

# **Sectoral Plan 2006 - 2009 under the Disability Act 2005**

## **Progress Report**

**Department of Social and Family Affairs**



**February 2010**

## Foreword from the Minister

I welcome the publication of the Department of Social and Family Affairs' Progress Report on its Disability Sectoral Plan which was prepared in accordance with the provisions of the Disability Act 2005.



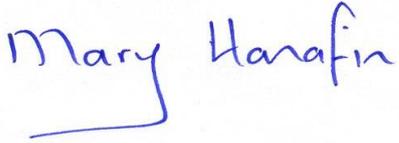
The work of the Department impacts on almost every person in the State and it has a key role in supporting those most in need including people with disabilities and their carers.

The Sectoral Plan of the Department was published in 2006 and contained a commitment that, at the end of 2009, a formal review of the Plan would be published. A comprehensive consultation process was undertaken with a wide spectrum of interests including the Department's customers and staff, disability stakeholders and service providers and the general public and the input from this process informed this Progress Report. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all those organisations and citizens who made submissions to this review and particularly to the Department's Disability Consultative Forum who continue to provide valuable advice and feedback to the Department on disability-related issues.

The Department's approach to its services for people with disabilities and their carers derives from its mission to promote a caring society, facilitate participation and advance social inclusion. The Progress Report for the period 2006 – 2009 outlines significant progress, across the wide range of objectives set in 2006 including providing substantial income support payment increases in disability and caring-related schemes, initiating an inter-agency programme aimed at facilitating people with disabilities to take up employment, training, education and other development opportunities, and enhancing services to facilitate greater access by people with disabilities to the Department's schemes and services. In addition, the Department's commitments to fully support its staff with disabilities to reach their potential in the workplace have been substantially advanced over the past three years.

While it is acknowledged that the economic downturn will continue to exert significant pressure on the delivery of the Department's schemes and services

generally, our aim will continue to be ensuring that those who are most vulnerable, including people with disabilities, are protected and that their living standards and access to essential services are maintained.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Hanafin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end of the word "Hanafin".

Mary Hanafin TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

## **Progress Report on Sectoral Plan for the period 2006 - 2009**

### ***Introduction***

Section 31(4) of the Disability Act 2005 requires that a report be prepared on the progress made on the implementation of the Disability Sectoral Plan, not more than three years from its publication. Over the three year period 2006 – 2009 of the Department's Sectoral Plan, significant progress was made towards achieving the objectives contained in the Plan as outlined below.

### **Objective 1: Develop specific social welfare schemes for people of working age to ensure that they have adequate, secure and sustainable income and related supports**

Over the period of the Sectoral Plan, the commitments contained in the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*, in relation to the level of social welfare payments, including illness and disability-related payments, were met in full. Welfare rates were increased in 2007, 2008 and 2009 by 12.1%, 6.5% and 3.3% respectively, and, in aggregate, welfare rates increased by some 17.5% in excess of inflation in that period.

The means test associated with the Disability Allowance (DA) scheme was enhanced through the introduction in 2007 of an increased capital disregard of €50,000. Prior to 2007, capital owned by an applicant for social assistance payments, including DA, was assessed with a disregard of the first €20,000. It was recognised that persons in receipt of DA may not have had the same opportunities to accumulate savings or other income through participation in employment and also that disability may hamper a person's capacity to live independently. Against that background, it was also recognised that families may wish to make future financial provision for a child or sibling but would have been concerned that such provision could adversely affect their entitlement to DA as the assessment of capital held in excess of €20,000, depending on the amount involved, could result in a significant reduction or loss of payment and secondary benefits. Similarly, in cases where a compensation award had been made to a customer as a result of accident or injury, the assessment of capital received in excess of €20,000 could result in a reduction or loss of payment of DA and associated benefits. Therefore Budget 2007 provided for a revised capital disregard of €50,000 for claimants of DA. About 400 recipients benefited, of whom approximately 300 moved to the full personal rate of payment.

Prior to 2007, people who were in residential care were disqualified from entitlement to full-rate DA by virtue of their residency. Instead, they were paid a Disability Allowance Personal Expenses Rate of €35 per week. With effect from

1 January 2007, entitlement to full-rate DA was extended to all those in residential care who had previously been disqualified on grounds of residency, benefiting some 2,700 people.

Total expenditure by the Department related to the Sectoral Plan was of the order of €2,420 million in 2007, €2,607 million in 2008 and is projected to amount to some €3,060 million in 2009. This represents an increase of 26% over the three years of the Sectoral Plan. The bulk of this expenditure relates to a range of income support schemes for people with disabilities. The principal schemes are Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Blind Pension, Occupational Injuries Benefit, Carer's Allowance/Benefit and Respite Care Grant as well as a range of secondary benefits. The main factors driving expenditure during the period of the Sectoral Plan were the annual increases in the rates of payment and increased numbers of recipients. The degree to which these two factors impacted on expenditure growth varied from scheme to scheme. For example, in the case of the biggest scheme, Disability Allowance, expenditure increased by 23% between 2007 and 2009. Of this increase, 30% was due to improvements in the rates of payment while 70% was due to the increased number of recipients. In respect of Carer's Allowance, expenditure increased by 36% during the same period and 40% of this increase was attributable to rates increases while 60% was due to the increased number of recipients. During the period of the Sectoral Plan, increases in the rates of payment were well in excess of movements in both the Consumer Price Index and wages.

**Objective 2: Ensure that coverage of the Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) system is appropriate to the respective circumstances of employed, self-employed and other categories**

The proposed introduction of Invalidity Pension for the self-employed was modelled by independent consultants as part of the 2005 Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund, published in 2007. The exercise demonstrated that such a change would have a material effect on the cost of Invalidity Pension, increasing projected expenditure for the Pension by some €0.3 billion in 2006 terms by the end of the review period. In light of this finding, there are no plans to extend cover to this group of insured workers. The significant financial implications of such a measure would have to be considered within a budgetary context, as would an appropriate increase in the rate of PRSI Class S contribution.

**Objective 3: Engage meaningfully with persons of working age, particularly marginalised and excluded groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other relevant agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training, education and other development opportunities**

In June 2006, a tapered withdrawal of Disability Allowance (DA) was introduced in order to incentivise claimants to engage in the labour market by taking up employment and to increase their income from employment. Earnings from employment of up to €120 per week are disregarded in the means test while earnings between €120 and €350 are assessed at 50%. In effect, claimants of DA may now earn up to €435 per week before entitlement to the payment is entirely lost. In some respects, the measure can be viewed as having been successful, insofar as the number of people availing of the income disregard has risen steadily from approximately 6,500 when the revised arrangements were introduced in June 2006 to some 9,600 at the end of September 2009. It is notable that this increase has taken place in the context of a steady and substantial increase in the overall number claiming DA and, in fact, the proportion of claimants availing of the disregard has remained consistent between 9% and 10% of the total claimload throughout the period since 2006.

The Sectoral Plan contained a commitment to complete an evaluation of the Midlands Pilot Project and this was achieved in 2007. Assimilating the learning from this Pilot, the Disability Activation Project (DAP), which is funded under the European Social Fund 'Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007 – 2013', commenced in January 2008. As part of this process, an inter-agency Implementation Team consisting of key personnel from FÁS, the Health Service Executive, the Department of Education and Science, VECs, the National Disability Authority and the Department was established in June 2008 and, to implement the Project, a dedicated facilitation team was put in place. Representation of the Community and Voluntary sector on the Implementation Team is being advanced. The Project is currently being undertaken in the Border, Midlands and Western Region and is testing processes for the engagement of people in receipt of disability-related payments.

Since the commencement of the DAP to the end of September 2009, some 650 illness payment recipients have been invited to attend for interview and, of these, almost 300 people have met project staff on a one-to-one basis to complete personal progression plans. In addition, training programmes, in conjunction with the VECs, targeted specifically at people on illness/disability payments in the region, have been provided. As part of this process the Project Facilitator met with key personnel in other Agencies on an individual basis to initiate and develop local working relationships and co-operation.

**Objective 4: Ensure that schemes and services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitates their full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming agenda**

The issue of access to public transport in rural areas is being addressed at present through the Rural Transport Programme which is managed on behalf of the Department of Transport by Pobal. Since 2004, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has contributed over €5 million to the Programme and has made a further €1.5 million available in 2009 to ensure that Free Travel pass-holders continue to have access to community-based transport services.

From 25 September 2006, all-time based restrictions on travel on public transport services for holders of Free Travel passes were removed. From March 2007, eligibility for a companion Free Travel pass was extended to those aged 66 to 74 who are certified as medically unfit to travel unaccompanied.

The All Ireland Free Travel Scheme for pensioners commenced in April 2007. The Scheme allows a Free Travel pass-holder (those aged 66 and older) to travel free of charge on all bus and rail services within Northern Ireland using a Smartpass card. Similarly, Northern Ireland Senior Smartpass-holders are entitled to travel for free on services in the Republic using their existing Senior Smartpass.

**Objective 5: Ensuring that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to seeking, accepting or improving employment**

**Ensure that payments and supports to carers are efficient and effective, recognising their needs and adequately addressing poverty and social exclusion and are adaptable to the needs of carers in a changing care environment**

The key policy change introduced in support of this objective, over the period of the Plan, was the enhancement of the income disregard available under the Disability Allowance (DA) Scheme as outlined in Objective 1. The Review of the Disability Allowance scheme, currently underway, is exploring how incentives to employment can be maximised within the context of the Department's activation agenda. The Review will be published in early 2010.

In June 2005 the Respite Care Grant was extended to all carers providing full-time care and attention to a person in need of such care regardless of their means or social insurance contributions. Since then, the Grant has been paid in respect of each care recipient. The rate of the Respite Care Grant was increased to €1,700 per year from June 2008.

The duration of Carer's Benefit and Carer's Leave was extended from 15 to 24 months, from December 2005 and March 2006 respectively.

The number of hours, which a carer may engage in employment, self-employment, education or training outside the home and still be considered to be providing full-time care and attention for the purposes of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit and the Respite Care Grant, was increased from 10 to 15 hours per week in June 2006.

Budget 2007 provided for new arrangements whereby people in receipt of a social welfare payment, other than Carer's Allowance or Benefit, who are also providing someone with full-time care and attention, may retain their main welfare payment and receive another payment, depending on their means, the maximum of which is equivalent to the half-rate Carer's Allowance. Similarly, people in receipt of a Carer's Allowance, who may have an underlying eligibility for another social welfare payment, may transfer to that other payment and continue to receive up to half-rate Carer's Allowance. These arrangements came into force in September 2007.

Budget 2008 increased the weekly Carer's Allowance income disregard from €320 to €332.50 per week for a single person and from €640 to €665 per week for a couple from April 2008. This means that a couple with two children may earn in the region of €37,200 and still qualify for the maximum rate of Carer's Allowance as well as the associated Free Travel and Household Benefits Package. A couple with an income in the region of €60,400 may qualify for a minimum payment, as well as secondary benefits. This measure surpasses the commitment in the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016* to ensure that those on average industrial earnings may continue to qualify for a full Carer's Allowance.

Budget 2009 increased the rate of Carer's Allowance from €214 to €220.50 per week for those aged under 66 years and the rate of Carer's Benefit from €214.70 to €221.20 per week. The rate of Carer's Allowance for those aged over 66 was increased from €232 to €239 per week.

### **Objective 6: Prepare and monitor the Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/inclusion) 2006-08**

#### **Ensure that there is clear knowledge and understanding of the nature, extent and causes of poverty and social exclusion and the strategies to address it**

The *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* (NAPinclusion), published in February 2007, sets out the range of policies and programmes,

along with specific targets and actions, aimed at reducing and eliminating poverty and social exclusion in Irish society, in particular for people with disabilities.

Reports of the annual Social Inclusion Fora and the report of an extensive consultation process, conducted by the Office for Social Inclusion, informed the production of the social inclusion elements of the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*, Ireland's report for the EU on *National Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2006-2008 - NSSPI*, the *National Development Plan 2007-2013* and the NAPinclusion. Access to quality work and learning opportunities and quality services, with particular reference to people with disabilities, is a key focus of the social inclusion section of Ireland's NSSPI for 2008 - 2010.

The Social Inclusion Division was established in the Department from 1 July 2009, arising from the integration of the Combat Poverty Agency and the Office for Social Inclusion. Promoting the availability and analysis of relevant data to support the monitoring and evaluation of social inclusion targets, including for people with disabilities, is a key task for the Division. The NAPinclusion Technical Advisory Group (TAG), consisting of State, professional and social partner data and research experts meets twice a year to support this process. The TAG was expanded in 2007 to include representatives from the social partner pillars and from agencies representative of the lifecycle groups, including the National Disability Authority.

Social portraits, which set out the statistical situation of lifecycle groups in the NAPinclusion framework, commenced publication in 2007 with portraits of older people and children. The third portrait, of people of working age, was published in February 2008 followed by the portrait of communities published in February 2009.

The European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) is carried out in Ireland by the Central Statistics Office. The primary focus of the survey is the collection of information, on the income and living conditions of the population, from which indicators on poverty, deprivation and social exclusion are derived. The latest EU SILC data shows that the rate of consistent poverty for people not at work due to illness or disability reduced from 17.9% of the population in 2006 to 15.8% in 2007.

The Annual Report on Social Inclusion 2008, which was published in November 2009, details the progress made towards the goals in the NAPinclusion. The report shows the progress made in 2008 towards achieving the main goals in the NAPinclusion, including the overall poverty goal to reduce consistent

poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012 with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016. The 2008 Annual Report on Social Inclusion is available on [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) and [www.socialinclusion.ie](http://www.socialinclusion.ie).

Under the process of Poverty Impact Assessment (PIA), Government Departments are required to take account of the impact of policy initiatives and legislation on people at risk of poverty. PIA Guidelines were introduced in Government Departments in 2007. The process of learning through implementation and updating the Guidelines continued over the period 2007 - 2009.

**Objective 7: Ensure that the rules for entitlement to Disability and Carers payments are appropriate to the circumstances of claimants, are easy to understand and are applied in a fair and consistent manner**

In 2007, the assessment of spouse/partner's earnings for Disability Allowance and other working age schemes was reformed in order to ensure that a family will always be better off where a spouse or partner is in paid employment and to deliver on the commitment in the Plan to ensure that means-testing rules are consistent with activation and support for work policies. With effect from September 2007, €20 per day of earnings (subject to a maximum of 3 days per week) is now disregarded and the balance assessed at 60%.

**Objective 8: Promote and develop a strong customer service culture through the Department and the agencies under its aegis and deliver continuous improvement in customer service for people with disabilities and carers**

Acting on the Sectoral Plan's commitment to ensure meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the Disability Sector in relation to the development, delivery and review of services, the Department continues to support its Disability Consultative Forum. Four meetings have been held in each of the past three years as part of engaging in the consultative process and promoting a strong customer service culture.

The Department's commitment to delivering a quality customer service was demonstrated through a series of focus group meetings with customers and representative bodies in developing the Department's Customer Charter and Customer Action Plan 2009 – 2011. The Charter and Action Plan build on the current framework for progressing and reporting on the Department's customer services and are published on the Department's website [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).

To facilitate maximum access to the Department's information on its schemes and services all information booklets are available through the Department's

LoCall Leaflet Request Line and through the website. An e-mail request facility for forms and leaflets is in operation since 2007 and an SMS request facility is in operation since 2009. The Department has worked with the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) to ensure that all forms and leaflets are produced in simple, clear, easy to read format and that they are accessible to people with different levels of literacy ability. By June 2009, six of the Department's information booklets have been accredited with the Plain English NALA mark. The Department's work in this area was recognised in 2007 when it received an O<sub>2</sub> Ability Award for Customer Service.

The Department's Comments and Complaints system, which allows customers to give feedback on the quality of the services they receive, facilitates the logging and collation of complaints made under the Disability Act 2005. In addition, formal procedures for making complaints regarding access to its schemes and services are published on the Department's website.

The Agencies under the aegis of the Department – the Citizens Information Board, Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) (to July 2009), the Pensions Board, the Family Support Agency and the Office of the Pensions Ombudsman have developed and published Customer Charters and Action Plans during the period of the Sectoral Plan. In this regard, the CPA undertook consultations with people with disabilities in relation to service quality, received training in Plain English and in the production of information in accessible formats and, as a result, certain website content was re-written to make it more accessible.

The Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency (DESSA) is funded by, amongst others, the Family Support Agency and the Citizens Information Board. It was established in 2001 to work with community development organisations in promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities at community level through their involvement in community development activity. DESSA conducted a pilot programme for Family Resource Centres in the western, mid-western and north-western regions in 2007 called the 'Steps to Mainstream Participation Programme'. The aim of the Programme is to increase the participation of people with disabilities in mainstream public, civic and community life. The Programme is delivered at local level through local community development organisations. It also aims to provide these organisations with the capacity and supports to co-ordinate the programme at local level. The supports include training, networking, advocacy and mentoring. The vision for this Programme is that people with disabilities are enabled to become active members of their communities, volunteering their time and experience, rather than being passive recipients of services and supports. Nine Family Resource Centres (FRCs) participated in the pilot programme.

DESSA's Community Advocacy Project, which was launched in September 2007 in five FRCs in the south-eastern region, supports people with disabilities and their families in accessing an independent, professional and inclusive advocacy service within their local communities. This is a partnership initiative between DESSA, the Family Support Agency and St. Brigid's FRC in Waterford and is funded by the Citizens Information Board. A key feature of the Project was the development of working relationships with five FRCs in the region in the promotion and delivery of a representative advocacy service. The Project represents the views, feelings and interests of people with disabilities and their families, supporting them to make informed choices and decisions concerning their lives and enabling them to participate more fully in society. To date, the majority of service users supported are individuals experiencing mental health difficulties.

The Project has successfully enabled individuals to achieve their desired outcomes in relation to issues such as housing, social welfare appeals, access to services in the HSE and discrimination in the workplace. A key element of the Project was the development of advocacy skills and capacity building with staff and volunteers of FRCs. In 2008, 13 individuals completed a six day training programme - Community Development & Advocacy - which is accredited by Sligo Institute of Technology.

**Objective 9: Achieve customer satisfaction by delivering social insurance and assistance disability payments, related supports and services to a high standard**

In accordance with the commitments in the Sectoral Plan to conduct individual scheme surveys at appropriate intervals and to elicit the level of customer satisfaction with services through other feedback channels, an independent Customer Survey was published in late 2006 which compared customer satisfaction levels with the results of the previous survey in 2001 and showed increased satisfaction amongst customers. In addition, a Disability Allowance Customer Survey, carried out in July 2007, showed that 89% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the manner in which they were dealt with and 79% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the speed in which their claim was dealt with.

A survey in the south-east area, carried out in 2008, showed that of the 75% of customers who used the Department's offices as a form of communication, 88% were either satisfied or fairly satisfied with the service.

A survey of Invalidity Pension recipients was carried out in early 2009 and a report was given to the Disability Consultative Forum in June 2009. A total of

1,000 Invalidity Pension recipients were invited to take part and 552 customers responded. Of these, over 90% of respondents:

- Found out about Invalidity Pension through the Department’s services;
- Said the application form was easy to complete;
- Found the information leaflet helpful;
- Were satisfied or very satisfied that their application was dealt with efficiently;
- Found that the staff were polite, helpful, willing to listen, knowledgeable and easy to understand;
- Were satisfied or very satisfied with the way they were dealt with by staff; and
- Were satisfied with the way their payment was made to them by the Department and with the payment service provided at the Post Office.

The Department’s Customer Charter, published in 2009, sets out the standards of service that people can expect in their dealings with the Department. The Customer Action Plan 2009 – 2011 builds on the Charter commitments and sets out a range of aims and actions to achieve them during the lifetime of the plan.

Following the ongoing policy of transferring existing and new claims to electronic payments, over 90% of all customers are now paid electronically. All Personal Payable Order book payments have been changed to electronic payment since September 2009. The following table sets out the percentage of recipients of disability-related schemes who are being paid electronically at the end of September 2009.

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Receiving Payment Electronically</b>
Carer’s Allowance	100%
Carer’s Benefit	100%
Blind Pension	100%
Disability Allowance	99.9%
Invalidity Pension	99.6%
Disablement Benefit	70.9%
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	48.4%

**Objective 10: Modernise and improve the delivery of services to the Department’s customers with disabilities through the development and implementation of ICT systems and organisational change programmes**

The Department’s Service Delivery Modernisation Programme (SDM) is aimed at delivering a high quality, proactive personalised service to all customers,

including those with disabilities, through delivery of services in a more efficient, flexible and integrated way.

A number of schemes for people with disabilities and their carers, including Domiciliary Care Allowance and associated Respite Care Grant, are being administered through the SDM Programme. Progress was made on the modernisation and improvement of delivery of services by the introduction of the SDM model for the Free Travel and Household Benefit schemes. Work has commenced to process new applications for Invalidity Pension through the SDM Programme in early 2010 and to transfer the existing customers by mid-2010. In advance of this, a business improvement process has been completed to ensure improved customer service.

Improved processes and procedures, introduced through the SDM Programme, enable the Department to provide a more effective and efficient service to its customers. The SDM programme also facilitates the provision of self-service electronic claim forms via the Department's website and it facilitates an SMS (texting) service where customers can request application forms for various schemes and services. In addition, the improvements in the Information Communication Technology facilities enable the Department's staff to view all of a customer's claim information on-line and in one place, thereby allowing the Department to provide timely information relevant to the customer's particular entitlements.

**Objective 11: Ensure that, medical examination and assessment procedures to determine eligibility for entitlement to disability income support are of a high standard and are applied in a consistent, efficient and effective way**

In January 2009, work commenced on the modernisation of the Medical Review and Assessment Service (MRAS). The MRAS Project will implement organisational and technical change in the MRAS over the period to the end of July 2010. In particular, the Project will involve the development of evidence-based protocols for use by Medical Assessors in both desk and 'in person' assessment which are designed to increase consistency in the performance of assessments. The Project will also include the development of ICT support for case management and the activation of social welfare customers.

Arising from the transfer of the Domiciliary Care Allowance scheme to the Department in April 2009, the medical conditions for eligibility of new applicants for the Allowance are being assessed by the Department's Medical Assessors using guidelines drawn up by an Expert Medical Group chaired by the Chief Medical Adviser of the Department. These guidelines are also used in any review of claims which were in payment prior to the transfer.

To enhance service standards, a formal arrangement for the provision of interpreters at medical assessments was put in place with the Department's Information Services and the information leaflet issued to customers who are notified to attend for 'in person' assessments was amended accordingly. In April 2009, procedural arrangements were agreed with the Citizens Information Board concerning the attendance of advocates, employed by the Community and Voluntary Programme which is funded by the Board, at 'in person' assessments.

The number of Medical Assessors increased from 17 in 2007 to 22 in June 2009. A number of the Medical Assessors recruited in 2007 and 2008 are located in regional centres which has increased the efficiency of the service.

**Objective 12: Implement Government Decision with regard to the transfer of Supplementary Welfare Scheme and non-SWA payments**

In February 2006, the Government decided that the General Register Office, certain disability-related income maintenance schemes and the Community Welfare Service (CWS) would transfer from the Health Service Executive (HSE) to the Department. The General Register Office transferred on 1 January 2008.

Domiciliary Care Allowance was the largest of the disability payment schemes to transfer to the Department from 1 April 2009 with 23,600 recipients. The first payments on new applications issued in May 2009. The stock of existing claims was transferred to the Department in August 2009 and the first payments to these were issued in September 2009.

There are approximately 3,000 recipients of Blind Welfare Allowance. A decision has not yet been made about the timing of the transfer of this Allowance to the Department.

One of the remaining two disability payment schemes, Infectious Disease Maintenance Allowance, is being discontinued. There are currently no recipients of the Allowance.

The arrangements in relation to the fifth scheme, Mobility Allowance, will be the subject of discussions between the Department and the Department of Health and Children.

One part of the original Government decision involved the possibility of transferring certain dental, optical and other benefits from the Department to the HSE. This aspect of the transfer programme may be reviewed following the Government's consideration of the *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* recommendations on Treatment Benefits.

A considerable amount of preparatory work to allow for the transfer of the Community Welfare Service (CWS) to the Department has been completed. The necessary legislative provisions to enable the transfer of the administration of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme from the HSE to the Department were included in the Social Welfare and Pensions Acts 2007 and 2008 and are subject to a Commencement Order. The quantum of resources required to transfer from the HSE to the Department to administer the scheme has been agreed. Arrangements in relation to accommodation, IT and financial management have been advanced.

Following the publication of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Review in 2006, measures were introduced in the Social Welfare Act 2007, to provide for a gradual withdrawal of payment, as the hours of employment or earnings increase, of those receiving Rent and Mortgage Interest Supplement. Those availing of part-time employment (up to 30 hours a week) and/or training opportunities may continue to receive Rent and Mortgage Interest Supplement subject to their satisfying the standard means assessment rules. In addition, from June 2007, the first €75 of additional income, that is, income above the standard rate of SWA appropriate to a person's circumstances, is disregarded for Rent Supplement purposes, with any additional income above €75 assessed at 75%.

The Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2007 provided for an improved capital assessment for SWA and other supplements by increasing the disregard from €520 to €5,000 with the assessment of the balance of capital brought more in line with the arrangements for other schemes.

Measures were introduced in 2007 to provide that a person in receipt of Rent Supplement, including a person with a disability, who is accepted as having a housing need under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), may engage in full-time employment subject to satisfying the standard means test and still be eligible for payment of Rent Supplement. Heretofore, with limited exceptions, a person in full-time employment over 30 hours a week would not be entitled to Rent Supplement.

As at September 2009, figures from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government indicate that local authorities have transferred over 12,200 Rent Supplement cases to RAS units. Housing authorities have also transferred over 10,600 Rent Supplement recipients to other social housing options making a total of over 22,800 transfers since 2005.

**Objective 13: Facilitate participation in education by social welfare customers of working age and specifically people with disabilities who are most distant from the labour market in order to enhance their employability and assist them in accessing sustainable employment**

To fulfil the commitment in the Sectoral Plan to establish a working group comprised of representatives from the relevant agencies to oversee the integration of the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme income support provision back into the Department's income support, an inter-departmental Steering Group, comprising officials from the Departments of Education and Science, Finance, Social and Family Affairs and FÁS, was established to progress the implementation of the recommendations on the Expenditure Review of the Back to Education Allowance Scheme (BTEA). The work of the Group has been overtaken by the inter-departmental work of the Senior Officials Group on Labour Market Issues which is examining the BTEA in the context of Active Labour Market Programmes.

The BTEA Scheme is now available to social welfare recipients, including people in receipt of disability-related payments. As a result of recent enhancements to the BTEA scheme the Cost of Education Allowance was increased from €400 to €500. From April 2009, the qualifying period for Second Level Allowance was reduced from six months to three months.

**Objective 14: Ensure that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities participating in the labour force or availing of training or educational opportunities**

**Engage meaningfully with persons of working age, particularly marginalised groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other relevant agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training and education or development opportunities**

In accordance with the commitment in the Sectoral Plan to co-ordinate the removal of disincentives across schemes, an agreement is in place with the Department of Health and Children and the Health Service Executive (HSE) on retention of HSE secondary payments in line with the retention of Disability Allowance arising from the change to the Disability Allowance withdrawal rate in June 2006. Prior to this, all means from earnings were taken into account for medical card purposes. In addition, the application of revised income disregards for people receiving Disability Allowance, as outlined in Objective 3, offers improved pathways into education and employment.

**Objective 15: Ensure that our schemes and services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitates their full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming principle of the equality agenda**

**Ensure that the rules for entitlement to Disability and Carers payments are appropriate to the circumstances of claimants, are easy to understand and are applied in a fair and consistent manner**

The OECD in its report on '*Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers*', published in November 2008, identified the structure of the Illness Benefit scheme as a particular area of concern, and in particular noted that many people are receiving the payment on a long-term basis. The report noted that "paying sickness benefit without time limitation is very unusual across the OECD, for good reasons" and pointed out that there is a great risk that those people will never return to the labour market and that this risk is particularly strong for unemployed people receiving Illness Benefit. Budget 2009 provided for changes in the structure of the Illness Benefit scheme which caps entitlement to the payment for claims made after 5 January 2009 to two years. In this way, Illness Benefit will function in its proper role as a short-term scheme and the issue of creating a stock of long-term claimants with a minimal attachment to the labour force, and with a decreasing likelihood of reintegrating into the labour force, will be addressed.

**Objective 16: To develop income and related supports for people with disabilities in order to ensure that they have adequate, secure and sustainable income**

**To ensure that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities participating in the labour force or availing of training or educational opportunities**

**To ensure that supports to Carers are efficient and effective and are adaptable to their needs in a changing care environment**

A Working Group, chaired by the Department of Health and Children and including membership from the Department of Social and Family Affairs, has examined the feasibility of the introduction of a cost of disability payment. The issues associated with the question of a cost of disability payment are to be considered further following the development of the needs assessment system provided for under Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005.

The Working Group recommended that steps be taken to improve the quality of data relating to disability in Ireland. The publication by the CSO, in October 2008, of the first round of results from the 2006 National Disability Survey represents an important step towards meeting this data deficit. Further

reports are anticipated which will deepen the level of data available on critical issues such as employment participation and educational attainment.

Ireland was one of 11 countries which participated in a review undertaken by the OECD to examine the interactions between employment and welfare systems. A report was published in November 2008 which specifically addressed the position in Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland. The report covered a number of areas including:

- Key trends and outcomes in relation to economic and labour market status, coverage and expenditure on disability benefits, and the impact of outside factors such as the ageing population;
- Evaluation of recent and ongoing reforms of sickness and disability-related policies in the reviewed countries;
- The role of the State in encouraging or discouraging inflows and outflows from benefits through better management and assessment procedures;
- The involvement of employers in job retention and recruitment among people with disabilities;
- The financial incentives and disincentives of work and benefits for people with a disability; and
- Institutional structures, institutional co-operation and governance within the reviewed countries.

The report noted that Ireland was at an early stage of structural reform although it noted that Ireland has recognised many of the challenges it faces and that various reforms were under discussion or planned (e.g. in relation to the employment strategy and activation initiatives). The report contained a number of recommendations in relation to enhancing the systematic engagement with customers, boosting the quality of employment support for people with disabilities; modernising the benefit system and the disability assessment process; and improving financial incentives for workers and raising the involvement of employers. These recommendations will inform the development of policy in these key areas in the years to come.

With respect to the Department's commitment to supporting carers, the report of the Working Group on long-term care was published by the Department of Health and Children in early 2008. The bulk of the recommendations lie within the remit of the HSE and the Department of Health and Children. One of the recommendations was the introduction of a structured consultation process involving carer's representative groups and relevant Departments and Agencies. The Department arranged the third consultation meeting with the carer's representative groups, which was held in December 2008.

The Department of Health and Children's Home Care Package Review, whose steering committee includes the Department, was undertaken during 2009.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs met with the consultants to advise them on the range of income supports available for carers and encouraged them to engage with carers as part of the Review. It is expected that the Review will be completed before the end of 2009.

During 2008, an Inter-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, with secretariat support provided by the Department of Social and Family Affairs, undertook work to develop a National Carers' Strategy. Faced with the current economic situation, it was not possible to set targets or time lines which could be achieved. In that context, rather than publishing a document which does not include any significant plans for the future, the Government decided in February 2009 not to proceed with publication of a National Carers' Strategy.

**Objective 17: Effectively engage with persons of working age, particularly marginalised groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training and educational or development opportunities**

**Ensure that services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitate full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming agenda**

Monthly meetings are held between the Department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and FÁS under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU sets out an agreed framework for the continuance, enhancement and expansion of the existing administrative and operational arrangements that Social Welfare Services and FÁS agree to apply to their separate and joint efforts to service the needs of unemployed people, people with disabilities and single parents, in addition to tackling unemployment and inactivity. It ensures a high degree of co-operation between the organisations. Its main aim is to have an agreed framework that documents the operational arrangements in both organisations to facilitate unemployed people to take up or return to employment. Some of the challenges facing FÁS and the Department are facilitating such groups as long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, immigrants, redundant workers and career changers to find employment. The MOU framework allows this to happen in a collaborative fashion.

Disability Allowance (DA) recipients aged 16-25 are included in the Disability Activation Project's (DAP) invitations to interviews. DA is payable to persons from age 16 and, as the DAP is totally inclusive of anyone in receipt of a disability/illness payment from the Department, DA recipients of all ages are

included, as appropriate, in invitations issued to engage with the Project. An example of an initiative supporting this age cohort involved the participation of 20 Leaving Certificate students with disabilities in a School Leaving Preparation Workshop which was integrative in approach and included students from a Special Needs School in the Westmeath area. The aim of the Workshop was to provide assistance to students to make the transition from secondary school through a range of practical life modules and additional holistic approaches.

**Objective 18: Ensure income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities seeking accepting or improving employment**

**Ensure that payments and supports for Carers are efficient and effective and are adaptable to their needs in a changing care environment**

The Dormant Accounts Board in its 2006 report, identified carers as a target group for priority support under the economic and social disadvantage element of its disbursement plan. Carers have been identified as a priority theme under the 'Economic and Social Disadvantage Category' in the Dormant Accounts allocation for 2007. The focus of the carers measure is to provide training to assist carers in undertaking their caring role. The Department of Social and Family Affairs is the lead Department for this measure and the funding is being channelled through the Department's Vote. Pobal are administering the measure on behalf of the Department and are responsible for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Applications were assessed by Pobal and 12 groups were approved for funding in December 2008 totalling €1.48 million. Groups have commenced the draw-down of funding and it is expected full draw-down will take place during 2009 and 2010.

**Objective 19: Ensure that all offices are fully accessible to persons with disabilities and staff members with disabilities**

To ascertain the degree of access to the Department's offices, 12 access audits were carried out in 2007. To enhance customer service for people with disabilities, hearing loop systems are installed as standard in all new Departmental offices or as part of major refurbishments.

Over the period of the Plan, 12 new Departmental offices, fully compliant with accepted accessibility standards, were established. Refurbishment projects were carried out in existing offices featuring automated doors, installation of lifts and installation of accessible toilets. In addition, the Department opened new Medical Assessment Centres in Tullamore and Athlone during this period.

Section 26(2) of the Disability Act 2005 requires each public body to have at least one officer authorised to act in the capacity of 'access officer'. In accordance with this provision, the Department has appointed a number of Access Officers. These Officers are responsible for providing assistance and guidance to persons with disabilities accessing the services provided by the Department. The Department has also appointed Inquiry Officers in accordance with Section 39(1) of the Disability Act 2005. Contact details for Access Officers and Inquiry Officers are available on the Department's website.

**Objective 20: Ensure that goods or services that are supplied to the Department are accessible to people with disabilities**

**Ensure that ICT goods or services that are supplied to the Department are accessible to staff with disabilities**

In order to ensure that goods or services that are supplied to the Department are accessible to people with disabilities Information Systems staff have been trained to consider the accessibility needs of all users, including people with disabilities and to take these into account when designing and programming the Department's ICT applications. These include direct integration with the latest technology for displaying Windows/screens as well as direct integration with JAWS screen reader for people with severe sight disabilities.

The Department allocated a budget to purchase Assistive Technology equipment for staff with disabilities. A needs assessment procedure has been put in place whereby a cross-functional team which includes representatives from Personnel, Health & Safety and Information Systems meet with the staff member and his or her line manager. A knowledge-base has been built and the needs assessment team give advice on tasks that can be undertaken by the staff member or on how a line manager can re-arrange the tasks within the workplace to better suit the staff member. This is to allow the staff member with a disability the option to undertake a range of tasks so that he or she has access to duties that will give him or her the potential to progress in their careers. On the basis of a needs assessment, the staff member may be invited to attend a professional assessment for Assistive Technology with one of the various organisations that specialise in the field of their particular disability. Based on the report received, the Department purchases the equipment necessary to enhance the staff member's work environment.

Information Systems staff periodically research new technologies that may benefit staff with disabilities in their working life. They liaise with organisations which deal with particular disabilities and attend equipment exhibitions.

Departmental staff who use particular Assistive Technology, user test each new implementation of systems before rollout. Staff with disabilities have user tested and provided feedback for the Department's time and attendance system, payslip enquiry system and websites. A good relationship has been built between developers and users due to this initiative.

The Department's template tender documents for both ICT and non-ICT supplies and services conform to W3C Triple A standards, National Disability Authority (NDA) guidelines and ICT supplies and services supplied must be able to facilitate installation of appropriate Assistive Technology as required. This measure was put in place to ensure that all new applications and systems are accessible with the range of Assistive Technology in use by staff. To assist the Department to move towards accessible systems, links have been established with the NDA and the Department also liaises with companies which test for accessibility across the range of disabilities.

**Objective 21: Deliver (and support the delivery of) a quality, comprehensive and up-to-date information service for customers with Disabilities and ensure compliance with Section 28 of the Disability Act 2005**

The primary objective of the Department's information policy is to ensure that all citizens are made aware of the wide range of schemes and services available and that they are kept informed of changes and improvements as they occur. The Department provides information in a clear and accessible manner to its customers and funds organisations that assist in the provision of social welfare information, including the Citizens Information Board, which comes under the aegis of the Department.

There are 130 Social Welfare offices throughout the country where customers can obtain information and guidance and where the implications of a person taking up temporary employment can be explained in detail. In larger local offices there are staff dedicated to information provision duties who are available to explain all the Department's supports and services and to help and assist people in completing application forms and accessing their entitlements.

In addition, the Department produces a comprehensive range of information leaflets covering each social welfare payment or scheme. These are available in a wide range of outlets across the country, including all Social Welfare Local Offices and Branch Offices, Citizens Information Centres, Post Offices and in other locations such as local community centres.

Translation and Interpretation Services are available at all Social Welfare Local Offices upon request. A Mobile Phone Interpretation Service is also being

piloted for use by Inspectors. The services of a Sign Language Interpreter are made available when required. Information in alternative formats, such as Braille, audio and larger print is available upon request. Information Services staff receive ongoing training and support in delivering information on disability services.

To further enhance accessibility and with the assistance of the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), the Department developed a Plain English style guide and six of the Department's information booklets have been accredited with the NALA Plain English mark.

In 2006, a comprehensive information campaign was undertaken to promote awareness of supports for carers. Advertisements were broadcast on television and radio and were published in both national and local newspapers. All advertisements carried the LoCall information number, 1890 662244. A broad mix of advertising was used in order to achieve the widest reach, including advertising in the publications of Community and Voluntary Organisations.

The Department, by funding through its Information Services, supports various information initiatives. For example:

- The National Council for the Blind of Ireland to produce an information leaflet about the support and services available to people who are experiencing significant sight loss;
- Care Alliance Ireland to produce and distribute four quarterly newsletters aimed at keeping family carer organisations briefed on the latest policy developments and research and promoting the issues facing family carers amongst their members and supporters;
- Mental Health Ireland to design, print and distribute an information leaflet to inform people who suffer mental health problems about their social welfare entitlements. The leaflet was launched in December 2008;
- The Irish Deaf Society in respect of a series of six Information Roadshows; and
- The Irish Wheelchair Association in 2008 to extract information and welfare rights and translate this information into a readable, step-by-step format in order to facilitate ease of access for people with disabilities.

Following a review of the Department's website [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) in 2006, a new website, which is AA+ compliant with accessibility standards, was launched in September 2008.

The Citizens Information Board's strategic approach includes the enhancement of advocacy services to the general public through the Citizens Information Services (CIS) focusing on access to services, welfare entitlements and employment rights. This type of mainstream advocacy is also open to people with disabilities and the Community and Voluntary Sector Advocacy programme is creating close links with the CIS to ensure that people with disabilities are encouraged and supported to use the mainstream services where possible. The advocacy capacity was strengthened through the introduction of Advocacy Resource Officers Pilot Projects. The nine Advocacy Resource Officers engaged under these pilot projects have worked to build the capacity of information providers within the Citizens Information Services to advocate on behalf of customers.

**Objective 22: Ensure that Disability Workplace management is an integral feature of the Department's HR Strategy, Policies and Practice**

Meetings of the Monitoring Committee, established to monitor compliance by the Department and the Agencies under its aegis, with the provisions in the Disability Act applying to public service employment, took place on a regular basis during the period of the Sectoral Plan. The Agencies submitted reports in respect of 2008 and these were considered by the Monitoring Committee and further contact made with the Agencies as appropriate. A Report covering all the Agencies under the aegis of the Department in respect of 2008 was submitted to the Minister and the National Disability Authority at the end of June 2009 in accordance with the statutory requirement.

The Department has appointed a dedicated Disability Liaison Officer whose primary role is to support employees with a disability, to promote their interests and to liaise and co-operate with internal and external service providers in ensuring that specific needs are met. The role also includes the collation of information of the numbers of staff with disabilities in the Department.

The Department's commitment to supporting staff with disabilities is included in its *Human Resources Strategy 2009 to 2012* which was published in 2009. Key actions to develop and deliver a number of initiatives, identified in Objective 7 of the Strategy, 'Fostering a Culture of Equality and Diversity', include:

- Training and awareness raising programmes, in relation to equality and diversity;
- Improvement of the supports available to staff with disabilities within the Department; and
- Implementation of the HR management-related provisions of the Sectoral Plan, which includes disability workplace management.

The Department won awards in all six categories in the O<sub>2</sub> Ability Awards in 2007. The categories were Leadership, Environment Accessibility, Customer Service, Recruitment and Selection, Learning, Development and Progression, Retention and Wellbeing.

**Objective 23: Ensure that the recruitment of persons with disabilities is developed with the Public Appointments Service**

Over the period of the Sectoral Plan, the Department liaised with the Public Appointments Service regarding best practice in the area of recruitment and assignment of staff with disabilities.

The Department participated in the 2008 Willing Able Mentoring programme which provides work placements for graduates with a disability. In addition, it took part in the Job Shadow Initiative co-ordinated by the Irish Association for Supported Employment in 2009.

**Objective 24: Ensure that all staff with disabilities or who acquire a disability are fully supported in the workplace and can realise their potential**

The Department continued to support staff through a formal Needs Assessment Process which enables any necessary workplace accommodations to be identified and met for new entrants and existing staff.

The disability information on the HR Intranet Site was developed to provide comprehensive support material for staff and managers. The material is maintained and enhanced on an ongoing basis.

In order to facilitate the deployment of Assistive Technology, a structure has been established which ensures the fast tracking of requests for specialised equipment. A ring-fenced budget has been designated solely for the procurement and research of Assistive Technology. Links have been established with external disability organisations so that staff can be assessed for the type of equipment best suited to their needs.

**Objective 25: Ensure that Disability Awareness is raised and enhanced across the Human Resource function, within the Department of Social and Family Affairs and Agencies**

The Department's Disability Awareness Guidelines, initially produced in 2005, were expanded to provide information on Mental Health issues. The Guidelines are distributed to all staff at least once a year and are given to new staff attending induction training courses.

Training was provided for HR staff on how to provide 'reasonable accommodation' for staff members to enable them to assist managers in

identifying and meeting staff needs. Training on Mental Health was given to HR Staff in 2007 by Mental Health Ireland following which a Mental Health Awareness Programme has been delivered to Departmental staff and will continue on an ongoing basis, as required.

The Department also provided courses, in conjunction with the Irish Deaf Society, on deaf awareness and an introduction to Irish Sign Language.

**Objective 26: Ensure compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act Systematically develop personal and career progression opportunities for staff with disabilities**

Under Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005, a statutory employment target of people with disabilities of 3% was established for all public bodies. Compliance with this target is monitored by the National Disability Authority and the Department reports annually on its compliance. The compliance figure is based on self-disclosure by staff members. The Department has exceeded this target in both 2007 (4.8%) and 2008 (4.5%).

A Career Progression for Staff with Disabilities Sub-Group was established to explore and report on any impediments to career progression for staff with a disability. A report was produced in 2009 and the actions identified will form part of future policy and initiatives in this area. The consultation with staff through this type of forum is acknowledged by the Department as a valuable resource to identify and improve its supports to staff members.

**Objective 27: Objective: Provide and promote advocacy services, particularly for people with disabilities, consistent with our role and remit**

Under the provisions of the Citizens Information Act 2007, the name of Comhairle, which was established in 2000 with responsibility for the provision directly to the public of independent information and advice on social services, was changed to the Citizens Information Board (CIB) in order to more clearly represent the functions of the organisation and to link it directly to the services and supports it provides, i.e. citizens information.

The statutory basis for the introduction of a personal advocacy service under the CIB was also provided for in the Citizens Information Act 2007. However, it has not been possible to date to proceed with the provision of the personal advocacy service as planned having regard to budgetary circumstances. The provision of an advocacy service for all citizens, including those with a disability, remains a priority for the Government, the Department, and the CIB.

The CIB has developed a Community and Voluntary Sector Advocacy Programme for people with a disability and has funded 46 separate advocacy projects. The overall focus of the programme is on representative advocacy for people with a disability. Projects either operate within a specific geographic area or are focused on a particular disability type. Each of the projects poses different challenges, some requiring more intensive work with smaller caseloads while others have larger caseloads with shorter periods of customer contact. Up to the end of October 2009, some 5,550 members of the public availed of the services provided by the projects. The CIB is monitoring the Community and Voluntary Sector Advocacy Programme to ensure that the projects are operating in accordance with the Board's advocacy guidelines.

An independent evaluation was carried out between 2007 and 2008 of the Advocacy Resource Officers Pilot Projects, which are due to conclude in the first quarter of 2010. Based on the recommendations of the evaluation and, in light of the current economic situation, a proposal was put forward to the CIB by the National Advocacy Resource Officer Steering Group for a permanent structure to support advocacy work in the CIS. This proposal involves the deployment of nine Advocacy Support Worker posts to provide support to the full network of 42 Citizens Information Services. Given the wider remit of the proposed Advocacy Support Worker under this proposal, the role will necessarily change to involve a greater emphasis on remote support as well as a focus on training and capacity building.

'Advocacy Practice', an 8 part course, was developed for information providers and delivered in 2008. The CIB provides advocacy training for CIS personnel by means of an accredited Information Providers' Programme (IPP) validated by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). It is designated at Level 6 on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) framework. The Programme is aimed primarily at the Information Providers, both paid and unpaid staff, who work for the Citizens Information Services. However, information providers from other organisations frequently participate. As at June 2009, 63 students graduated from the Sligo Institute of Technology and the Waterford Institute of Technology. The CIB continues to work with the Sligo Institute of Technology to review the Higher Certificate in Arts in Advocacy and to develop it to degree level. As part of the Advocacy Practice course, the CIB provides two training days for advocates each year. Other courses provided include; Non-Instructed Advocacy, Case Management, Mediation and Negotiation Skills and the CIB provided a course in Disability Legislation, which was attended by 20 advocates, in April 2009.

A project, in association with Inclusion Ireland, is facilitating the development of self advocacy groups in St. Joseph's Disability Service in St. Ita's, Portrane.

## **Objective 28: Support equal access to information and social and civil services for all**

In line with the commitment of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) to continue to develop the Assist Ireland website and telephone help-line in partnership with other agencies, this website has been upgraded and went live from July, 2009. The phone line (1890 277 478) and email information service ([support@assistireland.ie](mailto:support@assistireland.ie)) received a total of 800 queries from January to end May 2009. An Assistive Technology seminar was jointly hosted by the CIB and Enable Ireland in January 2009. Those in attendance at the seminar gave positive feedback about the Assist service.

The CIB established the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) as an independent limited company and the service commenced in April 2007. A website and online booking facility has been developed by SLIS ([www.slis.ie](http://www.slis.ie)). During 2008, SLIS provided interpretive services to 2,000 customers with the highest demand from Third Level Colleges at almost 18% followed by public sector services at 14%. Health Services accounted for over 13% of bookings and voluntary organisations for deaf people and legal services, represented over 12% respectively.

Guidelines on removing barriers and improving access to information for everyone, which were originally published by the CIB in June 2005, were reviewed and updated. The Guidelines were redeveloped as a series of factsheets and are available on the CIB website since July 2009 with links to further resources on relevant websites.

The sixth Joint North/South Information Conference, hosted by the Department, was held in Cavan in October 2008. The Conference is hosted on alternative years by the Department and the Social Security Agency (SSA). The event brings together frontline staff from both organisations and provides an opportunity for them to share common experiences from their work-related activities. The Voluntary Sector and Information and Advice Sectors on both sides of the border are also invited.

The Department's website was the subject of an accessibility audit, carried out by the Centre for Inclusive Technology. The audit found that the site was clearly designed with accessibility in mind. In February 2009, the new site which meets the required XHTML, AAA standards, won the Irish eGovernment Accessibility Award.

**Objective 29: Develop pro-active initiatives to address the information, advice and advocacy needs of vulnerable and socially excluded groups, including people with disability, older people and foreign nationals**

To progress this objective, the 2006 edition of the SW4 Guide to Social Welfare Services (including those for people with disabilities), is available on the Department's website in Polish, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, French, Spanish, Romanian and Portuguese. A review of the number of downloads from the website in 2006 and 2007 was carried out in order to assess the value of continuing to translate into all of these languages. The review concluded that it is not cost effective to continue to translate into all of these languages. As a result, in 2008, the SW4 Guide was translated into Irish and Polish only.

Information Grant funding has been provided to the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed in 2009 for the latest edition of the 'Working for Work' booklet.

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) promotes access to information, advice and advocacy services through its three channel approach: online through [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie), by phone through the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and face-to-face through the Citizens Information Services (CIS) network. The website is fully accessible to users with disabilities and content is available in a number of languages. The CIPS offers a range of communications channels to facilitate people with disabilities and the CIS provide accessible premises and outreach services targeting vulnerable groups including people with disabilities. Omnibus Research, carried out by Millward Brown IMS in February and March 2007, indicated high satisfaction levels with the three information channels.

The CIB Regional Services work in collaboration with a range of organisations to address the information and advocacy needs of marginalised groups. In 2007, nineteen project initiatives were supported, of which six targeted people with disabilities. In addition the CIB published booklets titled *Information for Older People Initiative* and *Pathways to Information for Foreign Nationals* in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The CIB also has 21 Touch Screen Kiosks located in CISs to introduce online information to marginalised groups. This project was funded by the Department of the Taoiseach.

**Objective 30: Ensure organisational disability awareness is enhanced throughout the Department and at senior managerial level**

A disability awareness training programme was delivered to senior management in 2008. It included a review of actions under the Sectoral Plan, the provisions of the Disability Act 2005, the *Civil Service Code of Practice for*

*the employment of people with a disability in the Irish Civil Service and mobility/promotion progression for staff with disabilities.*

A Mental Health Awareness Programme is being delivered to staff and will continue, on an ongoing basis, as required. Mental Health Ireland and GROW (a Mental Health Organisation which helps people who have suffered, or are suffering, from mental health problems) both took part in the provision of this training, which gives an overview of the subject of mental health and how people can be affected by various conditions such as schizophrenia and depression. The training addresses the stigma associated with various conditions, fear of disclosure and managing a person's own mental health.