

Vision

An Ireland where everyone - particularly the most vulnerable - has access to the information and advice they need in order to realise their rights. The values that we uphold and apply to all aspects of our work are:



Available to all

We will offer independent, impartial, confidential and non-judgemental information, advice, money advice and advocacy in ways that are accessible to all.



Responsiveness

We will always listen to people's views, reflect on what we learn and review our services to ensure they are responsive to changing situations and emerging needs. We will make the best use of new technologies and other opportunities.



Customer service

We are committed to supporting a professional, impartial and timely service that responds to people's needs.



Confidentiality

We will respect and promote people's right to privacy.



Focus on quality

We will continually improve our products, services and methods of working to meet the needs of all our stakeholders.



Excellence

We will motivate our staff to deliver products and services that exceed objectives, needs and expectations.



Leadership

We will offer supportive leadership and encourage innovation in our areas of expertise in a way that benefits everyone.



Promotion of equality and human rights

We will promote equality and human rights in all we do.

“I was just looking at **citizensinformation.ie** for more than the thousandth time in the last few years and said I’d drop you an email to say thanks. In a world where you look for everything first online... It’s really great to have this resource that’s in simple English and up to date. So thanks very much.”

CIS customer



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Chairperson's Introduction

I would like to introduce CIB's Annual Report 2020 by paying tribute to Ita Mangan, who chaired CIB for the past five years, including most of 2020, and to whom the Board owes a significant debt of gratitude. Ita presided over CIB's key project during her tenure, which was the restructuring of MABS and CIS into regional entities. As a Board member, now Acting Chair, I can relate very well to the ambition of consolidating that work, as overseen by Ita in CIB's Strategic Plan 2019-2021, which immediately followed the restructuring project.

I also want to thank the entire Board of CIB. The Board, with their diverse backgrounds and expertise, provided invaluable support to the organisation and to me in 2020.

Due to COVID-19¹, 2020 was a year like no other. CIB's ability to inform millions of citizens about their rights and entitlements, focusing on supporting vulnerable groups or people in vulnerable situations, is a unique capacity that the pandemic brought into sharp focus. I believe that CIB is very well placed to continue to advocate for marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, minority groups and people with debt difficulties, as well as those seeking to realise their social rights and entitlements, which these days is often a complex and lengthy task.

The main strategic ambition of the Board of CIB for 2020 was the realisation, in practice, of the benefits of restructuring. Without adequate metrics in place, it will always be difficult to understand what worked best and what needs to improve. I look forward to leading the new Strategy and Governance Committee to fully achieve this goal. The Committee, established in late 2020, is also charged with setting a new overall strategy for CIB, including a digital strategy, and overseeing the succession of both the Chair and CEO.

CIB staff and the staff of our service delivery companies changed how they worked in 2020 beyond recognition. However, despite our complete reliance on online meetings and the replacement of face-to-face services with non-personal communications, CIB and the service delivery companies have weathered the COVID-19 storm well. A lot of evidence was gleaned in relation to people's information preferences and how they used technology when they needed a service. I expect that this will prove invaluable as we embark on setting – and measuring the implementation of – digital and organisational strategic goals.

¹ A virus that was not previously observed in humans was identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. In February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially named this new coronavirus 'COVID-19'.



CIB's service delivery companies have provided a customer-focused service unlike any other. Their independent and confidential advice, including advocacy and money advice, continued to be heavily relied upon in 2020 by thousands of people. While COVID-19 continues to present significant challenges to health, including mental health and employment, in our community and the world over, I believe that the services offered by CIB-funded companies will always be needed, particularly in times like these.

I look forward to consulting with all of our stakeholders to develop CIB's next strategic plan, with a continued focus on supporting citizens to access their rights and entitlements, with the trusted support of CIB and its service delivery companies. Thanks to the CEO and staff of CIB for supporting a high quality of service delivery which is valued very much by our citizens. I also want to record our appreciation for the support of our funders, the Minister for Social Protection and the officials in her Department.

On behalf of the Board, I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of our frontline health services in their immense contribution to fighting the pandemic, and in helping to keep our citizens safe and well.

Finally, I want to record our gratitude and appreciation of the massive contribution made by Angela Black as our Chief Executive over the past six years. Before the end of 2020, Angela advised us of her intention to retire in early 2021. She has provided dynamic and dedicated leadership at all times and leaves behind a huge legacy, including the completion of the restructuring of service delivery and the reconfiguration of CIB itself. We wish Angela a long and happy retirement. Go raibh míle maith agat, Angela.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Sheridan'.

Sean Sheridan
Acting Chairperson



2020 in Numbers



15.4 million total users
of [citizensinformation.ie](https://www.citizensinformation.ie)

55 million
total webpage views

Over 7,000
content revisions on [citizensinformation.ie](https://www.citizensinformation.ie)



369,745 people helped
by Citizens Information Services – face to face and phone calls



726,658 queries answered

1,376 queries answered through CIB social media channels



17 policy submissions made



156,299 enquiries
responded to by Citizens Information Phone Service



10,247 borrowers
in late-stage mortgage arrears received advice



17,300 households supported

with financial advice through Abhaile



22,950

calls to the MABS Helpline



3,081 initial enquiries processed

by the National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities



7,159 appointments completed

on the Irish Remote Interpreting Service



4,016 advocacy cases

undertaken in CIS



6,761 Social Policy Returns

in total from CIS and CIPS

Chief Executive's Foreword

While 2020 delivered a challenge of historic proportions to CIB in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also produced an immediate and extraordinary response by the staff of both CIB and the service delivery companies it funds. Some individuals stood out in terms of their determination to provide services for CIB and the citizens in our communities.

This annual report has been prepared under a unique set of circumstances as all our offices were closed for much of the year. Services that would usually be delivered face-to-face were forced to move online for remote communication with clients. However, 2020 provided evidence of the high level of motivation that exists across service delivery office staff in supporting the communities we serve. I was especially impressed by the agility of staff in opening and closing offices and providing services online or in person, as circumstances allowed.

In relation to our main website, citizensinformation.ie, I commend the imagination and innovation that brought us the CIS COVID-19 call-back service as well as the launch of a dynamic new app. This app enables members of the Deaf community to access remote interpreter services. The redeployment of CIS employees to the Citizens Information Phone Service and MABS staff to the MABS Helpline ensured that support and information were continually targeted to areas of greatest need, regardless of the pandemic.

The biggest project of 2020 was to have been the complete upgrade of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and telephony system supporting CIB and the network of 21 service delivery companies. Indeed, despite delays caused by COVID-19, the Wide Area Network (WAN) and telephony upgrade is, at the time of writing, almost complete. Its success is largely thanks to heroic work by Brian McCarthy and his team, who juggled access to sites between lockdowns and made complex arrangements with the various contractors involved. So, CIB and the network of service delivery companies will soon have an entirely new ICT and telephony infrastructure that is fit for the 21st century, with dropped connections hopefully becoming a thing of the past.

Rivalling the ICT upgrade in terms of scale was the almost-continuous website update project. This was all the more remarkable as it was entirely unexpected and unplanned. The COVID-19 information update was the 'gift that kept on giving' to the Information Resources (now Digital Content) team. CIB normally received the COVID-19 material on Friday afternoons, so it was a year of many lost weekends for Cathy Gerrard and the team.



The Digital Content team carried out almost 7,000 content revisions across the citizensinformation.ie website, almost double the number of revisions of the previous year. Many people, both in Ireland and abroad, have expressed their gratitude, and I add my thanks here for the timely and faithful reproduction of Government COVID-19 information in an easily digestible format, the classic trademark of our citizensinformation.ie website.

While the national and regional services of MABS, NAS, CIS and SLIS adapted to the pandemic by providing new online services, CIB set out to prepare a digital strategy that would reflect the potential of all services to reach more people, while operating in a more effective and efficient way. If there is a silver lining to the pandemic for CIB, it is that it forced us to accelerate the use of technology to reach citizens, especially those who are in vulnerable situations. This also meant we had to put technology resources into automating some functions within the services we fund. The digital strategy will aim for balance, not for moving everything online. Over the coming years I expect CIB to use technology to reach the greatest number of citizens, either face-to-face or through other means.

We must, in a measurable way, reap the benefits of the restructuring of the CIS and MABS network which took place in 2018, to reach people in the way they wish to be reached, at their convenience.

As for me, I will not be in CIB to see the digital strategy completed as I am retiring after six-plus years in the role of CEO. I am grateful to all the staff of CIB, past and present, who contributed to the success of the organisation and who have supported me personally. As a result of all of our efforts, I believe CIB has evolved into a more modern organisation with great prospects for further development in the years ahead. I appreciate the support I always received from Ita Mangan, our Chair from 2015 to December 2020, and the support of the Board of CIB in steering the executive in a positive direction. Now that Seán Sheridan has taken over as Acting Chair, CIB will continue the important work of guiding strategy and governance to benefit all those who need to access our services.



Angela Black

Angela Black
Chief Executive



Chapter 1: The Citizens Information Board



The Citizens Information Board (CIB) supports the provision of information, advice, advocacy, money advice and budgeting assistance across a wide range of public and social services. These services are delivered in three different ways – online, by phone and in person.

Staffing and Funding

CIB's staff body comprises:

- 86 employees
- 76.86 whole-time equivalent (WTE) employees
- Additional seven staff working on projects outside the Employment Control Framework – three people on the Abhaile team, two on the Dedicated Mortgage Advice project and two on the Irish Sign Language project

Our head office is in Dublin and we have offices in Cork, Kilkenny, Limerick and Galway.

The Comptroller and Auditor General audit CIB's financial statements. We will publish the 2020 audit when available on citizensinformationboard.ie.

Our Mandate

Our mandate is:

- To ensure that individuals have access to accurate, comprehensive and clear information relating to social services
- To assist and support individuals, in particular those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options
- To promote greater accessibility, coordination and public awareness of social services
- To support, promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services, and to highlight issues that are of concern to users of those services
- To support the provision of, or directly provide, advocacy services for people with a disability
- To support the provision of advice on personal debt and money management through the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)

A key role of CIB is to support, promote and develop information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services, and to highlight issues that are raised by the users of those service delivery companies.

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through citizensinformation.ie. The Citizens Information Board funds and supports 21 independent companies referred to as, 'service delivery companies.' This mandate is clearly defined through two Acts².

Information is provided directly to the public through the Citizens Information website (citizensinformation.ie) and our periodicals and publications where the public can get up-to-date information.

The Services CIB fund – Service Delivery Companies

Citizens Information Services are a nationwide network where everyone one can get free, impartial and confidential information on a range of social and public services face-to-face from our staff in local **Citizens Information Centres**. The services also provide an advocacy service to those having difficulty claiming or using their entitlements.

Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) provides advice and information over the telephone and through the Live Advisor Service (webchat).

Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) offers free, confidential and independent assistance for people in debt or in danger of getting into debt.

MABS Support provides technical, training and other support to MABS.

Abhaile, the mortgage arrears support scheme, assists homeowners in resolving problems with home mortgage arrears, helping them to stay in their homes where possible. Accessed through MABS, Abhaile provides free expert financial and legal advice.

National Traveller MABS (NT MABS) advocates for the financial inclusion of Travellers, helping them to access legal and affordable savings and credit.

The **National Advocacy Service** for people with disabilities (NAS) provides representative advocacy to adults with disabilities in vulnerable situations.

Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) provides Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreting services in real-time through video link.

² The Comhairle Act 2000, as amended by the Citizens Information Act 2007, and the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2008.

The Role of CIB in Supporting these Services

CIB works closely with these services to ensure that the public gets the best information, advice and support possible, and that the services comply with best practice in finance, governance, human resources and premises management.

We provide infrastructure and supports to help our services deal with citizens' enquiries and connect with local communities. We ensure high quality by setting and monitoring standards, and provide ICT services, equipment, infrastructure, training, websites and publications.

Through comprehensive financial controls, reporting frameworks and service level agreements, we ensure that appropriate services are provided in return for funding.

Service level agreements with our service delivery companies set out both parties' commitments. These agreements include delivery, governance, financial controls, HR practices, data protection, reporting guidelines, evaluation and monitoring. Our internal audit process provides recommendations on updating practices and improving compliance with the governance and reporting requirements.

Support for services is provided in a number of areas, including advice on premises and facilities management, industrial relations and human resources. An Employee Assistance Programme is available to all service delivery companies.

Strategic Plan 2019-2021: Delivering Information, Advice, Money Advice and Advocacy Services for our Communities

The vision for this three-year plan is an Ireland where everyone is adequately equipped with the information and advice that allows them to realise their rights. Our plan places particular emphasis on delivering this information and advice to the most vulnerable.

The strategy's dual objectives are to build on the restructuring of services over recent years and maximise the benefits of these investments to deliver greater quality and more accessible services for the public.

Strategic Priorities

Strategic priority 1: Enhancing Service Quality and Availability

Achieving a consistently high standard through a modern, measurable framework of information, advice, money, advice and advocacy services.

Strategic priority 2: Service Development and Innovation

Identifying, promoting and implementing service development and innovation.

Strategic priority 3: Consolidation and Delivery

Building the capacity of the network of CIB services, including leadership and support, to consolidate and deliver the benefits of restructuring.

As a consequence of the restructuring of the CIS and MABS service delivery companies, in 2018, the MABS ND company (provider of technical support to the MABS companies) was reorganised to meet the needs of the newly-formed regional MABS companies. In early 2020, a new company, MABS Support, was established and replaced MABS ND. The MABS Helpline function was integrated into North Dublin MABS.

The Board of CIB established a Strategy and Governance Committee in 2020 to assist the Board with various matters. These include Board and CEO succession planning as Angela Black our CEO of 6 years will leave in 2021, and the development of CIB's next strategic plan which will run from 2022 to 2024.

The full text of the plan is available on citizensinformationboard.ie in both English and Irish.

Social Policy and Social Policy Submissions

One of CIB's key roles is to support, promote and develop information on the effectiveness of social policy and social service provision. Consequently, we gather and analyse information and data to help determine what is working well for the public and where changes are needed so that social services are more responsive and easier to access.

We identify relevant problems and priorities across a range of areas, including social welfare, housing, health and social care services, as well as over-indebtedness and financial exclusion. Staff in Citizens Information Centres (CICs) help by submitting a report known as a Social Policy Return (SPR) to CIB when they think a client is experiencing a particular difficulty or pattern of challenges in accessing social or public services. Individual cases can indicate a broader problem or concern with a policy, practice or piece of legislation.

The data, evidence and insights these frontline services provide can show the impact of government spending, policy and policy administration. We use this information to highlight recurring issues so that policy and public services can be improved. This information was particularly beneficial during 2020 when policy in many areas had to change quickly.

New Data Collection Categories

CIB set up new data collection categories, focussing our data analysis on the new payments and schemes put in place to assist the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their jobs or incomes during the year.

The data we recorded on a day-to-day basis provided evidence of the effect of the many emergency measures rolled out by the Government during 2020.

Social Policy Submissions

In 2020, CIB prepared 17 policy submissions and contributed to ongoing debate and policy formation around issues related to the services we fund. We made submissions to Government departments and agencies in response to consultations across a range of areas and national strategies.



1. Gender Equality

Citizens' Assembly, Houses of the Oireachtas, March 2020

The submission drew from the feedback received from CIB service delivery companies, focusing on work and caring responsibilities.

2. National Volunteering Strategy 2020 – 2025

DEASP, March 2020

The submission reiterated the need for a greater focus on key areas –enhancing volunteering as a core component of active citizenship.

3. Consultation on the National Minimum Wage

Low Pay Commission, March 2020

In response to the Low Pay Commission's consultation, the submission was based on the feedback from services on issues for clients with employment-related queries and focused on in-work poverty, the living wage, and the role of work income in alleviating poverty.

4. A Regulatory Framework for Adult Safeguarding

Law Reform Commission Issues Paper, May 2020

The submission focused on residential and congregated settings during the COVID-19 crisis and emphasised the importance and need for a regulatory framework.

5. Review of the Consumer Protection Code for Licensed Moneylenders

CIB & MABS - Department of Finance, June 2020

CIB and MABS made a joint submission to this consultation. CIB and MABS emphasised that any review of the Code must be considered in the broader context of the alternatives available to low-income borrowers.

6. Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID-19 Response

Houses of the Oireachtas, July 2020

This submission describes the range of initiatives taken by the Board and CIB supported services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the COVID-19 related matters that citizens raised in their queries to services and issues relating to health and social care provision post-COVID-19.

7. Cost of Disability Research

DEASP, August 2020

CIB provided detailed feedback on the survey instrument drafted by Indecon Consultants, who were commissioned by the DEASP to research the cost of disability.

8. National Guidance for Employers and Employees on Remote Working

Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, August 2020

The submission noted that the practices put in place during the pandemic will not be sufficient as home working (either full-time or part-time) becomes the norm for many employees.

9. CIB Pre-Budget Submission 'Leaving Nobody Behind: Protecting Citizens' Rights and Entitlements Post COVID-19'

DEASP, September 2020

Each year CIB prepares a Pre-Budget submission based on the issues raised by those in contact with CIB service delivery companies. The 2020 submission, 'Leaving Nobody Behind: Protecting Citizens' Rights and Entitlements Post COVID-19', identified two priorities – addressing poverty, and helping people return to work. It also included MABS's concerns and recommendations relating to debt, combatting arrears and financial exclusion which were priority issues for its clients.

10. CIB Budget 2021 Outcomes

DEASP, September 2020

This paper reviewed Budget 2021 and assessed the new changes introduced with respect to our analysis and recommendations in CIB's Pre-Budget submission 2021.

11. Recommendations on National Electronic Patient Summary

HIQA, September 2020

CIB responded to HIQA's draft recommendations on the implementation of a National Electronic Patient Summary. CIB provided observations on legislation, governance, stakeholder engagement, national health identifiers and sources of information.

12. Department of Social Protection Statement Strategy, 2020-2023

DEASP, October 2020

The submission focused not only on income supports, but also on ensuring that the risks of people falling into poverty are minimised, highlighting the importance of a strong welfare state for everyone in society.

13. Legal Aid Board (LAB) Draft Statement of Strategy, 2021 – 2023

Legal Aid Board, October 2020

CIB submitted observations to the Legal Aid Board, highlighting resource constraints that the LAB is operating under and the concerns reported by service delivery companies in accessing LAB services.

14. Department of Rural and Community Development Strategy, 2021-2023

DRCD, October 2020

The submission noted that the new strategy needs to consolidate and enhance several approaches and initiatives that have been to the forefront of policy on local development over a number of years, focusing on 'bottom-up' approaches and building community capacity.

15. Strategy for the new Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Dept. of Children, November 2020

The submission identified principles that should underpin the Strategy of the reconfigured Department. It included; the need to address child and family poverty, deliver specifically on the European Pillar of Social Rights, and give a stronger voice in decision-making structures to children and young people, people with disabilities, lone parents with child-care responsibilities and ethnic minorities.

16. Statutory Sick Pay Scheme

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, December 2020

CIB's submission highlighted previous recommendations for a statutory scheme, most recently in the 2021 Pre Budget submission. It focused on the appropriate minimum rate of payment, the duration of the scheme, eligibility requirements, waiting days, supports for employers and reintegration programmes for people recovering from illness.

17. Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy 10-Year Strategy

Further Education and Training Authority, December 2020

CIB made a submission on a new 10-year national strategy for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy, with recommendations on literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy.

The social policy team also contributed to the Disability Federation of Ireland - Survey of External Stakeholder Organisations (Disability Federation of Ireland, November 2020).

Also in 2020, we published the following research report:

'Employment Rights That Work for All: A Citizens Information Perspective'

During 2020, CIB hosted a webinar to mark the publication of the social policy report 'Employment Rights That Work for All: A Citizens Information Perspective'. This report examined the key employment rights issues raised by information services in recent years, arising out of their support work with clients. This was a timely report given the COVID-19-related focus on employment rights issues, such as hours of work, low wages, precarious employment and entitlements to income supports.

Social Policy Grant Scheme, 2020

CIB provided funding for social policy initiatives undertaken at a local level by CIB service delivery companies working independently or in conjunction with other local voluntary or community organisations. We awarded grants to South Leinster CIS, Dublin South MABS and North Leinster CIS to research specific issues that affect their clients.


Advocacy Services

CIB provides a free advocacy service to the public through the national network of Citizens Information Services (CIS), and a specialist advocacy service through the National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities.

Advocacy is a means of empowering and supporting people to reach the outcome they want and, where necessary, representing and negotiating on their behalf. This may involve expressing someone's view or helping them secure their rights or entitlements, often related to social, health, financial, employment and living supports.

Advocates in CIB services work in partnership with their clients to support them to reach their desired outcomes and in having their voices heard. Advocates take action to uphold the person's rights, ensuring fair and equal treatment and access to services. This may require writing letters with or on behalf of clients, negotiating with third parties such as employers, or supporting and representing the client at formal hearings.

See Chapter 3 for further details and page 70 for more about the National Advocacy Service.



“Thank you so much! I really appreciate the details. This is the clearest info I've found in weeks”

Promoting our Services

In 2020, our campaign activity, March to November, included print, radio, digital and social media promotions. Campaign messaging this year centred on the supports available during the pandemic such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). Campaigns centred on reminding the public that despite the closure of drop in services that advice and help were still available by phone, email, messenger app and social media channels.

MABS was awarded gold for Best Engagement Rates on Facebook by the State of Social Media in the Public Sector in 2020 study (from over 500 public sector bodies). Citizens Information won gold for Page Performance Index (PPI), which measures a combination of engagement and growth.

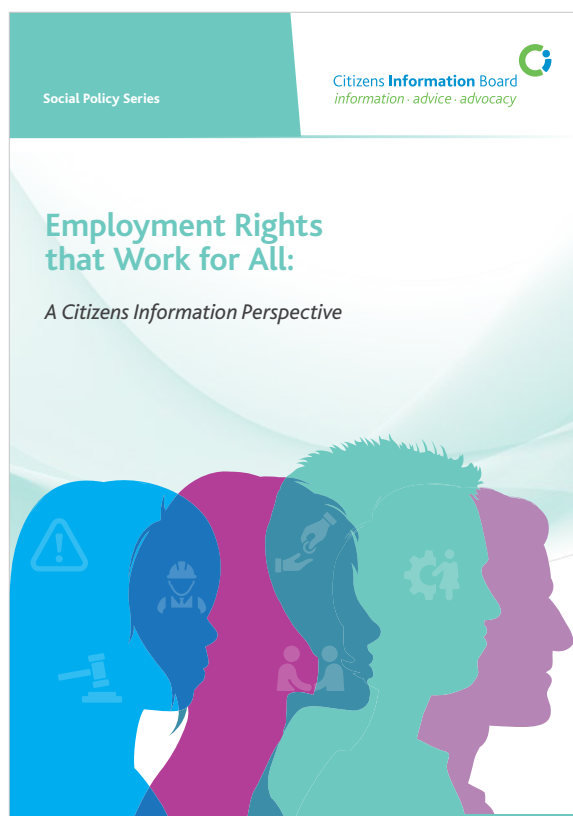
Media Coverage in 2020

In 2020 our services were featured in over 280 articles in national and regional papers and more than 700 broadcast interviews with a peak in April and May.

Reports that received coverage included the pre-budget submission entitled 'Leaving Nobody Behind: Protecting Citizens' Rights and Entitlements Post COVID-19', 'Employment Rights That Work for All: A Citizens Information Perspective' and 'Attitudes to Debt and Impact of COVID-19'.

Citizensinformationboard.ie

Citizensinformationboard.ie is CIB's corporate website. It sets out the work of CIB and that of its service delivery companies (SDCs), and serves as a site for CIB to publish documents under its Freedom of Information publication scheme.



Publications

CIB published the Benefits and Taxes wallchart and leaflet as normal at the start of 2020. However, other publications scheduled for 2020 were not published due to the pandemic. We will revise and issue these at a later date.

The image shows the cover of the 'Benefits and Taxes 2020' wallchart and leaflet, published by Citizens Information Board in February 2020. The cover is divided into several color-coded sections: green for 'Payments for people of working age', blue for 'Child benefits', red for 'Pay-Related Social Insurance (PRSI)', purple for 'Payments for people with disabilities', orange for 'Payments for carers and guardians', yellow for 'Payments for older people', and pink for 'Payments for widowers and surviving civil partners'. Each section contains a list of various benefits and tax-related information, such as 'Jobseeker's Benefit (JBS)', 'Child Benefit', 'PRSI Class 1', 'Disability Benefit (DB)', 'Carer's Allowance', 'Pension Credit', and 'Widow's Pension'. The cover also features the Citizens Information Board logo and the text 'Citizens Information Board'.

The image shows the cover of the 'Relate' journal, published by Citizens Information Board in January/February 2020. The cover features the title 'Relate' in large, bold, red letters. Below the title, it says 'The journal of developments in social services, policy and legislation in Ireland'. The cover also includes the Citizens Information Board logo and the text 'Citizens Information Board information - advice - advocacy'. The cover is divided into several sections: 'Contents', 'Page No.', '1. International law and principles', '2. Irish law', '3. Children and health', '4. Children and education', '5. Criminal law and children', '6. Children with disabilities', '7. Youth homelessness', and '8. Key bodies involved in protecting children's rights'. The cover also features a list of articles and their authors, such as 'The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child' by Dr. Eoin O'Connell and 'The Children's Rights Alliance' by Dr. Eoin O'Connell.

Relate is our journal which covers legislation updates and developments in the broad social services and social policy areas. Six issues of Relate were published, with three focusing on Ireland's response to COVID-19. Other issues covered 'Children and the law in Ireland', 'UK-EU relations after Brexit and implications for the island of Ireland' and 'Accessing Public Records, Personal Data and Other Information'. From March 2020, Relate was sent out in electronic format only.

eLearning and Training

2020 was a productive year for the eLearning team in terms of the development of new courses. There was also strong growth in staff use of online learning and successful completion of courses. The following new online courses were added to our library:

- Department of Social Protection (DSP) Illness, Disability and Carer’s Payments
- DSP Pensions and Related Payments
- Housing and Homelessness
- Immigration
- Advocacy in the CIS
- Data Protection in the CIS
- Social Policy in the CIS

In response to the pandemic, a COVID-19 Induction course was developed to ensure safe working practices across all services.

CIB eLearning: Health & Safety

COVID-19 Lead Worker Representative

This is the person in your local office who has agreed with management to be responsible for ensuring that COVID-19 prevention measures are followed to help prevent the spread of the virus in the workplace. Every office should have at least one LWR.

LWRs are informed

- The LWR is required to keep up to date with the latest COVID-19 advice from the Government along with the specific control measures put in place for CIB services.

LWRs communicate

- The LWR is responsible for keeping all their work colleagues up to date with the latest COVID-19 advice from Government and CIB.
- The LWR supports the engagement of all employees through clear communication of safety plans and any other workplace practice amendments. This includes issuing pre-return to work form for employees to complete at least three days in advance of their return to work.
- The LWR also maintains regular communication with the location manager and reports any issues or concerns. In some instances, they may also liaise with CIB’s Facilities Executive.
- The LWR is available to fellow employees to listen to any COVID control concerns or suggestions they may have.

LWRs implement

- The LWR assists managers in completing a building risk assessment checklist when staff are returning to an office. This is an initial premises inspection and assessment and is important given that premises may not have been occupied fully giving rise to a deterioration in conditions.
- The LWR also assists the manager in implementing the relevant measures to protect staff and visitors.

LWRs monitor

- The LWR monitors compliance with safety measures. This includes daily monitoring of hand-washing and respiratory etiquette, social distancing practices, provision of hand-sanitisation equipment and supplies and ensuring proper office ventilation is in place.

LWRs record

- The LWRs keep a record of any problems, areas of non-compliance or defects and what action was taken to remedy the issue.
- The LWR is also responsible for keeping a log of any group work in order to facilitate contact tracing, if needed.

LWRs respond

- All LWRs are aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and how the virus is spread.
- LWRs have developed local response plans setting out how to deal with a suspected case of the virus in the workplace. If an employee displays symptoms during working hours, the LWR will follow all the steps set out in CIB’s guidance for dealing with a suspected case.
- Once the affected person has left the workplace, the LWR will support CIB with the follow-up actions set out in CIB’s Guidance.

Citizens Information Board

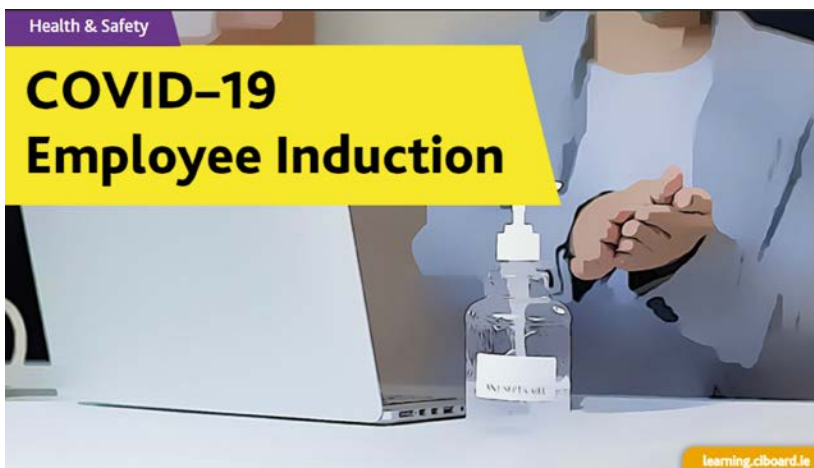
Sample COVID-19 course handout

A mandatory CIS Induction Training for Information Providers course was also developed as a precursor to the comprehensive and mandatory 'Essential Training for Information Providers' (ETIP) programme.

The eLearning team developed and launched work-themed staff discussion forums to facilitate peer sharing, social learning and the development of an online community of practitioners across the CIS and MABS services.

The use of eLearning as well as successful course completion rates surged in 2020. Overall, 3,752 Certificates of Completion were issued in CIB, MABS, CIS, NAS and SLIS. Staff completed and passed a mandatory online assessment. This is a 70% increase on the 2,215 certificates awarded in 2019.

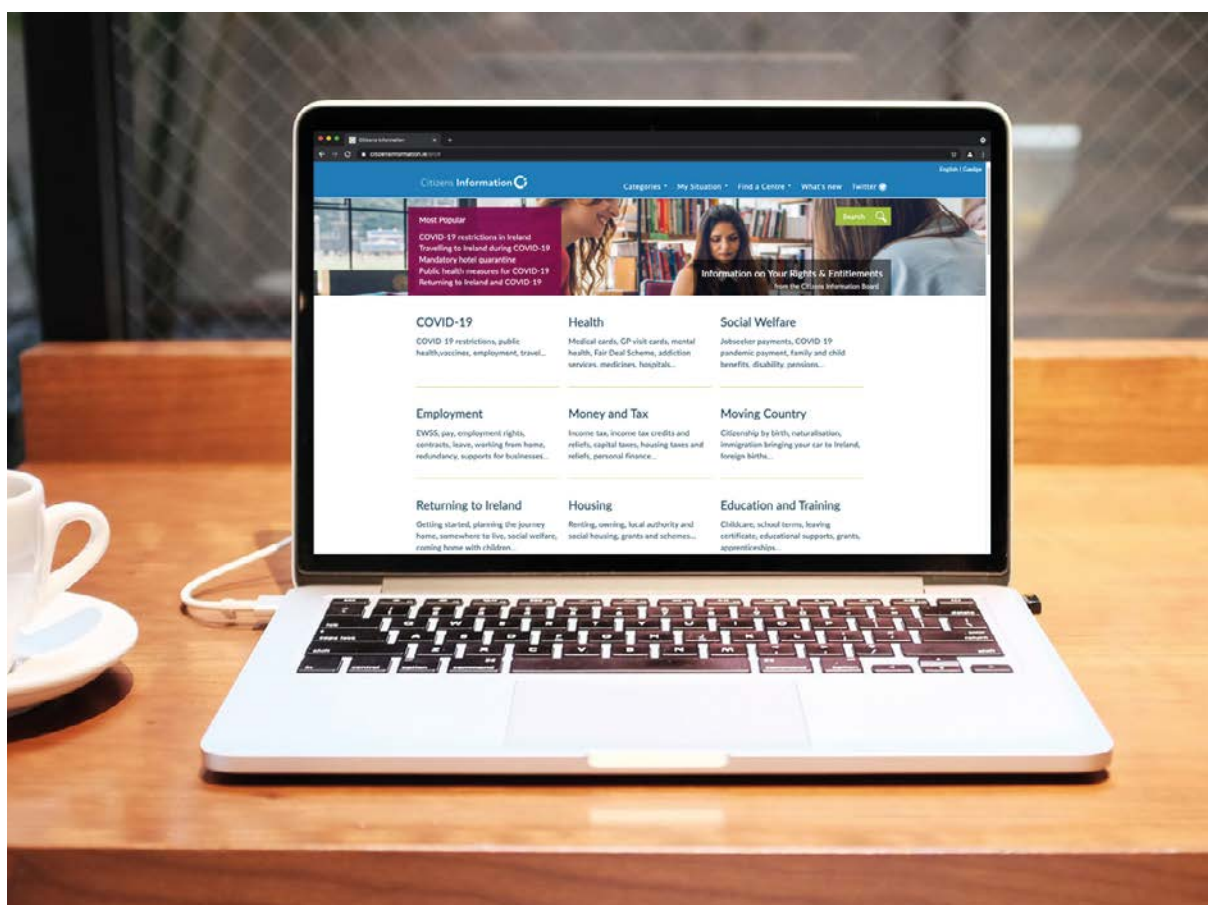
In addition to the specialist training requirements in the various CIB services, there is also a need for eLearning to provide online training in general areas of productivity, business and information technology skills. These requirements are addressed through external providers of high-quality training, such as LinkedIn Learning. In 2020, staff in CIB-funded services completed 875 courses on LinkedIn Learning.



Screenshot from COVID-19 Employee Induction Course

Chapter 2: Citizensinformation.ie

CIB’s website, citizensinformation.ie, is designed to be a one-stop-shop for public service information. Here, members of the public will find all the important information about their rights and entitlements, gathered from the various government departments and agencies and presented in a way that’s easy to use and understand.



In 2020, citizensinformation.ie recorded 15.4 million users³ (a 22.4% increase on 2019) and 55 million page views⁴ (a 17.2% increase on 2019).

3 We use Google Analytics on citizensinformation.ie for statistical reporting. There was a substantial fall-off in the users being recorded through Google Analytics from October 2020 following implementation of cookie compliance opt-in mechanisms and a reduction in website visitors who accepted analytics cookies. We estimate that the percentage increase in traffic to the website was higher than the figures here.

4 The total number of page views on the website was 55,089,269. This includes traffic to the news pages, Find a Citizens Information Centre pages and other pages on the site. There were 47,840,368 page views of content pages (88% of all page views on website).

2020 at a Glance

Total users:
15.4 million

Busiest day:
Monday 16 March
435,000 page views

Most visited document:
**COVID-19
Pandemic
Unemployment
Payment**
2.2 million
page views

Total page views:
55 million

Busiest week:
16-23 March
878,975 users

Most visited category:
Social Welfare
15.3 million
page views

Most common search term:
**COVID-19
Payment**

COVID-19-related pages accounted for six of the most viewed pages on the site, with the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment page accounting for over 120,000 users and almost 2.2 million views.

Most Viewed 2020

Page	Users	Page Views
COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment	120,2670	2,168,195
Social welfare payments and COVID-19	602,332	1,001,987
Your employment rights during COVID-19 restrictions	547,283	829,606
Public health measures for COVID-19	483,507	667,574
Returning to Ireland and COVID-19	395,893	569,396
Jobseeker's Allowance	328,429	545,963
Illness Benefit	283,576	518,744
COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme	319,914	529,877
State Pension (Contributory)	257,674	456,442
Irish citizenship through birth or descent	319,468	431,637

In 2020, as in previous years, most users (83%) arrived onto the website through a Google search. A further 9.5% of users came from 'direct traffic', in other words, they typed or pasted the link of a specific webpage directly into the search bar.

Top 15 Category Rankings 2020

Rank	Category	Users who visited the category in 2020	Page Views	% Total Page Views
1	Social Welfare	4,642,180	15,324,957	28%
2	Employment	3,421,243	8,182,060	15%
3	Health	2,000,445	3,647,464	7%
4	Travel and Recreation	1,838,743	3,228,928	6%
5	Housing	1,306,681	3,208,216	6%
6	Money and Tax	1,466,872	2,767,091	5%
7	Moving Country	1,259,299	2,588,676	5%
8	Education	967,830	1,831,885	3%
9	Family and Relationships	808,794	1,774,174	3%
10	Justice	867,750	1,526,423	3%
11	Government	574,946	956,164	2%
12	Returning to Ireland	319,136	924,507	2%
13	Consumer	477,833	777,657	1%
14	Death and Bereavement	373,284	661,403	1%
15	Environment	257,390	379,199	1%
	Total		47,840,368	88%*

Social Welfare continued to be the most visited category, followed by Employment. Not surprisingly, Health shot up the rankings to become the third most visited category, with high traffic to COVID-19 pages on public health, plans for living with COVID-19, face coverings and COVID-19. *Total is only 88% of total page views across the whole website.

At the end of 2020, there were 1,173 content pages on the site, published in English and Irish. The Irish language pages had 23,941 visitors and 61,564 page views (0.11% of all page views).

Traffic to the website from mobile devices was 62.47%.

Category Traffic Sources

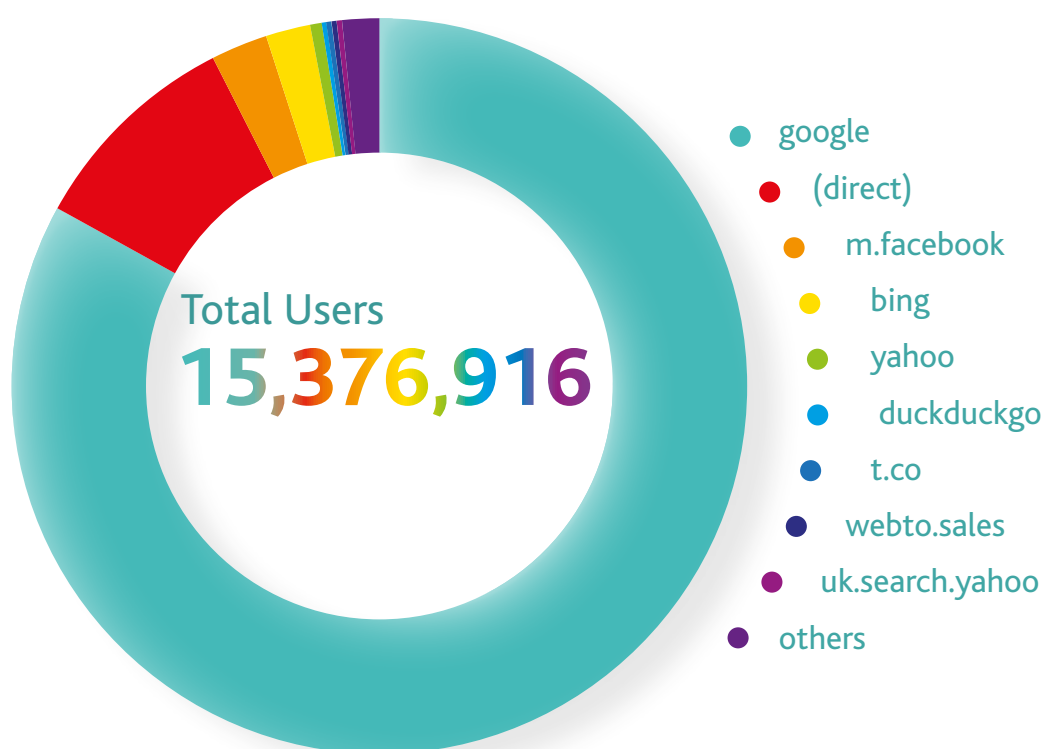


Figure 1: Traffic sources in 2020

COVID-19 and citizensinformation.ie Response

The first mention of COVID-19 appeared on citizensinformation.ie on 19 February 2020, with readers directed to hse.ie for more information, as this disease that had not previously been observed in humans. Ireland’s first case of COVID-19 was confirmed 10 days later.

Following the Taoiseach's speech from Washington on 12 March 2020 and the immediate closure of schools, all CIB staff started to work from home from Friday, 13 March. Over that weekend, a new income support payment, the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, was announced for those who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

On Monday 16 March, a new document on the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was added to citizensinformation.ie. That day alone, more than 177,000 visitors to citizensinformation.ie viewed over 43,000 pages, making it was the busiest day of 2020.

During that week⁵, 878,975 users visited the website searching for information on the new COVID-19 payment, other social welfare payments, employment rights and a range of other topics. In all, they viewed a total of 2,409,257 pages.

It was clear that many people were looking for detailed information about public services, the response to COVID-19 and their rights. Like all other public bodies, Citizens Information needed to dramatically transform working processes to meet our users' needs during a time of unprecedented change and anxiety, with the added challenges of working from home.

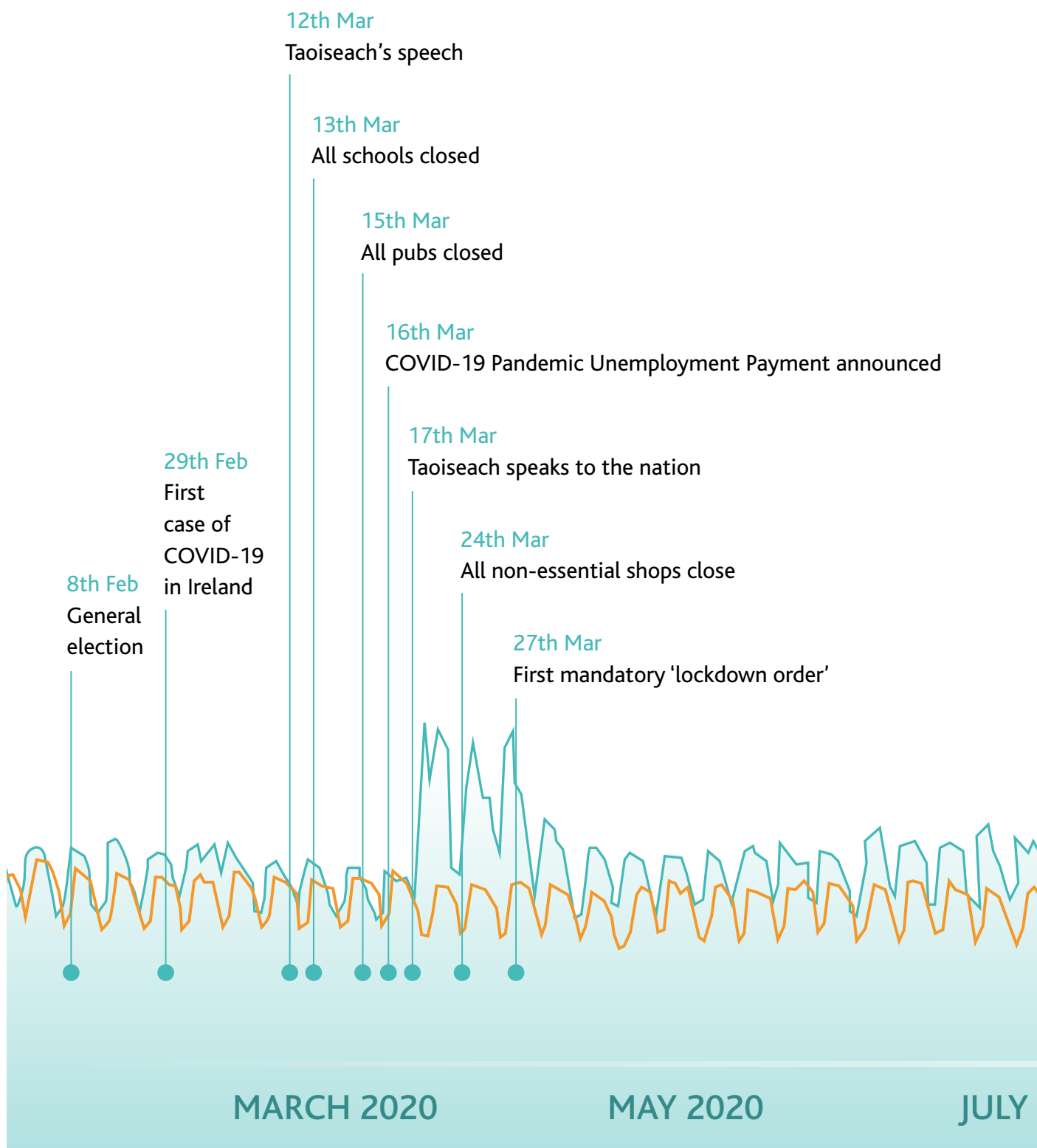
Responding Quickly and Appropriately

The arrival of COVID-19 was a very stressful time for people across Ireland, with mass lay-offs, school and business closures and a great deal of fear around the spread of the virus. This created a surge in demand for relevant information, and our digital content team moved into overdrive, publishing new content as it became available.

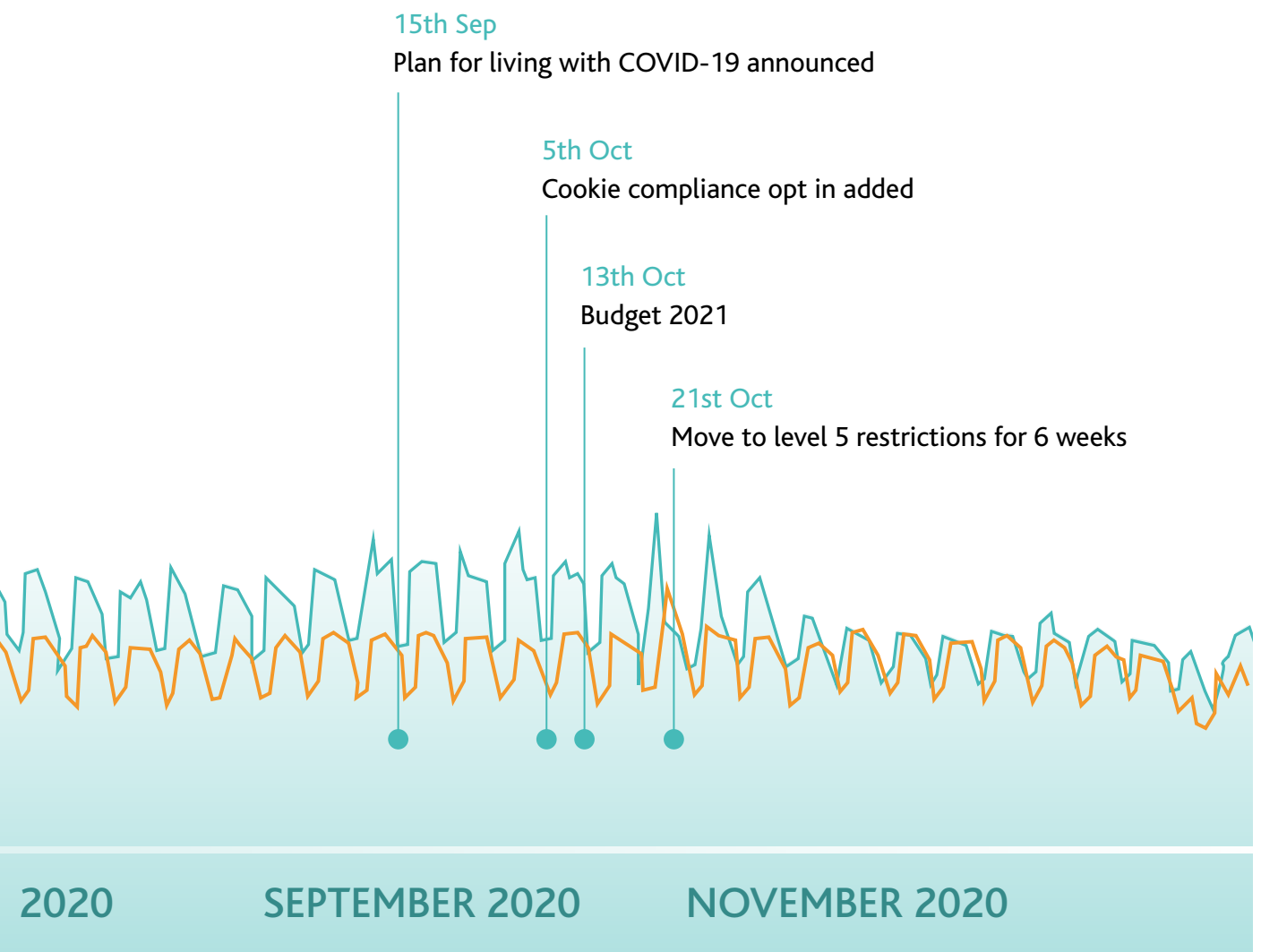
Against a backdrop of uncertainty, it was vital to ensure the continued quality and accuracy of our content. The existing processes and systems the CIB website team had in place were key to its success.

⁵ Monday, 16 March to Monday, 23 March 2020

Website Traffic and 2020 Key Milestones



01 January 2020 - 31 December 2020 —
01 January 2019 - 31 December 2019 —



How did we do it? We;

- Created standalone COVID-19 related pages that could integrate information on a single topic from a range of sources
- Developed content based on user needs including feedback from our services through new discussion boards
- Amended pages several times a day in response to questions or requests from the public and our service delivery companies
- Used web traffic and search data to identify the content that users searched for.
- Published updates on our Twitter and Facebook pages and responded to queries through social media
- Worked with stakeholders and Government departments, including the Department of Social Protection, we pushed out a massive amount of much-needed information to the public
- Added 35 new documents related to COVID-19 to the website. The combined traffic to these COVID-19 documents accounted for almost 10 million page views and 18% of all traffic to the website in 2020
- Undertook almost 7,000 content revisions across the website, more than double the number of revisions in 2019
- Developed a new call-back service accessible through a new form on the website. This form was submitted 31,291 times
- Kept Citizens Information and MABS staff informed on a daily basis of all COVID-19 news articles and media updates and highlighted any new content on the website
- Continued to issue the fortnightly Scope newsletter throughout the pandemic to CIB's funded services

As Ireland's response to the pandemic moved from lockdown to an opening up and partial return to work over the summer and then back to lockdown again, the public's information needs were in constant change. By the end of the year, much of the content that had been published at the start of the pandemic had been renamed, removed or revised.



Social Media in 2020

In 2020, as a result of the pandemic and our response to it, we cemented our reputation as a trusted source of information. At the start of the pandemic, people were searching for and widely sharing information on social media, some of which was unverified and inaccurate. We made an immediate decision to significantly increase our use of social media to get accurate information out quickly and to drive traffic to the citizensinformation.ie website.

Our posts provided concise, timely information and pointed people to our website and services for more information and advice. We provided answers to the most pressing questions, directing users to our service delivery companies and other organisations for further help. There was a very positive response to our more vocal and responsive social media presence, with a vast increase in people following and engaging with our social media accounts.

The Citizens Information Facebook account was activated in September 2019, and by the end of 2020 it had over 17,000 followers. Our Twitter account increased its followers by 52% to over 10,000 in 2020. These figures highlight the public appetite for trusted government-sourced information on social media.

We published 1,360 Facebook posts, and tweeted or retweeted 1,514 times throughout the year. There was huge engagement with this content as followers liked, shared and commented on it.

We had an engagement rate of 16.8% on Facebook, and 1.2% on Twitter. For reference, a Facebook engagement rate above 1% is considered good and on Twitter anything between 0.3% and 1% is considered very high engagement. What makes the figures we reached even more impressive is that the average engagement rate for public sector bodies in 2018 was 0.3% on Facebook and 0.4% on Twitter.

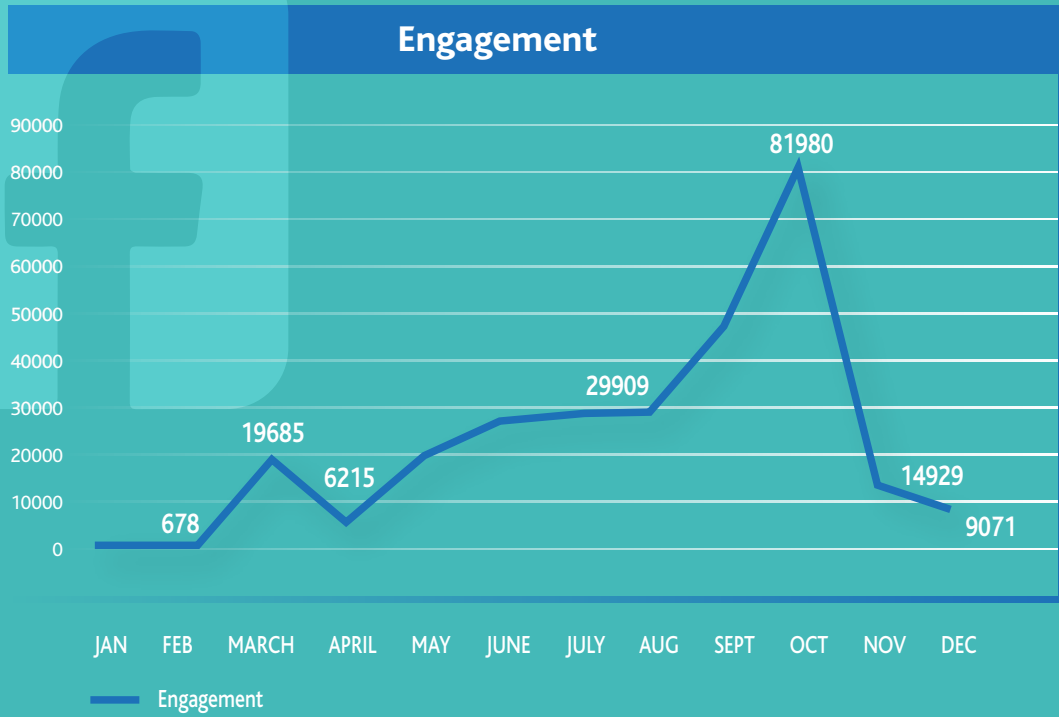
On Twitter  Website Feedback

The [@citizensinfo](https://citizensinfo) website is such a fantastic resource

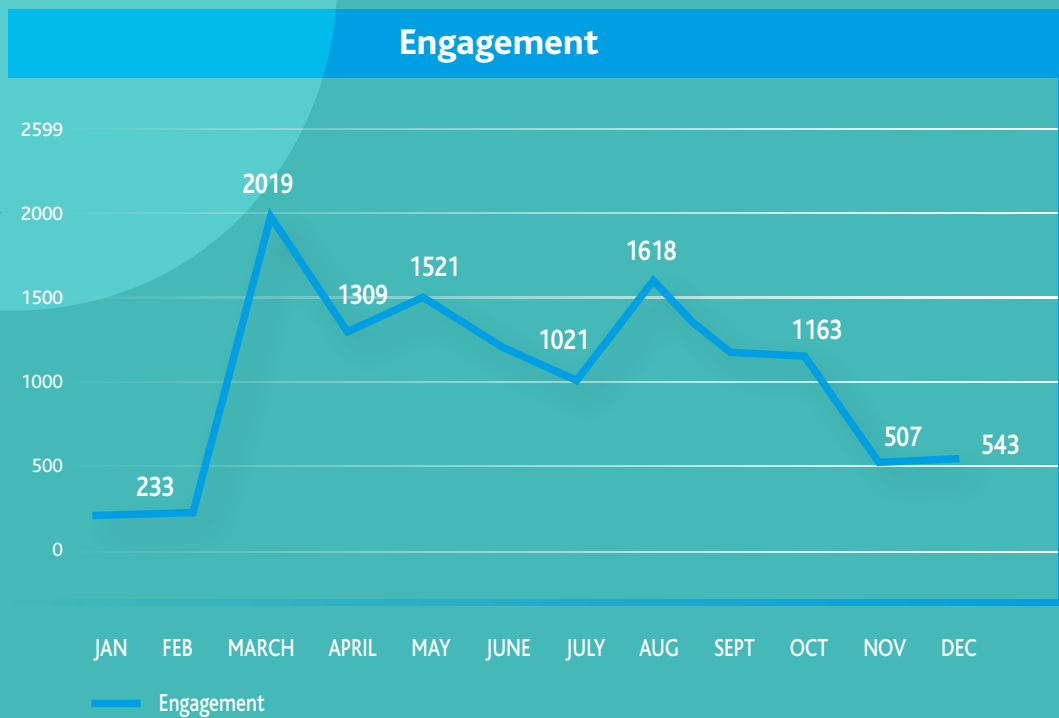




Facebook 2020



Twitter 2020



On Twitter  Website Feedback

This website is great for general information on all topics
[@citizensinfo](#) @TodaySOR
citizensinformation.ie/en/

On Twitter  Safe Home Ireland

[@citizensinfo](#) playing a blinder with getting critical and relevant info out.
Don't forget CIC offices are available countrywide for phone and email queries.
centres.citizensinformation.ie

We began responding to queries on social media in 2020 and by the end of the year we had answered **1,376** (664 on Twitter and 712 on Facebook). Queries focussed on social welfare, the pandemic, travel and employment rights. On our social media channels, the replies to such queries are public, so they reach far more people than just the person who originally made the query.

Also in 2020, we developed social media videos and ran a consumer campaign. The videos covered topical issues, such as how to use a face mask. These videos proved very popular and were among our top posts in 2020. The consumer campaign ran for a month, promoting the new consumer section of the website.

During the year, our social media accounts became recognised as trusted sources of information by other organisations.

- We were listed as a verified account on Facebook
- We were added to Facebook and Twitter COVID-19 information hubs
- We were recognised in the Public Sector Marketing Institute's 'State of Social Media' report

New Consumer Category

In 2020, CIB developed a new consumer category, 'Common Consumer Problems', to replace 'Consumer Affairs'. The category was simplified, with content consolidated, streamlined, updated and modernised. We addressed gaps in content and applied plain English principles, making it more relevant to more users and easier to understand.

2020 Google Analytics statistics for this consumer category show that it had 319,136 users and 777,657 page views. This represents a 60.09% increase in users and a 52.2% increase in page views on the 2019 figures.

New Consumer Category – Most Visited Pages

Page	Users	Page Views
Travel plans and COVID-19	114,284	168,022
Your rights as a consumer in Ireland	44,639	61,041
Shopping during COVID-19	34,754	43,537
TV licences	26,947	35,526
Buying a used car	23,183	32,289
Total	243,807	340,415

The new content is available online at citizensinformation.ie/en/consumer/.

Returning to Ireland

In 2020, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade continued to provide funding to CIB to deliver an online information resource for returning Irish emigrants, a project that was first initiated in 2019. The content covers practical areas such as how the Irish taxation system works, how to get an Irish driving licence or how to get a passport for a child born abroad.

In 2020, the focus shifted in response to the pandemic.

- We provided up-to-date and accurate information for Irish emigrants returning to Ireland, responding to queries from the public by email and through social media
- We published new content including 'Returning to Ireland during COVID-19'
- We shared relevant information and updates on social media
- We networked with relevant groups, organisations and statutory bodies to circulate information and promote 'Returning to Ireland' content
- We participated in COVID-19-related talks and webinars for returning emigrants and support organisations, together with groups funded by the Emigrant Support Programme and other key stakeholders

The Returning to Ireland pages had over half a million visitors and almost 1 million page views in 2020.

Returning to Ireland – Most Visited Pages

Page	Users	Page Views
Returning to Ireland and COVID-19	395,874	569,342
Returning to Ireland	64,924	101,792
PPS numbers for returning Irish emigrants and their families	21,037	30,350
Bringing a non-EEA spouse or civil partner home to Ireland	18,029	26,407
Irish citizenship and passports for children born abroad	13,690	17,120
Total	513,544	745,011

Returning to Ireland content is available online at citizensinformation.ie/en/returning_to_ireland/.

Public Service Innovation Fund and Pilot Voice Search Project

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) launched a new Public Service Innovation Fund in mid-2019. CIB's application, which addressed voice-based search, was successful and was awarded €30,000 in late 2019. Voice-based search is a method of search which allows people to search using spoken voice commands rather than typing.

We used the funding to examine what types of public service information are most likely to be asked for using voice, and to optimise selected information on the citizensinformation.ie website for voice search.

We believe voice-based search could support information officers responding to live chat queries, and make sure that citizensinformation.ie content continues to rank for all types of search queries.

Preparing for Brexit

During the year, the citizensinformation.ie team continued to monitor Brexit developments. We added relevant information on what Brexit means for citizens in preparation for the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. Over 2.2 million website users visited citizensinformation.ie from the UK in 2020, viewing 4.7 million web pages.

"I just wanted to thank you for always having up to date, accurate and **easy to understand information regarding any COVID rules. You and your team have played a blinder. Well done."**



Chapter 3: Citizens Information Services (CIS)

The national network of Citizens Information Centres (CICs), overseen by eight regional Citizens Information Services (CISs), provides free, impartial and confidential information, advice and advocacy services to the public.

Staffing and Funding

At the end of 2020, there were 215.29 whole-time equivalent (WTE) employees in the CIS network. There were also 146 employment scheme workers and 896 volunteers (equivalent to 106.32 WTE), a slight reduction on the 2019 figures.

CIS Regional Managers are responsible for overseeing the delivery of a regional work plan, optimising available resources and driving a consistent approach to service delivery within their geographical area. Regional boards of management help steer and manage these companies, with CIB providing a range of oversight and support services.

Region	Location of Regional Manager
North Dublin CIS	Balbriggan
Dublin South CIS	Tallaght
North Leinster CIS	Navan
South Leinster CIS	Tullamore
North Munster CIS	Limerick
South Munster CIS	Cork
North Connacht and Ulster CIS	Monaghan
South Connacht CIS	Galway

In 2020, CIB paid an operational grant of €15,689,469 in total to the eight CIS companies, an increase of €1,274,824 on the 2019 budget allocation.

2020 at a Glance

Callers to the CIS:

369,745

Advocacy cases:

4,016

Social policy returns:

5,799

COVID-19 and the CIS Response

In 2020 CIS experienced an unprecedented rise in demand for information in a rapidly changing information environment, as new emergency schemes, regulations and legislation came into effect. Telephone and email became the predominant means of contact with clients, due to restrictions on providing drop-in services. CIS also experienced a loss of capacity, following Government advice and guidance, temporarily standing down its volunteer workforce of 896 people in March 2020.

Both the Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service continued to deliver information and advice to the public during a confusing and challenging time. CIB led the re-configuration of CIS operations, in collaboration with Regional Managers and Boards, through regular consultations and meetings. This partnership ensured CIB could adopt a national approach to maintaining an effective CIS service offering, and enabled the implementation of several new initiatives to overcome the challenges presented by COVID-19:

- Information Officers from the CIS network were reassigned to support CIPS phone lines during peaks in caller demand
- A dedicated national COVID-19 email address was set up and is monitored by a team of Information Officers
- A 'Request a Call Back' service was introduced, providing customers with an opportunity to complete a web form to receive a follow-up call from an Information Officer within two working days. This service is advertised on both the Citizens Information Board and Citizens Information websites

Month	Requests for Call Backs
April	1,121
May	2,427
June	4,470
July	3,784
August	4,154
September	4,003
October	4,622
November	2,940
December	1,701
Total	29,222

In June 2020, CIB began working with the CIS through the newly-established CIS Service Delivery Advisory Group to adopt a consistent approach to re-opening some CIS offices to the public by appointment only.

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, the Citizens Information Service network has developed and embraced new ways of working. This was done so that services could provide an effective and responsive information service to the public in a rapidly changing information and policy environment.

The CIS developed its service to meet these challenges and play a vital role in supporting the many people who need an opportunity to talk through their options in accessing critical support services and social benefits.

Excellence in Customer Service Acknowledgement

A case study, 'Enhanced Customer Service to Meet Emerging Public Need' was published in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's 'Excellence in Customer Service Case Studies Report' (Our Public Service 2020). This report was launched at the annual Quality Customer Service Conference in December 2020 by the Minister of State at the Department.

The case study developed by CIB is based on a presentation delivered at the Quality Customer Service Network meeting in June 2020. The meeting was about 'Addressing COVID-19 Customer Service Challenges & Innovating for the Future'. A video recording of the full presentation is included on the Our Public Service 2020 website.

Callers

CIS helped 369,745 people in 2020 and answered 726,658 queries. The table below shows a regional breakdown of 'queries', 'callers' and 'queries for each caller'.

Table showing the queries and callers for each CIS

CIS	Queries	Callers
South Leinster CIS	131,915	53,615
North Munster CIS	117,227	47,743
North Connacht & Ulster	111,217	52,316
North Leinster CIS	102,913	57,572
South Munster CIS	91,507	51,256
North Dublin CIS	76,793	46,770
South Connacht CIS	55,253	30,828
Dublin South CIS	39,833	29,645
	726,658	369,745

Where age was recorded, almost half of all callers were in the 26 to 45 age group (49.29%), followed by people aged 46 to 65 (34.66%). Some 12.33% of callers were aged 66 years and over, with the remainder aged under 25 (3.72%).

Where nationality was recorded, the majority of callers were Irish (193,560). Of the non-Irish callers, the highest category was Polish (11,450), followed by the United Kingdom (4,014). These 'top three' were the same as in 2019.

Not surprisingly, with the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent closure of offices, only 29.48% of clients contacted the CIS in person in 2020, compared with 78% in 2019.

In contrast, 64.33% contacted the CIS by telephone in 2020, representing a significant increase on the 2019 figure of 21%.

Queries

The types of queries dealt with by CIS were similar to those of previous years, with social welfare, health, housing and employment being the most common. The newly created COVID-19 query category was ranked third most popular for 2020 in terms of client demand. Social welfare was the largest query category in 2020, accounting for 307,239 queries (42.28%). Together, social welfare, employment and COVID-19 made up 60.89% of all queries for 2020.

2020 Top Query Categories

Ranking	Top 10 Query Categories 2020	Number of Queries 2020	% of Overall Queries 2020
1.	Social Welfare	307,239	42.28%
2.	Employment	69,009	9.49%
3.	COVID-19	66,281	9.12%
4.	Housing	57,646	7.93%
5.	Health	47,816	6.58%
6.	Money and Tax	35,210	4.84%
7.	Local	29,411	4.04%
8.	Justice	20,871	2.87%
9.	Birth, Family and Relationships	20,134	2.77%
10.	Moving Country	20,099	2.76%

*COVID-19 categories we counted as specific social welfare payments such as the PUP Scheme, Enhanced Illness Benefit, as well as the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (Revenue administers), as well as employment rights related to COVID-19).

Actions

In all, 74.47% of queries in 2020 were recorded as complex. This represents a significant increase on 2019's figure of 65%. Information needs in 2020 became more complicated with the ever-changing government policies and guidance around the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of queries recorded as requiring information was 325,711 (44.82%), advice and assistance was 398,107 (54.78%) and advocacy was 2,840 (0.39%).

How Citizens Information Services helped Clients in 2020

• Explored people's options	77.94%
• Calculated amount of benefit or tax entitlement with caller	6.44%
• Benefits check	6.05%
• Filled in a form with a caller	4.91%
• Contacted a Government department or agency (public/voluntary sector) on behalf of caller	2.10%
• Assisted with online access or application	1.01%
• Gave advice on an appeals process	0.35%
• Phoned an employer, landlord or other (private sector) on behalf of a caller	0.20%

Advocacy in Citizens Information Services

Citizens Information Services (CIS) offers an advocacy service in a wide range of areas, including social welfare, employment, housing, consumer issues, health and immigration.

Eight advocacy support workers (ASWs) are employed across the Citizens Information network to coach and mentor staff in advocacy casework to build their capacity. Our advocacy support workers also provide on-call advice on casework, and are supported by an external expert support service.

In 2020, CIS worked on 4,016 advocacy cases, requiring over 11,130 hours of work.

Long term cases: There were 1,969 long-term cases recorded, which took 9,043 hours. Typically, these cases are about complex issues or appeals, such as employment, social welfare and housing, and take months to progress.

Short term cases: The remaining 2,047 were short-term cases, taking 2,087 hours and involving over 6,000 recorded actions, such as providing information, preparing forms, making phone calls, and writing letters or emails to employers, landlords, Government departments or agencies.

Most (69%) of advocacy cases in 2020 related to social welfare, followed by employment (15%) and housing (8%).

Even though advocacy provision in 2020 was severely affected by public health restrictions which reduced the number of cases considerably, the first two months of 2020 indicated a strong demand for advocacy, with a 38% increase compared with the same period in 2019.

Of the 1,969 individual advocacy cases dealt with by services in 2020, some 1,086 cases were already open at the start of 2020. There were 883 new cases (45% decrease). In total, 1,272 cases were closed in 2020.

The gender breakdown of advocacy clients is 57% female, 43% male. Nationality was recorded in 75% (1,470) of cases. Of these, 40% held a non-Irish citizenship, including 13% who held a non-EU citizenship. When all cases are included, 590 (30%) clients were recorded as having non-Irish citizenship, with 194 of those having non-EU citizenship.

Altogether, 69% of cases in 2020 related to social welfare. Consistent with information and advice queries, social welfare cases far outnumbered other advocacy case issues. The number of new social welfare cases in 2020 represented a 42% decrease from 2019. However, the proportion of overall cases related to social welfare increased by 4% in 2020.

The most significant social welfare subcategory was Disability Allowance (21% of all cases), followed by Invalidity Pension (12%), Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit (11%), pay (5%) and Jobseeker's Allowance (5%).

The next highest number of advocacy cases opened in 2020 related to employment (15%). This represented a significantly high percentage of advocacy-related work in the CIS context. This was followed by housing (8%) and immigration (3%), with consumer, health and education at less than 2% each.

While overall advocacy case numbers decreased in 2020 compared with 2019, there were notable increases in the number of cases involving public holidays and annual leave, employment terms and conditions, minimum notice and hours of work.

Advocacy Expert Support

Advocates in CIS have access to an expert panel, contracted by the Citizens Information Board. When CIS clients face a particularly complex social welfare or employment issue, the CIS can request advice from legal experts. This expert advice was integral to the successful resolution of some of CIS's more complex advocacy cases in 2020.

Social Welfare Interventions

In social welfare cases, the most significant advocacy intervention (70% of cases) was working with or on behalf of the client to submit an appeal to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

Altogether, 74% of outcomes agreed by the client and advocate at their initial meeting and drawn up in their Advocacy Plan were achieved in the social welfare cases that closed in 2020. Some 6% were partly achieved and 20% not achieved.

Employment Interventions

The most significant advocacy intervention in these cases was assisting the client in direct negotiations with their employer.

Intervention	Number of Cases	Percentage of total cases where intervention applied*
Direct negotiations with employer	130	88%
Work Relations Commission (WRC) hearing attendance	88	59%
Settlement agreement	56	38%
WRC hearing support to client, no CIS attendance	26	18%
WRC mediation	11	7%
Labour Court hearing attendance	5	3%
Direct negotiations with liquidator / receiver	3	2%
Labour Court hearing support to client, no CIS attendance	3	2%
Legal referral	3	2%
Total	325	*More than one intervention may present in each case.

Altogether, 71% of outcomes agreed in the Advocacy Plan were achieved in employment cases in 2020. This was followed by 13% recorded as partly achieved and 16% not achieved.

Social Policy Returns from Citizens Information Services

Staff in CIS submit social policy returns to CIB when they think a client is experiencing a particular difficulty or pattern of difficulties in accessing social or public services. Individual cases can indicate a broader problem or concern with a policy, practice or piece of legislation. In 2020, CIS's submitted 5,799 social policy returns.

The pandemic has affected all areas of people's lives and public service provision in 2020, including health and social care, jobs and working conditions, income support and living standards. Social welfare-related matters continued to be the main focus of the network of CIS social policy feedback submitted to CIB, representing over 40% of all policy issues raised. We expected this focus on social welfare, given the scale and speed of Government interventions to support incomes during the year.

The COVID-19 category accounted for 18% of the social policy returns during 2020. This category contains specific social welfare-related payments such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) Scheme and Enhanced Illness Benefit. It also includes the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme administered by Revenue, as well as employment rights issues related to COVID-19.

The other key areas of concern reported by services included housing, money and tax issues, health, employment and travel / recreation.

Almost two-thirds of feedback reported by CIS referenced operational or administrative difficulties in these categories:

- Social welfare
- Health service entitlement (which is dominated by Medical Card queries)
- Money and tax issues
- Housing

Staff in the CIS considered the remaining cases (37%) to be difficulties caused by the policies, legislation or guidelines that underpin the scope of schemes, benefits or services. These concerned either 'inconsistencies in policy' or 'gaps in service provision'.

Data analysis showed that applicants faced particular difficulties with the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. Some of the supports and initiatives introduced in response to COVID-19 inevitably had unforeseen and unintended consequences, as well as gaps in coverage. Some policies were refined in real-time, as feedback on the consequences became apparent.

Employment rights and conditions also featured regularly in the feedback from services, and concerns were reported regarding the Medical Card, disability and illness payments, and mortgages, rents and home loans.

In addition, CIB service delivery companies highlighted the following policy concerns in 2020.

- Difficulties experienced by workers under-18 and over-66 who were laid-off by their employer and were not eligible for the PUP
- Seasonal workers who were not in employment directly before the pandemic, and therefore, were not eligible for the payment
- 'Frontier workers', people who live in Northern Ireland, but work in the Republic of Ireland were not entitled to the PUP
- Self-employed PUP recipients who were also working as PAYE employees

Reports regarding Medical Cards were related to applicants' difficulties in applying for and renewing their cards online, in particular for older clients.

During 2020, CIB service delivery companies also raised concerns related to the availability and affordability of suitable housing options for low-income households.

Advocacy Development Group

The CIS Advocacy Development Group (ADG), comprising representatives from the CIS and CIB, is responsible for maintaining a strategic and high-level national focus on developing advocacy services and identifying gaps in CIS advocacy standards, policies, and resources. The ADG oversees and authorises advocacy-related policies and procedures.

Chapter 4: Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)

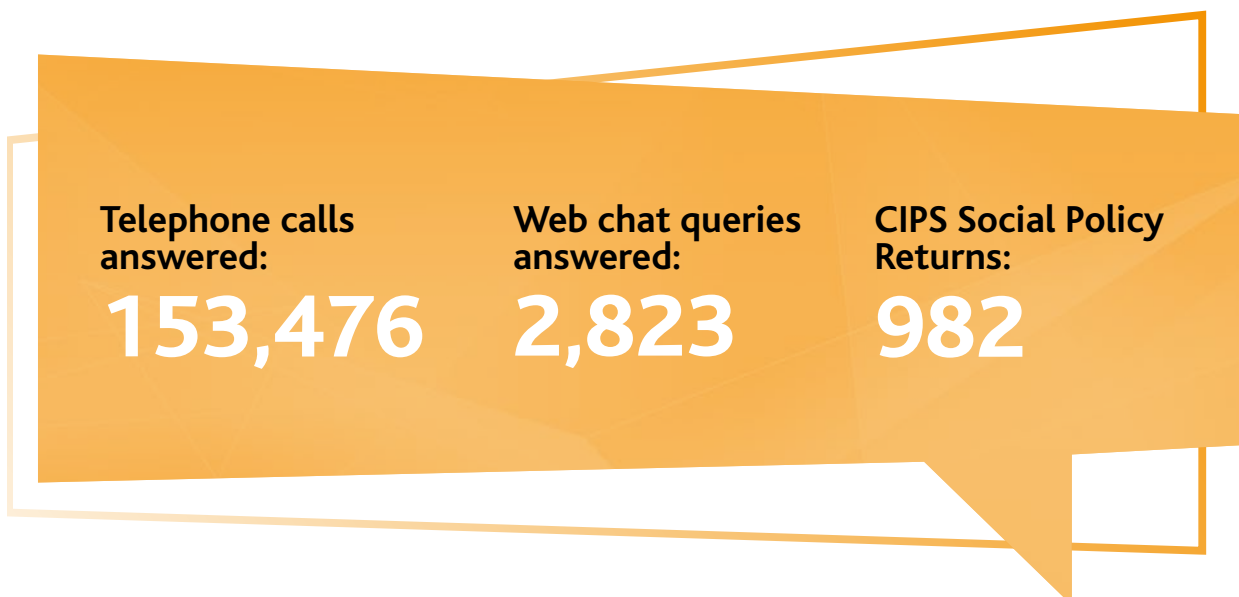
The Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) is based in Cork and provides a comprehensive and confidential telephone information service to the public. CIPS contributes to other aspects of CIB’s remit through social policy returns. It provides a webchat service aimed at supporting the Deaf Community. CIPS also provides a peer support service for all information providers working across the eight regional Citizens Information Services.

Staffing and Funding

CIPS is staffed by a manager, two team supervisors, 17 whole-time equivalent information officers, a senior administrator and two part-time administrators. One temporary information officer supported the peer support service throughout the year.

In 2020, CIPS received an operational grant of €1,358,232 from CIB.

2020 at a Glance



COVID-19 and the CIPS Response

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, 2020 was successful year for CIPS. The high number of callers and ever-changing information landscape brought a dramatic increase in service delivery demands in March 2020, and we quickly adapted the CIPS offering. Through innovative solutions, and by partnering with other CIB-funded companies, CIPS not only maintained services, but increased its capacity. This was achieved by upskilling colleagues from other CIS regional companies and by increasing staff. CIPS added one full-time equivalent information officer in October and four additional temporary full-time information officers in December.

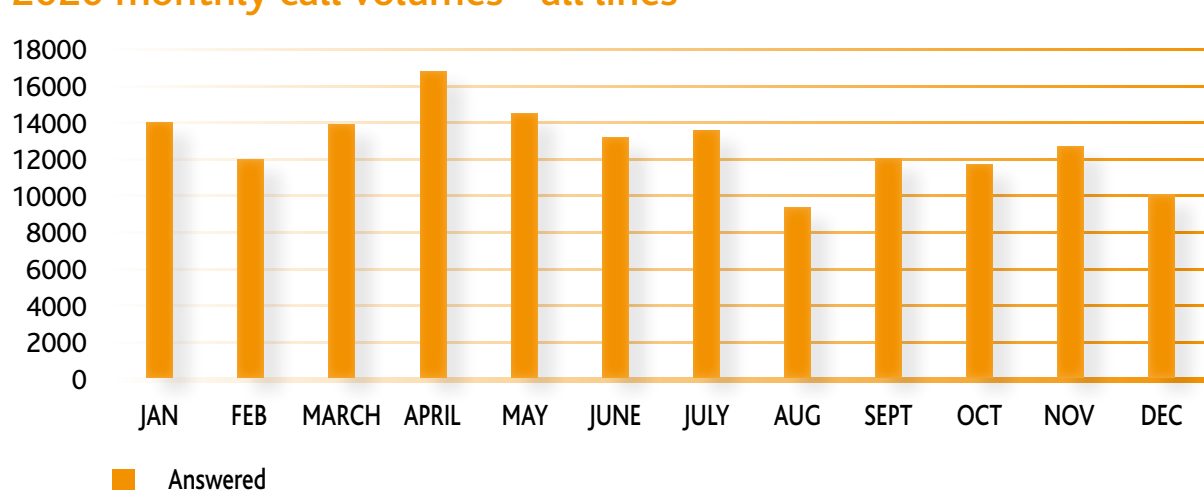
Statistics

In 2020, CIPS answered 153,476 telephone calls and engaged with the public on 2,823 webchats. CIPS provide a peer support service to all staff in the CIS, while it was suspended in April and May due to COVID-19, it responded to 2,120 phone calls over the remaining ten months.

Telephone Service


The 153,476 calls from the public answered, represents a 7% increase from 2019.

2020 monthly call volumes - all lines



Webchat Service

This service is aimed at people who experience hearing or speech difficulties and other barriers to communication by telephone. 2,823 webchat queries were answered in 2020. This was a 20% increase on 2019.



“Had a client this morning saying Citizensinformation.ie is her go to website for everything as it is **so well put together** and very easy to follow! She had huge praise for the staff involved and wish to thank them for all the help they have given her.”

Peer Support

The Peer Support Service is a direct link between CIPS and the Citizens Information Centres (CIC) nationwide. The service aims to offer local CICs access to a team of Information Officers who are available to provide query support and consultation to staff and volunteers. This was suspended in April and May as resources were focused on assisting the public. When the service re-opened in June, demand was low as there were few centres open and limited face-to-face appointments.

There were no volunteers in the Citizens Information centres for the remainder of 2020.

Quality Assurance

CIPS has a number of measures in place to ensure the quality of its interactions with the public and with Citizens Information staff.

- A strong induction programme, with ongoing and refresher training
- In-house support for complex queries
- One-to-one coaching every two months
- Call recording, with assessment by team supervisors
- Dedicated 'non-contact' time allocated to information officers for research and learning

Quality continues to be a key focus in CIPS. As part of the quality checks in place, team supervisors evaluate three calls for each information officer every month. Additionally, team supervisors conduct coaching sessions with information officers every two months.

Social Policy Returns from Citizens Information Phone Service

CIPS has two social policy co-ordinators and six social policy team members. CIPS submitted 982 social policy returns to CIB in 2020, a 20.6 % increase on 2019. Over half, 57.7% of these related to social welfare.



Chapter 5: Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) provides a free, confidential, non-judgmental and independent service throughout the country for people with debt issues. MABS helps people, particularly those on low incomes, with practical advice on dealing with their finances. MABS also provides local communities with education on budgeting and money management.

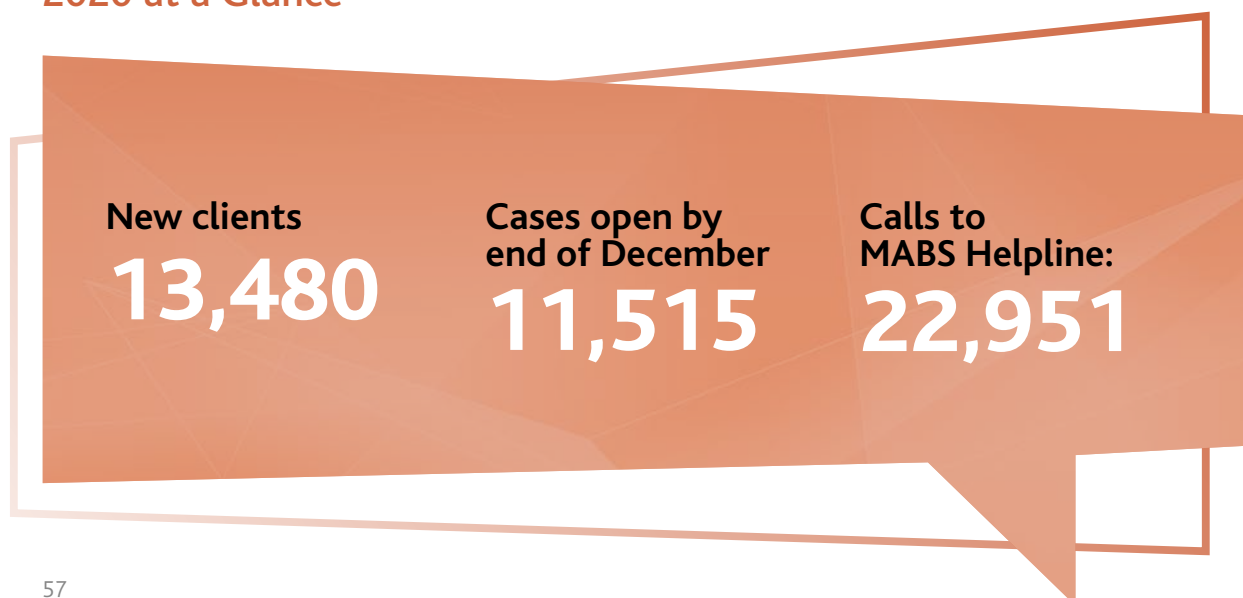
Staffing and Funding

At the end of 2020, the number of whole-time equivalent staff in MABS regional companies was 290. This comprised eight regional managers, 47 money advice co-ordinators, 86 administrators and 149 money advisers (including dedicated mortgage arrears advisers). There were 11 staff members working on the MABS Helpline, 11.5 whole-time equivalent staff in MABS Support and five staff in National Traveller MABS. CIB funding to MABS in 2020 was €18,652,969. An additional €2,449,585 was allocated to fund the Dedicated Mortgage Arrears (DMA) service, and €1,850,000 to fund Abhaile.

COVID-19 and MABS Response

COVID-19 significantly affected the work of MABS in 2020. MABS was deemed an essential service and continued to be available to existing and new clients by telephone and email. However, face-to-face appointments stopped in March. There was a limited reopening of face-to-face appointments in June, but these ended again in October when further public health restrictions were announced.

2020 at a Glance



MABS Messenger was introduced into MABS due to the COVID-19 pandemic to increase access point to MABS services, accessible through the MABS website. MABS social media activity increased significantly over the year and MABS was recognised as having one of the best engagement rates on Facebook in Ireland, in the 'State of Social Media in the Public Sector Report'.

In August, the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act, 2020, introduced new measures to deal with rent arrears and give additional protections to tenants economically affected by COVID-19. This legislation mentions MABS as a source of support for tenants and requires the Residential Tenancies Board to let relevant tenants know about MABS. In addition, MABS advises tenants with other debts and budgeting matters.

Statistics (MABS in Numbers)

New and active clients 2020

- MABS supported 13,480 new clients in 2020
- 1,040 people who did not require long term support, sought information about budgeting and money management from MABS
- As of 31 December 2020, the total open cases was 11,515

Profile of New Clients

Age and Gender

Most new clients (63%) were in the 41 to 65 age group. A further 26% aged were between 26 and 40

Just over half (55%) were women

Income Source

52% of new clients received a social welfare payment. Of these:

- 34% received disability payments, carer's payments or an Invalidity Pension
- 9% received the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)
- 26% received Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit
- 33% of new clients were in employment
- 5% were self-employed
- 37.5% of households had one income source

Accommodation

48% of clients lived in mortgaged accommodation

6% of clients lived in homes they owned outright

15% lived in private rented accommodation

13% lived in rented local authority accommodation

3% of clients lived with their parents

15% lived in various other accommodation types such as with family or friends, or sheltered housing

Total Debt Owed

New clients in 2020 owed their creditors a total of €1.186 billion

The average level of recorded debt for each new client was €88,000

Over 90% of the debt was owed to a bank or other financial institution, a sub-prime lender or a debt collection agency

New Roles for MABS in Legislation

Residential Tenancies Act 2020

In August 2020, the Residential Tenancies Act 2020 gave additional protection to tenants who find themselves in rent arrears because of COVID-19. It is now mandatory for all tenants seeking to avail of these added protections to engage with MABS. This is a welcome step, as it gives MABS the opportunity to offer its full service to tenants, helping them to deal with any other money matters and take steps to maximise their income.

Given the temporary nature of the legislation, it was agreed that one MABS company, South Leinster MABS, would be the designated contact point for Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) referrals. There were 33 referrals between the beginning of August 2020, when the Act was enacted, and the end of December 2020. MABS works with referred tenants to assess their current rent arrears situation and explore options to help sustain the tenancy.

Enhanced Role for MABS Under the Consumer Protection Code

In June, the Central Bank of Ireland published regulations under the Consumer Protection Code to protect customers of licensed moneylenders. These new regulations followed the Central Bank's review of the Code, which began in 2018. Moneylenders must now include prominent warnings on the high cost of credit in all advertisements for loans with an Annual Percentage Rate (APR) over 23%.

CIB and MABS consulted with stakeholders in 2018 about the review of the Consumer Protection Code in relation to moneylenders. The changes made to the Code reflect several of the recommendations from the CIB/MABS submission about protecting low-income consumers. The revised Code references MABS in several places and states that potential borrowers should be told of alternatives to high-cost credit and directed to contact MABS if they need a loan for basic needs, such as accommodation or electricity.

Events and Community Education

Online Presentation to Former Debenhams Workers

Given the expertise in the MABS network, services are often called upon to support different cohorts of people experiencing financial crisis. For example, Dublin South MABS facilitated an online money advice and information session for around 1,200 Debenhams staff around the country who were being made redundant.

MABS National Helpline

The MABS Helpline is a national telephone service. Its function and staff transferred to North Dublin MABS in February 2020. By the end of March, in response to COVID-19 and the public health need to protect staff, the Helpline began operating remotely. In 2020, the Helpline responded to 22,951 calls, comprising 11,897 clients.

Callers can leave a voicemail, requesting a call back. In 2020, some 884 callers requested a call back. The Helpline also responded to 2,380 email requests during the year.

MABS Webinars

A webinar series was organised in autumn 2020 to highlight some of the sectors that have undergone significant change because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three experts spoke about the changes and developments and their possible effect on the work of MABS. These talks, held over Zoom, were given on the following themes:

- COVID-19 - Self Employment and Business Survival Essentials, presented by Kieran Comerford, Head of Economic Development & Enterprise at Carlow Local Enterprise Office
- Using Proportionality in Mortgage Arrears Cases, presented by Dr Padraic Kenna, Senior Lecturer, School of Law, College of Business, Public Policy and Law, National University of Ireland, Galway
- The Central Bank’s Role in the National Consumer Protection Framework, presented by Derville Rowland, Director General, Financial Conduct, Central Bank of Ireland

Money Advice and Budgeting Service
Autumn 2020 Webinar Series

A series of webinars will be held in September 2020. The COVID-19 (coronavirus) Pandemic has impacted on every aspect of our life and has fundamentally changed the way we work, travel, shop and more besides. Three experts have been invited to speak in relation to the possible impact the COVID-19 Pandemic will have on MABS clients.

Date & Time	Presenter	Title	Chair
Webinar 1: Wednesday September 2 nd 12pm to 1pm	Kieran Comerford Head of Economic Development & Enterprise at Carlow Local Enterprise Office (Carlow)	Covid-19- Self Employment and Business Survival Essentials	Michael Laffey Regional Manager, North Leinster MABS
Webinar 2: Tuesday September 15 th 12pm to 1pm	Dr. Padraic Kenna Senior Lecturer, School of Law, College of Business, Public Policy and Law, National University of Ireland, Galway	Using Proportionality in Mortgage Arrears cases	Michelle O’ Hara Regional Manager, South Leinster MABS
Webinar 3: Wednesday September 30 th 12pm to 1pm	Derville Rowland Director General, Financial Conduct, Central Bank of Ireland	The Central Bank’s role in the National Consumer Protection Framework	Angela Black CEO, Citizens Information Board

HOW CAN I ATTEND?
Attendance at the webinars is via Zoom.
Attendance is free and open to all but an application form must be completed and your attendance agreed with your line manager.
Booking forms will be available from your line manager.
Booking deadline is August 21st.

Funded and supported by Citizens Information Board

MABS Autumn 2020 Webinar Series leaflet

MABS National Helpline Client Profile

- Gender: 56% female, 44% male
- Age range and relationship status: Most callers were married and in the 41 to 65 age group. The next highest age group was 26 to 40
- Accommodation: Most callers lived in mortgaged accommodation, followed by private rented accommodation and local authority accommodation
- Income source: 48% of callers received a social welfare payment, 9% of this category were receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). 32% of callers had income from work

Referrals from Helpline to MABS Offices

- In 2020, a total of 4,941 referrals were made to MABS offices from the Helpline for further support by a money adviser. Of these, 577 were emergency cases
- 362 clients were referred to the Dedicated Mortgage Arrears service, of which 39 were urgent cases

Utility Arrears

The MABS Helpline is often a first point of contact for people with utility debt (gas, electricity) or disconnection notices. In 2020, 5,400 calls made to the MABS Helpline related to utility arrears. Helpline advisers put 1,700 utility-related payment plans in place for clients. Many utility providers put a moratorium (stop) on disconnections in March as part of a support package to help people through COVID-19. The MABS Helpline Co-Ordinator is a member of the Consumer Stakeholder Group of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU).



Chapter 6: MABS Support



MABS Support was set up in February 2020, following a reorganisation of the work of MABS National Development. It supports the MABS regional network by providing high-quality training and money management education resources to maintain quality standards and ensure MABS can contribute to relevant policy.

Learning and Development

This is a core activity of MABS Support CLG. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 training events were mostly delivered online to the MABS network. The courses offered in the first six months of 2020 included case file review training for money advisers and induction training for new MABS staff.

The second half of the year provided training and support to the MABS network in response to COVID-19 issues. It covered emerging needs in the areas of mortgage and rent arrears, client care and support skills, telephone skills and support to clients experiencing mental health difficulties or domestic abuse.

“After struggling for several years, I finally went to Mabs, the State’s free advice and budgeting service, and found them **most supportive** and helpful around paying creditors. I would highly recommend them to anyone in debt.
(www.mabs.ie)”



Case Work and Technical Support

From March onwards, the Case Work and Technical Support team focused on supporting MABS to adapt and deliver services in a new way as most services were no longer engaging with clients face-to-face due to COVID-19. Among the supports developed were a suite of letters and a new Client Assessment Form, updated to take account of new issues such as income loss due to COVID-19. The team was also heavily involved in the redevelopment of the mabs.ie website, reviewing its information and educational content.

Social Policy and Research

MABS Support coordinated and contributed to a number of research submissions in 2020, including:

- The Oireachtas detailed scrutiny of the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2018 Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform. This submission relayed the experience of MABS in supporting clients with loans from licenced money lenders and the effect of the overall cost of these loans on their budgets
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of the Primary School Curriculum. MABS proposed that money management education be included on the revised curriculum
- The Citizens Information Board's pre-budget submission

Stakeholder Engagement

MABS Support engages with many stakeholder groups to support the financially vulnerable in Ireland, including:

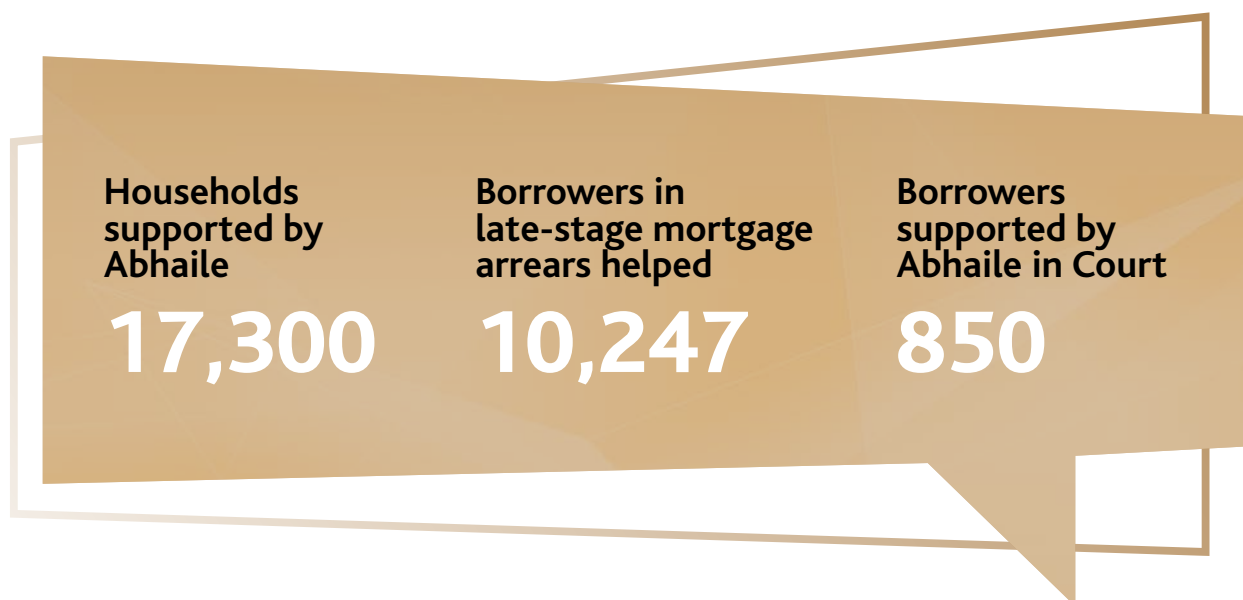
- Safeguarding Ireland State Payments Group
- Joint Working Group for Abhaile
- Bereavement Research Advisory Group
- St Vincent DePaul (SVP)
- Threshold
- The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU)
- The Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland
- The Central Bank of Ireland (CBI). MABS Support, together with CIB and the eight MABS regional companies, participated in a group convened by CBI to consider the Central Bank's Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA)

Chapter 7: Abhaile – Mortgage Arrears Support Scheme



Abhaile is a State-funded service that helps homeowners to resolve their home mortgage arrears. It provides free financial and legal advice and help from experts, accessed through MABS. Abhaile helps mortgage holders in long-term arrears to find the best solutions and stay, wherever possible, in their own homes.

2020 at a Glance



Abhaile provides a one-stop-shop to a range of financial advice and legal supports. Financial advice is provided by a MABS Dedicated Mortgage Arrears (DMA) adviser (see below) or a Personal Insolvency Practitioner (PIP). Legal support is available from duty solicitors and MABS court mentors (see below) at circuit court possession hearings. Legal advice is available from a solicitor service, and through Personal Insolvency Arrangement (PIA) reviews, also known as Section 115A reviews under the Personal Insolvency (Amendment) Act 2015.

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Department of Justice and Equality jointly coordinate and fund the Abhaile scheme. CIB administers the funding and looks after the scheme’s governance and communications remit. MABS, the Insolvency Service of Ireland (ISI), the Legal Aid Board and CIB work together to implement the Abhaile scheme.

Abhaile continued to operate throughout 2020. The Abhaile project has been extended to the end of December 2022. The decision to extend the scheme reflects the continued high level of long-term mortgage arrears and the success of Abhaile in helping to reduce this level.

The primary aim of Abhaile is to encourage people to contact MABS as they are the gateway to the scheme's supports. MABS encourages and supports people who have not engaged with their lender to do so, or to engage with Abhaile and the range of services available through the scheme.

Abhaile Communications

The Abhaile communications team's objective at the beginning of 2020 was to maintain public awareness of the supports available under the scheme. COVID-19 restrictions complicated Abhaile's efforts to reach our potential client base. These public health restrictions reduced our advisers' ability to physically meet with those in need of support.

COVID-19 Response and Abhaile

Abhaile was responsive to the increased demands of the pandemic.

- An online chat service was launched on mabs.ie, operated by money advisers from across all MABS regions
- Advisers moved to virtual consultations, enabling the necessary consultations that are part of the mortgage arrears resolution to continue

Statistics for Abhaile

By the end of 2020, almost 17,300 households had been supported by Abhaile through financial advice from either a Personal Insolvency Practitioner (PIP) or a Dedicated Mortgage Adviser (DMA).

Over 22,950 calls were made to the MABS Helpline in 2020, the percentage of callers who asked to speak with an Abhaile representative was 10.1%.

There were 1,492 unique queries to the online chat service, 7% of these related to mortgage arrears.

Abhaile's other focus is to encourage people to access the MABS website for information and support. The website is promoted through various social media channels and radio advertising. By the end of 2020, 251,662 users had visited the website, representing an increase of 54.4% (88,674 users) compared with 2019.

Dedicated Mortgage Arrears (DMA) Adviser Service

This service, set up in 2015, predates the Abhaile scheme. It helps borrowers cope with mortgage arrears by providing free, independent, expert advice and support tailored to individual circumstances. The DMA service is now part of Abhaile.

By the end of 2020, DMA Advisers had provided advice and assistance to 10,247 borrowers in late-stage mortgage arrears. As a result, nearly one-quarter of these borrowers resolved their housing problems. The solutions negotiated included alternative repayment arrangements, interest-rate reductions, mortgage-to-rent and lump-sum settlement.

Court Mentoring Service

There are 31 County Registrar courts across Ireland. MABS staff attend County Registrar courts as part of the Abhaile scheme to support borrowers at possession hearings.

Typically, two court mentors (MABS staff members) attend a possession hearing. One mentor stays outside the court to meet and discuss the situation with clients. The other mentor attends the court to observe proceedings, take note of referrals by the registrar, support clients and answer any questions if directed by the registrar. The court mentors take note of all possession orders listed and their outcomes.

In March 2020, the court mentor service was suspended in line with public health guidelines and the decision of lenders to suspend eviction proceedings from April to June. Despite the temporary suspension, court mentors attended 175 sittings and supported 850 borrowers in 2020.

“She finds our site to be **very informative** and clearer than other websites... she went on to say how marvelous the website is for her and especially in these times as she is at home.”

Chapter 8: National Traveller MABS



The primary aim of National Traveller MABS (NT MABS) is to promote financial inclusion for Travellers. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic including public health restrictions on Travellers influenced much of the NT MABS work programme in 2020, as it actively sought measures to assist Travellers with the increased financial pressure of the crisis.

As a result of school closures and self-isolating requirements, Travellers experienced increased food, fuel and sanitation costs. This coincided with the increased challenge of changes to social welfare payments from weekly to fortnightly. Higher costs, the move to a more cashless economy and less frequent income payments created a risk of increased use of high-cost or illegal credit from licensed and unlicensed moneylenders.

COVID-19 and NT MABS Response

NT MABS developed an information campaign, Managing Your Money During COVID-19. Though originally aimed at members of the Traveller community, the campaign had much broader appeal and interest. Information brochures were distributed to Traveller organisations, the MABS Helpline and MABS offices, and promoted on various social media platforms. The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) helped to circulate materials as part of its community work.

Information supports provided by National Traveller MABS in 2020 included:

- Advice on problem gambling
- Five things to know before taking out a loan
- Information on changes involving utility companies, including the moratorium (temporary stop) on disconnections and emergency credit arrangements
- Changes to payments and schemes following the Government 2020 budget
- Updated guide for services supporting Traveller families with a member in prison



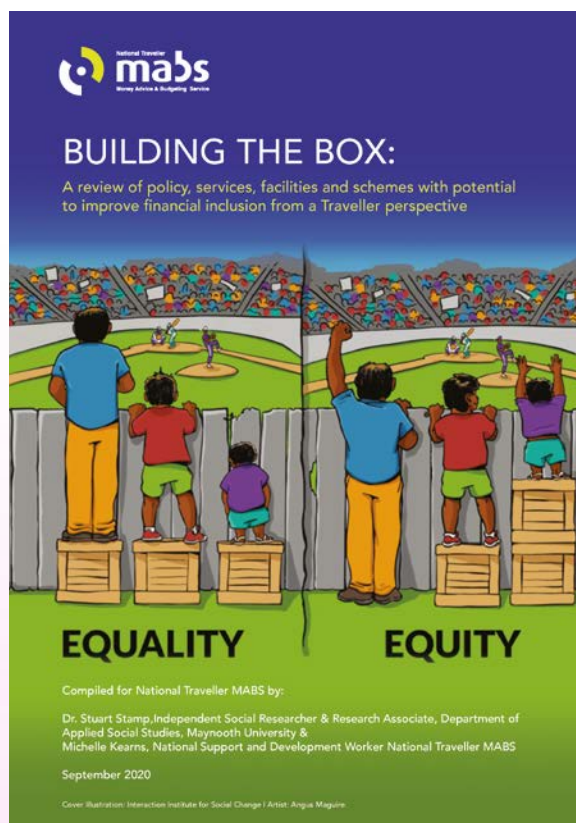
Policy Work and Submissions 2020

NT MABS contributes to policy development and submissions on behalf of Travellers, often in partnership with other Traveller organisations. Among the submissions NT MABS contributed to in 2020 were:

- Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy 10-Year Strategy for Ireland
- Irish Red Cross Hardship Fund, advocating to reduce the age eligibility criteria for Traveller applicants
- A pre-budget submission focusing on accommodation, financial inclusion measures and access to credit

Traveller Accommodation Project

A new Caravan Loan Scheme is being piloted by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in five local authority areas. This loan scheme will enable local authorities to provide loans to Travellers to buy their own caravans or mobile homes on halting sites for use as their primary residence. Traveller accommodation workers will link in to support those who wish to apply to the scheme and to help manage repayments.



Research on Financial Inclusion Measures

NT MABS produced a research paper on financial inclusion for Travellers. The final report, Building the Box, was launched virtually by Senator Eileen Flynn on 15 December 2020.

Chapter 9: National Advocacy Service (NAS)



The National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities (NAS) provides a free and confidential advocacy service to adults with a disability, particularly those in vulnerable situations, isolated from their communities, who communicate differently or have limited formal or natural supports.

NAS works in partnership with clients and empowers them to make decisions about their lives, be listened to and consulted by families and service providers, and access supports to live their lives and enjoy meaningful participation in family, work and leisure.

Staffing and Funding

The NAS staff allocation in 2020 consisted of one national manager, one corporate services manager, four Regional administrators, four regional managers, eight senior advocates and 28 advocates. The CIB budget allocation for NAS in 2020 was €3.19 million.

COVID-19 and the NAS response

NAS made a number of submissions specifically relating to COVID-19:

- Submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on COVID-19 (joint submission with the Patient Advocacy Service)
- Submission to the Nursing Home Expert Group (joint submission with the Patient Advocacy Service)

During Level 5 restrictions NAS reassessed its model of service delivery as face to face meetings with clients were no longer possible. Instead NAS engaged with clients via email, text, WhatsApp, FaceTime and Zoom and other video platforms. NAS worked closely with service providers to ensure residents were supported to have contact with their advocate by these methods.

When restrictions eased slightly, capacity building and assessment was undertaken by NAS, especially where face to face engagement was essential, it was often undertaken in outdoor settings including going for walks in public areas with people often with the assistance of family members or keyworkers. Many Disability Service providers also facilitated alternative venues in gardens or large indoor spaces which were well ventilated and unoccupied.

Service Statistics

In 2020, NAS worked on 3,081 initial enquires, involving over 3,800 hours of engagement with clients. They were given information, remote support for themselves or family members, and/or guidance with correspondence or meetings.

In 2020, NAS Advocates spent over 12,000 working hours representing clients on 1,047 advocacy cases. Of these, 458 were new cases.

Disability	Clients (some clients have more than one disability)	Percentage of clients
Intellectual	505	48%
Physical	316	30%
Mental Health	283	27%
Autism Spectrum	145	14%
Learning	139	13%

Social Policy, Submissions and Awareness Raising

NAS continued building relationships with the HSE National Office of Human Rights and Equality Policy, the HSE National Quality Improvement Team and other relevant groups. During 2020, NAS:

- Contributed to an Assisted Decision-Making publication for staff
- Participated in a HSE Quality Improvement Division webinar on the role of advocacy in supporting decision-making, particularly during COVID-19
- Engaged with the HSE Disability National Consultative Forum to plan the re-start of non-COVID disability services, working collaboratively with disability service providers, the HSE and advocacy organisations on issues which emerged during the pandemic
- Contributed to Guidance Regarding Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation and DNAR (Do Not Attempt Resuscitation) Decision-Making during COVID-19
- Participated in the Department of Health Nursing Home Report Reference Group. This group was set up as part of the State's response to the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel: Final Report

NAS also made other submissions, including:

- Response to the Law Reform Commission consultation on Adult Safeguarding (joint submission with Patient Advocacy Service)
- Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability



The Patient Advocacy Service (PAS)

The Patient Advocacy Service provides information and support to people who want to make a complaint about the care they have experienced in a HSE-funded public acute hospital. It also supports those affected in the aftermath of a patient safety incident. The service is independent, free and confidential.

In 2020 NAS received about €1.2 million directly from the Department of Health to run the PAS service.

In 2020, PAS staff consisted of one service manager, one corporate services officer, two advocacy team leads, eight advocacy officers and one communications officer.

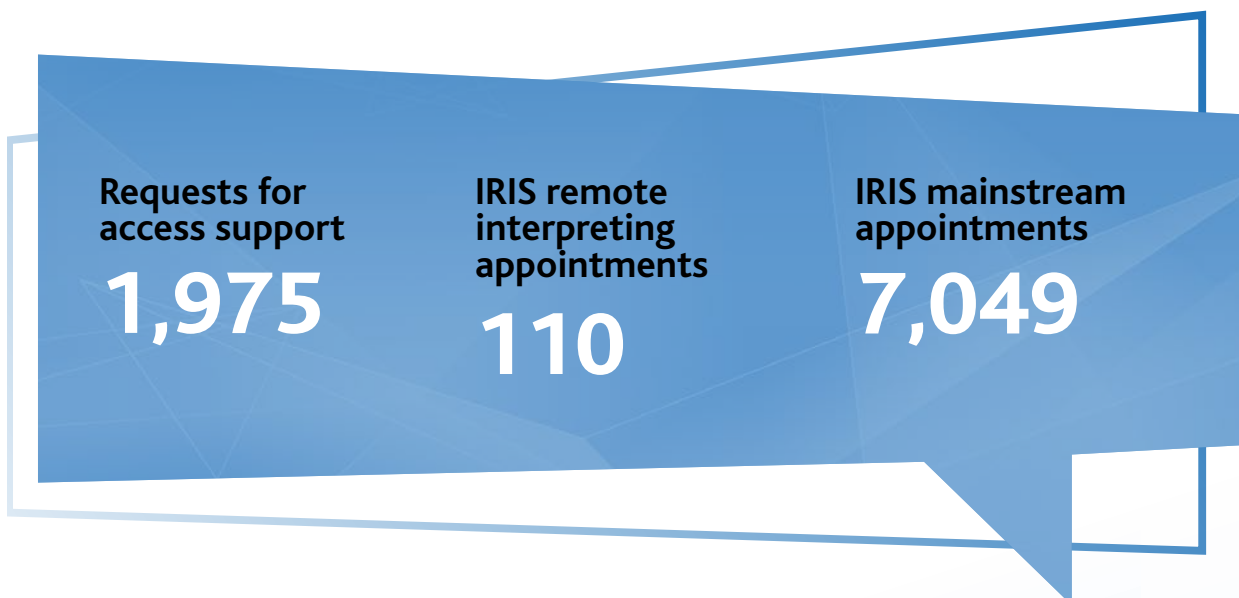
Chapter 10: Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS)



The Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) supports high-quality Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpretation services to ensure Deaf people can access public and social services and take part in Irish society as full and equal citizens.

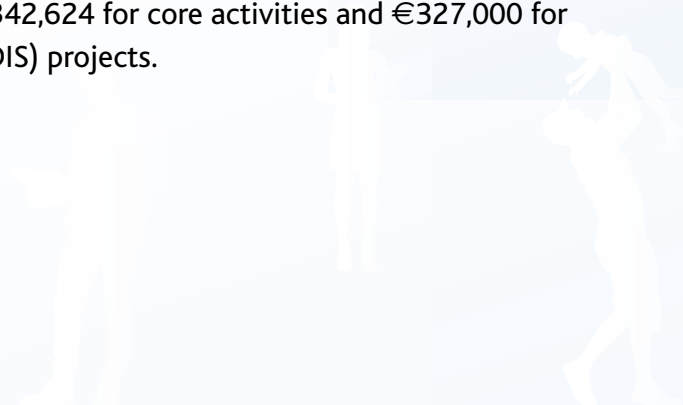
SLIS provides the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) through a video link to help supporting Deaf people access information, entitlements and rights.

2020 at a Glance



Staffing and Funding

In 2020, SLIS had one manager, a 0.6 whole-time equivalent (WTE) finance officer, three administrators, five IRIS interpreters and a 0.5 WTE quality development officer. The CIB budget allocation for SLIS in 2020 was €342,624 for core activities and €327,000 for National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS) projects.



National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021

SLIS has been allocated multi-annual funding (administered by CIB) under the 2017 National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS). The 2017-2021 Strategy is a coordinated and planned approach across Government departments to promote greater inclusion of people with disabilities in society. It sets out clear objectives and provides resources to allow SLIS to promote greater inclusion of the Deaf Community by:

- Extending the hours of the Irish Sign Language (ISL) remote interpretation service to evenings and weekends
- Increasing the number of trained sign language and Deaf Interpreters
- Establishing a national register of sign language interpreters and a quality-assurance scheme for interpreters in consultation with key stakeholders
- Providing a continuing professional training and development programme for interpreters

'I'm addicted, this is what social inclusion actually means.'

'We have used this service a few times now and happy to be able to get our issues sorted fast same as a hearing person who would just pick up the phone done there and then.'



COVID-19 and SLIS's response

The remote interpreting app meant that SLIS interpreters could work safely in their homes to provide remote interpreting services via the new app, launched in November 2020, to the Deaf community.

Pilot On-Demand ISL Interpreting App

In 2020, SLIS collaborated with CIB to pilot an on-demand ISL interpreting app, available on smart phones, tablets and computers, which allows the user to connect with an ISL interpreter between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

'It's great because waiting for a day or few days for an appointment to make these simple everyday life calls or depending on family members to do the call which takes away our independence.'

'Please don't abandon this after the pilot.'

'This app gives us back our dignity so hope it continues after this pilot scheme is finished. It's a brilliant app.'



Feedback from users of the ISL App

Sign Language Interpreting and Access Support Services

SLIS operated the following services in 2020:

- A 24/7 emergency service to arrange for sign language interpreters in crisis situations
- A referral service linking service providers and Deaf people with interpreters
- A service to enable access to a doctor (GP) and HSE Primary Care service
- A support and access service to help service providers reduce barriers and become more accessible
- A Social Interpreting Fund to cover interpreting costs for funerals and hardship cases

IRIS Mainstream Service

The Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS) supported 7,049 appointments on the mainstream IRIS service.

IRIS Remote Interpreting App

The remote interpreting app supported 110 appointments. It went live on 16 November 2020.

Support and Access Service

SLIS received 1,975 requests for support in 2020. These comprised:

- 634 referral requests, including an emergency referral service
- 307 access support service requests, and
- 1,034 GP and Primary Care-access scheme requests

Achievements and Developments in 2020

- Completed a new strategic plan for 2020 to 2024
- Worked with the CIB ISL Unit (a new unit set up to progress actions under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy and support the implementation of the requirements of the ISL Act 2017)
- Established a Register for Irish Sign Language Interpreters, as required under the ISL Act 2017
- Increased the capacity of IRIS to provide evening, Saturday and Sunday appointments. Offered on-demand access to ISL interpreting through the app
- Commissioned training for Deaf interpreters which was delivered by Trinity College Dublin's Centre for Deaf Studies
- Facilitated the delivery of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training for interpreters in Ireland

"I'm emailing to provide positive feedback on a "call back" discussion with one of your Information Officers, they were professional, informed and very helpful throughout! Many thanks for the guidance."

Appendices

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Appendix 1: Customer Service Charter

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through citizensinformation.ie, the Citizens Information Phone Service (0818 07 4000) and the network of Citizens Information Services. We are responsible for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and provide the National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities.

We put the citizen at the centre of everything we do and this Charter sets out the principles that underpin our services. You can find our Customer Service Action Plan on our website, citizensinformationboard.ie.

We are committed to:

1. Clear, Comprehensive and Accurate Information

We will provide clear and detailed information about public and social services to help you identify your needs and access your entitlements.

2. Prompt, Courteous and Efficient Responses

We will be responsive to your needs and we will deliver our services sensitively and efficiently.

3. Equality and Diversity

We will respect diversity and ensure your right to equal treatment.

4. Choice

We will plan and deliver our services so you can access them in the way that suits you best.

5. Access

We will ensure that all our services and offices are fully accessible. Contact our Access Officer at accessofficer@ciboard.ie.

6. Official Languages

We will provide our services through English, Irish and bilingually where required.

7. Consultation and Evaluation

We will consult with you to establish your needs when developing, delivering and evaluating our services.

8. Internal Customers

We will support our staff to ensure that they provide an excellent service to one another and to you.

9. Co-ordination

We will work closely with other organisations to deliver citizen-focused public services.

10. Appeals

We will maintain an accessible and transparent appeal and review system where appropriate.

11. Comments and Complaints

We want to provide the best service possible to you and welcome all comments on our services. Contact our Customer Services Officer on commentsandcomplaints@ciboard.ie.

Appendix 2: Board Members 2020

The Board members of CIB in 2020 were:

- Ms Eilis Barry
- Ms Teresa Blake
- Mr James Clarke
- Ms Mary Doyle
- Mr Tim Duggan
- Ms Josephine Henry
- Ms Mary Higgins
- Ms Tina Leonard
- Ms Ita Mangan, Chair (to 11 December 2020)
- Dr Joanne McCarthy
- Mr Niall Mulligan
- Ms Joan O'Connor
- Mr Cearbhall O'Meadhra
- Mr Ian Power
- Mr John Saunders
- Mr Seán Sheridan (Acting Chair, from 12 December 2020)
- Ms Nicola Walshe

You can find a list of current Board members on the CIB website, citizensinformationboard.ie.



Appendix 3: Service Teams and Structure

To carry out its functions, the Citizens Information Board (CIB) organises its work under the following four pillars:

1. Service Development and Support – Citizens Information and Advocacy
2. Service Development and Support – MABS and Abhaile
3. Digital Content, Social Policy and Research, and eLearning
4. Corporate Services

Pillar 1. Service Development and Support – Citizens Information and Advocacy

Citizens Information and Advocacy

Citizens Information Service Delivery

The Citizens Information (Service Delivery) team promotes and supports continuous improvement in the quality and reach of essential frontline Citizens Information services. It provides a range of critical supports (including management, quality, training and organisational development supports), as well as substantial policy and procedural advice to the nationwide network of Citizens Information offices and the national Citizens Information Phone Service. The team also monitors and reports on service development and delivery, and allocates and monitors funding (operational grants) to the frontline services.

Advocacy

The Advocacy team in CIB is responsible for promoting and advancing the provision of advocacy services, and funding, monitoring and supporting frontline services delivering advocacy. These are the National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities (NAS) and the network of Citizens Information Services (CIS). The Advocacy team collaborates with CIS to develop advocacy standards, policies and resources.

The Advocacy team funds, monitors and supports the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS). In 2020, the Irish Sign Language (ISL) Unit was established within the Advocacy team, to deliver on critical projects under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy and the commencement of the Irish Sign Language Act.

Pillar 2. Service Development and Support – MABS and Abhaile

MABS Service Delivery

The MABS Service Delivery team is responsible for coordinating and supporting the eight Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) regional companies. The Service Delivery team resources and supports MABS so it can deliver high-quality services to the public, and makes sure those services are constantly improving in response to public need. We develop and support new services and projects with MABS including the Dedicated Mortgage Arrears service. The MABS Service Delivery team is also the main point for communication to and from MABS companies. In addition, the team addresses obstacles to service delivery, including issues relating to ICT, staffing, finance and premises, in cooperation with the Operations and ICT Teams.

Abhaile

The Abhaile communications team is responsible for delivering communications and information campaigns to borrowers with long-term mortgage arrears. The goal is to encourage engagement with the State's mortgage arrears supports and contribute to positive solutions for those homeowners in the longest mortgage arrears. Abhaile is jointly coordinated and funded by the Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Social Protection. MABS, the Insolvency Service of Ireland, the Legal Aid Board, the Courts Service and the Citizens Information Board work together to provide the Abhaile services.

PR and Promotions

A public relations and promotions executive promotes awareness of the Citizens Information Board and its main service brands of Citizens Information and MABS.

Pillar 3. Digital Content, Social Policy and Research, and eLearning

Digital Content

The Digital Content team, formerly called the Information Resources team, is responsible for the Citizens Information website, citizensinformation.ie, and CIB's information publications and periodicals. The team is also responsible for CIB's corporate social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook and CIB's corporate website, citizensinformationboard.ie. In 2021, the team changed its name to the Digital Content team to better reflect its remit and activities.

Social Policy and Research

The Social Policy and Research team is responsible for developing CIB's social policy feedback role. It conducts research on models of information, advice and advocacy provision and on the information needs of the public. The team collects and analyses information and data on social policy and the administration of social services from the service delivery companies. It produces information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and highlights the concerns of service users to policy-makers. The team prepares evidence-based reports and contributes to public policy formulation by responding to policy consultations and preparing submissions.

eLearning

The CIB eLearning team is responsible for developing online courses and resources to support the learning and development needs of staff and volunteers, particularly in the Citizens Information Services. The team works with CIB and the service delivery companies to identify training needs. These are then developed into online courses containing interactive lessons, videos, case studies and assessments. CIB's eLearning courses are available through a dedicated learning management system and can be accessed on any device with internet access.



Pillar 4. Corporate services

Corporate Services

The Corporate Services team was set up in June 2020. It is responsible for overseeing governance areas such as Data Protection, Freedom of Information, the Ombudsman and access to information on the environment. The team coordinates the provision of information to the Department of Social Protection as required. It will coordinate the development of management information systems, including systems to capture outcomes, and key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned to the strategic plan. It manages and coordinates the production of the annual report and other corporate publications. The team is also responsible for CIB's internal communication function.

HR and Governance

The Human Resources and Governance team supports CIB staff, in recruitment, induction, health and wellbeing, and training. The HR and Governance team works closely with the Operations team, which is responsible for supporting the service delivery companies on HR and governance matters.

Finance and Administration

The Finance team is responsible for all finance matters and procedures. The team makes sure that proper financial controls and reporting procedures are followed by CIB and service delivery companies to make sure the taxpayer gets value for money.

ICT

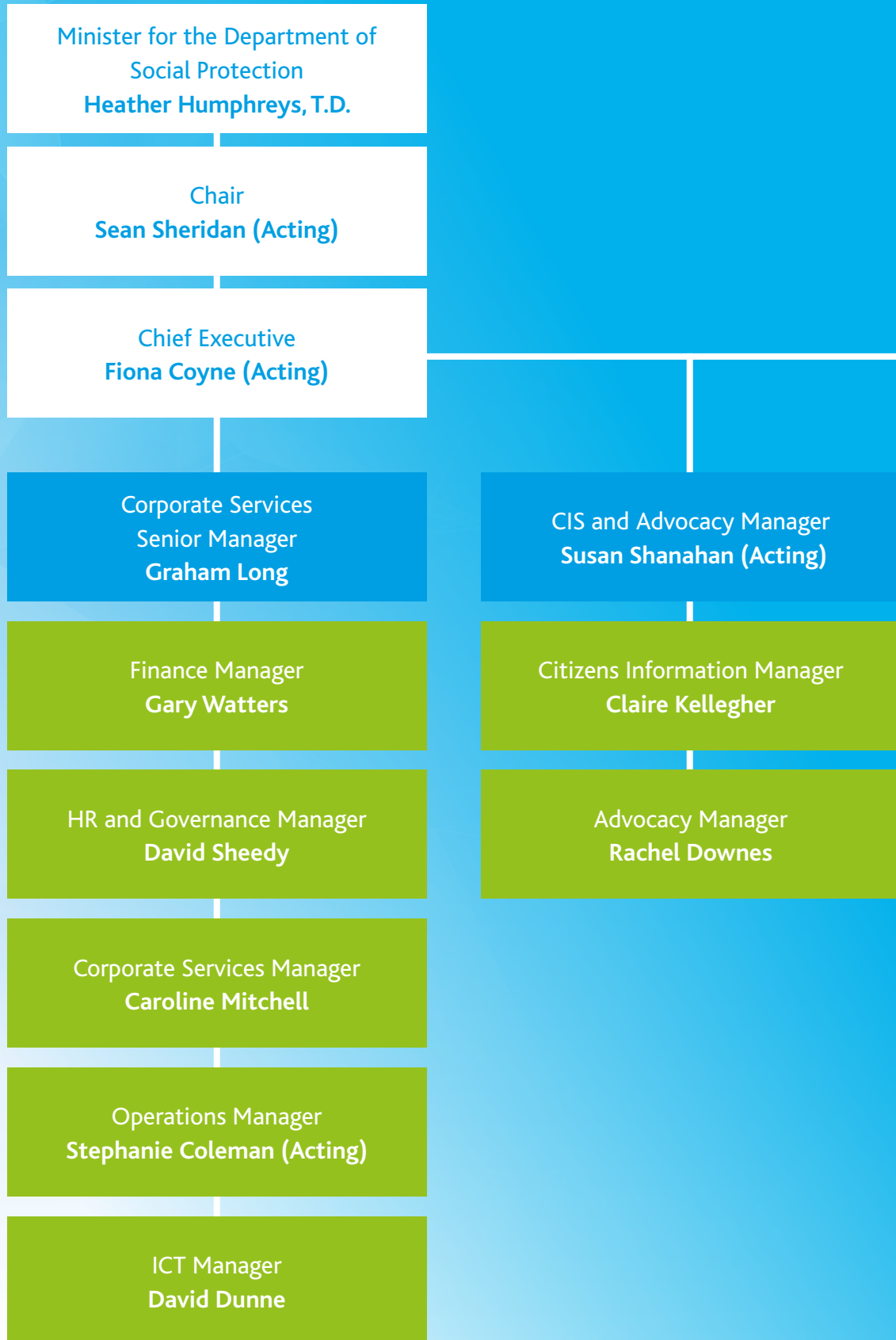
The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) team is responsible for the delivery of modern ICT supports to CIB and the service delivery companies. This involves the development and maintenance of networks and infrastructure as well as the provision of hardware and applications to more than 1,800 staff at 200 locations.

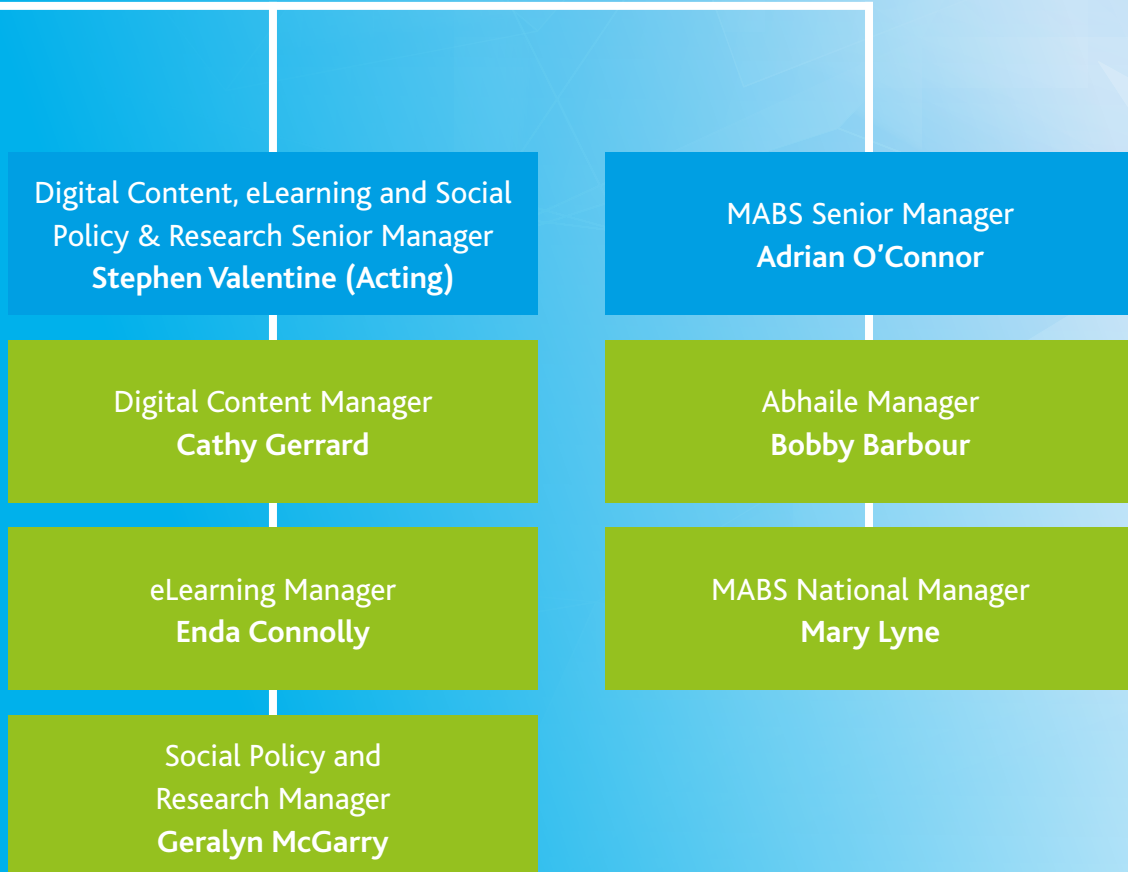
Operations

The Operations team is responsible for supporting and monitoring the service delivery companies in relation to HR, finance and premises. This is achieved through the provision of policies, guidelines, procedures and resources to maintain best practice and ensure compliance with the law. The team is also responsible for a number of areas in CIB, including health and safety, property development and management.



Appendix 4: Organisation Chart





Appendix 5: Energy Use 2020

By law, under S.I. 542 of 2009, public sector organisations are required to report annually on their energy usage and the actions they propose to take to reduce consumption. Heating, lighting and ICT account for the main energy usage in CIB. The latest statistics from the Sustainable Energy Association of Ireland (SEAI) reports the CIB consumption as follows:

- Energy Consumption 40.5% better than baseline so we have achieved our 33% target requirement
- Energy Consumption 19.4% better than 2019, most likely COVID restrictions on occupancy related
- CO₂ 47.8% less than baseline
- CO₂ 24.7% better than 2019

CIB plans to further its energy reduction programme in 2021 by:

- Signing up to the SEAI Interim Partnership programme
- Setting up an energy awareness programme
- Evaluating and investing in energy saving initiatives and projects



Appendix 6: Protected Disclosures Act

CIB is committed to fostering an appropriate environment for addressing concerns relating to potential irregularities or wrongdoing, with respect to financial reporting and other matters in the workplace. CIB is also committed to providing the necessary support and assurances for staff who raise genuine concerns.

The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 requires public bodies to set up and maintain procedures for dealing with protected disclosures. CIB has robust procedures in place in line with the provisions of the Act.

CIB did not receive any submissions under the Protected Disclosures Act during 2020.



Appendix 7: Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

All public bodies in Ireland have a responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans.

Under Section 42(1) of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, CIB, in common with all public bodies, must have regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination
- Promote equality of opportunity and treatment for its staff and the people to whom it provides services
- Protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of its members, staff and the people to whom it provides services

Equality of access to information, advice and advocacy is a core principle of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the services it provides and funds. We aim to ensure equality of access by providing services in person, by phone and online, as well as through the Live Advisor service on the webchat and the Irish Remote Interpreting Service (IRIS). The citizensinformation.ie website has been designed to provide a high level of accessibility.

CIB also has robust policies and procedures in place to promote equality and human rights and to support our staff. CIB's Staff Resource Pack contains detailed policies and procedures on employee relations including policies relating to dignity and respect in the workplace, learning and development, bullying and harassment, performance, and safety, health and welfare.

Through our Employee Assistance Programme, we encourage staff to maintain good physical and mental health. We support employee health and wellbeing. We also provide professional support for staff who want to progress in their career.

Appendix 8: Citizens Information Board Main Offices

George's Quay House
43 Townsend Street
Dublin 2
D02 VK65

1st Floor,
Riverstone House
23-27 Henry Street
Limerick

101 North Main Street
Cork
T12 AKA6

4th Floor
Dockgate
Merchants Road
Galway
H91 EY10

4 The Parade
Kilkenny
R95 VO52



Appendix 9: Funding Provided to Service Delivery Companies in 2020

Services	Total €	Total €
Citizens Information Services	2020	2019
Dublin South	€2,073,868	€2,085,741
Dublin North	€2,343,264	€2,133,052
South Leinster	€1,917,986	€1,994,847
North Leinster	€2,419,694	€2,161,778
North Connacht & Ulster	€2,037,563	€1,812,033
South Connacht	€1,389,260	€1,248,928
North Munster	€1,861,122	€1,699,333
South Munster	€2,051,335	€2,058,288
Total	€16,094,092	€15,194,000

Services	Total €	Total €
MABS	2020	2019
MABS ND	€266,582	€1,683,641
MABS Support CLG	€1,209,076	€0
National Traveller MABS	€316,359	€250,000
Dublin North	€2,974,509	€2,169,256
Dublin South	€2,900,951	€2,748,689
South Leinster	€2,189,274	€2,423,048
North Leinster	€2,150,677	€2,041,187

North Connacht & Ulster	€1,951,071	€1,980,244
South Connacht	€1,819,385	€1,654,150
North Munster	€2,449,287	€2,565,923
South Munster	€2,046,728	€2,101,000
Total	€20,273,899	€19,617,139

National	2020	2019
Citizens Information Phone Service	€1,251,419	€1,267,500
Sign Language Interpreting Service	€583,424	€528,835
National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities	€3,216,279	€3,252,308

Second Tier Supports	2020	2019
Threshold	€47,000	€47,000
Free Legal Advice (FLAC)	€132,031	€140,400
Treoir	€34,400	€34,400
Immigrant Council of Ireland	€68,000	€68,000
Total	€281,431	€289,800

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through citizensinformation.ie, the Citizens Information Phone Service and the network of Citizens Information Services. It is responsible for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and the National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities.

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Citizens **Information** Board
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