



Review 2009/10

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The period covered by this review was difficult and challenging for many people - some newly unemployed, many struggling with debt and others finding it hard to make ends meet.

During 2009 more than 3.5 million people visited our websites, over 700,000 people used Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service to get information on their rights and entitlements and 22,000 people got help with problem debt from the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

This review summarises the work of the Citizens Information Board over 2009 and into 2010. Our strategic plan *Pathways to Services – Putting Citizens at the Centre* sets out our strategy up to 2012.

About us

The Citizens Information Board is the statutory body responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice (including money advice and budgeting) and advocacy services to members of the public on a wide range of public and social services. We do this through:

- The network of Citizens Information Services (CISs)
- The Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)
- The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)
- The citizensinformation.ie website

The Citizens Information Board delivers a range of pilot advocacy services to people with disabilities in partnership with the community and voluntary sector and funds the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS). We also provide information directly to the public through targeted microsites, losingyourjob.ie and keepingyourhome.ie.

Citizens Information Services

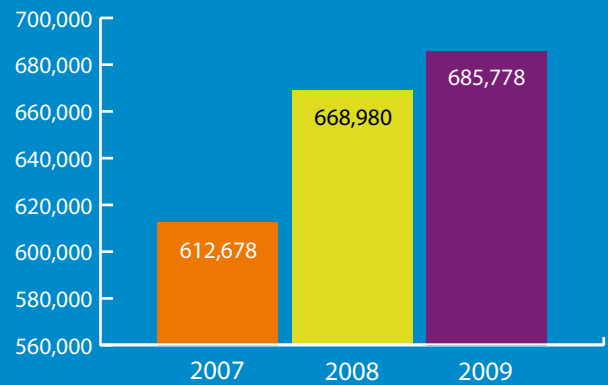
The nationwide network of Citizens Information Services (CISs) provides a face-to-face service for anyone who needs information, advice or advocacy. Outreach and mobile services also bring information to citizens who might not otherwise be able to access it – in residential institutions, prisons, hospitals and remote locations. In 2009 social welfare accounted for 430,689 queries or 44% of all queries, followed by employment (12%), health (9%) and money and tax, housing and local queries with 5% each.

CISs also regularly work on collaborative projects with partners that include the Department of Social Protection, Family Resource Centres, the HSE, County and City Development Boards, MABS, partnership companies and voluntary and community organisations. Citizens Information Services provide clinics in partnership with other organisations such as MABS, financial advice through CAVA and legal advice through FLAC. Other CISs have clinics for Consumer Advice, the Equality Authority, Office of the Ombudsman and Threshold.

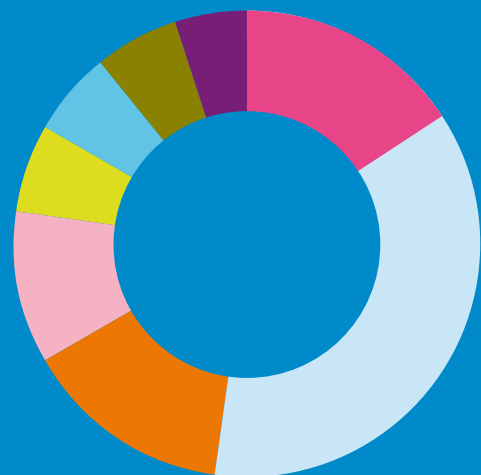
Advocacy in Citizens Information Services

Information providers in the network of Citizens Information Services (CISs) provide advocacy services by supporting their clients to act on their own behalf wherever possible (self-advocacy). They also advocate on behalf of clients – for example, contacting and negotiating with a third party or attending meetings, hearings and appeals. In 2009, 55,522 queries or 6% of all queries involved an advocacy response.

Increase in callers



Most frequent query categories



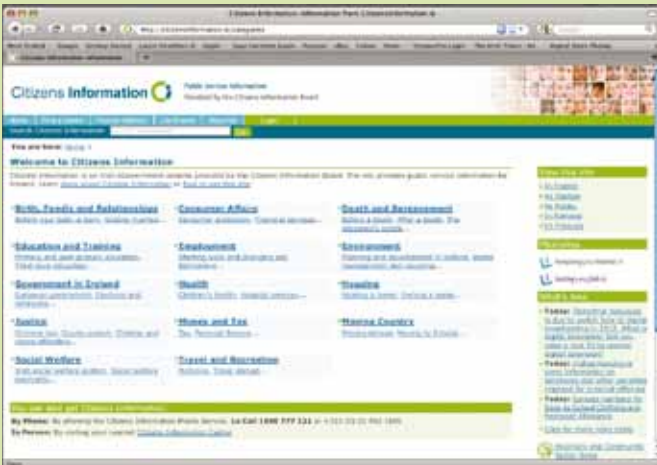
- Social welfare 44%
- Employment 12%
- Health 9%
- Money and tax 5%
- Housing 5%
- Local queries 5%
- Justice 4%
- Other 4%

In 2009 **685,778** callers contacted Citizens Information at over **250** locations with **972,528** queries. These concerns were dealt with by **104** information officers, **170** scheme participants and **1,192** volunteers. In the first half of 2010 Citizens Information Services handled **over half a million** queries, an increase of **8%** on 2009.

Citizensinformation.ie

The citizensinformation.ie website provides comprehensive information on every aspect of living in Ireland, presented clearly, simply and effectively. Citizensinformation.ie is widely used by the general public and acts as the primary information source for information providers in Citizens Information Centres and the Citizens Information Phone Service. It also provides useful information for staff in the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and other organisations.

Its database of addresses now includes more than 8,000 links to Google Maps and during 2009 we developed an interface to make it easier for users to find their nearest Citizens Information Centre.



Responding to customers

We have also become involved in social networking by starting a twitter feed at twitter.com/citizensinfo and by answering queries on some of the major Irish bulletin board websites, in particular on boards.ie. Discussion threads with contributions from the service have been viewed more than 22,000 times.

Citizens Information Phone Service

The Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) is funded and supported by the Citizens Information Board. This national telephone helpline provides a comprehensive and confidential information service to people throughout the country. The telephone service is provided Monday to Friday from 9am to 9pm on lo-call 1890 777 121. The service also offers access routes (web “live advisor” and text) for people with hearing and speech difficulties.

Social welfare and employment queries accounted for close to two-thirds (65%) of all CIPS queries in 2009. While employment queries remained static at 18%, social welfare enquiries rose from 32% of all queries in 2008 to 47% in 2009.

An analysis of social welfare queries, conducted in the second half of 2009, showed that 29% were about Jobseeker’s Benefit and Jobseeker’s Allowance.



LOG ON

www.citizensinformation.ie



LO-CALL

1890 777 121

Mon to Fri, 9am-9pm



DROP IN

260 locations nationwide

In 2009 citizensinformation.ie recorded **3.46 million** users and more than **30 million** page downloads – an increase of **33%** on 2008. In the first half of 2010 **2.3 million** people visited the site.

154,823 queries were answered by the Citizens Information Phone Service in 2009. Demand for the service increased by **36%** over the previous year.

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)

On 13 July 2009 the Citizens Information Board assumed formal responsibility for MABS under part 4 of the 2008 Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act.

MABS provides a free, confidential and independent service countrywide for people in debt or in danger of debt. MABS emphasises practical, budget-based measures to help people with debt difficulties.

There are 53 MABS offices in Ireland including MABSndI and National Traveller MABS. The 51 local MABS offices operate on an appointment system. The MABS website (mabs.ie) provides budgeting and money management information and includes a variety of self-help information leaflets, guides and budget sheets. The MABS Helpline 1890 283 438 is another route to information and services for people in debt difficulties.

In common with other services, 2009 saw an increase in demand and resulting pressure on staff and services. MABS companies also report that new clients are presenting with multiple debts and more complex debts. The top debt types that people contact MABS about are personal loans, utility bills, credit card debts and mortgage debt.

MABSndI (MABS National Development Limited) provides training and technical support to MABS staff nationally. MABSndI also highlights policy issues related to debt and money management.



In particular MABSndI has been engaged in a number of policy initiatives related to tackling mortgage debt and arrears including the work of the High Level Group on Mortgage Arrears and the Department of Social Protection's review of the Mortgage Interest Supplement.

Other policy initiatives during the year included:

- Development with Irish Banking Federation (IBF) members of a Debt Management Protocol which became effective in September 2009.
- A major submission to the Law Reform Commission in response to its *Consultation Paper on Personal Debt Management and Debt Enforcement*.
- A new factsheet: *MABS advice on Mortgage Arrears* which gives succinct practical information and advice to borrowers who are in difficulty with mortgage repayments on their home.
- A major national seminar on Housing Debt for MABS staff and management.
- The launch of EuroWatchers, a household budgeting programme, developed by MABS Iarthair Dhun na nGall and North Donegal MABS with Donegal VEC and MABSndI. The initiative was awarded the VEC Building Partnerships award which recognises partnership initiatives between organisations.



Minister for Social Protection, Éamon Ó Cuív T.D. opening new premises for Loughrea MABS.

MABS helped over 22,000 people deal with their problem debt in 2009. The MABS Helpline dealt with **24,802** calls and mabs.ie had **250,065** visits. By the end of June 2010 MABS had just under **24,000** active cases and the MABS helpline had dealt with over **14,000** callers.

Responding to the downturn

Almost 167,000 people lost their jobs in 2009. By the end of the year the official unemployment rate was over 13%, compared with 8% at the end of 2008. A major focus of our work in 2009 and into 2010 was responding to the downturn and supporting people who found themselves in difficult circumstances due to job loss or debt.

The Citizens Information Board response to the downturn included a website, losingyourjob.ie, information leaflets and posters, specialised training for information providers and support for local information initiatives. This integrated response demonstrated the Board's capacity to respond quickly and effectively to a changing environment.

Losinyourjob.ie

[Losinyourjob.ie](http://losingyourjob.ie) gives information on rights and entitlements for people who are working reduced hours or who are unemployed. Since its launch the website has attracted 85,000 users and had more than 480,000 pages downloaded. [Losinyourjob.ie](http://losingyourjob.ie) won a Taoiseach's Award for Public Service Excellence in February 2010.



Taoiseach, Brian Cowen T.D. presenting Sylda Langford, Chair, Citizens Information Board with a Public Service Excellence Award.

In 2010 the service worked with MABS to produce a second microsite, keepingyourhome.ie, aimed at people in rent or mortgage arrears. Over 18,000 people have visited the site since its launch.



Local initiatives

CISs nationwide are often best positioned to respond rapidly and appropriately to job losses and redundancies in their local communities. During the year various local initiatives included:

- Co. Cavan CIS worked with the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Social Protection, MABS, FÁS, HSE and other local organisations to run an information day for unemployed people.
- Co. Louth CIS ran an information session for unemployed people in Dundalk and Drogheda.
- Waterford CIS provided an outreach service to Waterford Crystal workers who were being made redundant

Advocacy

During the year our pilot Advocacy Programme for People with Disabilities supported 46 projects nationwide. The focus of this programme is on representative advocacy for vulnerable people with disabilities – helping clients defend their basic rights, make life choices, access entitlements and make formal complaints or appeals. The projects are hugely diverse, involving partnerships between a significant number of organisations nationwide and covering a wide range of disability groups including people with physical/sensory disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities and people with mental health issues. The pilot programme has been evaluated and it is planned to implement the proposals in 2011.

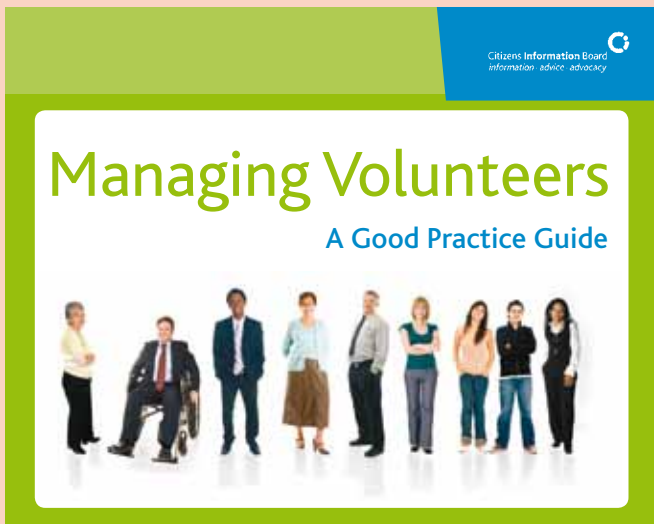
Over **5,000** people with disabilities have received an advocacy service over the course of the pilot programme. 28% of cases involved access to rights and entitlements in the social welfare and health areas and supporting people to take appeals and make complaints. Housing and accommodation issues featured in 21% of cases while a further 5% of cases involved supporting people with disabilities who wished to gain more independence in their lives.

Training services and resources

We supported Citizens Information Services to provide high quality services to their customers by delivering 70 training courses in over 50 locations throughout the country. These courses responded to the training and development needs of 1,250 people throughout the network.

We deliver the FETAC-accredited Information Providers Programme in three ways: through attendance at a designated centre, by distance education and by recognition of prior learning. The programme supports information providers to deliver a quality information service. It consists of two modules that cover Information, Advice and Advocacy Practice and Social and Civil Information.

We launched a new web edition of *Managing Volunteers: A Good Practice Guide* in January 2009. It gives information on good practice for the wide range of voluntary and statutory organisations that involve volunteers in their work. The materials included in the guide can be adapted by individual organisations.



As part of the Citizens Information Board's response to the downturn two-day training events were organised in the five CIB regions (Dublin, Limerick/Cork, Sligo, Carlow/Kilkenny and Westmeath) on *Job Loss and Unemployment – Dealing with Current Queries*. Later in the year a programme called *Minding Self and Serving Others* was developed to support information providers in a challenging work environment.

Research and social policy

The Citizens Information Board undertakes social research on topics that are based on the feedback we receive, and are of particular concern to the users of social services in Ireland.

Our social policy work highlights the concerns of users to those who provide services. This in turn encourages improvements and developments in service provision and service delivery. During the year social policy reports captured the growing number of people facing redundancy and the difficulties they experienced coping with job loss, claiming benefits and managing debt.



Pictured (centre) at an event honouring Citizens Information volunteers with more than 20 years service is Tom Fitzgerald, Tipperary CIS, the longest serving volunteer with Minister for Social Protection, Éamon Ó Cuív T.D. and Tony Mc Quinn, Chief Executive, Citizens Information Board.

Our recent research reports include *Getting There: Travel and Transport and Access to Social Services*, which deals with a range of issues experienced by the public in relation to travel and transport and access to social services, and *Volunteering in Citizens Information Services: the role and contribution of volunteers*. This research was conducted by the Centre for Non-Profit Management at Trinity College Dublin and a report was published in early 2010.

The Citizens Information Board has initiated research into clients' pathways to and experiences of public services in the context of increased demands on public services during the downturn.



Publications and periodicals

The Citizens Information Board publishes a wide range of publications and other resources to ensure that the public and information givers have access to accurate, up to date and comprehensive information on rights and entitlements.

Visit citizensinformationboard.ie/publications for a full list.

Relate is our monthly journal covering legislation and developments in the broad social services and social policy areas. The EU Supplement covers significant EU developments in the broad areas of social policy, consumer policy and citizens' rights and is published quarterly.

Voice, our policy newsletter, documents initiatives in response to issues raised by CIBs and provides feedback on policy developments at local and national level.

Speaking up for Advocacy is our advocacy newsletter. It discusses advocacy issues and details projects and research relating to advocacy.



President Mary McAleese at the SLIS Accreditation ceremony with Anne Coogan, Chairperson, SLIS and Tony McQuinn, Chief Executive, Citizens Information Board.

Other services



The Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) is the national agency for the provision of sign language interpreting services in Ireland. It is funded and supported by the Citizens Information Board. President Mary McAleese became patron of SLIS in 2009.

assistireland.ie

Assist Ireland, assistireland.ie, is an online database of aids, appliances and assistive technology provided by the Citizens Information Board for people with disabilities. In 2009 the website had **540,000** unique users.



Our new strategic plan

During the year the Citizens Information Board published its fourth strategic plan – *Pathways to Services – Putting the Citizen at the Centre*. It was developed during a severe economic downturn and a very challenging period for public finances.

The strategy acknowledges the challenges of providing public services during the economic downturn. Our clients include some of the most vulnerable people in society. Access to information, advice, budgeting and advocacy are more important to them now than ever before. Our strategy commits us to delivering accessible and user-friendly services to all our clients, with a particular focus on reaching the most vulnerable. The strategy also commits us to using the resources at our disposal as efficiently and effectively as possible without compromising the quality of our services.

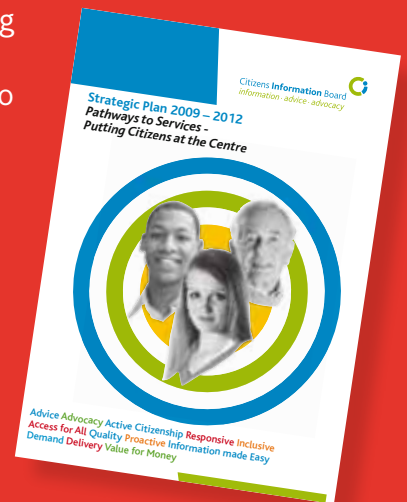
The strategy provides a single framework for the development of services provided by the Board and its delivery partners over the next three years. It positions the Citizens Information Board at the interface between citizens and the State and sets out the priority actions that the Board must undertake to deliver its strategic objectives.

The Strategy is underpinned by two key principles:

- Maintaining a citizen-centred approach to keep the citizen at the centre of everything we do
- Becoming more proactive so we are constantly anticipating changes in our service environment and in citizens' needs

The Strategy consists of five strategic priorities:

- 1: Delivering a seamless service to citizens
- 2: Assuring quality of our services
- 3: A pivotal intermediary between citizens and public services
- 4: Leading and developing MABS
- 5: Organising ourselves to deliver quality service to clients.



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