



Minister Says New Legislation Will Deliver Improved And Expanded Information To All Citizens On Their Rights And Entitlements

Brennan Launches Co. Wicklow Citizens Information Network & Visits Award Winning School Sports Project

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., said today that significant improvements in the delivery of access to information on basic rights and entitlements to State services, especially for those most vulnerable in society and for migrants coming to Ireland, will soon be delivered under new legislation.

Minister Brennan said that the new Citizen's Information Bill, which will be introduced into the Dáil next week, and is expected to become law before the end of 2006, will deliver a seamless and customer friendly national information and rights awareness service under one easily accessible and highly visible brand - Citizens Information.

The Minister also disclosed 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 was speaking when launching the County Wicklow Citizens Information Network in Laragh. The first citizens information centre in Co. Wicklow was established in Bray in 1972 and now, 34 years later, there are also centres in Arklow and Wicklow Town and outreach services in Baltinglass and Carnew.

In 2005, Co. Wicklow Citizens Information Network dealt with 11,968 queries and for the first six months of 2006, there has been an increase of 43% over the same period last year. The Minister also presented certificates to over 30 people who have undertaken initial training in information provision in the county.

During his official visit to Co. Wicklow, Minister Brennan also visited East Glendalough School in Wicklow Town to celebrate its success in the national Young Social Innovators Awards with its original project - "Sports for All" - winning the Social and Family Affairs Communications Award. The school project team designed a



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sports programme that all students, including those with a disability, can take part in. Games include chair volleyball, blindfolded dodge ball and 3-legged basketball. The school now aims to create on video a unique P.E. curriculum for primary and secondary schools that will allow all pupils to take part.

Under the provisions of the new Citizens Information 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).

One of the Bill's 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 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, 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."

Minister Brennan said that all the major sources of information and advice will now be grouped under the one easily identifiable and accessible brand of Citizens Information. This week, the new Citizens Information website (www.citizensinformation.ie) will replace the OASIS site, which in 2005, reached nearly 2.5 million people. The one brand will also apply to the 235 Citizen Information Centres, which in 2005 dealt with almost 734,000 queries, and the Citizens Information Phone Service which had almost 88,000 queries in 2005.



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Speaking in Co. Wicklow, Minister Brennan said: "Every weekday, all over the country, people give up their time to ensure that others are made aware of their rights and entitlements. The Citizens Information Centre volunteers are models of personal participation in the community. The growing complexity and range of legislation and services in our modern society makes it difficult for citizens to be aware of the full range of their rights and entitlements. Citizens Information Centres allow people to obtain impartial, accurate information that can enable them to access their entitlements. While providing information, advice and advocacy to all strata of society, Citizens Information Centres provide particularly needed support to less advantaged groups such as those with disabilities, those living in areas of disadvantage and the thousands of immigrants coming to our country every month."

The Minister said that County Wicklow Citizens Information Network had responded to this challenge by providing information, advice and advocacy to these new arrivals. Information for new arrivals has been printed in a number of languages. In Bray CIC a Chinese volunteer provides a weekly information service for members of the Chinese community.

County Wicklow Citizens Information Network

Co. Wicklow Citizens Information Network provides a free and confidential information and advocacy service in the areas of:

- Social Welfare Rights and Entitlements
- Taxation
- Housing
- Employment Rights
- Health
- Local Information
- Careers Information
- Consumer Advice
- Legal Advice

Bray CIC has a Chinese information service, launched in 2005, which is available 3 hours per week. Free financial advice is available 2 hours per week. Free legal advice is available through a legal advice bureau for 2 hours per week. Wicklow County Enterprise Board has a clinic once a week providing information and advice for entrepreneurs interested in starting their own business. The National Association for



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Deaf People (NAD) has an outreach clinic once a month, where supports and information for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People is provided.

In **Arklow CIC** a Free legal advice is available through a Legal Advice Bureau (LAB) for 2 hours on the last Thursday of every month. There is a weekly domestic counselling service available from the centre and this is provided by Bray Women's Refuge.

In **Wicklow Town CIC** the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), which assists people who are in debt or in danger of getting into debt, operates every Wednesday morning from the centre by appointment and Wicklow Working Together provides a support service to long term unemployed people on Monday afternoons.

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