



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Launches Citizens Information Bill To Deliver Major National Customer Friendly 'Know Your Rights' Information Service

Seamus Brennan - "Initiative Is A Major Overhaul And Modernisation Of Information Provision On All Social Services"

Bill Also Introduces New Personal Advocacy Service For People With Disabilities Who Have Difficulties Obtaining Social Services

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D. today published and officially launched the Citizen's Information Bill 2006 which will deliver a major new seamless and customer friendly national information and rights awareness service under one easily accessible and highly visible brand - Citizens Information.

Under the provisions of the new Bill the name of Comhairle, which was established in 2000 with responsibility for the provision directly to the public of independent information and advice services on social services, will be changed to the Citizens Information Board (An Bord um Fhaisnéis do Shaoránaigh).

Minister Brennan today also announced the appointment of Mr. Chris Glennon, a former Political Correspondent of the Irish Independent, as the new Chairman of Comhairle.

The Minister also launched the Citizens Information Strategic Plan 2006-2009 which is designed to meet the needs of a dramatically changing and evolving 21st century Ireland society, in which the delivery of independent, quality, accurate and integrated information is a priority, including meeting the challenge of immigration from new EU Member States and elsewhere.



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Unveiling details of the Citizens Information Bill, Minister Brennan announced that one of its primary purposes is the setting out of the legislation for the introduction, under the Citizen's Information Board, of a new personal advocacy service for people with disabilities. The new service represents a huge step forward for this most vulnerable group within society and will have the result of significantly improving the position of people with disabilities who up to now may have encountered difficulties in applying for, or obtaining, a social service.

Minister Brennan said: "The new Citizens Information Bill, combined with the implementation plan set out in the Strategic Plan, represents a major overhaul and modernisation of the provision of information on all social services and will deliver an integrated and seamless supply of high quality and independent information to the entire population, and in particular, those in society who are most vulnerable and in need of supports. The provision of independent, clear and accessible information has a central role in helping to break down barriers, eases anxieties, opens up opportunities and very 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. However, there are many other social issues, such as employment, health services, housing, education, family concerns and consumer rights, which people need access to information on. We now have the blueprint for the start of a new and exciting era in the provision of an information service that is geared to meet the needs and demands of an expanding and increasingly diverse 21st century Ireland".

The Citizens Information Bill will be introduced into the Dáil next week and the legislation is expected to become law before the end of 2006.



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The major information, advice and advocacy initiative includes:

- A high quality, customer-focused integrated information service on all aspects of social and civil services to assist people in securing their rights and entitlements.
- The drawing together of three separate existing channels of information under one clearly visible and easily accessible brand name - Citizens Information.
- Delivery of a one brand Citizen Information services through more than 230 Citizens Information centres, the Internet and a single phone number. Also the harnessing of new and emerging technologies to further improve and expand the availability of information.
- A commitment to increased funding to allow the new Citizens Information Board to increase, improve and expand information services. Total funding in the region of €55 million will be provided for the period 2006-2007.
- Additional funding for the developing and facilitating of advocacy services which will provide for the assignment of a personal advocate to a person with a disability to assist them in overcoming barriers to full participation in society. Estimates on additional funding required currently being prepared.
- The appointment of a Director of the Personal Advocacy Service who will have responsibility for the management and control of the service. Also, arrangements for an independent appeals process where the applicant is dissatisfied with a decision regarding his or her eligibility for the assignment of a personal advocate.
- The undertaking of nationwide, high profile information and awareness campaigns by the Citizens Information Board on specific social services and welfare issues.
- Increased and targeted emphasis on the provision of clear and accessible information for all immigrants on their rights, entitlements and supports.
- Changing the name of Comhairle to the Citizens Information Board so that it better reflects and clearly identifies the core responsibility of this statutory



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body which is supporting and promoting greater accessibility and public awareness of social services and the provision and dissemination of integrated information.

- Changes to the terms of office and the membership of the Citizens Information Board. The number of members will be reduced from 20 to 15 members while the term of office is being extended from 3 to 5 years. These provisions are designed to provide greater continuity in the leadership of the organisation to the benefit of relationships between voluntary and community information providers throughout the country.

Under the existing Comhairle services three separate information channels operate:

- The OASIS website which, in 2005, reached nearly 2.5 million people.
- The Citizens Information Service, providing a face-to-face service at 235 locations, which in 2005 dealt with almost 734,000 queries.
- And the Citizens Information Phone Service which dealt with almost 88,000 queries in 2005.
- All three will now be branded under the one easily identifiable title-Citizen Information.

Outlining details of the new advocacy service, Minister Brennan said: "The position of people with disabilities will be significantly improved by the introduction of the new service, which will provide for the assignment of a personal advocate to a person with a disability, who would otherwise have difficulty in applying for or obtaining a social service. People with disabilities face many barriers to full participation in society. By targeting this most vulnerable group for particular attention through increased supports and interventions, such as that which is represented by the Personal Advocacy Service provisions of this Bill, the Government is delivering on its commitment to contribute in a very meaningful way to the productivity, independence and total integration of people with disabilities into all aspects of society."



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Minister Brennan said that in recent years he had introduced a programme of funding for a multitude of projects in the voluntary and community sector, which were designed to develop and provide advocacy services to people with disabilities around the country. This programme is being delivered by lead organisations in the voluntary and community sector, including service providers, community groups and organisations representing people with disabilities. In fact, this year the overall focus of these projects is on those people with disabilities who are most vulnerable, particularly those living in residential care settings. "It is my resolve to ensure that the advocacy services provided for by these projects are of the highest quality and that the community and voluntary programme continues to be underpinned with strong values and principles, always keeping the person with the disability at the centre of the service."

The Citizens Information Bill sets out the role of the personal advocate as:

- Assisting, supporting and representing the qualified person to apply for and obtain a social service.
- Pursuing any right of review or appeal on behalf of the qualifying person.
- Providing support and training to a qualified person and any member of his or her family, a carer or any other person representing his or her interests in order to promote the best interests of his or her health, welfare and well-being.
- Entering any place that provides day care, residential care or training for the qualifying person to represent his or her interests.
- Assessing information, attending meetings or consultations, and identifying any person who may assist the qualifying person, subject to the requirements of data protection legislation.

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