



Speech by

Mr Martin Cullen, T.D.

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

on the occasion of the

Citizens Information Board's Conference

Citizens Information – Information to Advocacy

In the Tullamore Court Hotel, Tullamore, Co. Offaly

On Friday, 12 October 2007



Chairperson, Mr Chris Glennon; Citizen Information Board members; Chief Executive, Ms Leonie Lunny; guest speakers; Citizens Information Service and Citizens Information Phone Service staff and volunteers, ladies and gentlemen:

I am delighted to be here this morning at your national conference 'Citizens Information – Information to Advocacy' and I wish to thank the Citizens Information Board Chair Chris Glennon for extending this invitation to me to join you here in Tullamore.

This is my first opportunity to address Board members and staff of the Citizens **Information Board** and equally the Boards of management, staff and volunteers of **Citizens Information Services** and the **Citizens Information Phone Service**. I had the opportunity to meet Leonie Lunny in Dundalk on the 4th October where the Co. Louth Citizens Information Service launched a useful booklet - *Information for Parents of Children with a Disability*. I am pleased to be here with you again Leonie and indeed with all of your colleagues. You have this opportunity to come together every other year to focus on the business of Citizens Information. I know this conference is focusing on how you can continue to respond to the challenges posed by the changing society within which your services operate and how you can offer convenient means of access to your customers, while being mindful of value for money and accountability. I hope your day and a half gathering is very fruitful and productive.

I know this is the first national conference for personnel of Citizens Information Services since the Board's name changed to Citizens Information Board and its functions expanded.

My Department is very supportive of the work of the Board. Increased funding has been provided to the Board each year, rising from just over €12 million in 2001 (its first full year of operation) to over €28 million this year. Officials in my Department have established a close and positive working relationship with the Board's officials and I intend to maintain and build on that relationship into the future.

Since your last conference, a 'new look' for Citizens Information has been developed. The strategic approach to providing information under a single brand, Citizens Information, was strengthened last year with the design and selection of



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a new logo. This new logo aims to strengthen public awareness of Citizens Information.

Your Brand has certainly been strengthened in my view, together with the promotion of your three core areas of work –

- the citizens information website (www.citizensinformation.ie)
- the Citizens Information Phone Service and
- the network of Citizens Information Services located throughout the country.

Your three channel approach is very much in keeping with current thinking. I am aware of the promotional campaigns that have been undertaken in the media to heighten awareness of your services for the public and I understand that business is increasing year on year. In fact, in the first six months of this year there were:

- 949,000 visitors to the citizens information website;
- 58,000 telephone queries to the Citizens Information Phone Service which also dealt with 12,600 email queries; and
- there were 311,400 callers to the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services which generated nearly 450,000 queries.

The importance of information provision cannot be over emphasised. Like all public representatives, I am very familiar with the fact that people's rights and entitlements can so often stand or fall on the quality of information available to them and on the level of access to information. The objective of the information provider is to bridge the gap between the citizen in need and the wide variety of services that are available to meet those needs.

Information services which can direct individuals and particularly those who are marginalised, to their rights and entitlements are essential. Your approach to reaching out to particular groups through presentations and outreach into day centres, hospitals and prisons for example, helps to ensure access to information. It is not just about providing basic information, very often it is about interpreting the information for the customer, and assisting them to act on the information they have received.

While advocacy support has always been provided by Citizens Information Services, the further development of advocacy services is to be welcomed, as this is an added value you can bring to the information experience for those who need it. It is also of great importance that people can choose the means of accessing information that is most convenient for them whether that be through use of the internet, the making of a telephone call, or taking the opportunity to drop into a local Citizens Information Centre or outreach service.



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I have been very interested in following the progress of the new Citizens Information website, primarily because I was a user of its predecessor, the OASIS website. This new website has been developed in the context of public service modernisation initiatives for citizens. It is an excellent resource for the public and for information providers, **including TDs in their local clinics**. I was delighted to hear of the United Nations World Summit award, which was recently won by the Citizens Information Board for this website.

The cross-border work you have engaged in along with your colleagues in Citizen Advice, Northern Ireland is another very important dimension to the Services you provide and I note you have Pat Hutchinson, presenting from a Citizen Advice Bureau on some of the challenges they have encountered in embracing change.

While I know that 85% of queries to the Citizens Information Phone Service are telephone queries, the expansion of service to include email queries (which come in through the citizen information website); text messages; live advisor service and videophone further increases people's options in accessing information. I would like to take this opportunity myself to thank the Citizens Information Phone Service for the assistance it has been providing to my Department. The Service has dealt with additional telephone calls received during recent advertising campaigns which were run to promote various schemes operated by my Department. Your help is very much appreciated.

I am glad to note too the continuing involvement of volunteers in the delivery of services by Citizens Information Services. The continued involvement on a voluntary basis by members of a community to meeting the needs of their neighbours is to be lauded and encouraged. I am aware that in some areas, foreign nationals are volunteering their time, and are being provided with the necessary training in order to deliver a service to those for whom language is a barrier.

Part of your brief is to assist and support individuals particularly those with disabilities in identifying their needs and options and in accessing rights to social services. In this regard the Citizens Information Act 2007 provided for the introduction by your organisation of a range of advocacy services including a Personal Advocacy Service.

The passing of this Citizens Information Act 2007 has marked another key milestone in the implementation of the National Disability Strategy. The Act along with the Disability Act 2005, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, the launch of six Sectoral Plans; and the commitment to a multi-annual *Investment Programme for Disability Support Services* represent an



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historic commitment to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Ireland.

(I know there have been developments too - which the Board has been heavily involved in – the recent establishment of the Sign Language Interpreting Service. The Service is funded and supported by the Citizens Information Board. Its key objective is making public services more accessible to the deaf community).

Citizens Information Services as I have said, have traditionally involved themselves in advocacy as part of the continuum of information, advice and advocacy. Customers have been assisted over the years through referrals to appropriate agencies, by assistance in dealing with service providers and in taking appeals where relevant. Indeed, I see that the conference programme includes an input by the Director and Chief Appeals Officer of the Social Welfare Appeals Office, Brian Flynn, in relation to Advocacy and Social Welfare Appeals.

I am very glad to see that this advocacy capacity is being strengthened in Citizens Information Services through the support of Advocacy Resource Officers and I understand that by the end of 2007, nine such projects will be in operation across 24 services. Services are being established around the country, advocates are being recruited and trained, and organisations are working in partnership to maximise resources and build on the expertise available to ensure people particularly with disabilities are supported to give voice to their needs. I know we have some way yet to go, however with the planned establishment of a Personal Advocacy Service, in time there will be a more comprehensive advocacy service available across the country for people with disabilities.

I made a reference to Departmental Sectoral plans earlier. The success of any strategy depends on the manner in which it is implemented. And that is why such emphasis has been laid on consultation and partnership, particularly for these Sectoral Plans which were launched in 2006.

Our own Department, Social and Family Affairs, produced its own sectoral plan in July last year. Collectively we play a pivotal role in providing supports for people with disabilities who may not be in a position to provide for themselves. In my Department, the number of recipients of illness, disability and caring supports at end December 2006 were 246,576 and the expenditure was €2.4bn.

Our Department delivers these supports in a way which reduces the risk of dependence and allows people to move from a position of welfare dependence to one where they can, to a far greater extent, meet their income needs from employment.



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Our Department's Sectoral Plan has been shaped by our values of equality, opportunity and social justice and has at its very core the desire to enable people with disabilities to face the future with confidence.

We have a responsibility, in conjunction with other agencies, to give people the opportunities and encouragement that they need, whether it is to take up employment, education or training opportunities or to support them with their caring responsibilities. I am committed to ensuring that no individual's talent or contribution is overlooked, and to helping our citizens to achieve their full potential, both in terms of participation in the labour market and in wider society.

I am happy ladies and gentlemen to have had this opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to the continued strengthening and development of Citizens Information for the benefit of those living in our country. I wish you all continued success in your work and thank you for your hard work and commitment.

[ENDS]