



INFORMATION NEEDS

ACTIONS

GOALS

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT



COMMITMENT

CUSTOMERS NEEDS



Information Services Strategy 2003-2006

*“Our commitment to meeting the
information needs of all our customers”*



Department of Social & Family Affairs



INTRODUCTION

Over the past three years, the Department has produced a number of strategy documents and programmes relating to the development of its services. All of these strategies contain a strong commitment to the provision of accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date information on social welfare schemes and services to all our citizens and to other information providers who serve the public:

- The Statement of Strategy 2001-2004 identified the “provision of comprehensive and accurate information in a clear and accessible manner to our customers, employers, staff and our external partners as being essential to the effective delivery of social welfare services”.
- The current Statement of Strategy 2003-2005 identified the same commitment as a specific objective coming under the high level goal of “promoting the development of adequate, secure and sustainable income support and related services and delivering appropriate services to the highest standards ...”
- The Customer Action Plan 2001-2004 highlighted the underlying objective of our information policy “which is to ensure that all citizens are made aware of their entitlements under a broad range of social insurance, social assistance and other supports and are kept informed of changes and improvements as they occur”.
- The Internal Customer Service Plan 2001-2004 identified a number of commitments aimed at our internal customers, including the publication of an Information Services Strategy.

Primary responsibility for the provision of information on all Departmental schemes and services rests with Information Services. This document sets out a strategy for those services of the Department which will enable the Department’s commitment to the provision of information to all those who require it to be fulfilled through a set of objectives and corresponding action points.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In implementing the Department's commitment to the provision of clear, accurate and up-to-date information, it is obvious that the range, variety and complexity of social welfare schemes and services poses a particular challenge to the effective delivery of information to members of the public and others involved in the dissemination of information on Departmental schemes and services.

Under the Strategic Management Initiative, Departments are required to produce a range of strategies and programmes as outlined above. To do this, Departments must analyse their own business environment, look at alternative strategies and present their business cases for change. This, together with the commitment to the provision of information contained in the Department's other strategy documents, is the primary context in which the Information Services Strategy is being formulated.

As part of the preparation of this document, an extensive consultation process with information providers, both internal and external, was undertaken. That process identified a number of problems and weaknesses with the current information dissemination arrangements. However, the MRBI Customer Survey 2001 showed that 90% of people surveyed were satisfied with the information they had received from the Department and also that over three-quarters of those surveyed perceived the Department as the first appropriate point of contact when they require information on social welfare services and schemes.

Those findings place a particular onus on the Department to ensure that the service provided to citizens is the best which can be provided.





In addition, the diverse means by which information is now accessed by customers and stakeholders, is focusing attention on the development of new and innovative ways of delivering information, such as web-based systems. However, it must also be borne in mind that many of those who require information on Departmental schemes and services may not have the resources to access information other than by traditional means. Furthermore, the Department tries to ensure that information delivery systems are both efficient and effective. All of these factors point the way towards the need for the development of a clear Information Services Strategy for now and into the medium term future.

The intention of this Strategy is to set out a plan for the next three years which will clearly articulate a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the future development and expansion of Information Services. This will, inevitably, include addressing, insofar as possible, the issues identified as problematic during the consultation process.

In delivering the Strategy, the Department will continue to have a very close working relationship with Comhairle, the national information agency for the provision of independent information, advice and advocacy services to all citizens, which comes under its aegis. The development of that relationship is of increasing importance in the future in relation to achieving the objectives of this Strategy. In that regard, the objectives outlined in Comhairle's Strategic Plan 2003-2006 have been taken account of in formulating this Strategy.

STATEMENT OF STRATEGY 2003 - 2005

In drafting its Statement of Strategy for the period 2003 to 2005 and having regard to its commitment to providing a quality service for all of its customers and stakeholders, the Department has identified a number of High Level Goals as broad statements of intent which are focused on outcomes and which relate to a particular sphere of activity. The High Level Goal most relevant to the activity of the Department's Information Services is that relating to Income Support, as follows:

“Promoting the development of adequate, secure and sustainable income support and related services and delivering appropriate services to the highest standards, in co-operation with other relevant agencies, and responsive to people's changing needs and entitlements, taking account of our responsibilities to contributors and tax-payers.”

4

Within that High Level Goal, the specific objective relevant to Information Services is

“to provide comprehensive and accurate information in a clear and easily accessible manner to customers, employers, staff and external partners.”

Taking that as its basis, the intention of the Strategy articulated in this document is to achieve that High Level Goal through six specific objectives which are expressed in terms of a range of corresponding actions capable of being measured or assessed.



OBJECTIVE 1

Information Dissemination

To develop and enhance the Department's Information Services, including the setting of standards for information content and dissemination processes.

ACTIONS

- Develop the central Information Services as a hub for the co-ordination of the delivery of all information on Departmental activity, thus giving Information Services responsibility for
 - the development of information policy in the future, in co-operation with other relevant sections of the Department,
 - the evaluation of information provision and the establishment of best practice, and
 - ensuring, in co-operation with other relevant sections of the Department, the accuracy, clarity and currency of all information disseminated, however provided.
- Develop an Information Officers' network, based in Local Offices, which will be the first port of call for the information needs of personal callers in relation to social welfare schemes and services.
- Promote usage of Information Services by internal customers as the primary contact point for information on schemes and services outside their direct knowledge or remit.



- Promote usage of telephone services as a vital and effective information access point in line with the proposal to develop a Telephone Services Team within Information Services which will ensure a more efficient and effective use of telephone services with particular regard to developments under the LoCall Project.
- Improve co-operation and co-ordination with other information providers, especially those with whom the Department has a funding relationship.
- Develop a corporate image for all information material produced by the Department which will be consistent with the overall corporate image of the Department.
- Promote the role of Information Services and the network of Information Officers through a publicity and awareness campaign. The use of a range of media, including local and community radio, will be a major element of that campaign.



OBJECTIVE 2

Information Delivery

To ensure the best possible delivery of Information Services in the context of this Strategy.

ACTIONS

- Determine, implement and monitor minimum standards for information delivery, including developing best practice and quality control in relation to design issues, forms and leaflets, publications, presentations, formats, etc.; monitoring the service provided by central Information Services staff and Information Officers; and ensuring the continued usage of the Department's corporate identity.
- Establish robust feedback systems for Departmental schemes and services from both internal and external customers so as to contribute to scheme based policy development and to efficiency and effectiveness reviews. Central to this action will be the development of a comprehensive customer query recording system.
- Through consultative fora, customer service panels and surveys designed to improve levels of customer services generally, seek to identify customer needs and expectations in relation to information provision. The information needs of people with disabilities and those who do not have access to electronic forms of information will require special consideration in this context. Information material produced by the Department will be evaluated in consultation with the National Adult Literacy Agency and other appropriate agencies to ensure the needs of customers with literacy problems and other special needs are met. A focus group of Information Officers, as provided for in the Internal Customer Service Plan, 2001-2004, will be established, in order to assist with the on-going evaluation of information provision.

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- Provide a quality information service through Irish in line with Civil Service-wide Quality Customer Service Principles and the requirements of the proposed Official Languages Equality legislation.
 - Provide a quality information service to non-national customers in co-operation with other relevant agencies and taking account of language and cultural differences.
 - Maximise the use of information technology so as to ensure that the potential in this area is realised with particular regard to the accessibility of information for those with special needs. The Department's website and OASIS (the internet based public service information system provided by Comhairle) are especially relevant information tools in this regard.
 - Maximise the opportunities for quality information provision arising in the development of the Department's new Service Delivery Model.
 - Review existing methods of information dissemination to ensure that, where appropriate, customers are made aware of all their entitlements and responsibilities when they make a claim under one of our services and schemes, and that changes and improvements to our services and schemes are publicised to our customers as they occur.
 - Improve co-operation and co-ordination with business areas of the Department in relation to information content and the efficiency and effectiveness with which information is disseminated. In this regard, proceed with the appointment of Information Co-ordinators within business areas to liaise with Information Services.
 - Provide support for all Departmental staff having direct contact with members of the public in the provision of information and advice.

- Develop appropriate links with the network of Community Welfare Officers working in Health Boards with a view to enhancing the provision of information on social welfare schemes and services through that medium.
- Promote and develop the range of information services available to employers, particularly with regard to the administration of the PRSI contribution system.
- Improve the co-ordination of Departmental activities in relation to information provision with a view to ensuring a more effective delivery of services, with particular regard to:
 - reviewing the role and functions of the Department's Dublin based Public Offices as a vital element of direct information provision, now under the responsibility of Information Services.
 - taking over responsibility for the management, design and overall content management of the Department's Website bearing in mind that business areas will still retain responsibility for the content pertaining to their specific schemes.
 - identifying ways of improving systems for the management and control of information related stock and materials with a particular focus on current operations, use of technology, stock control systems and potential for future development.



OBJECTIVE 3

Training and Support for Information Officers

To provide Information Officers based in Local Offices with the necessary training and support to enable them achieve the objectives of this Strategy, especially in terms of the development of local information services.

ACTIONS

- Review the current structure of Information Services in the light of its changing role and responsibilities.
- Develop an appropriate selection process for Information Officers.
- Initiate a comprehensive training needs analysis for Information Officers from which a training programme can be developed to provide them with the skills necessary to deliver an information service of the highest possible standard, including customer service training, interpersonal skills, IT skills and media skills.
- Develop a reporting structure for Information Officers which takes account of the need for an efficient and effective relationship with Information Services.
- Provide Information Officers with the necessary IT equipment, support and training, including access to OASIS, to enable them to make maximum use of information technology in their jobs.

OBJECTIVE 4

Development and Role of Central Information Services

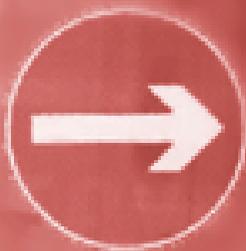
To provide staff in Information Services with an improved level of support and training given their central role in the development of an effective information service.

ACTIONS

- Provide staff in Information Services with the same level of training as provided to Information Officers.
- Re-organise central Information Services functions so as to provide greater clarity of purpose for staff and an improved working environment, with particular reference to:

Telephone Services

A Telephone Services Team will be developed so as to ensure a more efficient and effective use of telephone services and taking account of developments arising under the LoCall Project. The main features of this service will be a central telephone bank requiring staff training and support, access to IT facilities, and a recording system to monitor the volume and nature of calls received.

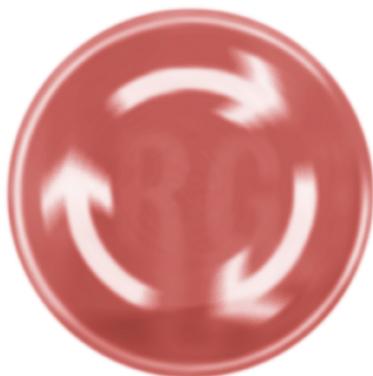


Forms Design

The current Forms Design Unit will be improved so as to ensure that the necessary skills, expertise and IT support are provided to this specialist area. The benefits will be a reduction in the timeframe for the production of new and revised literature and a greater throughput in terms of more frequent revisions and updates of printed literature. Account will be taken of the print media requirements of customers with special needs, including those with specific language deficits.

Advertising

The current Advertising Services will be improved with a focus on developing the potential to be pro-active in advertising the Department's schemes and services. In addition, the scope for utilising new and innovative ways of communicating information to our diverse range of customers which also meet value for money criteria will be pursued.





OBJECTIVE 5

Development of the Information Role of the Department's Local Office and Branch Office Network

To develop the Social Welfare Local Offices and Branch Offices as first points of contact for the information needs of personal callers in relation to social welfare schemes and services.

ACTIONS

- Work in partnership with local office management to improve the quality and effectiveness of the information giving process in the context of Local Offices being developed as information contact points.
- Ensure close co-operation between Information Services and other relevant sections of the Department in relation to the upgrading of Local Office facilities.
- Enhance the information role of Local Offices through a branding campaign which will clearly identify them as information contact points on all social welfare schemes and services and, in that way, help to improve the public perception of Local Offices.
- Ensure that the contribution of the Branch Offices to the information giving process is maximised. In this regard, relevant training and other supports similar to those provided to Information Officers will be provided, including participation in the development of a customer query recording and feedback system.



OBJECTIVE 6

Relationships with External Organisations.

To provide appropriate support to organisations providing accurate and independent information on social welfare services and schemes to citizens while recognising the Department's primary responsibility for the dissemination of information and advice on social welfare schemes and services.

The national information agency, Comhairle, is funded by and operates under the aegis of the Department. It supports the provision of independent information, advice and advocacy services on the full range of social services so as to ensure that citizens have access to accurate, comprehensive and clear information on those services. The principal delivery mechanism for those services is the network of Citizens Information Centres which are funded and supported by Comhairle.

The Department also supports a number of national information giving organisations under its scheme of grants for welfare rights and information projects by the independent information giving sector. Grants are provided by way of annual or project related funding.

ACTIONS

- Continue to play a significant role in contributing to, supporting, promoting and assisting in the implementation of the strategic aims and objectives of Comhairle, as provided for in its Strategic Plan. In this regard, a memorandum of understanding setting out the relationship with Comhairle will be put in place.

- Continue to develop, promote and enhance existing grant schemes aimed at supporting welfare rights and information projects by the independent information giving sector, having regard to new and emerging needs in the information dissemination area.
- Develop and foster links with other information giving organisations, including organisations in other countries, with a view to sharing experiences and keeping abreast of new developments and best practice in information dissemination.
- Improve the quality and accessibility of information aimed at potential emigrants and persons moving across borders, with particular reference to:
 - working with relevant agencies to respond to the information needs of emigrants so as to ensure that customers can access information and advice on emigration at a local level.
 - working with relevant agencies to meet the information needs of emigrants who are considering returning to Ireland.
 - responding to the information deficits identified in the recently published Report of the Task Force on Emigration Policy.
 - responding to the information needs of cross border workers identified in the North/South Ministerial Council's Report 'Obstacles to Mobility'.





IMPLEMENTATION

The objectives and corresponding actions described in this Strategy represent an integrated package of measures designed to secure the successful achievement of the goal identified for the Strategy. An implementation plan along the following lines will be put in place:

- the **establishment of priorities** within the objectives set with the development of the central role of Information Services in information co-ordination and dissemination being identified as a major priority in implementing the Strategy;
- the **development of a timetable** for achieving the objectives;
- the **establishment of a structure for managing the process** which involves the establishment of an Implementation Group representative of all main interests; and
- provision for an **evaluation process** designed to inform the future direction and development of Information Services beyond 2006.

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