in Ireland were described as 'diverse, with long-standing services sitting alongside recent initiatives and experimentation' (OECD, 2002, p.2);

» This report noted that there was a:

  Strong core of committed guidance professionals in Ireland and that they were supported by an extensive framework for service delivery, by a national infrastructure for training and by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (OECD, 2002, p.3);

» The OECD (2002) recognised the National Resource Centres for Vocational Guidance, of which there are two in Ireland, one in the National Centre for Guidance in Education, and one in FÁS, help to promote a European dimension to guidance;

» Wannan & McCarthy (2005) raised questions regarding service users, for example:

  » Is the empowerment of users a stated objective of the guidance services or is it implicit?

  » Do users tend to be treated as active collaborators in formulating their career goals and plans, or more as passive recipients of guidance services?

  » To what extent do guidance services work through and with significant factors in the lives of users and actively involve users in this process? (Wannan & McCarthy, 2005, p.15).

» Wannan & McCarthy (2005) highlighted how quality assurance systems for career guidance should ensure that 'individual users are regularly consulted on their satisfaction with and experience of the service' (p.18);

» In the recent report 'School Matters. The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools' (Department of Education and Science, 2006), the members described the changing social context in which schools operate, institutional developments, the issue of disruptive behaviour and how it impacts upon teaching and learning as well as school ethos and community, as well as making recommendations to improve the current situation. The essential role of parents was emphasised as well as the necessity of providing additional supports for teachers and strengthening links with support services such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Methodology

The consultative process subcommittee's brief was:

To undertake a consultative process with the public so that the experience of the public of guidance and their recommendations will inform the Forum's recommendations for how all gaps identified by the OECD can be addressed. (NCGE, 2006, p.34)

The consultative process was carried out in two phases and was discussed in the context of a detailed review of the literature on guidance.

Summary Details of Phase One

Following meetings of the National Guidance Forum and of the consultative process subcommittee, discussions, emails and two pilot studies between June 1st and September 1st 2005, it was agreed to seek the views of as wide a range of service users and non-users, on guidance services in Ireland. A targeted approach was employed to distributing the questionnaires, which involved members of the National Guidance Forum actively assisting in distributing questionnaires to individuals within their organisations as well as among the general public, while assisting those with literacy difficulties to complete the questionnaire.

Members also contacted organisations and voluntary bodies they were associated with to inform them of the consultative process and to invite them to complete the questionnaire on the Forum website. In addition a press release was issued by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). 56 libraries were contacted by email to inform them of the consultative process and invite them to distribute questionnaires to library users. Twelve organisations were selected at random from the NCGE Database of Guidance and Support Services for Young People which is available on www.ncge.ie and invited to distribute questionnaires to their service users. A total of 635 completed questionnaires were returned by the 31st of December, 2005.

Almost two thirds of respondents were female and the vast majority of the total group (88%) were Irish nationals. 45% of people who completed the questionnaire were aged between the ages of 16 and 30 inclusive, 51% were between the ages of 31 and 60 exclusive while 4% of people were 61 and over. Just over half of the sample, 54% lived in a city or large town, with 46% living in a rural area or small town. 54% of the people who completed the questionnaire described themselves as employed, 25% were students, 6% worked in the home, 4% were unemployed, 9% were on a training course, 2% were retired and less than 1% received a disability allowance.

Participants' occupations were classified according to the system used by the Central Statistics Office in the 2002 census (Ireland, 2003). The majority of people who described their occupation, 48%, belonged to the Managerial and Technical grouping, with 6% Professional Workers, 18% Non-Manual, 9% were Skilled Manual, 8% semi-skilled, and 5% unskilled. The 6% who were coded as 'Other' were respondents who described themselves as working in the home. It is important to note however that 34% of the total sample of 635 people did not answer the question on occupation.

Summary Details of Phase Two

Phase Two involved focus groups with seven targeted groups, i.e. people who are not Irish nationals, early school leavers, people who are unemployed or who are receiving a low income, people with physical and/or learning disabilities, parents of preschool and primary school children, adults with literacy difficulties and people who were aged 60 years and over.

61% of the participants of the focus groups were female and 88% of them were Irish nationals. The category 'other' includes people from the rest of Europe, Africa and South America. 31% of those who participated in the focus groups were aged between 15 years and 30 years inclusive, 48% were aged between 31 and 50 years inclusive and 21% were aged 61 years or over. 60% of the focus group participants left school between sixteen and eighteen years, 30% left before the age of sixteen and 10% left after the age of eighteen. 58% of participants live in a city or large town with 42% living in a small town or rural area. In response to the question 'What is your current situation?', 4.5% of the people who attended the focus groups described themselves as students, 3% answered that they were working in the home, 22% were employed, 6% were unemployed, 21% were on a training course, 23% were received disability allowance and/or attending a sheltered workshop and 21% were retired. 27 people (37.5% of the total) described their occupation.

These were classified according to the social class and occupation list used in the 2002 Census (Ireland, 2003). 4% of people in the focus group sample were professional workers, 26% were managerial and technical, 22% non-manual, 30% semi-skilled and 4% non-skilled. 27% of people reported their highest level of qualification as being either the Primary Certificate or no qualification, 33% had the Group, Intermediate or Junior Certificate, 15% had completed the Leaving Certificate, and 19% had obtained either further training, certificates or diplomas while 6% had received third level degrees.

Summary of Results of Phase One of the Consultative Process

The questionnaire designed in Phase One was intended to elicit respondents' knowledge, experience and opinion of guidance services in Ireland, as well as recommendations for how guidance services might be improved. It was distributed in several ways to a wide range of the general public. 635 people returned completed questionnaires and details of their results are contained in Chapter Four and are discussed in Chapter Six of the Consultative Process Report. Some of the findings which emerged from Phase One are presented below; however, it is emphasised that these points must be read in the context of the report as a whole, rather than taken in isolation.

» Over a third of respondents were 'positive' or 'very positive' about guidance services, with one sixth describing themselves as being 'negative' or 'very negative' about guidance services;

» 65% of the sample said that guidance was available while they were in school and 84% of those availed of it;

» This guidance was predominantly associated with decisions regarding college and careers;

» 56% of the total sample answered the question 'How helpful was guidance in school' and of these 43% said it had been 'very helpful' or 'helpful' while 26% described it as 'very unhelpful' or 'unhelpful';

» Many people gave detailed comments on their experiences of guidance in school which focused on a range of issues such as their experience of individual guidance counsellors, the type of guidance they had received and when they had done so, their views on life-long guidance and private practitioners as well as resources and developments and the role of parents in guidance;

» 78% of the sample described themselves as 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their current situation, (e.g. work, study, training etc.);

» 21% of people reported having received guidance since they left school and the vast majority, 78%, said that they had not;

» Guidance for those who had received it since school mostly concerned work and career issues with 10% of respondents describing having received counselling;

» 80.5% of the 123 people who answered the question 'How helpful was guidance since school' said that it was 'very helpful' or 'helpful' with only 6% describing it as 'unhelpful' and no-one stating that it was 'very unhelpful';

» People's comments regarding their experience of guidance since school focused on the differences in guidance since school, the need for additional resources and the importance of making guidance accessible;

» Information and counselling were the aspects of guidance which respondents rated most highly, while assessment was the aspect they rated lowest;

» Development programmes, referral and advice also rated highly as important aspects of guidance;

» 58% of respondents said that guidance would be 'very helpful' or 'helpful' to them now, compared with only 9% who said that it would be 'very unhelpful' or 'unhelpful';

» Reasons people gave for indicating that guidance would be helpful now included being at a crossroads in their lives, having difficulty in making decisions, stress, as well as some more general points;

» 69% of respondents said that they did not know where to access guidance services;

» 145 people (23% of the total sample) listed where guidance could be accessed: 43% said 'school/college', 11% cited an adult education centre, 8% indicated FÁS, 10% the internet and 10% family members, church members, friends and colleagues;

» Respondents were asked what they would recommend to improve services and their suggestions included the following: advertise services better; develop services at second level; develop services for people who do not have easy access to guidance; develop services for people who are not Irish nationals; networking and better linkage of services, the role of the guidance practitioner; training and quality control; and some more general comments.

Summary Results of Phase Two of the Consultative Process

A total of 72 people took part in the seven focus groups. Participation was voluntary, and while it was explained at the outset of each group that participants could leave at any time, each person stayed until the end. The duration of the focus groups ranged from one hour to one hour forty five minutes. Group size ranged from four to fifteen people. In four of the seven focus groups each member was very involved and contributed to the discussion easily and often. In the remaining three groups, (the early school leavers, people with a disability, and the older age group), some participants chose to remain quiet or to say very little. While the groups differed in terms of age, current situation and life experience, there was a marked consistency among the groups in their view that guidance services needed to be made more accessible to people at all ages and stages of their lives. It is also important to note that some people who were members of one group were also similar in some way to those in another group, e.g. a parent who was not an Irish-national, a person with a literacy difficulty who was retired, and a parent who was unemployed. Therefore discussions in several of the groups tended to have a broad as opposed to a narrow focus.

Summary of Themes which Emerged During Focus Groups

» There is a need for guidance to be provided from preschool right up to the elderly;

» Guidance services at preschool and primary school need to be developed and those at second level need to be strengthened and expanded;

» Guidance services in second level schools need to be available and to be seen to be available for students in the Junior Cycle and for those who are less academic, as well as for those who intend to go to university;

» Guidance services for adults need to be developed, expanded, resourced and advertised;

» Teachers, employers and parents have a role in guidance provision;

» Guidance services must be confidential and available for everyone who wants it, irrespective of age and financial situation;

» People need information and yet acknowledge that information on its own is not enough;

» Counselling and personal development programmes are important aspects of guidance for adults, as many people need to build up confidence before they can make the most of training and career opportunities;

» People are concerned regarding the possible financial consequences of engaging in training and employment schemes and this may hinder them from availing of lifelong learning opportunities;

» There is a need for guidance services to follow-up on initial interviews;

» Guidance is important for groups such as parents, people with disabilities, people who are not Irish nationals, people who are due to retire or who have retired, children and adults who have literacy difficulties, and people who are unemployed or on low income;

» Many people who would benefit from guidance services do not know how to access them and 'need guidance to get guidance';

» People also have a personal responsibility in availing of opportunities which are available to them.

Discussion of Findings in the Context of the Literature

The Discussion (Chapter 6 of the Consultative Process Report) draws together the various results and themes which emerged through the consultative process as a means of making recommendations to the members of the National Guidance Forum by considering key themes which were evident in the literature and which were referred to repeatedly by people who completed the questionnaires as well as by those who participated in the focus groups. These themes are as follows:

» People's views on guidance generally;

» Guidance for children and young people;

» Guidance for adults;

» Key issues in guidance:

  » Quality control;

  » Access;

  » Implementing policy;

  » Individual responsibility.

The Discussion Chapter addresses limitations of the consultative process, i.e. that other relevant research was not yet available, the limitations of questionnaires and the limited range of focus groups. It acknowledges that given external limitations such as resources and time it was reasonable that every group could not be specifically targeted at present and noted that despite these limitations the results (Chapters 4 and 5 of the Consultative Process Report) contain very interesting and important material, which when seen in the context of the literature, suggest that significant gaps in provision, lack of clarity about guidance and where to access it, and quality assurance issues are matters of concern for people in Ireland.

People's Views on Guidance

Policy makers and service providers agree that guidance is a key factor in Ireland's economic prosperity and that it has a vital role in helping people cope with the increasing social difficulties and challenges. Although the vast majority of respondents to the questionnaires answered that they did not know a lot about guidance services in Ireland, their various comments suggest that they know more about what the term guidance refers to and their experiences of guidance than they realise.

People appreciated being asked for their opinions and the vast majority of people who participated in the focus groups were very positive and enthusiastic about the consultative process. While some of the comments were critical of the type of guidance received, nobody expressed the view that guidance practitioners are not required. On the contrary, many people were very clear about the benefits and role of guidance in helping them access lifelong learning. Guidance was recognised as having a broader role than helping people with career choice and several respondents specifically referred to guidance practitioners as having a role in providing support, promoting positive mental health and thus helping to prevent suicide.

Guidance for Children and Young People

Under the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) guidance is now seen to be a whole school responsibility and guidance counsellors have a broad role which includes providing counselling support to students, promoting educational and social inclusion, addressing educational disadvantage and the prevention of early school leaving and poor educational attainment (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Participants in both phases of the consultative process varied in how positive they were towards their experience of guidance either as a child or young person themselves and/or their children's experience of guidance. Opinions seemed to depend on factors such as the individual guidance counsellor, the resources available, whether the guidance counsellor first met students in first year of secondary school or only in their final year. The secondary school was described as being the main setting for delivering guidance services, although the parents of preschool children spoke highly of an introduction to careers that their children were receiving as a result of visits to the preschool by local bin men, Gardaí etc. The type of guidance people received mainly focused on

decisions regarding college and careers. There was recognition in some of the questionnaires as well as among the parents in the focus group that parents had a role in providing guidance to their children, and wished to be informed and supported in that role.

The young people who participated in a focus group had left formal schooling, primarily it seemed, due to consistent behavioural difficulties which resulted in their being suspended. From this group of eleven, only three could describe having met a guidance counsellor while they were in formal schooling. Of those, the experience of two was negative and seemed to focus on disciplinary issues, while that of the third was very positive in helping her deal with a family bereavement. All of these young people had access to informal guidance in their Training Centre and were not particularly positive about their experience, citing concerns over confidentiality as a reason why they would not approach that person for help.

The four people with literacy difficulties described the severe and long-lasting effects of their experiences in school. Each of these adults was adamant that children should receive as much support and guidance as possible to ensure that they could leave school being able to read and write with self-confidence. Many adults, both in the focus groups and in the questionnaires described guidance services in schools as being greatly improved since they were at school.

People made a number of recommendations regarding guidance services for children and young people including: introduce guidance in preschools and primary schools but ensure that children are not 'boxed in' too young; increase the allocation of guidance in schools; involve parents, teachers and outside agencies in guidance provision; make the use of guidance services compulsory for second level students; ensure that guidance counsellors act professionally and respect the confidential nature of their role; and develop all aspects of guidance i.e. counselling, development programmes, assessment, and referral as well as providing more information.

Guidance for Adults

A much smaller number of adults (21%) reported that they had received guidance since they left school and the vast majority (80%) of these described the guidance they had received as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. This compares with 43% of people who described their experience of guidance in second level as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. 54% of people had accessed guidance since school from a guidance practitioner and/or careers service, while 30% accessed it through FÁS or work. There was a very consistent call for providing more information and for making it more accessible to people. However the adults who participated in the focus groups referred specifically to valuing an ongoing, supportive and individually tailored guidance service which would help them to develop self-confidence and stress management skills as well as accessing training and/or employment. These people spoke about their need for the counselling aspect of guidance to help them come to terms with their situation, irrespective of whether that was having recently arrived in Ireland with very little English, having had a history of reading difficulties, having a disability or adjusting to retirement. It was clear that they wanted guidance services to do more than provide information and they wanted to be able to use those services as often as they needed to, with the guidance practitioners following up on their progress.

There was definitely widespread agreement that the provision of guidance for adults needs to be widened to include: adults who are employed as well as unemployed; adults with financial difficulties, as well as those who are earning a good income; students who are engaged in higher education; and adults who have retired as well as those who are working. Respondents referred to many of the issues described in the literature, for example:

» Recognising the value and importance of guidance programmes and career management skills (Jarvis, 2003);

» Difficulties in knowing that guidance services exist and how to access them (GTI, 2006);

» The difficulty and reluctance people who have been unemployed for a long period have in accessing guidance services (Humphries, 2004);

» The role that FÁS has in combining a guidance function and a job placement function (OECD, 2002);

» The complex needs for people with literacy difficulties (NALA, 2005), people with a learning disability (NDA, 2005) and older people (Age Action Ireland, 2006);

» The challenges and difficulties language barriers can create (Ward, 2002);

» The complex, busy lives many adults have and the financial implications of engaging in further training or work programmes (Brown, 2004);

» Distinguishing between the differing guidance needs of adults (Sampson et al. 1999) and tailoring models to those needs (OECD/EC, 2004);

» The needs, role and contribution of employers (Humphries, 2002);

» The importance of having a logo for guidance services which would be easily identified (Brown, 2004).

Perhaps one of the most stark findings of the consultative process is that while only 9% of the 577 people who answered the question 'how helpful would guidance be to you now?' said that it would be 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful', and 58% said that it would be 'very helpful' or 'helpful', 69% of the total sample reported not knowing where to access guidance services.

A very strong theme which emerged in the questionnaires and in the focus groups was people's desire to have more information. While some people definitely appreciated the benefits of the other aspects of guidance, such as counselling, development programmes, advice and referral, this seemed to be overshadowed by a consistent call for more and more information. However, there was also recognition that information on its own was not enough. Issues concerning information are well documented in the literature. Brown (2004) distinguished between 'information' and 'informing' and with IT facilities increasingly becoming more available, it is important

to remember that 'you can have information at the touch of a button and still not be informed' (Brown, 2004, p.77). Sultana (2004b) wrote 'we are not living in an information age, but in an information dump, therefore we need to provide high quality information and help people to develop the skills to use it' (p.4). This is consistent with Clayton (2000) who emphasised that the purpose of guidance is to give people the skills to make choices, rather than to steer them to lifelong learning.

Perhaps one of the most striking things to emerge from this consultative process is the very high regard in which the majority of respondents hold guidance. Policy makers and researchers such as Sultana (2004) and Jarvis (2005) write about the benefits guidance can give to the individual as well as to society and to the economy. The comments of many people in the focus groups demonstrated that while they also considered guidance to be very beneficial, this depends on a range of variables such as whether guidance is provided in the first place, if the resources are adequate, if the guidance practitioner is trained and if the person wanting to receive guidance has sufficient English to ask for what he/she requires. The benefits for those who did receive guidance and who were helped to avail of it were remarkable, particularly among those people who had a disability, those who had literacy difficulties and those who were in the older age group.

Key Issues in Guidance

The four key issues discussed specifically were: (1) Training and quality control; (2) Access to guidance services; (3) Implementing policy and (4) Individual responsibility. The Discussion (Chapter 6 of the Consultative Process Report) concludes by pointing to the challenge for guidance policy makers, service providers, trainers and practitioners to ensure that while respecting the right of the individual not to engage, guidance services are accessible, well resourced, well run, and available for everyone who needs them, with the recognition that some people may need help and support in being able to access appropriate and relevant guidance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There was a marked consistency among the views of the many researchers and policy makers in guidance referred to in the Literature Review and among those of the people who participated in both Phase One and Phase Two of this consultative process that while the definition of guidance can be vague and confusing, the process of guidance clearly involves the following key aspects: information, counselling, assessment, development programmes, advice and referral.

In essence a key finding which emerged in this consultative process is that people 'need guidance to get guidance'. As well as developing and strengthening resources in guidance, people in the general public need to be informed, supported and guided to use these services. This report contains many suggestions from the participants in the consultative process as to how that might be done, suggestions such as the following:

» Widen guidance provision so that it is available from pre-school to post-retirement;

» Ensure that people working in guidance are well trained and supported, with proper quality assurance procedures in place;

» Ensure that guidance services are in appropriate and convenient locations and that they are well resourced;

» Provide guidance that is individual and suitable to the needs of clients in terms of the way in which guidance is provided, who it is provided by and the methods used;

» Recognise and support the role of parents, teachers, employers and others in guidance;

» Guide people to avail of guidance services by:

  » Informing them of the services through advertising widely in a way which will clearly reach the target groups;

  » Helping them access it by providing sufficient supports;

  » Providing follow-up services if required;

  » Strengthening links with referral agencies.

This report noted that these recommendations are not new. They are contained in many reports and policy documents. Yet they are made here by people who are unemployed who have 'slipped through the net'; people who have literacy difficulties and who were 'let down' by the formal education system; young people who have left the formal school system, people who are not Irish nationals and who are struggling to understand and be understood; people who have physical and/or learning disabilities who have to 'fight' to get what they want; parents of children who are determined to ensure that their children get what they need; people who have retired and who feel 'invisible' and who have to argue that they have a right to education too.

These recommendations are also made by other people who were involved in this process – people who are well educated and grateful for the guidance they have received and keen to see it available to all; people who are in higher education and who are progressing well in their studies as well as those who are experiencing challenges; people who are in employment, earning a good wage, but would like to consider a career change and do not know how to; people who are guidance practitioners who recognise what supports and resources are needed to help them do their jobs well; people who are teachers who see themselves as having a role in guidance; people who are employers who see the benefits of guidance to individuals and to the economy; people who are very negative about guidance services as well as people who are very positive about guidance services in Ireland.
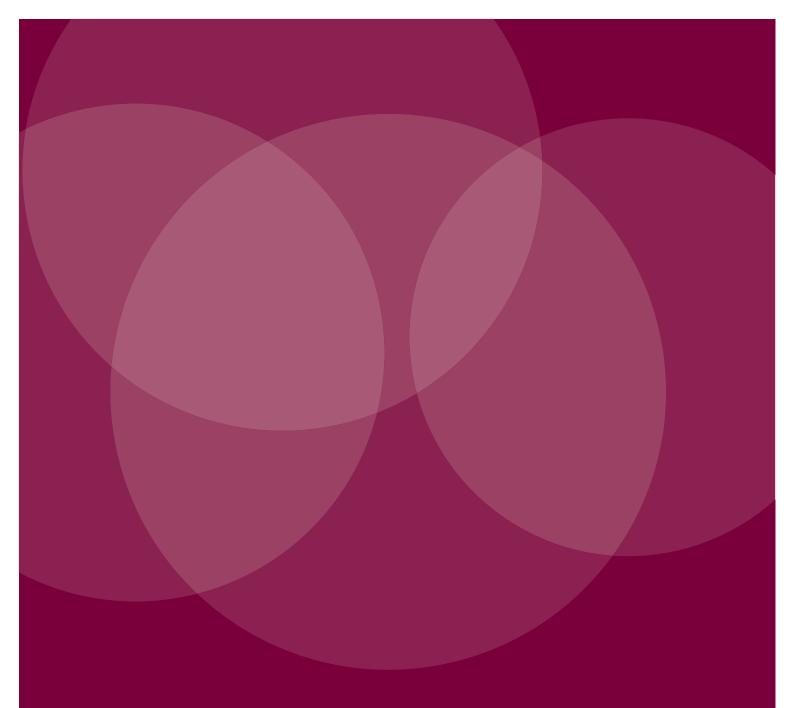
In summary, these recommendations have been made by people who recognise the benefits of guidance and who want guidance services to be developed and resourced. These people are an enormous resource and many of them are already involved locally and nationally in providing 'informal guidance' through their participation on national committees and on voluntary helplines.

The National Guidance Forum's agreed definition of guidance is that it:

Refers to the process of facilitating individuals or groups at any point throughout their lives to develop their capacity for the self-management of their personal, social, educational, training, occupational and life choices in order to grow towards their potential and thereby to contribute to the development of a better society. (NCGE, 2006, p.33)

Ireland has changed and is continuing to change. The effects of the rapid period of economic prosperity are visible everywhere. So too are the effects of the increase in social difficulties Ireland is continuing to experience. Guidance is recognised as having a key role in helping people living in Ireland to cope with transitions, challenges and difficulties.

The results of this consultative process clearly show that people value guidance, want guidance and recommend that guidance services are developed and strengthened so that everyone, irrespective of age, ability or financial circumstances, can be helped to be aware of them, helped to access them and helped to benefit from them. People's enthusiasm and willingness to engage with the consultative process demonstrates clearly that members of the general public can become actively involved in ensuring that lifelong and lifewide guidance is available and is availed of.

(See full Consultative Process Report report for Acronyms and References.)

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