



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Welfare Queries Top List As Over 700,000 Seek Advice Through Nationwide Network Of Information Services

Minister Brennan Visits Counties Louth & Monaghan To Open Citizen Information And MABS Offices

The Minister for Social Affairs, Seamus Brennan TD, today released statistics showing that the nationwide network of Citizen Information Centre (CIC) offices dealt with more than 700,000 queries from members of the public last year.

Minister Brennan said that according to the latest research and analysis social welfare queries accounted for over one third of all the queries, followed by employment, health services, family matters, housing and law issues.

Minister Brennan announced the latest statistics during official visits to Co. Louth and Co. Monaghan during which officially opened the Co. Louth Citizen's Information Centre (CIC) and the Drogheda MABS (Money Advice & Budgeting Service) offices and attended as Guest of Honour at the 25th anniversary celebrations for Monaghan Citizen's Information Centre (CIC). The Minister also visited local Social Welfare offices in both counties.

Minister Brennan also released the latest figures for the numbers of people in Co. Louth and Co. Monaghan who benefit from social welfare supports and entitlements. In Louth a total of 41,843 people, including almost 16,000 families who receive Child Benefit for over 30,000 children, benefit. For Monaghan the figure is over 18,000, including 7,000 families with over 14,000 children.

***(A full breakdown for both counties is detailed at the last page)**

The latest statistics for Citizen Information centres show that in 2005 a total of 733,879 queries were processed by centres nationwide -compared with 676,846 in 2004. A breakdown under the various categories showed 34% were about social welfare issues, 15% concerned employment queries, health services and payments (13%), family matters (7%) law (6%) housing (6%), tax (4%), consumer (3%), education (2%) and debt (1%). A range of general queries accounted for the remainder.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Brennan said: "These latest statistics clearly demonstrate the extent of the public's need for information on entitlements and rights. The Citizens Information Centres and outreach services provide a valuable and easily accessible network of information points that reach into every corner of the country. The provision of information on the scale provided helps break down barriers, eases anxieties, opens up opportunities and often clears the way for citizens, particularly those who are most vulnerable in society, to improve their situations and build better lives. When you consider that over 970,000 payments are made by my Department each week that in total benefit more than 1.5 million men, women and children, it is understandable why queries on welfare rights and entitlements should make up more than one third of overall information and advice queries."

The national network of citizens' information services is supported by Comhairle, the statutory body operating under the aegis of the Department of Social Affairs, with responsibility for the provision of information, advice and advocacy services. This year the Department is providing funding to Comhairle of over €24 million - €3 million more than in 2005 - of which almost €10 million is earmarked as support Citizens Information Services.

Minister Brennan paid a special tribute to the solid foundations that have been laid by the volunteers, and other staff, in the various Citizens Information Centres throughout Ireland.

He said these volunteers remain at the heart of the service and continue to give freely of their time and energies in order to ensure that the people can access information on their rights and entitlements and can be assured of helpful advice as they seek to work their way through often complex situations.

Co. Louth Citizens Information

The Co. Louth Citizen's Information service new offices in Drogheda presents a broader structure for the development of information services throughout the county. Since 2002 there has been considerable development within the Drogheda CIC in terms of staffing, extension of services and opening hours and the acquisition and



Department of Social and Family Affairs

refurbishment of the new offices in Mayoralty Street. The staff and volunteers of the CIC can now provide an advocacy service which acts as a direct link between the client and one or more Government departments or agencies. Last year Drogheda CIC dealt with over 6,000 queries compared with 4,000 in 2004.

Drogheda MABS

Minister Brennan also disclosed that last year alone almost 27,000 people countrywide used the MABS service compared with 18,000 some 4 years earlier. In that period 2000 to 2004 the number of new clients availing of MABS has more than doubled with a total of 16,000 new clients using the service. The number of MABS countrywide has grown to 52 and funding from the Department of Social Affairs has increased from €5 million in 2000 to over €16 million this year.

Minister Brennan said more and more people are recognising the value of the service MABS offers. As it is free, independent and confidential, it is very reassuring to an indebted person that they can reveal the most intimate details of their financial affairs to a money adviser in complete confidence.

Minister Brennan added: "Money Advisers encounter first hand the human face of serious debt situations. The impact on people and families can be horrendous with loss of dignity and indeed loss of self esteem. The nature of debt is varied and can range from small loans to difficulties with utilities bills such as electricity, gas and telephone bills, credit card debt, mortgage or rent arrears or indeed debt around life events such as First Communion, bereavements and weddings. The increase in the availability of credit to the public is emerging as another significant factor in the continuing rise in the numbers seeking help from MABS. The service is reaching out to people in debt, or in danger of sliding into debt, and helping them to regain control of their finances and budgets for the future".

The new Drogheda MABS office, which is located in the same building as the CIC office, has seen a doubling in recent years of the number of people availing of the service. The demand on the service can be attributed to the increase in the availability of credit and to the quality of the service provided by the MABS staff. Funding for the service has increased from €76, 000 in 2000 to almost €178, 000



Department of Social and Family Affairs

this year. In 2002 a special contribution of €225, 000 was made towards the purchase of offices.

Monaghan CIC Celebrations

County Monaghan Citizens Information Service today celebrated 25 years as a registered Citizens Information Centre and 37 years as an Information Centre. It provides free and confidential information, advice and advocacy service to the people of Co. Monaghan. People contact the service for information on a broad range of topics including Social Welfare rights and entitlements, employment rights and conditions, taxation, health etc. Last year the CIC dealt with 14,000 queries.

In partnership with Citizen Information services in both Meath and Louth, Co. Monaghan CIS was successful in tendering to be part of a pilot scheme established by Comhairle to employ an Advocacy Resource Officer to train and support staff to act on behalf of customers. An Advocacy Resource Officer has been appointed and staff have now begun to take on more queries which involve advocacy.

Monaghan CIS has a close association with the National Association for the Deaf and is the first CIS to have a profoundly deaf Information Officer who can provide a service to people in the community with hearing difficulties.

*** FULL BREAKDOWN FOR BOTH COUNTIES:**

DETAILS OF NUMBERS BENEFITING IN CO. LOUTH

Unemployment Payments:	6,743
Old Age Pensions:	4,421
Retirement Pension:	2,851
Pre-Retirement Pension:	347
Disability Benefit/Allowance:	4,090
Widow's & Widower's Pensions:	2,950
One-Parent Family Payment:	2,953
Supplementary Welfare Allowance:	984
Carer's Benefit/Allowance:	586
Child Benefit recipients:	15918 families with 30251 children
<i>Total benefiting in Co Louth:</i>	<i>41,843</i>



Department of Social and Family Affairs

NUMBERS BENEFITING IN CO. MONAGHAN

Unemployment Payments:	2,335
Old Age Pensions:	3,115
Retirement Pension:	960
Pre-Retirement Pension:	144
Disability Benefit/Allowance:	1,847
Widow's & Widower's Pensions:	1,636
One-Parent Family Payment:	859
Supplementary Welfare Allowance:	218
Carer's Benefit/Allowance:	452
Child Benefit recipients:	7058 families with 14461 children
<i>Total benefiting in Co Monaghan:</i>	<i>18,624</i>

Ends