

Department of Social and Family Affairs

Sectoral Plan under the Disability Act 2005

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
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TEACH SUN ALLIANCE, SRÁID THEACH LAIGHEAN,
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH 2
nó tríd an bpost ó
FOILSEACHÁIN RIALTAIS, AN RANNÓG POST-TRÁCHTA,
51 FAICHE STIABHNA, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH,
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Foreword from the Minister

Sectoral Plan under Disability Act, 2005

Department of Social and Family Affairs



I welcome the publication of this Disability Sectoral Plan prepared by my Department in accordance with the provisions of the Disability Act, 2005 as part of the National Disability Strategy.

The National Disability Strategy represents a commitment by Government to drive forward a significant evolution in policy and provision for people with disabilities. The Disability Act, 2005, is one element of this Strategy and gives a statutory basis to the policy of mainstreaming public service delivery.

In addition, the Act provides for this innovative system of sectoral planning which will ensure that key mainstream services will have clear goals for delivering services to people with disabilities.

My Department's pivotal role is to provide income support for people with disabilities who may not be in a position to provide for themselves. Spending on these entitlements to almost 240,000 recipients of disability or caring related social welfare schemes in 2005 was over €2 billion.

However, in line with the current more enlightened and supportive policy direction, my Department will strive to deliver these supports in a way which reduces the risk of dependence and allows people to move from a position of welfare dependence to one where they can, to a far greater extent, meet their income needs from employment.

I am also conscious of the need to recognise, in addition to economic outcomes, the potential for advancement through a variety of activation measures, such as furthering education or developing life skills. In this context, this sectoral plan outlines a significant proposal for a new economic and social participation model based on a life cycle approach for people of working age, including people with disabilities.

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

This sectoral plan has been developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the National Disability Authority and the principal organisations representing people with disabilities and service providers. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all organisations who made submissions to this plan as well as the Department's Disability Consultative Forum who provide, on an ongoing basis, invaluable opinion and advice to me and my Department on disability related issues.

This plan has been shaped by our values of equality, opportunity and social justice and has at its very core the desire to enable people with disabilities to face the future with confidence. I look forward to its implementation over the next three years and to continuing the commitment to expand and deliver services and supports that best support, recognise and encourage people with disabilities and those who provide a caring role.

Séamus Brennan, T.D.
Minister for Social & Family Affairs

Executive Summary

This sectoral plan is aimed at developing services that not only give people with disabilities financial security but encourage maximum participation in society and do so in partnership with other Government Departments and Agencies. In line with changing policy orientation, this Department will over the period of the Plan (2006/2009) seek to deliver support to people with disabilities which will reduce their risk of dependence. It will also allow them to meet their income needs to a far greater extent from employment as well as achieving other social outcomes, such as further education and developing life skills.

The plan arises from an intensive process of consultation with the Disability Sector, through the Disability Legislative Consultative Group, the National Disability Authority, as well as the Department's Disability Consultative Forum. The Department also received a number of both oral and written submissions.

The plan identifies the key policy issues to be addressed during the period of the Plan and include:

- Government policy on social welfare rates
- Preparation and Monitoring of the National Action Plan against Social Inclusion (NAPS/inclusion)
- Developing a data strategy to address information gaps on disability necessary for monitoring evaluation and overall policy development

- Extending eligibility; identifying potential for rationalisation and integration and addressing benefit traps and disincentives within the structures of social welfare disability schemes
- Improving income supports for Carers
- The development of an advocacy service under the aegis of Comhairle.

A number of key strategic developments are being undertaken by the Department which include, the transfer of income maintenance payments from the Health Services Executive, Service Delivery Modernisation involving change in technology and organisational systems, improvements in Customer Service commitments and a review of the Medical Assessment system. The ultimate objective of these developments is to provide transformational change to income support and other related disability services administered by the Department.

The Department will continue to develop a range of employment and other supports available to people with disabilities and will actively engage with other relevant Government Departments and Agencies. During the period 2007-13, the Department is committed to the development of a systematic programme of engagement for all people of working age, and specifically including people with disabilities. This will be in keeping with the life cycle approach proposed in the NESC report on a '*Developmental Welfare State*'.

Effective cross-departmental co-operation is critical for the achievement of many of the goals identified in the sectoral plan. The plan identifies the key actions where the Department in conjunction with other agencies will co-operatively develop service provision for people with disabilities. Specific protocols have been agreed with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Health and Children including actions and timeframes to achieve key objectives.

The Disability Act contains a number of specific provisions relating to accessibility of services for people with disabilities, including accessibility to Departmental Offices; accessibility of services; accessibility of goods and services supplied and accessibility of information services. The Plan details a comprehensive set of actions to ensure accessibility to services.

The Department recognises that raising disability awareness and capacity building of expertise within the organisation is fundamental to the successful implementation of this Sectoral Plan. A series of activities and initiatives including the Department's proposals on the Employment of and Human Resource programme for staff with disabilities are set out in this Plan. Additionally, proposed actions on organisational disability awareness and development programmes are contained within the Plan.

A central focus of the approach undertaken by DSFA has been to adopt an organisation-wide view, one also that included agencies under the aegis of the Department. In particular, the role of Comhairle with regard to information and advocacy services for people with disabilities.

The Disability Act 2005 has made provision for a complaints and redress procedure. Accordingly, the Department is making specific provision for a system of complaint and redress as required under sections 26 and 39 of the Disability Act 2005 (i.e. the appointment of Access and Inquiry Offices).

In conclusion, a framework has been put in place to facilitate internal, external and cross departmental review and monitoring of the Plan and its implementation.

1. Context

The Department's Statement of Strategy, *Security with Opportunity (2005-07)*, specifies the Department's mission "to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and related services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families". The Strategy, in the context of the increasingly diverse needs of our different customer groups, places significant emphasis on the need to develop services that not only give customers financial security but encourage maximum participation in society and do so in partnership with other Departments and Agencies.

Political, economic and social factors at national, EU and international levels will all impact on the Department over the period of the Strategy as will changes in the delivery of services themselves. This includes technological changes that will facilitate more customer-centred approaches and allow multiple agencies to manage customers in a more consistent and integrated fashion.

The key changes in the political context are those arising from the Programme for Government, the Social Partnership Agreement and the National Action Plans to combat poverty and social exclusion (NAP/Inclusion). The main elements of the Programme for Government which impact the strategy are captured under the themes of '*Sustaining a Strong Economy, Building an Inclusive Society and Supporting Civil Life.*' These include commitments relevant to the Department in the areas of Disability and Caring.

The economic environment is also critical in terms of creating the potential to make resources available for improved income support and new service initiatives. It is anticipated that over the medium term, the continued buoyancy in the labour market will allow for growth in employment and an increase in the employment rate over time. The employment rate for people with disabilities is, however, significantly less than for others. The report by the National Disability Authority on *Disability and Work*¹ shows that people with disabilities are two and a half times less likely to be in work than non disabled people and that people who are more severely restricted in what they can do have substantially lower employment rates than others. The longitudinal data obtained in the Living in Ireland Survey (conducted with a set of individuals between 1994 and 2000) found that, of those reporting a chronic illness or disability, in all six years of the study, they had spent an average of only 1.6 years in work over the period, whereas those who never reported an illness or disability spent 3.5 of the years in work on average². Thus, whilst the buoyancy in the labour market may benefit people with disabilities, as part of the wider population seeking employment, it is clear that more specific measures will be required if their employment rates are to substantially increase.

Despite the fall in the level of unemployment since the 1990s, the percentage of the population of working age dependent on social welfare payments has remained consistent albeit with a change to its composition. The numbers in receipt of

1 Disability and Work, The Picture We Learn From Official Statistics (Disability Research Series 1)

2 Gannon B and Nolan B, ESRI (2005), Disability and Social Inclusion in Ireland, A Study for the Equality Authority and the National Disability Authority

unemployment payments has decreased whilst the numbers receiving illness/disability, carers and lone parent payments continues to increase. The total number of recipients of illness, disability and caring payments increased from just over 143,000 at end 1996 to almost 240,000 by end 2005. Spending on illness, disability and caring has risen in the same 10 years from €710m in 1996 to over 2 billion in 2005. The main reasons for the increase in expenditure are the introduction of and improvements to the Carer's Allowance and an increase in the numbers of recipients of Disability Allowance.

The latest data on poverty, from the EU SILC³, show that the percentage of persons experiencing consistent poverty (below 60% median income and deprived of basic items) fell from 8.8% in 2003 to 6.8% in 2004 and a downward trend also applied to people whose main income status is sick or disabled over these two years. Poverty rates which can also result in persons becoming socially excluded have clear implications in relation to the needs for income support and for supporting transitions to employment.

The National Disability Strategy presents an opportunity to consider the needs of people with disabilities in a more comprehensive and coherent way than hitherto. In this sense, the strategy presents an opportunity to apply the vision underlying the Department's own Strategy and outlined in the NESC study on the Developmental Welfare State⁴ as a concrete series of supports and services.

To date, the main focus of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, has been to provide income support to people with disabilities who cannot provide for themselves and thereby tackle the underlying problem of a relatively high level of poverty amongst people with disabilities. This income support provision impacts on the lives of almost every person in the State and remains the largest element of the Department's business. The role of the Department, however, also includes supports for people to return to work and support for activities to combat poverty. In relation to people with disabilities, and in line with the changing policy orientation, the Department will seek to deliver these supports in a way which reduces the risk of dependence and allows people with disabilities to move, where possible, from a position of income dependence to one where they can to a far greater extent meet their income needs from employment.

The Department recognises that these objectives present major challenges. In the first instance, people with illness or disability do not comprise a homogenous group. They range from those with temporary illness who will return to work within a short time period without support, those on long term absences who need support to return their jobs and those who may either have no capacity or only partial capacity to undertake employment. Secondly, for people with illness or disabilities, interventions are required which respect and recognise the needs of different categories, are integrated across agencies and which serve to address the issues of long term social welfare dependency. This is particularly relevant

3 EU SILC results for 2004 (CSO 220/2005)

4 NESC, *ibid*

in policies to increase job retention, return to work and employment rates among people with disabilities. Thirdly, the policy orientation on some issues (most notably policy in relation to social welfare payment rates) extend to all low income groups and a specific sectoral approach must keep in mind the balance between sectoral specific actions and those which apply to a wider range of groups.

Effective cross-departmental co-operation is necessary for the achievement of many of the goals, objectives and strategies of the Department. In relation to issues affecting people with illness and disability and family and informal carers, the Department of Health and Children (DoHC) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) are the two primary departments with which DSFA interacts but relevant co-operation with other Departments are also referenced in this plan. This includes the Department of Transport (see section 3 on Rural Transport Initiative); the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (see section 4, table 4.4.on the review of SWA and the Rental Accommodation Scheme) and the Department of Education and Science (see section 5.4 on the Review of the Back to Education scheme).

As part of the consultation process required under the Disability Act 2005, the DSFA, together with the DETE and the DoHC have agreed protocols on actions to address issues which require inter-departmental co-operation and these are outlined in more detail in section 6 of the plan.

In terms of disability proofing, the Government has agreed to amend the Cabinet Handbook to incorporate a requirement that all substantive memoranda submitted to Government take account of the impact on people with disabilities. Appropriate guidance will be developed to assist with the proofing requirement in the context of proposals being developed in relation to equality proofing more generally.

2. Preparation of Sectoral Plan, Consultation and Submissions Received

2.1. Introduction

In addressing and designing its Sectoral Plan a Programme Management approach was adopted by the Department to ensure compliance with the Disability Act and the timely preparation of its Sectoral Plan. A formal Project board was established consisting of Principal Officers and Business Managers with functional responsibility for the relevant Departmental areas. The Board met 7 on occasions and reported to the Top Management Team as well as the Department's Policy Committee chaired by the Secretary General.

Prior to the enactment of the Disability Act a Senior Officials Group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach was convened. This group oversaw the preparation of the National Disability Strategy and reported to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion (CCSI). This group was reconvened to monitor progress on implementation of the strategy, the Disability Act, Comhairle Amendment Bill and Sectoral Plans. The Department was represented on the group.

The central focus of the approach undertaken by DSFA has been to adopt an organisation-wide view, one also that included agencies under the aegis of the Department. Similarly, the Department's interpretation of its commitments, obligations required under the Disability Act and in respect this plan's implementation, is not one narrowly confined to disability income support. The intent is that, the plan is representative of all citizens with disabilities irrespective of age, income support, or employment status and who avail of services from the Department.

2.2. Key Actions Undertaken

The key activities undertaken as part of this project to ensure compliance with the Act as well as timely preparation of the Sectoral Plan included:

- On the advice of the National Disability Authority a strategic framework for the preparation of this sectoral plan was employed.
- Key stakeholders both internally and externally were identified and responsibility assigned for the delivery of the necessary internal actions or inputs.
- The activities required for the implementation of this Plan have been located and articulated within the Business Planning Process of the Department. The objectives, actions and performance indicators or outcome measures are aligned to Departmental Strategic and Business Planning processes.
- The Plan was broadened to also incorporate those agencies which come under the Department's aegis (i.e. Comhairle, Combat Poverty, Pensions Boards/Ombudsman, and Family Services Agency).
- The existing policy framework was reviewed and account taken of submissions received from Disability representative organisations and service providers.

- A review of the procurement procedures was conducted. This review incorporated the specific requirements of the Disability Act to ensure that goods and services procured are accessible to persons with disabilities.
- A comprehensive position audit of the Department's existing service delivery was completed (see appendix 1). This audit identified any deficits that existed in service delivery. This audit was informed by the Code of Practice on Accessibility and as well as looking at organisations who have track records of best practice (i.e. The Royal Mail who are regarded a organisational leaders in structured disability work management and disability service strategy).
- Cross Departmental issues were identified for progression with relevant Departments (i.e. Departments of Health & Children and Enterprise Trade & Employment). Protocols for the co-ordinated and integrated progression of this agenda have been agreed and monitoring mechanisms put in place.
- A review of the existing information services and formats, to assess whether they are adequately accessible to all persons with disabilities and in appropriate mediums, has been completed.
- An analysis of the extent to which buildings, used by the Department's customers and staff are fully accessible, has been completed. Where such deficits exist these will be addressed in a Programme of works to be undertaken

in conjunction with the Office of Public Works (OPW).

- An analysis of staff and organisational disability awareness has been completed. Typically this includes the extent to which disability awareness programmes, training and development have occurred within the organisation.
- A review of the organisation's compliance with the target for the employment of people with disabilities has been finalised. Additionally, this review also included the HR measures and proposals undertaken in the context of organisational Disability Management.

2.3. Consultative Process

Consultation with customers and their representative organisations is an integral part of the Department's business. The Department has over a number of years developed and used a variety of consultation methods in order to obtain as wide a view possible. These include day to day contacts, customer surveys, customer panels and feedback from the Department's Comment and Complaints system and through its Disability Consultative Forum.

Under the provisions of the Disability Act, provision was made for all relevant Departments to consult with people with disabilities and/or their representatives in advance of the publication of its Sectoral Plan. The primary method of consultation employed by the Department was with the Disability Legislative Consultative Group (DLCCG) which was established by the National Disability Authority at the request

of Government to provide a platform to consult with the disability sector on disability legislation. The DLCCG chaired by the NDA, comprises umbrella bodies representing people with disabilities their families, carers and disability service providers. The membership of the DLCCG is detailed in table 2.2. The Taoiseach committed that the relevant Ministers would consult with the DLCCG in relation to the preparation of the Sectoral Plans.

Additionally, the Department has consulted on its Sectoral Plan through its existing Disability Consultative Forum. This Forum has operated since 1996 and is comprised of the principal organisations representing people with disabilities and service providers. It meets on a quarterly basis and the organisations included are: (*National Disability Authority, Comhairle, Inclusion Ireland, Disability Federation of Ireland, Mental Health Association, People with Disabilities in Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, Federation of Voluntary Bodies, Eastern Regional Area Health Authority*)

The Forum acts as a channel to communicate the views of such organisations to the Department and also provides a mechanism to review and make recommendations which can influence policy making. In addition, the Forum has reviewed the operation and administration of income and employment support services delivered by the Department. More generally it has acted in an advisory capacity to the Department on Disability related issues. As a result of this ongoing consultation initiative and collaborative approach, the Department has gained a far better appreciation of the issues faced by people with disabilities and their representative organisations.

The series of consultations which took place included:

- Senior Departmental Officials met with the Disability Legislative Consultation Group on four occasions regarding their comments and observations on the Department's Plan.
- Bilateral meetings between National Disability Authority and DSFA on 9 separate occasions regarding compliance with the Act and the preparation of this Sectoral plan.

At the invitation of the NDA, the Department gave a presentation to Disability Representative Organisations on its approach in preparing its Sectoral Plan and meeting its obligations and the provisions of the Disability Act.

2.4. Submissions Received from the Disability Sector

In the conduct of its business, the Department receives submissions on a regular basis from the Disability Sector which inform the policy-making process. These include submissions made in the context of budgetary proposals (and presented to the Minister at the annual pre-budget forum) as well as submissions sought and received in other areas of work, for example, as part of the Government's Expenditure Review Initiative. In this regard, a review was completed of the Department's Illness and Disability Payment schemes, a key feature of which was the consultation process with relevant representative organisations.

Having regard to the consultations undertaken, a series of both oral and written

submission were received from a variety of representative groups and service providers including:

- The National Disability Authority (NDA)
- The Department of Social & Family Affairs Disability Consultative Forum
- The ‘Not for Profit Business Association’
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Inclusion Ireland
- Irish Association of Supported Employment

These submissions are published in their entirety full on the Department’s website www.welfare.ie with the Department’s

Sectoral Plan. A summary of the key issues which representative organisations considered the Plan should incorporate is detailed in **table 2.1**.

All submissions have been critically examined by the Department in the context of its preparation of the Sectoral Plan. In response to and when addressing the issues highlighted by the Disability Sector, the key actions and commitments proposed by the Department are articulated within this plan. These include policy development, strategic service development, activation and employment as well as compliance with the provisions of the Disability Act 2005.

Table 2.1	
Issue(s) Submitted	Organisation
Broaden the Sectoral Plan to include agencies under the Departments remit	NDA,NFPA,DFI Consultative Forum
Ensure that disability is integrated into the Statement of Strategy and business planning of the Department and all public bodies under its aegis	NDA,NFPA
Ensure social welfare payments move in line with other incomes in society. Set targets for reducing poverty among people with disabilities	NDA, DFI, Consultative Forum, DLCG
Tackle and remove benefits traps within income and related supports. Develop proactive strategies to support pathways into work for those who can, and to promote continuation in employment of workers who acquire a disability	ALL
Review the title “Rules of Behaviour” and their content, to better reflect the autonomy of PWD. Set claim processing time targets for no-quibble re-entry to disability payments (and secondary benefits) after an unsuccessful return to work, and for processing exemptions from the Rules of Behaviour to take up training or work.	ALL

continued...	
Specifically detail how compliance with the sections 25-28 of Disability Act 2005, on accessible services, and Part 5, on targets for employing people with disabilities in the public service will be realised.	NDA,NFPA
<p>Eliminating inconsistencies and inequities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long stay charges – rent supplements • Invalidity Pension • Disability Allowance • People in institutional/residential care • National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion • Consultation • Means testing 	Inclusion Ireland, NFPBA
<p>Comhairle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The critical role of Comhairle in the enabling process • Promotion of Comhairle • Promotion of accessible information through Comhairle • Review of Assistive Technology information provision by Comhairle • Advocacy • Sign Language Interpretation 	NDA,NFPBA
Consideration of and introduction of a Cost of Disability payment	ALL
Cross Departmental Issues, Joint Commissioning of services	ALL
Role for the family support division of the Department to address issues relating to disability in its supports for family life	NDA
Disability Awareness and Disability Proofing	ALL

Table 2.2	
Acronym	Full Title of Organisation
NDA	National Disability Authority
NFPBA	Not For Profit Business Association (Central Remedial Clinic, Cheshire Ireland, Enable Ireland, Gandon Enterprises, Irish Wheelchair Association, National Association for Deaf People, National Council for the Blind of Ireland, National Learning Network, RehabCare)
Consultative Forum	Department of Social & Family Affairs Disability Consultative Forum NDA, Comhairle, DFI, Federation of Voluntary Bodies, Inclusion Ireland, Health Service Executive East Area, People with Disabilities in Ireland, Forum for People with Disabilities
DFI	Disability Federation of Ireland
DLCG	Disability Legislative Consultative Group Disability Federation of Ireland, Mental Health Ireland, National Federation of Voluntary Bodies, Not for Profit Business Association, People with Disabilities in Ireland)
INCI	Inclusion Ireland
IASE	Irish Association of Supported Employment

3. Policy - Meeting the Needs of People with Disabilities

3.1. Introduction

Following the report of the Commission on the Status of people with Disabilities and the establishment group⁵, the concept of mainstreaming of services and income supports for people with disabilities has featured strongly in any discussion of the design and the delivery of services

The concept of mainstreaming is an important one in the context of income support services. It implies that the needs of people with disabilities should be addressed within the broader range of income supports, with specific actions to overcome difficulties identified for people with disabilities such as take-up, higher poverty and lower employment rates and reduced employment incentives. The Department also recognises that measures to achieve other social outcomes, such as further education and developing life skills are important in any social inclusion policy. This is the approach the Department is trying to take in the development of this sectoral plan.

The Department's Statement of Strategy (published on the website www.welfare.ie) identifies six high level goals in the business of the Department as it relates to;

- Retired and older people
- People of working age
- Children
- Coverage access and entitlement
- Poverty, Social Inclusion and Families
- The Department and its staff.

These goals will allow the Department to align its main strategies and business planning with the life-cycle approach of the Developmental Welfare State⁶. The three main population groups: older people and those in retirement, people of working age and children, have different income support needs. Within each of these groups it may be appropriate to identify the needs of persons with disabilities who may face particular difficulties in terms of their personal capacity to earn a living, secure caring and avoid poverty. In developing policy to address the needs of particular groups, however, a number of key objectives set out in the Department's Statement of Strategy are particularly relevant in the context of this Sectoral Plan. These are outlined below.

3.1. Objective: Developing specific social welfare schemes for people of working age to ensure that they have an adequate, secure and sustainable income and related supports.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs is responsible for ensuring that the range and level of social security coverage is appropriate to the circumstances of different groups. Additionally, that the services for which people are eligible are readily accessible and delivered in an efficient, effective and integrated way, through direct provision to customers and, where appropriate, supporting agencies in providing services. The Department will work for the continued enhancement and integration of supports in line with overall social welfare commitments and targets.

⁵ A Strategy for Equality, Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, (1996)

⁶ NESR Report 113, (2005) Developmental Welfare State

A recent development which will have implications for the Department's delivery of services for people with disabilities is the Government decision to transfer income support and maintenance schemes currently administered by the Health Services Executive (HSE) to this Department. These schemes include the Domiciliary Care Allowance, Blind Welfare Allowance and Mobility Allowance. An inter-departmental group has been established to progress the implementation of the transfer of these functions. This transfer will allow for their provision within primary social welfare legislation as well as opportunities for scheme rationalisation and integration, in line with the Government's policy of mainstreaming. *(See also sections 4 on Strategic Service Development and section 6 on Inter-Departmental Co-operation).*

Income support comprises three payment types:

1. Universal payments (e.g. child benefit)
2. Insurance based payments which depend on payment of Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contributions
3. Social Assistance payments based on a means test

A range of secondary benefits is provided with insurance and assistance payments while the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA), administered by the Health Service Executive (HSE), provides a means-tested safety net payment. *(See Appendix 2 for details of income support payments).*

Social insurance has always been an important cornerstone of social protection policy, with social insurance coverage for certain payments being extended to additional groups over recent years, the introduction of new benefits and the reduction in the real level of earnings required to secure an insurable employment record. There are a number of strategic questions concerning the type of social insurance provision which is appropriate and whether new contingencies need to be provided for; whether the conditions for access need to be changed; whether access should be broadened further etc. However, the main focus of attention in the short to medium term will be ensuring that the current system adequately reflects changing labour market conditions and the requirements to balance work and caring responsibilities.

In relation to social assistance, the level of dependence on assistance payments has reduced as social insurance coverage has expanded. The social assistance system, like the social insurance system, is contingency based, which means that payments can be targeted and adapted to the needs of particular groups. This, however, involves a high level of complexity arising from the different rates, means tests, disregards, thresholds etc. which is a challenge.

The future structure of social protection and in that context, the appropriate balance between social insurance, social assistance and Universalist coverage is an issue which has been addressed in the recent NESC report on the '*Developmental Welfare State*'⁷.

The improvements in the social welfare rates since 2001 have seen increases awarded at a cumulatively higher percentage than gross average industrial earnings. Budget 2006 increased payment rates by over four times the rate of inflation with the lowest rate increasing by €17 to €165.80 per week. This has benefited all social welfare recipients, including those in receipt of disability and illness payments. Recipients of Carer's Allowance received increases of over 17% in Budget 2006, bringing the weekly rate for a carer under 66 years of age to €180 and the rate for a carer over age 66 to €200 per week. The annual Respite Care Grant, which is paid to all full-time carers, also increased to €1,200 in June 2006.

Government policy as regards social welfare rates is guided by the commitment in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) and the new Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement⁸ to increase the lowest social welfare personal rates to €150 per week (in 2002 terms) by 2007.

Research has shown that households experiencing joblessness or low income employment are most at risk of poverty and that those headed by a person with a disability are a vulnerable group in this regard⁹. A recent report by the Economic and Social Research Institute has also shown that the consistent poverty rate amongst those persons reporting a chronic illness or disability is significant¹⁰. This study also refers to those 'in home duties', which would include carers of older people and people with disabilities, and found that households where the reference person is engaged in

home duties also experience risk of poverty.

A number of factors could be considered as affecting these trends including:

- The lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities;
- Issues relating to the additional costs of disability which might reduce disposable income for people with disabilities;
- The impact of extended durations on the social welfare system;
- Differences in household composition among the group which increase the possibility that people with disabilities are in workless households.

Developing policies to improve schemes as well as analysing labour market trends and incorporating activation and employment objectives in the course of scheme reviews will thus be of great importance in meeting the objective of sustainable income.

With regard to family and informal carers who provide care for older people and people with disabilities, Government policy has placed an increased emphasis in recent years on supporting this group in their role of caring for and maintaining family members and relatives in their homes and communities. The primary supports from this Department for carers are the Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit schemes and the Respite Care Grant. (*See also Appendix 2 on income supports*)

8 Towards 2016 Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement (2006-2016)

9 Living in Ireland Survey 2001

10 Gannon B and Nolan B, Disability and Social Inclusion in Ireland, ESRI 2005

The Department has worked closely with the Department of Health and Children through the '*Working Group on Long Term Care*' to ensure the development of supports and services for older people. A process of structured consultation, on a cross-departmental basis, will be progressed with carer representative organisations and in conjunction with the Department of Health and Children, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and other Departments, as appropriate.

Carers of older people and people with disabilities may also be a vulnerable group in that they may be unable to engage in full-time employment and may be at risk of poverty. Whilst in recent year, there has been an increase in female participation, mainly among married and older women, in the workforce, it has been estimated that this rise in female employment may reduce the supply of family carers by around 15% over the next 10 years¹¹.

Women still frequently form the majority of those in part-time employment and carers in the home of older relatives and relatives with disabilities. This has an impact on their employment potential and earnings and consequently on their prospective pension entitlements.

Formal provision was made in 1999 for the award of credits to claimants of Carer's Allowance who have left insurable employment to engage in caring duties. This ensures that carers' Social Insurance records are preserved for Old Age (Contributory) Pension purposes. Further appropriate and timely interventions are necessary which support carers during their role as carers and, equally importantly, when their caring role has ceased.

The Department will continue to review the scope for further development of the Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit and Respite Care Grant having regard to the recommendations in the reports on Carers by the Equality Authority¹², the Carer's Association¹³ and Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social and Family Affairs¹⁴ and other available research.

11 Mercer Limited, 2002, Study to Examine the Future Financing of Long-Term Care in Ireland.

12 Equality Authority (2005), Implementing Equality for Carers

13 The Carers Association (2005) Towards a Family Carers Strategy

14 Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs (2003), Report on the Position of Full Time Carers

Action Points		
Objective in Strategy Statement	Activities Proposed	Performance Indicator
Develop specific social welfare schemes for people of working age to ensure that they have adequate, secure and sustainable income and related supports	Increase social welfare payments (specifically those for people with disabilities) in line with Government policy and financial sustainability.	Commitments met in Partnership Agreement 2007 on payment rates. First phase completed January 2007.
	Further the recommendations of the Report of the Review of Illness and Disability payment schemes.	Implement policy proposals in the context of Budget 2007 and otherwise.
	Progress, in consultation with the Department of Health and Children, the extension of entitlement to Disability Allowance for all those in residential care.	Disability Allowance payable to all in residential care, subject to the qualifying conditions which are applied to all. Completed by 2007.
Ensure that coverage of the Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) system is appropriate to the respective circumstances of employed, self-employed and other categories	Review coverage of the PRSI system for self-employed persons in terms of risk covered.	Implement policy proposals, if required.

3.2. Objective: Engaging meaningfully with persons of working age, particularly marginalised and excluded groups and providing services directly and in co-operation with other relevant agencies to encourage and support the people concerned in taking up relevant work, training, education or development opportunities.

Since the early 1990s, the Department has been developing its policy to move from

largely passive income support provision to a more active social welfare system in order to address issues of poverty and social exclusion and to make people more financially independent. The activities to achieve this objective have included identifying supports required to increase labour market activity and the potential of referrals to existing guidance services (e.g. FÁS/Health Services Executive) as well as co-operation with relevant departments and agencies to ensure that schemes designed to increase labour market activity are efficient.

There are a number of specific employment and training incentives available within the system to encourage and facilitate people, including those with illness and disability, to take up available work or training options. These include the Back to Work and Back to Education Allowances, as well as exemptions from the general “no work” conditions of the disability benefit and invalidity pension schemes, to facilitate people to undertake employment of a rehabilitative nature and income disregards on the means-tested Disability Allowance and Blind Pension. A number of initiatives are also in place which facilitates carers in maintaining contact with the labour market (*see also section 5 on Employment and Activation*).

The model of activation outlined in the *NESC Developmental Welfare State report*¹⁵ outlines a life-cycle approach, linked to activation measures, which puts less emphasis on contingencies (e.g. unemployment, disability, lone-parenthood) and more on facilitating progression, regardless of the circumstances which led the person to be in receipt of income maintenance. A proposal for a Social and Economic Participation Programme to be operated by this Department has been developed. This aims to promote participation and social inclusion, primarily through activation measures aimed at people of working age, including people with disabilities - section 5.6 of this Plan outlines this innovative proposal in some detail.

Action Points		
Objective in Strategy Statement	Activities Proposed	Performance Indicator
Engage meaningfully with persons of working age, particularly marginalised and excluded groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other relevant agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training, education and other development opportunities	Complete evaluation of Midlands Pilot Project	Final evaluation completed September 2006
	Develop strategy for multi-agency co-operation, based on learning from Midlands Pilot	Completed by end 2009
	Develop economic and social and participation programme	Complete implementation by 2013. Commence phase 1 2007.
	Evaluate the outcome on employment participation rates arising from the change to the withdrawal rate of DA for earnings in excess of the income disregard	Implement policy change if required

15 NESC, *ibid*

3.3. Objective: Ensuring that schemes and services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitates their full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming principle of the equality agenda.

The National Disability Strategy builds on the existing strong legislative and infrastructural framework for equality and also gives statutory effect to the policy of mainstreaming public service provision for people with disabilities. Extensive and sustained consultation with the disability sector has been a key influence on the development of the Strategy and will be a feature of the development of the Sectoral Plans.

A comprehensive regional consultation process has already been undertaken by this Department in conjunction with the National Disability Authority following the publication of the Outline Sectoral Plan. Consultation on the sectoral plan will continue via the Department's Disability Consultative Forum which comprises the principal organisations representing people with disability¹⁶.

Meeting the objective of full participation in society for people with disabilities will also ensure that they are facilitated in maximising employability and labour market participation as well as other forms of activation, including educational and life-skills development. (*See also section 5 on Activation and Employment*).

Access to transport is an important prerequisite for people with disabilities in participating more fully in society in general as well as facilitating access to employment opportunities. A number of Government Departments have responsibility for transport issues. For example, the HSE, under the Department of Health and Children, currently administers the Mobility Allowance which provides financial assistance towards transport costs while the Department of Transport is responsible for issues in relation to accessibility. As referred to in section 3.1, the proposed transfer of income maintenance functions from the Health Services Executive to this Department will provide an opportunity to examine those schemes which provide financial assistance towards transport (Free Travel, Mobility Allowance, Motorised Transport Grant, Supplementary Welfare Allowance) in a more integrated way.

The Rural Transport Initiative, managed on behalf of the Department of Transport by Pobal (formerly Area Development Management) is providing funding on a pilot basis for community transport groups to address the transport needs of people in their areas through the provision of local transport services. The DSFA is contributing €850,000 for the initiative in 2006 ensuring that free travel pass holders continue to have full access to community based transport services.

The objective of the Free Travel scheme, which is administered by this Department, is to encourage older people and people with disabilities to remain independent and active

¹⁶ Membership of the Disability Consultative Forum: Inclusion Ireland (formerly NAMHI); Disability Federation of Ireland; Federation of Voluntary Bodies, Mental Health Association; Irish Wheelchair Association; People with Disabilities in Ireland; Forum of People with Disabilities; Comhairle; National Disability Authority and the Health Services Executive.

in the community, thereby reducing the need for institutional care. The scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible, including road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as LUAS, Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as services provided by over eighty private transport operators. The vast majority of private contractors providing a service under the scheme operate in rural areas.

The Department will continue to review the operation of the Free Travel scheme, address potential anomalies and identify the scope for further improvements, as resources permit.

Action Points:		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicators
Ensure that schemes and services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitates their full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming agenda	Continue to engage in a consultative process with people with disabilities following the publication of the sectoral plan.	Hold regular meetings of the Disability Consultative Forum to review the implementation of the sectoral plan and other issues, as relevant
	Continue to review the operation of the Free Travel Scheme and identify scope for further improvements and/or rationalisation in the context of any transfer of HSE functions	Changes to Free Travel Scheme implemented if required Rationalisation and Integration of schemes addressing costs of transport in context of HSE transfer

3.4. Objective: Ensuring income supports and associated secondary benefits do not create financial barriers to seeking, accepting or improving employment.

With regard to this objective an analysis will be undertaken in relation to the incentive effects of payment levels and structure of schemes along with the assessment of employment participation activity and

the removal of unemployment, inactivity and poverty traps through appropriate scheme changes or the provision of in-work supports. The impact of the payment of Disability Allowance from sixteen years on the decisions made by young people in this age group is relevant. Also, working cross-departmentally to identify and address wider poverty traps beyond the social welfare system. (See section 6 on cross-departmental co-operation).

The underlying cost of disability can also be higher for many people with disabilities. The 'Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities' recommended the introduction of a Cost of Disability Payment and a recent review by this Department of illness and disability payments¹⁷, supported the view that the costs of disability should be met separately rather than through higher basic income maintenance payments which would not be targeted at those with greatest need. The report further stressed the importance of meeting these costs in a way that is less dependent on labour force status if people with disabilities are to be given the opportunity to participate in the workforce¹⁸.

A working group established under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) with cross-departmental membership and chaired by the Department of Health and Children, examined the feasibility of the introduction of a Cost of Disability payment¹⁹ and concluded that, in the absence of a process of assessment of need and comprehensive data relating to disability, it was not feasible to introduce such a payment at this time. However, in terms of ensuring adequate levels of income for people with disabilities, the Department will work for the continued enhancement and integration of supports in line with overall social welfare commitments and targets. This will include a rationalisation of existing allowances for people with disabilities in the context of the Government's policy of mainstreaming and the proposed transfer of functions from the

HSE to this Department (*See also section 4 on Strategic Service Delivery and 6 on inter-departmental co-operation*). Other issues around cost of disability will be considered following the development of the needs assessment process provided for under Part 2 of the Disability Act, 2005.

One recent development in addressing the barriers that exist for people who wish to undertake or increase their employment, as part of the social welfare Budget package 2006, is a change to the withdrawal rate of Disability Allowance and Blind Pension for income in excess of the current earnings disregard level.

This change, effective from 1st June 2006, will mean that earnings above the current income disregard of €120 per week and below €350 per week will be assessed at 50%, rather than the 100% assessment as has applied. For a single person, this will mean that they can earn up to €390 per week before Disability Allowance/Blind Pension is fully withdrawn. The outcome of this change will be monitored to assess its affect on increased employment participation and to identify any further policy changes required.

17 Report of the Working Group on the Review of Illness and Disability Payment schemes DSFA (2003)

18 Report of the Working Group on the Review of the Illness and Disability Payment Schemes, Stationery Office, 2003

19 Membership of this group comprises Department of Health and Children (Chair); Department of Social and Family Affairs; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of Finance; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; the Health Services Executive and the National Disability Authority.

Action Points		
Objective in Strategy Statement	Activities Proposed	Performance Indicators
Ensuring that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to seeking, accepting or improving employment	Ongoing analysis of the incentive effects of payment levels and structure of schemes for people with disabilities along with the assessment of impact of such traps on actual participation activity	Changes to employment and training participation rates by people in receipt of disability payments. Yearly analysis completed for period 2007/2009. Make policy changes as required in budgetary context to provide incentives for greater participation.
	In conjunction with the Department of Education and Science, conduct a study on the impact of the payment of Disability Allowance from aged 16 years on education and employment incentives for young people	Complete study by quarter 4 2007. Implement policy changes relating to the age of qualification for DA if appropriate following analysis
Ensure that payments and supports to carers are efficient and effective, recognising their needs and adequately addressing poverty and social exclusion and are adaptable to the needs of carers in a changing care environment	Improve income supports for carers in line with the commitments in the Programme for Government	Review of Carers Allowance and Carers Benefit carried out and appropriate measures put in place

3.5. Objective: Preparing and monitoring of the implementation of the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/inclusion)

The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI), which is located within the Department of Social and Family Affairs, is the Government Office with overall responsibility for developing,

co-ordinating and driving Ireland's NAP/inclusion.

People with disabilities face many barriers to participation and require a multi-faceted and multi-agency response. The National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/inclusion) sets out the framework for the Government's response to these problems and comprises the range of policies and

programmes, along with specific targets and actions, aimed at reducing or eliminating poverty and social exclusion. The OSI works closely with senior officials in relevant Government Departments in monitoring and evaluating progress against social inclusion targets.

The plan specifically targets people with disabilities as one of a number of groups who are particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. There are indications of progress against the over-arching commitment in the plan to increase the participation of people with disabilities in work and in society generally. Progress to date against more specific targets has been variable, for example, while participation in third level education by students with disabilities will reach its 1.8% target level by 2006, the unemployment level for disabled persons is still higher than the national average. Some progress has been made in the development of accessible transport services for people with disabilities.

Following an extensive consultation process, a new Action Plan (2006-08) is being prepared at present by the OSI. The consultation process confirmed that persons with disabilities still constitute a group that is most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion and that services for people with disabilities require to be improved and to be delivered in a more integrated fashion. The next Plan will have a specific focus on people with disabilities and will contain targets to take account of the findings of the OSI's consultation process. The overall aim for people with disabilities is to increase their participation in work and society generally,

and to assist them and their families to lead full and independent lives.

The Office for Social Inclusion is also developing a data strategy, designed to ensure that the necessary data is available for monitoring, evaluation, policy prioritising, targeting and overall policy development. One element of this strategy is the identification and filling of data gaps which prevent proper measurement of progress against the targets contained in the NAP/inclusion.

OSI has identified continuing significant data gaps for vulnerable groups, including people with a disability, and is currently consulting with Government Departments to identify how these gaps can be filled. Another issue in relation to data is the exclusion of a direct question on disability in the EU-Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), other than where someone's principal economic status is given as "ill or disabled". This may have an impact on the ability to assess the extent to which poverty reduction targets are being met for people whose labour force status is not "ill/disabled" and is an issue for discussion at EU level when the EU-SILC questionnaire is being reviewed later in 2006.

OSI has also engaged the Economic and Social Research Institute to produce a series of "Social Portraits" of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities. This project involves the collation of statistical information available from different sources, which in turn will give a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic situation of key vulnerable groups.

Action Points		
Objective in Strategy Statement	Activities Proposed	Performance Indicators
Prepare and monitor the Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/inclusion) 2006-08	Work with Departments and Government Agencies in determining their objectives and priorities having regard to the outcome of research and consultation with stakeholders and the assessment of the existing plan by the EU	Input to national partnership process Publication of NAP/inclusion for EU completed by quarter 3 2006.
	Ensure that objectives, priorities and costed actions to implement them are identified on a departmental basis in good time	Strategy to fill in data gaps Completed by end 2007
	Promote cross departmental linkages to promote the effective delivery on shared government policy	
	Develop an effective consultation process with groups and committees engaged in policy, the Community and Voluntary sector and promote the involvement of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in the process	Implementation of Poverty Proofing guidelines. Rolled out by quarter 1 2007.
Ensure that there is clear knowledge and understanding of the nature, extent and causes of poverty and social exclusion and the strategies to address it	Development of technical supports necessary to underpin and develop the NAPS, including a data strategy, poverty proofing guidelines and co-ordinated research in consultation with the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) and the Combat Poverty Agency	Analysis of ESRI/CPA research. Completed by 2009.

4. Strategic Service Development

4.1. Introduction

In the context of this Sectoral Plan a number of key strategic developments are being undertaken by the Department of Social and Family Affairs aimed at critically enhancing services and their delivery to persons with disabilities. By implication, such developments are longitudinal in dimension and necessarily represent implementation timeframes beyond the scope of this Plan. The ultimate objective is, however, to provide transformational rather than transactional change to income support and other related disability services administered by the Department.

4.2. Coverage, Access and Entitlement

A strategic goal of the Department is to ensure that the range and level of social security coverage is appropriate to the social and economic circumstances of different groups. Additionally, the services for which people are eligible are readily accessible and delivered in an efficient, effective and integrated way, through direct provision to our customers and by supporting agencies in providing services to our customers.

There are a number of strategic questions concerning social insurance for disability payments which will continue to be addressed e.g. whether the insurance base of the system should be strengthened, whether new contingencies need to be provided for, whether the conditions for access need to be changed, whether access should be broadened further. However, the main focus of attention over the period of the current Sectoral Plan will be ensuring that the current

system adequately reflects the changing labour market condition, social inclusion, poverty reduction and the requirements to balance work and caring responsibilities.

In relation to social assistance the policy direction has been to reduce the level of dependence on assistance payments as social insurance coverage has expanded. The social assistance system, like the social insurance system, is contingency based, which means that payments can be targeted and adapted to the needs of particular groups. This also involves a high level of complexity arising from different rates, means tests, disregards, thresholds etc. Problems arising from the contingency based nature of the system have been highlighted from time to time and this is an aspect which also needs to be addressed.

The future structure of social protection and in that context, the appropriate balance between social insurance, social assistance and universalist coverage and the role of service provision in the context of social protection have been addressed in the context of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) on the concept of a '*Developmental Welfare State*'.

The large and diverse customer base including carers and persons with disabilities for which the Department serves has a major influence on the design of our customer service programmes. It is essential that those services are constantly monitored and updated so as to respond effectively to the changing needs of our customers. A summary of the activities to be undertaken by the Department are outlined in Table 4.2.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Ensure that the rules for entitlement to Disability and Carers payments are appropriate to the circumstances of claimants, are easy to understand and are applied in a fair and consistent manner.	Review the contingency basis of disability schemes and put forward any proposals for change arising.	Proposals brought forward.
	Develop proposals for simplification of aspects of the means test.	Proposals brought forward in Social Welfare Acts 2006/2009.
	Ensure that means-testing rules are consistent with activation and support for work policies.	Number of rules reviewed and revised. Social Welfare Acts 2006/2009.
	Undertake transfer of functions from HSE	Integration and simplification of payments and supports 2006/2009.
	Implement revised Disability Allowance earnings disregard	Implement measure by June 2006. Monitor impact and complete by December 2007.
	Introduce automatic entitlement to State Pension for all Invalidity Pensioners over 66	Implement measure by September 2006

4.3. Customer Service

The services for people with disabilities and carers which the Department are responsible for provide essential supports to people who have recourse to them. The delivery of those services has to be of a high standard in order to meet the legitimate needs of such customers. The Department and its agencies are conscious of their roles as public service organisations of the need for those services to be provided to the highest standard. For the purposes of this Sectoral Plan and in its wider Service Delivery Strategy the Department is committed to:

- providing a quality, reliable and caring service to the public,

- assisting them in establishing their rights,
- anticipating their needs where possible,
- taking full account of their views;
- seeking ways to improve the effectiveness of our service,
- treating customers in accordance with fair procedures;
- providing our customers with all necessary information regarding our decisions and our services,
- ensuring a fair application of internal rules and procedures,

The precise activities to be initiated for the period of this Sectoral plan are detailed in table 4.3.1

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Promote and develop a strong customer service culture through the Department and the agencies under its aegis and deliver continuous improvement in customer service for people with disabilities and carers.	Delivery of services to customers with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum of delay.	Evaluate and report on progress being made under (i) the twelve Quality Customer Service Principles, (ii) the commitments in the Customer Charter, and (iii) the Customer Action Plan 2004-2007. Completed by end 2007
	Ensure meaningful consultation with and participation by the Disability Sector in relation to the development, delivery and review of services.	Number of Disability Consultative Forum meetings. Number of issues progressed during period 2006/2009.
	Support the agencies under the aegis of the Department in meeting their obligations in implementing the principles of quality customer service.	Publication of Customer Action Plans and Customer Charters, where appropriate, for the bodies under the aegis of the Department.

The Department and its agencies are aware of the importance of delivering a quality customer service to all their customers. These services affect individuals, families and society in general and the Department are committed to meeting the differing needs of these customers and especially Carers and persons with disabilities. In this regard, the Department's Customer Action Plan 2004-2007 and Customer Charter demonstrate a strong commitment to customer service. The Department's Customer Charter makes a clear statement about the standards and services its customers can expect (see appendix 2). Those commitments will be subject to ongoing evaluation and will be reported on in the context of the Department's Annual Reports.

Consulting with and listening to customers is an integral part of the Department's business and is the key to informing our service delivery approach. The Department utilises a number of different mechanisms to gather customer feedback, including customer panels involving direct contact with customers, touch screen surveys at our local offices, scheme specific postal surveys, the comments and complaints system, and independent national customer satisfaction surveys. The principal activities which the Department is committed to delivering upon are scheduled in table 4.3.2.

Table 4.3.2		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Achieve customer satisfaction by delivering social insurance and assistance disability payments, related supports and services to a high standard.	Decide and deliver on entitlements in a timely, accurate and efficient manner in line with customer needs and expectations and in accordance with the terms of the Customer Charter and Customer Service Plan.	Achievement of targets in Customer Charter and Customer Action Plan met 2006/2009 (see Appendix 2)
	Implement new Service Delivery Modernisation (SDM) programme to enhance administrative efficiency and improve customer service in relation to pensions.	Introduce Service Delivery Model for Invalidity pension Scheme. Completed by first quarter 2008.
	Undertake a national customer satisfaction survey	Benchmark survey results against delivery outcomes Completed by October 2006.

continued...		
	Conduct individual scheme surveys at appropriate intervals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Allowance 2007 • Invalidity Pension 2008 • Carer's payments 2009
	Elicit customer satisfaction with service through other feedback channels.	Customer survey responses meet targeted satisfaction levels
	Develop and enhance the Department's payment delivery services.	Implementation of Payment Delivery Strategy. Completed end 2009.

4.4. Service Delivery Modernisation

Following an extensive examination of how best to deliver its own services in the future, the Department has embarked on a Service Delivery Modernisation (SDM) programme. The aim of the programme is to deliver a high quality, proactive service to customers. The SDM programme is an ambitious multi-year programme of change, using modern systems to facilitate more customer centred services and also support e-government strategies.

The first two phases of the SDM programme have been successfully implemented for Child Benefit and State Pension (i.e. Old Age) schemes. These phases brought together a number of eGovernment projects initiated by the Department to integrate applications for the purpose of delivering significant improvements in customer service and in the administration of services.

The next phase of the SDM programme is now being prepared and includes the Invalidity Pension Scheme see table 4.4. In bringing in new technology the Department will be conscious of the needs of persons with disabilities and their ability to access.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Modernise and improve the delivery of services to the Department's customers with disabilities through the development and implementation of ICT systems and organisational change programmes.	<p>Develop a proactive high quality service for customers.</p> <p>Design, develop and implement new secure ICT systems for long-term pension schemes.</p> <p>Design and implement a programme of organisational change in parallel with ICT development to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new streamlined and integrated work processes • redesigned organizational structures • Appropriate performance targets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of new service delivery system for Invalidity Pension and, Household Benefits/Free Travel. Completed by first quarter 2008 • New SDM system, processes and structures, conforming to best practice, in place for Invalidity Pension Scheme Completed by first quarter 2008.

4.5. Review of Medical Assessment System

The Department of Social and Family Affairs has recently undertaken a comprehensive review of medical certification, reporting, review and assessment procedures for schemes related to illness, disability and caring. This fundamental review of the Service (MRAS) was undertaken to ensure that appropriate and revised arrangements are put in place resulting from the far-reaching changes that have occurred since the current system was established. Additionally, to take account of the significant modernisation plans currently underway within the Department (see table 4.5).

The review incorporates an assessment of and report on all aspects of Medical Certification, Reporting, Review and Assessment in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, economy and customer service with reference to current national, EU and international best practice. The Review details the alternative approaches to meeting the Department's requirements in these areas, puts forward options for the development of an enhanced service and recommends a preferred approach.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Ensure that, medical examination and assessment procedures to determine eligibility for entitlement to disability income support are of a high standard and are applied in a consistent, efficient and effective way.	<p>Review the existing arrangements for medical review and assessment and bring forward proposals for reform as appropriate. Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce new case management system • Redevelop role and functions of Medical Assessors • Revise accessibility of assessment venues • The development early intervention systems for categories of disability recipients • Revised Medical certification processes. • Linking eligibility assessment to activation 	<p>Review was completed April 2006. Project commenced by quarter 3 2006.</p> <p>Number of MRAS review recommendations implemented and completed during period by quarter 4 2009</p> <p>Number of customer surveys undertaken to obtain feedback on revised service delivery</p>

4.6. Transfer of Health Service Executive Functions

The Supplementary Welfare scheme has, thus far, been administered by the Community Welfare Service of the Health Service Executive on behalf of the Department of Social & Family Affairs. The Commission on Financial Management and Control Systems in the Health Service, which reported in 2003, noted that over the years the health system had been assigned responsibility for a number of services which might be regarded as non core activities. It recommended that the Government consider assigning non core

activities currently undertaken by agencies within the health service to other bodies.

The Government subsequently set up an interdepartmental group to examine this issue. The report of the interdepartmental group was recently accepted by the Government. The report recommends, among other things, that income support and maintenance schemes (i.e. Supplementary Welfare Allowance, Rent Supplement, Domiciliary Care Allowance, Blind Welfare Allowance, Mobility Allowance) should be transferred to DSFA.

As a first step, an inter-Departmental working group has been established to progress implementation of the transfer of functions between the Departments of Social & Family Affairs, Finance, Health & Children and the Health Services Executive. The changes arising from this Government decision will have major implications for the Department's existing services for persons with disabilities and for the future delivery of supplementary welfare allowance and other related payments. The main activities being undertaken are scheduled in Table 4.6.

In addition to the transfer of functions, a review of Supplementary Welfare Allowance system and the implementation of the

Rental Accommodation Scheme will also be undertaken during the period of this sectoral plan. The standard means test for SWA rent supplement (and other secondary benefit payments) will be kept under review with a view to providing enhanced financial incentives to take up part-time employment, training, education or other progression options, and minimizing where possible, the impact of the withdrawal of social welfare. However, the overall emphasis will be on the provision of appropriate long-term housing solutions rather than on moving retention thresholds at which some or all of the social welfare payment is lost.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Implement Government Decision with regard to the transfer of Supplementary Welfare Scheme and non SWA payments.	Establishment of interdepartmental working group.	Group established May 2006.
	Report of working group on implementation to Government. Commence transfer process	Report submitted by October 2006. Transfer process commenced 2007/2009.
	Complete the Review of SWA scheme.	Review Completed by July 2006. Report published by October 2006
	Implementation of the Rental Accommodation Scheme to enhance the response of local authorities to long-term housing need and eliminating dependence on the SWA rent supplement scheme.	Implementation to be completed by September 2008

5. Activation & Employment

5.1. Introduction

While the Department of Social and Family Affairs has a primary role in ensuring that social security programmes are developed in ways that are responsive to the income needs of all people, it also has a role to provide opportunities to encourage and assist people to become less dependent on the welfare system.

The Department will during the period of this Plan (2006/2009) continue to develop the range of employment and other supports available to persons with disabilities, as well as, addressing potential financial barriers which may prohibit labour market or other activity. Additionally, the Department will actively engage and work closely with the Department of Health & Children and Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and the relevant agencies under their remit, on these issues, as well as training, and employment support for people with disabilities.

The Department during the period 2007 to 2013 is committed to the development of and the implementation of a systematic programme of engagement for all persons of working age including with people with disabilities. This programme represents an important structural reform of the income support system and the activation of persons receiving these supports.

5.2. Existing Employment Activation Supports Process

The Department has a range of existing activation measures for people with disabilities that complement its payment functions. These initiatives include such employment support measures as:

- Back to Work Allowance which can assist transition to work for people in receipt of disability related payments
- The Back Education Allowance which allows for second chance educational opportunities and enhance employability.
- Family Income Supplement.
- Special projects are supported by Facilitators in the Department's Social and Family Support Service (SFSS) through its facilitator network
- Earnings disregards for Disability Allowance and Blind Pension schemes which exempt a proportion of earnings from employment.
- Exemptions from the general "no work" conditions in the case of certain rehabilitation employments for Disability Benefit and Invalidity Pension.
- Technical assistance and training grants

The SFSS assists people who are most marginalised and most distant from the labour market, by focusing on their abilities and potential. The service supports a wide range of personal development and basic skills training initiatives at local level in co-operation with other statutory and non-statutory agencies, which are availed of by lone parents, people with disabilities,

unemployed people and others. In some cases participants progress to employment, training or further education, while in others the outcome is increased self-esteem and increased capacity and willingness to participate in further self-development opportunities. Additionally the SFSS has as a key remit the provision of quality information and referral of customers to other agencies or service providers.

5.3. Midlands Pilot Project

This Project was initiated in January 2005 and designed as a multi agency response to increasing numbers applying for Disability Allowance with particular reference to those between the age of 16 and 25 years. The agencies involved in the project were the Department of Social and Family Affairs, FAS and the Health Service Executive. Preliminary research into the employment and training support needs of those on a Disability Allowance payment was undertaken in counties Longford, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath and has involved a series of one-to-one consultations with recipients of the allowance in the age cohort 16 to 25 years.

The objectives of the project included:

1. Provide an integrated point of contact for persons with disabilities and a multi agency examination of their training and employment support potential.
2. Facilitate participation in training and employment supports by addressing the needs of groups with high risks of poverty (i.e. people with disabilities).
3. Reduce social welfare dependency and create economic independence for people with disabilities.

4. Examine the nature and extent of existing supports used by various providers to assist people with disabilities to progress to employment or other opportunities.

5. Analyse and benchmark the outcomes of the pilot against previous approaches.

The findings and an evaluation of the project being completed will critically inform any further development by the Department with regard to activation for people with disabilities.

5.4. Implementation of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Expenditure Review

The BTEA is a second chance education scheme administered by this Department designed to assist unemployed people, lone parents and other disadvantaged groups who are being held back in their search for employment by a lack of qualifications. The primary objective of the scheme is to remove the barriers to participation in second and third level education faced by people in receipt of long-term unemployment and other payments, thereby providing an incentive to them to improve their employment prospects.

There are two strands to the scheme, one at second level and one at third level. The Third Level Allowance was established as a separate stand alone scheme with effect from September 1996. The Second Level Allowance Scheme was established on a similar basis in April 1997. Both schemes were merged into a unified BTEA Scheme in January 1998.

A Review of the BTEA scheme was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and published in September 2005. The review has now moved to the implementation phase.

An inter departmental steering committee of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Department of Education and Science, Department of Finance and FAS has been set up to progress the implementation of the review.

Terms of reference for the committee are as follows:

- Implement the recommendations of the BTEA Expenditure Review contained in the September 2005 report.
- Explore the policy recommendations in the BTEA Expenditure Review; explore the administrative and operational requirements and I.T. supports, set out definitive eligibility criteria in a customer centric manner.
- Detail the administrative / operational requirements in order that a successful implementation of the recommendations contained in the review are achieved.
- Detail and have put in place the necessary IT supports/systems to ensure the implementation of the recommendations.

- Devise an internal and external information strategy to support implementation of the BTEA Expenditure Review providing clarity for implementers and customers of the BTEA Scheme.

- Arrange for working groups, as appropriate, to be put in place to progress the recommendations contained in the BTEA Expenditure Review.

The recommendations of the Working Group will shape the future of second chance education and income support for the target group of welfare dependent people. They will also structure the delivery of these services in a more cohesive way, building on and developing the 'joined-up' Government strategy, providing enhanced customer service and more effective outcomes. This approach to dealing with the needs of the target group will help ensure that those who are most in need of this assistance are directed to it through the NEAP referral system with the appropriate educational supports provided by the Department of Education & Science and a standard rate of income support being provided by DSFA (see table 5.4).

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Facilitate participation in education by social welfare customers of working age and specifically people with disabilities who are most distant from the labour market in order to enhance their employability and assist them in accessing sustainable employment'	Establish a Working Group comprising representatives from the relevant agencies to oversee the integration of VTOS income support provision back into DSFA income support.	Group established September 2005. Integration of VTOS recommendation to be completed by 2008.
	Revise scheme to facilitate participation in education by social welfare customers of working age that are most distant from the labour market.	Complete revision and introduce scheme extension by September 2006
	Implement the recommendation that the Department of Education & Science (and its Agencies) should provide all educational supports while the Department of Social & Family Affairs should provide income at the rate of the primary payment,	Implementation completed by September 2008 for second level option and September 2009 for third level option. Department Social & Family Affairs & Department Education and Science.
	The NEAP process should be enhanced, where an education option is considered to be most appropriate in the context of second chance or further education, referral to the BTEA should be made.	First phase completed by September 2006. Further phases for completion 2007 and 2008.
	Implement recommendation that the VEC become the main access route for the target group in applying for second chance education in the further education sector	Complete implementation by September 2008. DFSA & DES

5.5. Development of Employment and Activation support

Having regard to the medium term development of employment and activation supports for persons with disabilities (i.e. 2006/2009) a series of initiatives are planned. These can be regarded as an intermediate position before the introduction of the significant Social & Economic Participation Programme as outlined in section 5.6.

Additionally the Department is committed to working in close co-operation with the Department of Health and Children and the Enterprise, Trade and Employment to progress this particular agenda. Details of this cross Departmental co-operation are detailed more comprehensively in section 6 of the plan. The Department's specific proposals are scheduled in table 5.5.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Ensure that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities participating in the labour force or availing of training or educational opportunities	Co-ordination of the removal of disincentives across schemes e.g. tailoring income limits for receipt of HSE secondary payments with Disability Allowance	Proposals made and discentive effects addressed 2006/2009. Analysis of trends in poverty, unemployment and inactivity traps.
	Implement revised Disability Allowance earnings disregard	Implement measure by June 2006. Monitor impact 2007 and participation rates of person availing of revised disregard
	Increase carers benefit and employment retention period duration to 2 years	Implement measures by June 2006.
Engage meaningfully with persons of working age, particularly marginalised groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other relevant agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training and education or development opportunities	Increase employment threshold for carers from 10 to 15 hours	Implement measure by June 2006
	Revise and update Memorandum of Understanding and Framework for Cooperation between Social Welfare Services and FÁS	Memorandum to be revised. Completed by December 2006

continued...		
<p>Ensure that our schemes and services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitates their full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming principle of the equality agenda.</p>	<p>Administration of the employment and activation supports (i.e. BTWA, BTEA, income disregards and exemptions schemes)</p>	<p>Analysis of participation rates for persons with disabilities within these schemes during the period 2007/2009</p>
	<p>Review findings and evaluation of the Midlands Employment and Participation pilot project</p>	<p>Evaluation completed by September 2006</p>
	<p>Projects to increase labour market participation of certain DB customers consolidated and expanded.</p>	<p>Completion of projects and evaluation of outcomes by end 2007</p>
	<p>Ensure that the policy relating to the automatic restoration of benefits and allowances for persons engaged in employment and activation is publicised and comprehended.</p>	<p>Publicity initiatives undertaken. Completed by 2007</p>
<p>Ensure that the rules for entitlement to Disability and Carers payments are appropriate to the circumstances of claimants, are easy to understand and are applied in a fair and consistent manner</p>	<p>Review the contingency basis of disability schemes and put forward any proposals for change arising.</p>	<p>Proposals brought forward 2006/2009.</p>
	<p>Develop proposals for simplification of aspects of the means test.</p>	<p>Proposals brought forward in Social Welfare Acts 2006/2009.</p>
	<p>Ensure that means-testing rules are consistent with activation and support for work policies.</p>	<p>Number of rules reviewed and revised. Social Welfare Acts 2006/2009.</p>
	<p>Undertake transfer of functions from HSE</p>	<p>Integration and simplification of payments and supports 2008/2009.</p>

5.6. Development of a Social & Economic Participation Programme

DSFA recognises that many of its customers could participate more fully in society and some could become more self-sufficient if they were provided with supports that address the financial and non-financial barriers to participation that they face.

An increased focus on activation measures is consistent with thinking elsewhere, for example as set out in NESC Report 113, the Developmental Welfare State. There is growing appreciation of the merits of a life-cycle approach linked to activation measures e.g. treating all people of working age in a similar way, whether they present as unemployed, lone parents, people with a disability or in some other category. This puts less emphasis on contingencies and more on activation – facilitating progression regardless of the circumstances that led the person to require income maintenance.

Accordingly, the Department is committed to the implementation of a Social and Economic Participation Programme. The objective of the programme is to promote participation and social inclusion primarily through activation measures aimed at people of working age.

While the programme will be aimed at people of working age, the expected outcomes will not lie exclusively in labour market activity. Given the levels of social exclusion experienced by certain recipient cohorts, outcomes such as enhanced quality of life, educational advancement, increased social and foundation skills are equally important and may in certain instances provide a

stepping stone to potential labour market engagement. The objective of the programme for people with disabilities is to promote participation and social inclusion, primarily through activation measures aimed at people of working age applying for or in receipt of both short term disability payments, such as Disability Benefit, and long term payments such as Disability Allowance and Invalidity Pension.

The proposed approach is necessarily complex and represents a major challenge for the Department. It will require substantial organisational changes and commitment of the necessary resources. Given the scale of change required particularly in DSFA but in other organisations also, it is envisaged that the programme would be implemented on a small, manageable scale at first so that the programme could be tested and developed as needed.

This system involves a more intensive engagement and case management of people with disabilities or illness payments. The primary focus is on the customer and at the first point of engagement with the Department of Social and Family Affairs (i.e. claim application). This customer centric approach provides a route for customers into the world of education, training or employment or other related activities.

The activation programme is a generic one that can be modified or applied to people of working age who are in receipt of income support and who have some capacity for further progression or activation (see FIG 1). For people with disabilities the programme is not singularly predicated on labour market engagement but also recognises that other

forms of activation such as further education, developing life skills are equally important social inclusion outcomes.

The primary objectives of the programme are to:

1. Identify a clear framework whereby people of working age are not passively paid income support without some exploration of their employment or other potential. The model provides a bridging mechanism between the income support system, the labour market and alternative social inclusion systems. There is an absence of this bridging mechanism in the context of certain working age income support schemes;
2. Provide a co-ordinated and integrated approach to the activation of people of working age rather than strictly through a categorisation of their income support contingency.
3. Provide for a systematic identification of the employment, educational or life skills potential for income support recipients. This will be achieved through appropriate profiling and the consolidation of previous information on interventions, allied to capacity assessment. This process will identify recipients for whom activation can be meaningfully achieved.
4. Establish clear boundaries between, as well as provide a more co-ordinated and systematic process of referral to, other statutory agencies and voluntary service providers, who have responsibility for and funding provision for the employment, training, and foundation skills services.

5. Ensure that the appropriate supports to enable and sustain participation are provided and co-ordinated on a multi agency basis.
6. Provide a consistent measurement of the outcomes for people who were activated or progressed, both in terms of labour market activity but also in respect of other social inclusion measures.
7. Enable a more appropriate impact assessment on the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing programmes and policy instruments across a range of statutory provision.

5.6.1. Intervention

The programme proposes that systematic, early and active intervention should take place with all client groups of working age. Ideally this should be undertaken by this Department at claim application stage. Additionally the model also has capacity to embrace people already engaged in activation (e.g. BTWA, BTEA, Disability payment Exemptions and Income Disregards). This would contrast with the current practice where, with the exception of unemployment payments, the provision of income support has been passively made without recognition that many people availing of income support may have some capacity for further progression.

The timing of such interventions would be predicated on certain attributes and following the necessary profiling or segmentation of customers. The first part of the process would be to proactively advise the customer that activation opportunities exist and that a systematic process of engagement is available.

5.6.2 Segmentation

Following a claim application the segmentation of customers of working age would occur. Ultimately, this would require an initial level of customer profiling at claim application stage. Typically the profile would include age, employment history, and geographical location etc, previous intervention history. It would also decide at what point interventions should occur.

In the case of Disability Schemes, the existing Medical Review and Assessment procedures would still be used primarily to establish an underlying entitlement to a disability income support. It would, however, also provide an assessment of occupational capacity or ability and activation potential.

It is recognised that many people with disabilities may not ever be in a position to engage in employment related activities because of the profundity of their disability. Accordingly, a more differentiated approach is required which enables activation to be directed at people with disabilities who are in a position to participate, or who expressly indicate that they would consider participating.

5.6.3. Intermediation

Following the assessment of the customer's employment or other activation potential at the previous "segmentation" stage, the "intermediation" stage would form the basis for further referral to the agency most appropriately placed to meet the needs of the customer involved. A number of configurations could occur:

- Based on the profiling no activation potential is evident and payment of income support remains the primary focus
- Direct referral to the relevant service provider, such as FÁS without interview
- Referral to DSFA facilitator for interview on assessment of needs or activation options
- Referral FAS or other agency for interview and further assessment of needs/options
- Referral to specialist services where appropriate

Based on these referrals/ interviews, activation would occur where appropriate and with the needs of the customer being more appropriately and immediately addressed. Specifically, the role of the Department would be that of intermediary with the customer and the agencies or service providers involved in the process, largely through the DSFA Facilitation Service. The DSFA role would be to complement, not to supplant, services provided by other agencies.

5.6.4. Supports

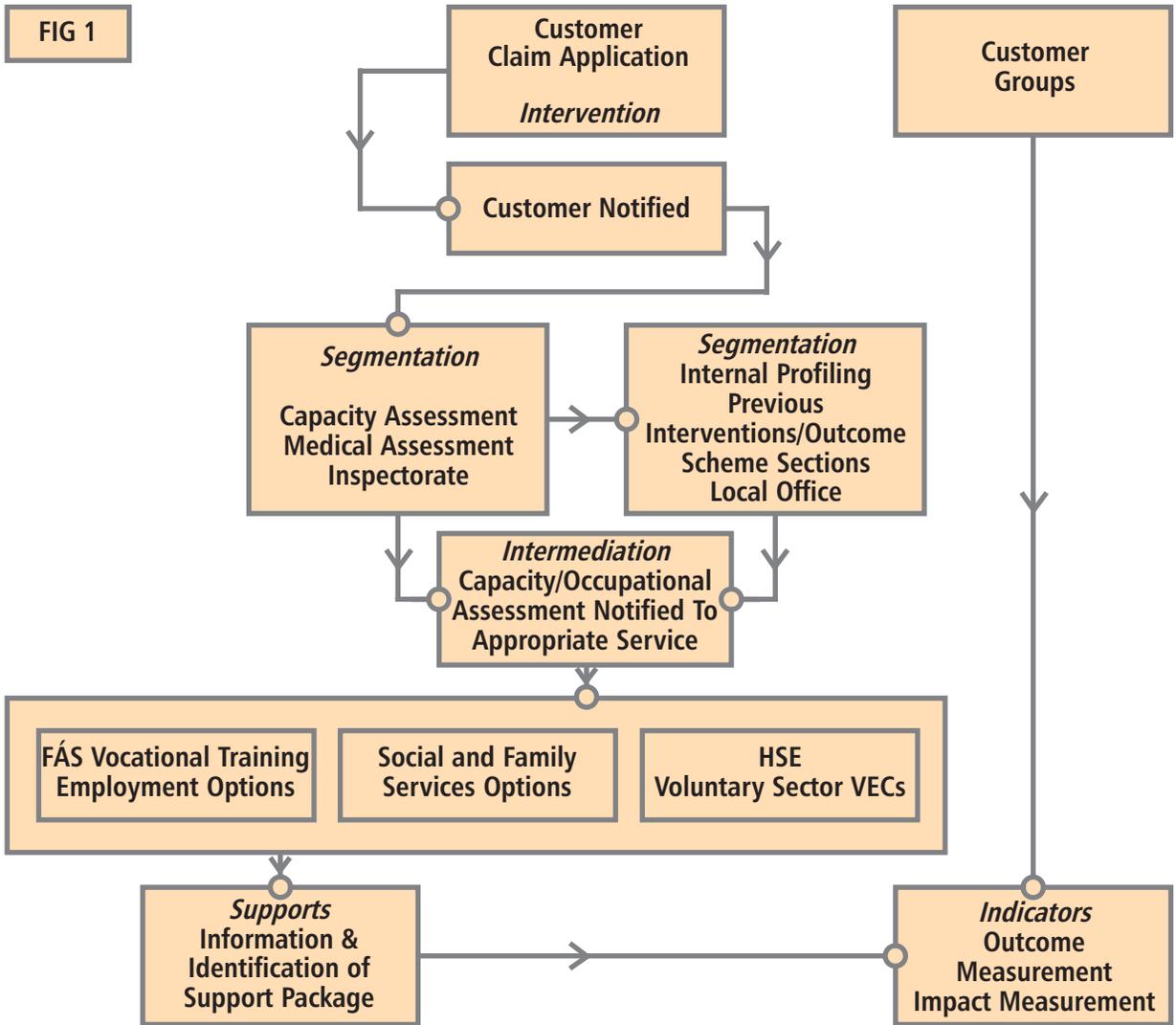
A critical part of the process would be the identification of employment training and other supports to inform the customer how activation options can be sustained and supported. This would include guarantees around the restoration of benefits, if required.

Where activation occurs, this would be supplemented with the relevant support packages comprising of the relevant employment, training, occupational supports that exist or new ones introduced. Similarly information needs could be met as part of this process. These information and support needs can be met, depending of the nature of the activation, either centrally through back office support, or through a localised response.

5.6.5. Outcome Monitoring

The final element of the process is to establish the outcome for the individual while also considering the impact of the activation mechanism undertaken. Over time, this will provide a relatively comprehensive profile of customers of working age who avail of income support. It will allow for an individual customer's activation history to be tracked across income support schemes, rather than on a scheme by scheme or contingency basis. This has implications in terms of better control and more systematic outcome measurement. In addition it will allow for the inclusion of more appropriate outcome measures rather than a strict concentration on labour market placement as the primary focus.

At a macro level, the Department would ultimately assume an important role in the measurement of labour market and social inclusion outcomes specifically in relation to its own customers. That role would be vital in terms of assessing the impact and efficacy of a variety of social inclusion and labour market interventions in reducing dependency on social welfare. The activation programme would provide a consistent measurement of the outcomes for people who were activated, both in terms of labour market activity but also in respect of other social inclusion measures. The programme would enable a more appropriate impact assessment on the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing programmes and policy instruments across a range of statutory provision in relation to DSFA customers.



6. Inter-Departmental Co-Operation

6.1 Introduction

Section 33(2) of the Disability Act, 2005, requires that in the preparation of its Sectoral Plan, appropriate co-operation between the Minister for Social and Family Affairs and the Ministers for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and for Health and Children in relation to the development and co-ordination of services provided for persons with disabilities is undertaken.

Effective cross-departmental co-operation is critical for the achievement of many of the goals identified both in the Department's own Statement of Strategy and within this Sectoral Plan. In some cases, this Department will have the central co-ordinating role (e.g. the National Anti-Poverty Strategy) while in other cases the Department does not have the lead role but must necessarily co-operate with other Departments to ensure that overall cross-Departmental policies (such as the National Disability Strategy) are delivered.

The Department, in developing its Sectoral Plan, has had particular regard to the commitments in the Programme for Government and recent Partnership Agreement '*Towards 2016*' to ensure that all state agencies prioritise integrated work in areas of significant disadvantage and that public activity supports the development of social capital, particularly on a local community level.

6.2 Existing Inter Agency Co-operation

Within the existing service delivery agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding and Framework for Co-operation between the Social Welfare Services and FÁS, acknowledges the close liaison and co-operation at central, regional and local levels. The Memorandum commits to working closely together to harmonise our endeavours and to increase the effectiveness of our services. Within this agreement, there is a specific protocol relating to persons with disabilities, reflecting the importance of information flows and the role of the social welfare system in providing incentives for people to access vocational training and employment services provided through FÁS. The Memorandum for Understanding is currently being updated and will reflect the actions agreed in cross-departmental consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and with FÁS.

Another recent example of inter-agency co-operation is the Midlands Pilot Project, conducted during 2005, which involved this Department working with FÁS and the Health Services Executive in undertaking preliminary research into the employment and training support needs of those in receipt of Disability Allowance aged between 16 and 25 years in four Midland counties. This research involved a series of one-to-one consultations with this target group of recipients of Disability Allowance, involving all three organisations. The evaluation process of this pilot project is almost completed. It will inform the

development of policy for future multi-agency co-operation on activation measures and follow-up services as envisaged in the proposals for a Social and Economic Participation programme outlined in section 5.6 of the Plan.

6.3. Inter-Departmental Co-operation

Having regard to linkages between the education and income support systems a series of initiatives between this Department and the Department of Education and Science have been agreed. An inter-departmental steering committee of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Department of Education and Science, Department of Finance and FÁS has been set up to progress the implementation of the Back To Education Review. Section 5.4. of this plan comprehensively outlines the joint programme with the Department of Education and Science for the implementation of this Review.

A further important development, in the context of inter-agency co-operation results from the Government decision on the transfer of income maintenance functions from the Department of Health and Children/Health Services Executive to this Department (which includes a number of disability-related schemes). An inter-departmental working group has now been established to progress the implementation of this transfer. The Plan also refers to the review of Supplementary Welfare Allowance (and rent supplements) and actions arising from this and the Rental Accommodation

scheme which will be progressed with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Ensuring that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities seeking, accepting or improving employment is a key objective of the social welfare system and the co-ordination of the removal of disincentives across schemes also requires inter-departmental action. This would include, for example, addressing the issue of income limits for medical card eligibility and secondary payments currently administered by the Health Services Executive (e.g. mobility allowance) or ensuring that employment incentive measures in social welfare schemes have a positive participation rate in training and employment programmes provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and FÁS.

As part of the preparation for the publication of this sectoral plan, this Department has met with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Health and Children to discuss the issues of mutual and strategic concern in relation to service provision for people with disabilities. In the interest of best reflecting the commitment to co-operation, a protocol has been agreed with each Department as outlined below. These protocols identify relevant key objectives drawn from this Department's Statement of Strategy in relation to people with disabilities and actions which require cross-departmental co-operation. The actions agreed in these protocols will be similarly incorporated into the sectoral plans of the

Department of Health and Children and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

A monitoring mechanism has been agreed with each of the other Departments for these protocols by means of regular bilateral meetings to assess progress which will, in turn, feed into the internal and external monitoring processes for the overall sectoral plan.

6.4. Protocol for Inter-Departmental Co-operation Department of Health and Children

Part 3 of the Disability Act, 2005, provides for the preparation of sectoral plans by six Departments, including the Minister for Social and Family Affairs and the Minister for Health and Children, and for the appropriate co-operation between the Ministers in relation to the development and co-ordination of services for persons with disabilities.

The mission of the Department of Social and Family Affairs is *'to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and related services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families'*.

The main functions of the Department which include the provision of services to people with disabilities are:

- To formulate appropriate social protection policies;

- To administer and manage the delivery of statutory and non-statutory social and family schemes and services; and
- To work with other Departments and agencies in the delivery of Government priorities

The mission of the Department of Health and Children is *'to help enhance the health and well-being of all by:*

- Supporting the delivery of high quality, equitable and efficient health and personal social services;
- Leading change in the health system
- Putting health at the centre of public policy and
- Promoting a "whole of Government approach" to health and social gain

The management and delivery of health and personal social services is the responsibility of the Health Services Executive under the Health Act 2004.

This protocol recognises the commitment of both Departments to work closely together to harmonise their endeavours and to increase the effectiveness of the delivery of services for people with disabilities.

Outlined in table 6.4 are the key objectives, actions and timeframes which the two Departments will work together to achieve to progress the commitments within their sectoral plans.

Table 6.4		
Objective	Actions	Timeframes
To develop income and related supports for people with disabilities in order to ensure that they have adequate, secure and sustainable income	Implement the Government decision on the transfer of income maintenance functions of the Department of Health and Children/Health Services Executive to the Department of Social and Family Affairs	Commenced May 2006 with establishment of an inter-departmental working group. Initial report to Government by October 2006. Transfer process 2006-09.
	Extension of eligibility for payment of full Disability	Completed by end 2007
To ensure that income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities participating in the labour force or availing of training or educational opportunities	Allowance to all those in residential care	Ongoing
	Co-ordination of the removal of disincentives across schemes	To commence 2006
	Review of eligibility criteria for assessment of medical card	Completed by quarter 3 2006
	Retention of HSE allowances for persons availing of DA earnings disregard.	Following the development of a needs assessment system provided for under Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005
To ensure that supports to Carers are efficient and effective and are adaptable to their needs in a changing care environment	Consideration of issues around the cost of disability Implementation of the recommendations of the working group on long-term care	Ongoing

6.5. Protocol for Inter-Departmental Co-operation, Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Part 3 of the Disability Act, 2005, provides for the preparation of sectoral plans by six Departments, including the Minister for Social and Family Affairs and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and for the appropriate co-operation between the Ministers in relation to the development and co-ordination of services for persons with disabilities.

The mission of the Department of Social and Family Affairs is *to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and related services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families.*

The main functions of the Department which include the provision of services to people with disabilities are:

- To formulate appropriate social protection policies;
- To administer and manage the delivery of statutory and non-statutory social and family schemes and services; and
- To work with other Departments and agencies in the delivery of Government priorities

The mission of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is *to work for Government and the people to increase quality employment and national competitiveness.*

The main functions of the Department in developing policy for people with disabilities are:

- to develop the skills of people with disabilities to enable them to access employment and to achieve vocational progression
- to stimulate awareness amongst employers of the contribution which people with disabilities can make to their businesses and encouraging them to recruit more people with disabilities
- to provide specific employment supports for people with disabilities and for employers

This protocol recognises the commitment of both Departments to work closely together to harmonise their endeavours and to increase the effectiveness of the delivery of services for people with disabilities.

In the context of progressing the commitments within the Sectoral Plans, table 6.5 below outlines the objectives, actions and timeframes which the two Departments will work together to achieve.

Table 6.5		
Objective	Actions	Timeframes
Effectively engage with persons of working age, particularly marginalised groups and provide services directly and in co-operation with other agencies to encourage and support these people in taking up relevant work, training and educational or development opportunities	In the context of the Memorandum of Understanding and Framework for Co-operation between Social Welfare Services and FÁS, develop the level of engagement between the organisations at local, regional and national level in a way that will best facilitate access to work and progression in employment for people with disabilities.	Complete by end 2006
	Informed by the results of the Midlands Pilot Programme for Disability Allowance recipients aged 16-25; improve the level of multi-agency co-operation in implementing employment on activation measures and follow-up interventions.	Evaluation of Midlands Pilot Project completed Sep 2006 Develop and implement co-operation on activation strategy 2006-09
	Develop the potential of the DSFA medical review and assessment process to assess occupational capacity and activation potential and establish a referral process to FÁS as a service provider	Develop in line with DSFA model of Economic and Social Participation 2007-13
Ensure that services which support people with disabilities do so in a manner which facilitate full participation in society and which meets the mainstreaming agenda...	Examine the scope of the social welfare system to play a more active role in employment retention strategies	Develop within the revised memorandum for Understanding and Framework for Co-operation with FÁS
	Develop a comprehensive information strategy, using DSFA contact and information points to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) increase customer awareness of the availability of FÁS employment and training opportunities (b) increase employer awareness of grants and subsidies for the employment of people with disabilities 	2006-09

continued...		
Ensure income supports and associated benefits do not create financial barriers to people with disabilities seeking accepting or improving employment	Examine the effects of employment incentive measures in social welfare schemes on the participation rates in training and employment programmes and further develop policies as required to increase both participation and progression rates	2006-09
	Evaluate effects of change to withdrawal rate of Disability Allowance to participation rates and to the take-up of the Wage Subsidy scheme. Amend policy as required arising from this analysis to increase employment incentive measures	2006-09
Ensure that payments and supports for Carers are efficient and effective and are adaptable to their needs in a changing care environment	Develop training initiatives, as priorities permit, which facilitate carers in carrying out their caring role and in re-entering the labour market when these responsibilities have ceased	2006-09
	Develop and monitor the Carer's Benefit and Carer's Leave schemes	2006-09

7. Compliance with Sections 25 to 28 Disability Act

7.1. Introduction

The Disability Act 2005 contains a number of specific provisions relating to the accessibility of services for persons with disabilities. Underpinning and supplementary to these legislative provisions is a Code of Practice on Accessibility of Services prescribed in S.I.163 of 2006. The Code relates, directly, to the matters outlined in sections 26, 27 and 28 of the Disability Act, 2005 and certain measures which can be implemented to ensure and enhance compliance. The particular provisions contained within the provisions of the Disability Act include:

- That all public buildings used by the Department and agencies under its aegis are in compliance with appropriate standards of access not later 2015. (Section 25)
- Public bodies are required, where practicable and appropriate, to ensure that their services are accessible for people with disabilities by providing integrated access. That means ensuring, as far as practicable, that people with disabilities can access public services along with other citizens. (Section 26)
- Public bodies are required to ensure that the goods or services that they purchase are accessible, unless it would not be practicable or justifiable on cost grounds or would result in an unreasonable delay. (Section 27)
- Communications by a public body to a person with a hearing or visual impairment must, as far as practicable, be provided in an accessible format, following a request. Information provided electronically must, as far as practicable, be compatible with adaptive technology. Published information, relevant to persons with intellectual disabilities, must be made available in easy to read formats. (Section 28)

In addressing the particular compliance requirements of the Act, the Department has undertaken a series of direct actions to firstly ensure compliance but additionally and where possible ensure that accessibility to its services is enhanced over and above the measures suggested in the Code of Practice on Accessibility. The following measures were undertaken:

1. An analysis of the extent to which buildings, used by the Department's customers and staff are fully accessible, has been completed. Again where such deficits exist, these will be addressed in a Programme of works to be undertaken in conjunction with the OPW.
2. A position audit of the Department's existing customer service delivery has been conducted. The audit has identified gaps in service delivery and allows for these to be comprehensively addressed in the context of the Sectoral Plan's implementation.
3. A review of the procurement procedures has been conducted to ensure goods and services procured are accessible to persons with disabilities.
4. A review of the existing information services and formats has been completed, to assess whether they are adequately accessible to all persons with disabilities and in the appropriate medium.

7.2. Accessibility to Departmental Offices (Section 25)

The Department is committed in its Customer Action Plan to provide clean, accessible public offices which ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and facilitate access for people with disabilities.

The Department has 143 buildings throughout the country. Of these, 129 are open to the public. At the moment, the number of offices which are fully accessible for people with disabilities is 103.

The process of upgrading the Department's office network will continue with a particular emphasis on providing privacy facilities and access for people with disabilities. This is being systematically undertaken, with all the necessary technical and financial resources, as part of its Building and Refurbishment programme. In addition, the Department is taking opportunities to provide alternative locations where refurbishment is neither practical nor appropriate

All office upgrades or refurbishment are undertaken in conjunction with the Office of Public Works, who ensure that compliance with standards regarding access and disability is adhered as required under the provisions of the Disability Act. The Department is committed to an accelerated programme of accessibility for staff and members of the public with disabilities well in advance of the statutory deadline of 2015.

In addition, to its office network the Department has 68 Branch Offices which are operated by Branch Managers who are employed on a contract basis. Under the

terms of the contract they are required to provide suitable accommodation.

As part of the Sectoral Plan process the Department met with representatives of the Branch Managers to emphasise the requirements and provisions of the Act. Additionally, the Department has existing agreement with the Branch Managers in relation to their role and their remuneration. Included in this agreement is the requirement that specific criteria be met in terms of the standard of accommodation provided by the Branch Manager. In this regard, they are required to make the premises fully accessible to people with disabilities, within a reasonable period.

The Department is working towards the objective of having all offices accessible to people with disabilities. In this connection, a refurbishment programme is ongoing in local offices. Access issues are addressed as part of these projects.

The Department has also recently undertaken a review of medical certification, reporting, and assessment in respect of illness, disability and caring income support schemes. The objective is to ensure that the appropriate arrangements are put in place having regard to changes that have occurred since the current system was established. The review has assessed and evaluated all aspects of the Medical Assessment system in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, economy and customer service with reference to current national, EU and international best practice.

Around 60 locations are used by DSFA for the conduct of medical examinations by Medical Assessors, and these include Departmental

premises, Government offices and other facilities. Arising from the review, a full and detailed analysis of requirements for Medical Review Assessment Service centres/work locations is to be carried out, with a view to maximising efficiency and ensuring that the customer experience is optimised.

Regarding the offices for Investigative Staff, the Department is moving these offices to ground floor accommodation as opportunities present themselves. In the interim, special arrangements are made to visit people with disabilities where they have problems accessing offices. Table 7.2.1 sets out the current position in relation to accessibility of the Department's offices.

Type of Office	Total Number	Number Inaccessible	Status
Social Welfare Local Office	58	5	4 new offices planned
Social Welfare Investigative Staff	63	19	3 new offices planned
Signing Centre	3	nil	
Headquarter Offices	15	2	
Regional Offices	3	nil	
Appeals Cork	1	nil	
Total	143	26	

In addition to ongoing programme of upgrading accommodation, the Office of Public Works administers a Disabled Access Programme. Under this programme DSFA has as part of the sectoral plan process secured a firm commitment from OPW to conduct a programme of 'access audits' on buildings occupied by the Dept. This programme will be based on a priority list determined by DSFA. OPW have also given an undertaking to carry out necessary alterations/modifications based on the results of these audits, to bring buildings up to the required standard. Established best practice will be taken as the determining standard and will equate to a

standard equivalent to that envisaged in the British standard 2003.

In conclusion, the ultimate objective of the Department is to ensure that all its offices used both by customers and by staff with disabilities are fully accessible well in advance of the deadline contained in the Disability Act. As far as possible this process is being accelerated for the duration of the published plan (i.e. 2006/2009). The precise actions, schedule of audits and performance indicators are contained in table 7.2.2 hereunder.

Table 7.2.2		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measurement
Ensure that all offices are fully accessible to persons with disabilities and staff members with disabilities	Schedule of Access Audits for all DSFA offices for 2006	Production of 2006 schedule
	Audits to be carried out in blocks of 4/5 offices during 2006/7	Number of audits carried out 2006/2007
	Audit reports to be examined to decide priority of works to be completed	Number of priority works completed 2006/2009
	Schedule of works to be agreed	Agreement on schedule of works finalised December 2006
	If building is totally unsuitable decision to be made to close building and re-locate staff source new premises exempt building under S 25 (4)c	Number of buildings identified for closure 2006/2009
	List of buildings due for closure to be submitted to Minister for exemption order under S 25 (4)a/b	Number of exemptions orders applied for
	Continue to prioritise remedial works to be carried out on needs basis for staff members with disabilities	Number of remedial works undertaken 2006/2009 Number of staff needs assessments undertaken
	Implement the recommendations of MRAS report, including a full and detailed analysis of requirements for Medical Review Assessment Service centres/work locations	Analysis of MRAS centre completed 2006/2007. Number of medical assessment centres upgraded

7.3 Accessibility of Services (Section 26)

The philosophy of providing for people with disabilities in the mainstream services of a Department is set out in section 26 of the Disability Act 2005 and is established government policy. To make this policy effective, the Department is committed to building its capacity to address disability both at a policy level and in terms of the delivery of services.

At the strategic level, this Sectoral Plan incorporates disability into the overall departmental strategy and policies not only in terms of social welfare payments and Comhairle but across the whole range of the Department's work. This includes the objective of facilitating and improving access to education, training and labour market programmes for people with disabilities and strategic service development. These issues are articulated in further detail in Sections 4 and 5 of the plan.

In the context of its existing service delivery functions a comprehensive position audit of the Department's existing customer service delivery was completed (*see appendix 1*). This audit identified deficits within existing service delivery system. The configuration of audit was informed by the Code of Practice on Accessibility and as well as looking at organisations who have track records of best practice in disability service provision.

Resulting from this audit a series of actions will be undertaken to address any gaps in service delivery for people with disabilities.

7.4. Accessibility of Goods or Services Supplied (Section 27)

The Department and agencies under its aegis are committed to ensuring that the goods or services that they purchase are accessible to people with disabilities. In this regard and coinciding with the preparation of its Sectoral the Department has completed a comprehensive review of its Procurement Governance and procedures.

This review has presented the Department with an opportunity to reflect the provisions of section 27 of the Disability Act in its future procurement activity. In general, the services procured by the Department of Social & Family Affairs are not directly related to the Department's provision and delivery of its service. However, where this is the case, the revised procurement process will ensure that such services are compatible with the needs of persons with disabilities.

In making arrangements, including contracts or other service level agreements, for the delivery of income support payments and other services, the Department will have full regard to the requirements of section 27 that such services are accessible to people with disabilities.

The procurement of Information and Communications Technology represents a significant element of goods and services procured by the Department. The importance of accessibility to such technologies both for staff with disabilities and customers with disabilities is fully recognised and has been considered in the context of ICT procurement.

The particular activities which the Department is committed to undertaking for the duration of this Sectoral Plan are detailed in table 7.4 below.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicators/ Outcome Measure
Ensure that goods or services that are supplied to the Department are accessible to people with disabilities	Complete review of procurement DSFA procedures and guidelines.	Review completed by July 2006
	All Requests for tenders to reflect section 27 provisions.	Number of RFT's issued 2006/2009
Ditto	Review accessibility of payments facilities to reflect section 27 provisions	Revision of contractual arrangements completed during 2007/2009
Ensure that ICT goods or services that are supplied to the Department are accessible to staff with disabilities	Establish a formal relationship with the National Disability Authority to ensure that software procured or developed in-house is accessible or at least compatible with Adaptive Technology	Relationship established by end 2006
	Provide hardware and software from a ring-fenced budget according to needs to staff with disabilities as required.	Budget allocated and amount expenditure on assistive technology for staff with disabilities. Completed each year during 2006/2009
	Develop internal software in line with agreed guidelines including internal user testing as appropriate	Compliance with agreed guidelines
	Research new technologies to benefit staff/customers with disabilities	Number of new technologies researched or adopted
	Procure hardware and software in line with recommended guidelines from the NDA	Number of ICT procurements made that are compliant with guidelines

7.5. Accessibility of Information Services (Section 28)

The Disability Act refers to Accessibility of information by public bodies that provide information to the general public, including access to information for persons with hearing impairment and/or with visual impairment. Under section 28 there is a requirement to ensure that all electronic communications are accessible to persons availing of adaptive technology. A further requirement is that all information published which is directly relevant to persons with an intellectual disability is made available in clear language which can be understood by the person.

The underlying objective of the Department's information policy is to ensure that all citizens are made aware of their entitlements and that they are kept informed of changes and improvements in schemes and services as they occur. The provision of information in a clear and accessible manner is an essential element in the effective delivery of social welfare services. The needs of people with disabilities are an important priority in enhancing access to information. The Department has articulated its commitment to providing accurate, timely and comprehensive information in its Information Strategy, Customer Action Plan and Customer Charter.

The Department produces a comprehensive range of information leaflets and booklets covering each social welfare payment or scheme. These information leaflets are available in a wide range of outlets across

the country, including all Social Welfare Local Offices, Citizen Information Centres, Post Offices etc. Information is also available on the Department's website, www.welfare.ie and on the Oasis website, www.oasis.gov.ie

The Department's email address, info@welfare.ie, is accessible for all customers. Those with hearing or visual impairments who have social welfare queries can avail of this service.

Claim forms, explanatory leaflets and information booklets can be ordered directly at any time, from our LoCall leaflet line at 1890 20 23 25. Leaflets allow people to study the information at their own pace.

Information Services operate a phone service where people can get information on all our services. The telephone is a convenient, quick and confidential means of getting advice.

Information Services for people with disabilities

Information Services

- Provide written information such as forms and leaflets in a format accessible for people with specific needs, such as Braille, audio tape or large print on request.
- Organize a sign language facilitator to be present at meetings, presentations etc, if requested.

- Work in partnership with National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) to implement a 'Plain English' policy to ensure that all forms and leaflets are produced in a simple, clear, easy to read format and that it is accessible to people with different levels of literacy ability. Staff of the division have recently undergone training on 'Plain English' guidelines by a NALA representative.
- Publish all information on the Department's website (*www.welfare.ie*) which has been developed to an XHTML, AAA standard. This enables visually impaired users to use special screen reading software to have the text read out by their computers. The site has been optimised for custom settings i.e. text can be re-sized on screen to suit customers needs. Furthermore, a strategic review of the website is underway. Enhancing compliance with, and maintaining the highest levels of access standards for people with disabilities will form a key part of the review. This review will be carried out by the end of July 2006.
- On-going promotion to Information Officers throughout the country about the needs of people with disabilities and the availability of information in alternative formats, i.e. Braille, audio tape, large print and of the availability of sign language facilitators on request.

Plans for this year include

- briefing for some 130 Information Officers from around the country at the annual Information Officers seminar (May 2006)
- notification to all scheme areas of the availability of these services and
- an article about facilities for people with disabilities in the Social Affairs magazine which is distributed to some 4,300 staff.

- Liaising with NALA on an ongoing basis to ensure the continued development of the 'Plain English' guidelines.

- Introducing a texting facility for customers. Work is underway to examine the possibility of introducing this facility. The service will allow our customers to contact the Information Services by text to request information booklets, leaflets, or with a specific social welfare request.

- Supporting Comhairle in the implementation of its strategic plan to improve access to information for people with disabilities including
 - the Programme of Support for Community and Voluntary Sector Advocacy
 - the introduction of the proposed Personal Advocacy Service and

7.5.1. Priority initiatives to support access for people with disabilities

These initiatives include

- Disability awareness training for all staff of Information Services Division. A deafness awareness course is being held by the National Association of the Deaf in May and members of staff will attend the course.

- the development of a scheme relating to the provision of Sign Language Interpretation Services.
- Progression of the Citizens Information Bill in line with the proposals for Comhairle to introduce the Personal Advocacy Service.
- Information Services will work with the Health Services Executive and the Mental Health Commission to examine how services can be improved when dealing with customers with mental health problems.
- Consideration will also be given to ways in which people in receipt of long term disability payments may be targeted to ensure they are aware of and taking up their full entitlements.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Deliver (and support the delivery of) a quality, comprehensive and up-to-date information service for customers with Disabilities and ensure compliance with section 28 of Disability Act.	Provision of service through appropriate mediums	Complete by end 2006
	Citizens Information Bill enacted	Enactment by 2006
	Ensure that our providing information services staff are fully, trained and supported in delivering our information services for disability services	Training plan specifically designed for the needs of Information Officers and provided. Completed by Quarter two, 2006. Number of staff trained.
	Implement a 'Plain English' policy to ensure that all forms and leaflets are produced in a simple, clear, easy to read format and that it is accessible to people with different levels of literacy ability.	Policy to be implemented in 2006 and refined over 2007/2009. Numbers of forms revised.
	Ensure that customers with disabilities and carers are made aware of their entitlements	Number of publicity initiatives undertaken and completed during period 2006/2009.

continued...		
	<p>Undertake a Strategic review of the Department's website carried out including upgrading and promoting usage of the Department's website.</p> <p>Continue to liaise with Comhairle, the national information agency under the aegis of the Department, and support the implementation of its Strategic Plan.</p>	<p>Review complete by July 2006. Number of recommendations implemented by 2007.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Programme of Support for Community and Voluntary Sector Advocacy. • The introduction of the proposed Personal Advocacy Service and • The development of a scheme relating to the provision of Sign Language Interpretation Services.

8. Disability Workplace Management: Employment of People with Disabilities

8.1. Part V of the Disability Act 2005

Part V of the Act, sections 46 to 50 refers to public service employment of people with disabilities, including quotas, monitoring compliance with the Act, as well as positive action measures to enhance employment of people with disabilities and the development of a Code of Practice.

Part 5 came into operation on 31 December 2005 and established a statutory basis for the 3% target for the employment of persons with disabilities by public bodies (other than the Defence Forces, Garda and prison officers). It requires Departments to establish monitoring committees to monitor compliance by the public bodies under its remit. The Department of Finance retains responsibility for monitoring compliance in relation to the Civil Service. The National Disability Authority is given an overall monitoring role and can direct bodies to make measures to ensure compliance.

8.2. Staff with Disabilities: Current Statistics

Each year, the Department reports to the Department of Finance on the number of staff with disabilities employed in the Department.

In relation to the agencies under the aegis of the Department the position in the future will be that this information will be sent to the National Disability Authority (NDA).

Table 8.2: Current position

Organisation or public body	Percentage of staff with a disability
Department Social and Family Affairs	3.3%
Comhairle	3.9%
Combat Poverty	3.1%
Family Services Agency	2.0%
Pensions Board	0
Office of Pensions Ombudsman	0

8.3. Departmental Commitments

The Department is committed to creating a positive working environment for all employees. Due to the specific and varied needs of staff with disabilities it has placed a particular emphasis on providing these employees with the supports they require. A High-Level Goal in the Department's Strategy Statement, 2005-2007, "Security with Opportunity", is:

"To develop an effective, adaptable and capable organisation and a culture of pride, innovation and performance with a high level of involvement by people at all levels and a climate which fosters personal and career development."

The Department's Human Resources Strategy 2003-2005, Partnership, Development and Performance", included a specific commitment to progress initiatives aimed at addressing issues affecting staff with disabilities. (A new three-year Human Resources Strategy is in development).

Significant progress has been made on these commitments, as set out below:

- A Disability Liaison Officer was appointed and as part of her role she has communicated the benefits of staff disclosing that they have a disability.
- Internal service providers liaise and co-operate with each other in the provision of services for staff with disabilities.
- A Needs Assessment structure for new staff or staff who acquire a disability is in operation.
- A review of Assistive Technology (AT) requirements for visually impaired staff members and hearing impaired staff members has been carried out. Equipment has been purchased and training provided. Staff with disabilities are assigned as key user testers for future AT packages.
- A Disability Issues Monitoring Committee was established on foot of a Workplace Partnership Report on the needs of staff with disabilities.
- Disability Awareness Guidelines were developed and issued to all members of staff.
- Awareness raising initiatives for managers and staff in relation to diversity/disability have been developed and implemented.

- Links with a range of external disability organisations have been established.

These initiatives all form part of the Department's Action Plan under the "Sustaining Progress".

8.4. Consultation with Staff with Disabilities

In recent years, the Department has engaged in consultation with staff members with disabilities in order to help formulate the organisation's human resources policy on disability-related issues by improving our understanding of the nature and implications of disabilities in the workplace. This has enabled the Department to identify the main issues which affect staff with disabilities and particular needs which may arise. This identification of needs has afforded the Department the opportunity to address these requirements through the provision of services by the internal support areas to these staff with disabilities. The consultation with staff with disabilities has also provided valuable input to the Department's development of policies for its external customers with disabilities.

8.5. Recruitment and Selection of Staff with Disabilities

Some people with disabilities who are employed in the Department were recruited by way of competitions, conducted by the Public Appointments Service (PAS), which were specifically held for persons with disabilities. Others were appointed on the basis of their participation in open

competitions also conducted by PAS. The Department will continue to liaise with and enhance its good working relationship with PAS with the objective of ensuring best practice in the area of the recruitment/assignment of staff with disabilities

In relation to internal staff promotions and competitions, at application stage candidates are asked if they have any particular requirements, for example regarding physical access for attendance at interview. All interview boards are fully briefed and provided with guidelines on communication with people with disabilities and the provisions of employment equality legislation. Signers to assist staff with hearing impairments are also provided, where requested.

8.6. Departmental Initiatives

8.6.1. Disability Liaison Officer (DLO)

The DLO is based within the Personnel/HR function and has responsibility to promote the interests of staff with disabilities and co-ordinate the achievement of the Department's objective of ensuring a supportive working environment that meets the particular needs of these employees. Key elements of the role are:

- To promote the interests of staff with disabilities.
- To liaise and co-operate with internal and external service providers in ensuring specific needs are met.
- To communicate information and advice to staff and managers on disabilities issues
- To research best practice in other organisations

8.6.2. Disclosure of Disability

The Department's Personnel/HR function has encouraged self-disclosure of a disability via various channels, e.g. internal circulars and staff magazines. Primarily, this is done to identify any particular requirements of individuals, however experience has shown that this also adds to the corporate knowledge regarding disability issues, facilitating the development of effective departmental policies for staff with disabilities.

8.6.3. Needs Assessment Process

A needs assessment procedure for staff with disabilities, whether they are new employees, those who have acquired a disability and those moving due to transfer or promotion within the Department, has been implemented. This process was designed through consultation with staff with disabilities in the Department. The procedure involves on-site visits by the Disability Liaison Officer, Health & Safety Officer and a representative from Information Services Division in which the individual's specific needs e.g. physical access, IT and HR requirements are discussed with the staff member and their line manager. In relation to staff affected by the decentralisation programme, the needs assessment process will have an important part to play - whether they are moving within the Department or to other Departments.

For staff members who have acquired a disability and also staff returning from long-term sick leave, the Department has adopted a phased return to work with the individual attending work on reduced hours initially and gradually building up to a full working day at the end of an agreed period.

8.6.4. Assistive Technology

A priority within the Department's Information Systems Division (ISD) has been the provision of various types of Assistive Technology to meet the needs of staff with disabilities. The first step in achieving this was for ISD to engage in research and build up a level of knowledge and expertise of the availability and functionality of Assistive Technology products.

In order to facilitate the deployment of Assistive Technology, a structure has been established which ensures the fast tracking of requests for specialised equipment. A ring-fenced budget has been designated solely for the procurement and research of Assistive Technology. Links have been established with external disability organisations so that staff can be assessed for the type of equipment best suited to their needs.

New in-house applications are being developed to be fully accessible to all. This is being achieved by liaising with expert consultancy groups and by including staff with a range of disabilities in the design of processes and user testing of processes. The new applications must adhere to at least Priority 1 guidelines as published by the National Disability Authority.

Further research is being undertaken into the technology available to those with physical and cognitive disabilities. Consultation with organisations such as Enable Ireland and the Central Remedial Clinic is in progress.

8.6.5. Workplace Partnership Group

Under the Department's Workplace Partnership process a Disability Issues Sub Group was established in 2003 to examine, in some detail, and report on issues affecting staff with disabilities in the Department. The group was representative of staff with different natures of disabilities and also included staff from relevant support areas.

Following on from the production of the report, "An Enabling Environment", a Disabilities Issues Monitoring Committee was established to monitor progress on the recommendations contained in the report which had been accepted by the Management Committee and Partnership Steering Committee.

The role of the Committee whose membership included staff with disabilities was to carry out regular assessments and monitor progress of recommendations made and to meet with relevant support areas to discuss the implementation of these.

8.6.6. Disability Awareness Guidelines

Disability Awareness Guidelines were produced and circulated to all members of staff in 2004 and again in 2005. These guidelines were developed in consultation with members of staff with disabilities, having regard to good practice internationally and particularly emphasise effective communication with people with disabilities. The content of the guidelines includes material which staff with disabilities themselves considered particularly important.

8.6.7. The Role of the Manager

All staff have a role to play in supporting colleagues with disabilities, in particular line managers. The Department produced a Support for Managers Pack providing information supports that are required for a line manager to carry out their role effectively. Included in this pack is advice to line managers on their role in supporting staff with disabilities and a list of practical steps which should be taken in order for them to do so.

8.6.8. Training and Development

Staff Development Unit (SDU) is the central training function in the Department. In addition to this area, there are training units based in IS Division, Decentralised and Regional Offices and our General Benefits area. As a matter of policy SDU makes no distinctions when offering training courses. Formal training requests by all staff are submitted on the agreed PMDS training and development form. Course invitations include a section which asks for any specific requirements or needs. These needs are subsequently facilitated. Additional expertise in delivering training is provided, when required, by CMOD, NCBI, Enable Ireland and the National Council for the Deaf. Apart from the formal courses there are a variety of other training delivery options for staff to choose from including self-learning, intranet, coaching, CDs, books and videos.

The Department's Training & Development Strategy 2005-2008 contains a specific commitment in relation to staff with disabilities as follows; "Ensure that all training programmes are accessible to

staff with disabilities, including physical location, course presentation and content". This commitment will be measured by evidence of training programmes being held at accessible locations, with availability of sign language interpretation and loop systems and accessible course materials (e.g. large print, Braille) and the use of assistive technology where appropriate.

8.6.9. Flexible Working Arrangements

The Department has a range of flexible working arrangements available to all staff including; flextime, job sharing, etc. These arrangements may be of benefit to some staff with disabilities in terms of workplace accommodation and employment retention.

8.7. Best Practice (O2 Ability Awards)

The O2 Ability Awards, created and designed by The Aisling Foundation, are the first Irish business awards for best practice in the employment of people with disabilities. The Awards examines all aspects of employment and recognises progressive attitudes and examples of best practice in organisations in relation to employment of people with disabilities.

The Department won awards in the following three categories in the 2006 O2 Ability Awards;

Leadership

Learning, Development and Progression Retention and Well Being

8.8. Central Developments for the Civil Service

8.8.1. DLO Network

An inter-departmental Disability Liaison Officers (DLO) network was established on a formal basis in spring 2005 and has been meeting regularly since then. The objective of the network is to allow DLOs to share knowledge and best practice in relation to the employment of people with disabilities, and to ensure that DLOs are kept up to date on legal requirements under equality legislation. The research report mentioned below identified the DLOs as vital to the implementation of a refocused disability policy, through their role of support and information provision to staff with disabilities and to managers to whom someone with a disability is being assigned. This Department plays an active role in the DLO Network.

8.8.2. Research Report

A research report entitled "Employment & Career Progression of People with a Disability in the Irish Civil Service" was undertaken by Goodbody Economic Consultants on behalf of the Department of Finance. The report proposed a new approach to the implementation of Government policy on the employment of people with disabilities. Department of Finance Circular 18/04, sets out the main conclusions and recommendations of the research report. The circular highlights the key areas where action will be taken to implement the recommendations. These include the development of the Code of Practice, appointment of a Disability Advisory Officer (as set out below) enhanced monitoring and recording arrangements

and new approaches to recruitment and placement of staff with disabilities.

8.8.3. Disability Advisory Officer

The Department of Finance has appointed a full-time Disability Advisory Officer, who is based in its Equality Unit. Their role is to build up a body of expertise which can be drawn on by Departments and Disability Liaison Officers. This Department liaises on a regular basis with the Disability Advisory Officer.

8.8.4. Code of Practice

A new Code of Practice on the Employment of People with Disabilities in the Civil Service is currently being drafted by the Department of Finance. It will include an emphasis on the need to support the career progression of staff with disabilities and policies as to how this can be achieved.

8.8.5. Recruitment Competitions

The Department of Finance are in discussions with the Public Appointments Service (PAS) in relation to the recruitment of people with disabilities into the Civil Service with a view to running appropriate competitions.

8.8.6. Sick Leave

The regulations that govern sick leave within the Civil Service can be of particular importance to staff with disabilities. The Department of Finance Circular 17/03 amended the provisions on clearance of candidates for establishment and promotion. It clarified the procedures to be followed where a staff member with a disability is being considered for establishment or promotion. The Department's Attendance Management

Policy includes specific reference to the needs of staff with disabilities in this regard.

resources aspects of the Disability Act, 2005.

8.9. Commitments and Actions 2006/2008 Sectoral Plan

A matrix of objectives, actions and related performance indicators are detailed in tables 1 to 5 below and represent the main areas for progression with regard to staff with disabilities. The commitments and actions also reflect the Department's commitment to fully meet the provisions of the human

The work programme is set out under the following headings;

- Departmental Strategies and Plans
- Staff Supports
- Raising Awareness
- Recruitment
- Employment/Personal and Career Progression

8.10. Departmental strategies and policies

Table 8.10

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator(s)
Ensure that Disability Workplace management is an integral feature of the Department's HR Strategy, Policies and Practice	Include a commitment to and related actions with regard to supporting staff with disabilities in the Department's Human Resources Strategy 2006-2008.	Inclusion in Strategy and subsequent Progress Reports on Strategy
	Further develop the role of the Department's Disability Liaison Officer and provide them with additional training and support.	Development of role. Attendance at training programmes.
	Hold regular meetings of the Disability Monitoring Committee, and communicate developments to all staff.	Regular meetings held. Outputs communicated to staff using variety of methods.
	Consider whether the Department should participate in further accreditation schemes which incorporate disabilities issues with the aim of receiving external, expert evaluation and guidance regarding best practice in this area.	Examination of options. If appropriate, participation in accreditation scheme(s)

8.11. Recruitment

Table 8.11		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator(s)
Ensure that the recruitment of persons with disabilities is developed with the Public Appointments Service	Continue to work with the Public Appointments Service and other relevant organisations regarding best practice in the area of the recruitment and assignment of staff with disabilities	Liaison with PAS. Development of enhanced policies and procedures.
	Participate in the 2006 Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme which provides work placements for graduates with disabilities Explore other suitable recruitment/work experience arrangements	Participation in programme in Q2/Q3 2006. Examination of other such arrangements and, if appropriate, participation in same.
	Liaise with PAS in relation to the open competition for people with disabilities for EO/AO grades in the Civil Service	Liaison with PAS. Communication to DSFA staff about the competition

8.12. Staff supports

Table 8.12		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator(s)
Ensure that all staff with disabilities or who acquire a disability are fully supported in the workplace and can realise their potential	Operate the Needs Assessment Process for staff with disabilities, for new entrants, existing staff on transfer/promotion and staff who acquire a disability. Seek opportunities to enhance the process.	Operation of process and introduction of any appropriate enhancements.
	Continue the policy (voluntary and confidential) of encouraging self-disclosure of a disability by staff	Regular communication of disclosure policy and monitoring of responses.
	Identify and progress the Assistive Technology (AT) requirements of staff with disabilities, including the delivery of the necessary training	Implementation of required AT supports and delivery of training.
	Update and enhance information on disability issues and the supports (including the Disability Liaison Officer) available for staff with disabilities, via the Department's Human Resources intranet and other sources.	Production and circulation of information and other supports using variety of channels and methods.
	Provide additional advice & information to managers in order to assist them in their crucial role in supporting staff with disabilities	Production and circulation of information and other supports

8.13. Raising awareness

Table 8.13		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator(s)
Ensure that Disability Awareness is raised and enhanced across the Human Resource function, within DSFA and agencies.	Enhance the Department's Disability Awareness Guidelines, including additional material on mental and emotional health issues.	Circulation of enhanced guidelines to staff in Quarter 3 2006 and at regular intervals thereafter.
	Issue guidelines to all staff members annually	
	Continue to liaise with external disability organisations to enhance the Department's internal expertise and awareness of all issues relating to staff with disabilities	Continuing liaison and co-operation. Availing of opportunities for additional linkages.
	Provide training for staff based in Personnel/HR on the "reasonable accommodation" aspects of equality legislation, this in turn will be reflected in training and additional awareness raising measures for managers.	Delivery of training. Number of staff trained and completed by 2007
	Provide training and awareness raising measures for managers of staff with disabilities - to include senior management. Ensure that disability awareness is incorporated in a number of departmental training programmes.	Delivery of training and awareness raising measures. Completed by end 2007

8.14. Employment and Career Progression

Table 8.14

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator(s)
Ensure compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act	Operate a monitoring committee to monitor compliance of Part 5 of the Disability Act, 2005 - involving representatives from the Department and the agencies under its remit.	Committee meetings held. Annual reports produced (first in Q2 2007).
	Implement the Code of Practice for the employment of people with disabilities in the Civil Service (currently being drafted by Department of Finance)	Implementation of Code (once published). Implementation completed by quarter 2 2007.
Systematically develop personal and career progression opportunities for staff with disabilities	<p>Personal and Career Progression</p> <p>Carry out analysis of the staff with disabilities to gain additional understanding of their particular needs regarding personal and career progression</p> <p>Consider the findings of the research and consultation processes conducted to date and engage in additional research/consultation in order to identify the main issues for staff with disabilities and measures to address these.</p> <p>Encourage staff mobility/work rotation practices for staff with disabilities with the aim of them gaining experience in a variety of areas of work.</p> <p>Encourage staff with disabilities to participate in promotion competitions (both internal and external) and provide the necessary supports (prior to and during the competitions)</p>	<p>Analysis carried out in Q4 2006.</p> <p>Research and consultation carried out Q4 2006 and Q1 2007.</p> <p>Communications to manager and staff and monitoring of such activity.</p> <p>Communication to staff and their managers on this issue. Production and circulation of support material. Monitoring of participation rates.</p>

9. Role of Comhairle

9.1. Introduction

Comhairle was established under the Comhairle Act 2000 and comes under the aegis of the Department. Its core function is to support the provision of and, where appropriate provide directly to the public, independent information, advice and advocacy services so as to ensure that individuals have access to accurate, comprehensive and clear information relating to social services and are referred to the relevant services. It has a statutory commitment to assist and support people, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social and civil services. It's Strategic Plan 2006-2009 sets out the strategy for achieving these aims.

The demand for Comhairle and Citizen Information Service (CIS) services is substantial. In 2005, there were 2.5 million individual users of the OASIS website, 88,000 callers to the Citizen Information Phone Services and 734,000 queries made to the Citizen Information Centres. Statistics on the number of people with disabilities using the services are not kept. However a survey of CIS services carried out on a biennial basis indicates that in 2005 11% of customers had a disability.

In common with the Department, the Disability Act 2005 confers responsibilities on Comhairle in relation to the services it delivers. Specific measures have been undertaken to address these obligations to meet the needs of people with disabilities under the Disability Act and the Sectoral

Plan of the Department. In addition the new Social Partnership Agreement supports the development of information and advocacy services for people with Disabilities

9.2. Citizens Information Bill, 2006

It is proposed to amend the functions of the Board, via a Citizens Information Bill, so as to confer enhanced and additional functions on it involving, inter alia, the introduction of a personal advocacy service specifically aimed at people with disabilities. The Citizens Information Bill, in conjunction with the Disability Act, 2005 and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 is a key element of the Government's legislative programme for improving services for people with disabilities. All three are intended to convey clearly the Government's intention to have an effective combination of legislation, policies, institutions and services in place to support and reinforce equal access for people with disabilities. It is the intention that the Bill will be enacted during 2006.

9.3. Advocacy Services

People with disabilities experience many barriers in accessing information and as a result can be unaware of their entitlements. The Strategic Plan 2006-2009 identifies objectives for the development of advocacy services for people with disabilities (see table 9.3.). In Citizens Information Services, advocacy entails helping people to obtain their entitlements and negotiate complex information. Most Information Officers offer

basic advocacy to clients and they may also assist clients with appeals in the areas of social welfare, equality and employment.

In preparation for its new remit to provide advocacy services to meet the needs of people with disabilities the report "*Developing an Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities*" was commissioned by Comhairle. The report recommends that a three stranded service be developed:

1. A Personal Advocacy Service run directly by Comhairle.
2. A Programme of support for community and voluntary sector advocacy.
3. A Community Visitors Programme for people in long-stay residential centres.

The report suggests that the community and voluntary sector advocacy would begin first in order to develop a range of advocacy services in advance of the Personal Advocacy Service.

In 2005 the development of Strand 2 began by funding 13 community and voluntary projects across a range of disability types, geographical areas, disability representative organisations and service providers. Together with the 3 projects initiated in 2004 (and two projects funded under the Dormant Accounts grants) eighteen advocacy projects are now providing advocacy for people with disabilities. These projects are distributed across eight counties and the lead organisations include both service providers, partnerships between different service providers, community groups and organisations of people with disabilities.

Projects also cover the range of disability types.

Comhairle is providing support, training and back-up to these projects. To underpin these new advocacy services with strong values and principles, the Comhairle Advocacy Guidelines were developed and published in 2005. These Guidelines set out standards for projects and advocates and point to the competencies required to deliver a high quality service.

Further funding is to be allocated in 2006 for advocacy projects. Expressions of Interest have been sought and information briefings held with respondents. 70 Expressions of Interest have been received and subsequently 46 full applications were made. It is anticipated that a further 13 projects will be selected and funded in 2006. As in 2005 the overall focus in the projects will be on services for people with disabilities who are vulnerable. Particular target groups will be:

1. people living in the community seeking a social service;
2. people in, or wishing to move from, long-term residential services and
3. young people completing their education.

The emphasis of this initiative will be on a representative advocacy service model: i.e. providing a trained advocate to assist vulnerable individuals with disabilities in addressing their needs and difficulties. Representative advocacy has been targeted because it has been least developed in Ireland and will provide Comhairle with the

most relevant experience in developing its own service. However, the importance of self-advocacy is also recognised and it is proposed to make some funding available to fund independent development in the self-advocacy area.

Providing effective advocacy services relies on having well-trained advocacy workers. This need is being addressed in several ways including providing advocacy modules in the FETAC Accredited Information Providers Programme and single-day courses on request. The Higher Certificate in Humanities

in Advocacy Studies is a distance learning course accredited at HETAC Level 6 which has been developed by Comhairle, the Sligo Institute of Technology and the Equality Authority and is now in its third year. The first students will graduate with a Higher Certificate in October 2006.

The activities included in the *Board's Strategy Statement 2006-2009* are set out in Table 9.3. Develop and facilitate advocacy services, particularly for people with disabilities and influence policy developments and administrative systems and procedures.

Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Provide and promote advocacy services, particularly for people with disabilities, consistent with our role and remit.	Develop an approach to the promotion of advocacy services to the public.	Advocacy services provided through CIC.
	Support the provision of quality advocacy services in the mainstream information context through Citizens Information Services.	Advocacy resource programme in place.
	Enhance the capacity of information providers in CIS to provide quality advocacy services, including training in advocacy skills and supporting an advocacy resource programme.	Advocacy training days/events provided.
	Plan and establish the Personal Advocacy Service.	Personal Advocacy Service in place.
	Support the establishment of advocacy services for people with disabilities through the community and voluntary sector.	Advocacy projects and initiatives supported.
		Approach to the development of Community Visitors programme agreed and initiated.
	Advocacy awareness campaigns conducted.	

continued...		
	Engage in research and planning for the establishment of the Community Visitors programme.	Strategic approach to the promotion of advocacy services to the public identified and implemented.
	Support advocacy training to underpin the development of quality advocacy services.	<i>(All actions to be implemented and completed by 2009)</i>
	Support other advocacy initiatives including self-advocacy in the community and voluntary sector in line with the aim of empowering people, in particular people with disabilities, to secure their rights and entitlements and to actively participate in society	

9.4. Interpretative Services for Deaf People

Within the outline Sectoral plan of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Comhairle was asked to prepare a scheme relating to the provision of Sign Language Interpretation Services (SLI).

It is estimated that there are approximately 5,000 deaf sign language users in Ireland, serviced by fewer than 50 freelance interpreters, some of whom are part time and most of whom are located in the east of the country. This is considered to be less than adequate. A new service model would aim to enable the State to effectively deliver on its responsibility to make public services accessible to the Deaf community through the provision of Sign Language interpretation.

In preparing for this, consultants were commissioned to undertake a study which would review existing services and service requirements, research international best practice and also advise as to how an Interpretative Service might best be established, with proposals on structure, set up and funding.

A review process was undertaken which involved:

- Desk research and analysis of SLI services in Ireland
- Targeted research on international best practice in SLI
- Wide Consultation with a range of stakeholders through interview,

discussions and workshops, which included the deaf community, representative bodies, service providers and Government Departments.

- Detailed consultation with Comhairle.

The report proposes the establishment of structures mandated and accountable to Comhairle that would facilitate access to Interpretative Services for deaf people throughout the country. Exploring and exploiting new technologies should be part of the drive to increase access to services. The report and the recommendations of the Board are being considered by the Minister of Social and Family Affairs.

Briefing sessions have taken place with a number of key stakeholders to present the outcome of the study and the proposed service model as well as discuss the implementation of the report. It is planned to engage in briefing sessions with a number of key stakeholders to present the outcome of the study and the proposed service model and to discuss the implementation of the report.

9.5. Compliance with Sections 25 to 28 of the Disability Act

Section 25

All of the Board's buildings are compliant with the requirements as specified under Code M of current building requirements and Comhairle is committed to exceeding the basic requirements of the Code and providing leading edge solutions in terms of accessibility. As an example of this

commitment to be a leader in terms of accessibility it is determined to pursue the Excellence through Accessibility Award for all of its premises. This will be undertaken on a phased basis commencing in 2006.

A programme of works is in train which is constantly seeking to bring all the Board's properties to the highest possible standards of accessibility both for staff and members of the public. A facilities and Health and Safety officer who is professionally qualified oversees this work and provides advice in relation to accessibility for Comhairle and Citizen Information Service premises.

Section 26

The provision of information is Comhairle's core business. One of the Board's strategic priorities is to "promote accessibility to information, advice and advocacy services and heighten public awareness of social and civil services" The objectives and actions proposed in the Strategic Plan 2006-2009 are set out in Table 9.5.

Comhairle sources, produces and integrates information on social services. It supports the provision of information to the public utilising a three-channel approach to service delivery, i.e. web-based on Oasis (Citizens Information online, www.oasis.gov.ie), by phone through the Citizens Information Phone Service, (a LoCall service available 9 am to 9 pm weekdays), and through face-to-face service delivery provided by the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services. A new integrated information website called "*citizen information.ie*" is being launched in Autumn 2006. This

website will incorporate the OASIS and Citizen Information databases. The Board also works in partnership with voluntary and statutory organisations generally in the provision of information. A range of strategies have been implemented to address barriers to access caused by lack of awareness of services, access to technology and physical barriers. These include:

Awareness of Citizen Information

Raising general awareness of the three channels of information delivery, i.e. web-based, Phone and face-to-face is a key priority for Comhairle and a multi-media campaign has been in place since 2005, with promotional activities taking place at national and local level.

In conjunction with this Comhairle, both directly and through the network of Citizens Information Services establishes partnerships and develops project initiatives with relevant organisations to overcome barriers and provide information to people with disabilities.

Web accessibility

Oasis, www.oasis.gov.ie, was designed from its inception to be accessible to all users, including those with disabilities who may use assistive technology software. In a survey of eGovernment websites in the UK and Ireland which was published in September 2005, Oasis was ranked 4th overall for user experience, and was adjudged the best website in the UK and Ireland for its accessibility features. The Comhairle website www.comhairle.ie carries all Comhairle publications in HTML.

Assist Ireland

Assist Ireland, www.assistireland.ie, is a comprehensive online resource database developed by Comhairle with disability organizations. This website contains relevant information on assistive technology products, suppliers and resources related to daily living and disability in Ireland. The website has won the Accessible eGovernment Award at the Irish eGovernment Awards 2005.

Citizens Information Centres - Physical Accessibility

In relation to physical accessibility, Comhairle allocates an annual budget line to improve access to Citizens Information Services which provide a face-to-face service to the public. All main centres are now accessible. Ongoing improvements are made every year with the aim of making all CIC premises fully accessible. All main services have inductive loop systems for the hard of hearing

Outreach services are established by CIS's to improve accessibility for people with disabilities who may have difficulties getting to a Citizens Information Centre. CIS's outreach to a number of disability organisations, hospitals, and mental health centres. In addition, a wheelchair accessible mobile information unit is available for use by Citizens Information Services to address the needs of those who have limited geographical access to Citizens Information Centres.

Section 27

Guidelines and a code of practice on procurement have been produced and endorsed by the Board. These guidelines are

adopted from the Department of Finance's 'Green Book', and subsequent updates, on Public Procurement and are currently being updated to reflect changes such as the increases in EU procurement thresholds. These guidelines and code of practice on procurement take account of the requirements of Section 27 of the Disability Act and, where required, appropriate assessments of need are carried out in order to establish specific requirements.

Section 28

Communication channels suitable for people with disabilities have been developed. All information publications are produced in various formats and are available in these formats through CIC's nationwide. They include large-print versions, Braille, tape and publications on disc. Access to Irish Sign Language interpretive services is also available.

The Oasis and Assist Ireland websites have been designed to meet the highest standards for usability and accessibility. The Comhairle website provides organisational information about Comhairle, as well as electronic copies of all its publications.

The Citizen Information Phone Service delivers information through seven different access channels; the Lo-call phone number, text messaging, email, live online adviser (available 9 am to 6 pm), videophone with Irish Sign Language interpretive service (by appointment only), fax and letter.

The development of this text messaging channel emerged from CIPS discussions with members of the Deaf Community who identified text messaging as being the preferred method of communication for many people who are deaf or have a severe hearing difficulty. In 2006 it is intended to promote the text service more widely. Callers to the service also receive information by post, primarily in the form of printed information. Information on mini disk, audio-tape, in large print and in Braille was also made available.

A new guide; *Access to Information for All: Guidelines on removing barriers and improving access to information for everyone* was prepared by Dr Jane Pillinger and published by Comhairle in 2005. This guide is aimed at organisations and individuals who are providing information to the public - whether they are informing an older person about their free travel pass, a foreign national on their employment rights, or a disabled person trying to book a holiday. It provides a checklist on how to make information accessible, under headings such as: Information in Alternative Formats, Telephone Services, Online Information, Face-to-Face Information and Making Offices Physically Accessible.

The principal activities planned under the *Strategic Plan 2006-2009* are set out in table 9.5. The strategic priority is to enhance accessibility to information, advice and advocacy services with particular reference to vulnerable groups and those in need.

Table 9.5		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measure
Support equal access to information and social and civil services for all	Continue to develop the Assist Ireland website and telephone help line in partnership with other agencies.	
	Progress Comhairle's approach to the further development of a sign language interpretation service for people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment.	Accessible sign language service in place. Guidelines on accessible information adopted by relevant bodies.
	Promote guidelines on accessible information to relevant statutory, community and voluntary bodies.	Partnerships with relevant agencies and bodies to promote equality of access to social and civil services undertaken.
	Consolidate and enhance partnerships with relevant agencies and bodies including cross-border bodies, to promote equality of access to social and civil services.	<i>(All actions to be implemented and completed by 2009)</i>
	Undertake ongoing evaluations of the impact of our accessibility policies on target groups and the general public.	
Develop pro-active initiatives to address the information, advice and advocacy needs of vulnerable and socially excluded groups, including people with disability, older people and foreign nationals.	Continue to develop information, advice and advocacy services to ensure accessibility to customers of different cultures and levels of literacy using a variety of methods of communication.	Customer satisfaction surveys Population awareness surveys of the three Citizens Information channels.
	Identify, facilitate and co-ordinate service delivery initiatives in co-operation with voluntary and statutory bodies that particularly focus	Information resources available in increasing range of languages.

continued...		
	<p>on marginalised and hard-to-reach target groups reflecting changing information and advocacy needs.</p> <p>Develop proactive initiatives relating to information, advice and advocacy to target groups who are socially excluded, including people with disabilities, older people and foreign national communities, recognising the impact of the digital divide.</p> <p>Support relevant organisations to develop their information, advice and advocacy services for excluded groups.</p> <p>Promote the use of Citizens Information Online, especially with marginalised and hard-to-reach groups.</p>	<p>Information, advice and advocacy initiatives targeted at specific marginalised groups undertaken.</p> <p><i>(All actions to be implemented and completed by 2009)</i></p>

9.6. Employment of People with Disabilities

The Board’s disability policy states that “In recognition of one of its core values Comhairle supports the public sector aim of employing people with disabilities. Comhairle takes active measures to facilitate the recruitment of people with disabilities. This includes working with voluntary, Governmental and non-governmental groups”. Over 90 people are currently employed and the Government’s 3% employment disability target has been exceeded by the Board.

Vacancies that arise are advertised through the national press, on the Board’s website,

the Citizens Information Database and on the Community Exchange website. Venues selected for interviewing are accessible, candidates are asked in advance of interviews if they have any special needs and audio loops are provided.

A number of initiatives to facilitate employees who have a disability have been put in place. These include:

- All offices are fully accessible and all external venues used to host events are checked to ensure their accessibility also.

- Installation of screen magnification software on PCs where required.
- Adjustments to workstations (e.g. provision of specialist telephone headsets, customised office furniture etc)
- Organisation of work regions to facilitate staff members with mobility issues.
- To improve accessibility, staff policy documents (example the Staff Resource Pack, personnel forms etc) can be accessed through the Board's Intranet.
- The Board has facilitated both the taking of special leave and the reduction of working hours to facilitate staff who felt they needed to adjust their work patterns due to an acquired disability.
- Where agreed between a staff member and their line manager a needs assessment will take place to identify and recommended measures.

Comhairle have been proactive in meeting its requirements to ensure accessibility and has put in place solutions which are innovative and have lead the way in terms of meeting assessed needs.

9.7. Compliance with other areas of the Disability Act

Section 5

Financial systems are in place that allow for the accounting of expenditure on the provision of the Disability Act as required

under Section 5 of the Act. These include specific budget heads to account for expenditure on:

- accessibility improvements to Citizens' Information Centres
- alternative formats of information publications
- the Assist Ireland website
- Cost of advocacy services to be provided under the Citizens Information Bill and Department of Social & Family Affairs Sectoral Plan.
- Cost of interpretative services for deaf people.

Specific additional costs incurred through the procurement of adaptive technology and equipment can also readily be tracked.

9.8. Organisational Disability Awareness

The Board recognises the importance of raising disability awareness among staff to ensure that people with disabilities receive the highest standards of customer service. Disability awareness training is an integral part of staff training programmes for Citizens Information Services. A training programme has been produced that delivers a range of training courses to information-providers in the community and voluntary sector, with a particular emphasis on Citizen Information Services. Disability awareness training and/or other courses with a focus on disability are frequently included. Citizen information services also provide their own disability awareness training for staff as required.

10. Departmental Agencies

10.1 Introduction

A number of agencies come under the aegis of the Department of Social & Family Affairs and include:

- Comhairle (see section 9)
- Combat Poverty Agency
- Family Support Agency
- Pensions Board
- Office of the Pensions Ombudsman
- Reach

Additionally, the Social Welfare Appeals Office is an independent office responsible for determining appeals against decisions on social welfare entitlements.

10.2. Compliance with Disability Act 2005

As part of the preparation of the plan, the Department met with senior managers of the agencies under its remit, to discuss the implications of the compliance requirements of the Disability Act 2005. A template was issued to each of the Department's agencies to audit compliance under the following headings:

- Expenditure: Section 5 requires the appropriate allocation of funds and appropriate reporting and accounting for any expenditure specifically related to the provision of the Disability Act;
- Public Buildings: Under Section 25 of the Disability Act all public buildings used by the Department and its agencies must be compliant not later than 2015;

- Access to Services: Under Section 26 public bodies are required, where practicable and appropriate, to ensure that their services are accessible to people with disabilities by providing integrated access so that people with disabilities can access public services along with other citizens. Sections 38 and 39 deal specifically with complaints whereby a public body fails to comply with the requirements of Sections 25 to 29 of the Act;

- Procurement: Under Section 27 public bodies are required to ensure that goods and services that they purchase are accessible to people with disabilities;

- Communication: Under Section 28, communications by a public body to a person with hearing or visual impairment must, as far as practicable, be provided in an accessible format, following a request. Information provided electronically must, as far as practicable, be compatible with adaptive technology. Published information, relevant to persons with intellectual disabilities, must be made available in easy to read formats;

- Public Service Employment: Sections 46 to 50 refer to public service employment of people with disabilities as well as positive action measures to enhance employment of people with disabilities.

In completing this audit, each agency is fully aware of its obligations under the Disability Act and the programme of actions required in improving or enhancing its

service provision for people with disabilities. The Department is fully satisfied that a high level of compliance already exists within the agencies under its aegis and that where any deficits occur procedures are being put in place to progressively address these.

10.2. Combat Poverty Agency

The agency has responsibilities in the area of advice to the Minister, research, action programmes and information relating to poverty in Ireland. Combat Poverty's 2005-7 Strategic Plan centres on three objectives - distribution of income and jobs, access to quality services, and local and regional responses to poverty. A fairer distribution of income and jobs is necessary for a poverty-free Ireland as are the provision of affordable and accessible services, such as health and education, and coordinated action at all levels and with particular groups at risk of poverty.

Through its main functions of policy advice, research, project support, innovation and evaluation, and public education, Combat Poverty seeks to develop and promote evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty. Under the recent NAPS /Inclusion Review process, Combat Poverty was centrally involved in a number of the sectoral consultations with a diverse range of groups including representatives of people with disability.

Through its in-house policies and practices, CPA seeks to reflect those same values of equality and inclusion which are the basis of their unique role as a state agency. The

Agency has joined the Excellence through Accessibility Award Scheme organized by the National Disability Authority with the initial assessment due to take place later in 2006. The Award Scheme assesses accessibility under three critical areas: customer services, buildings and environment and website and technology. Participation in this Award Scheme will be used on an ongoing basis by the agency to inform the current review of its 2004-6 Customer Service Action Plan and help develop targets for a new Action Plan.

It has been standard communications policy for some years of the Combat Poverty that multi-format publication of material is provided on a request basis to facilitate customer needs. Under a three yearly review of the agency's web site, accessibility standards are being reviewed during 2006 in line with current best practice.

Other initiatives include:

- OPEN (One Parent Exchange Network) has been awarded funding by Combat Poverty as part of the Building Healthy Communities Initiative for a three-year mental health project to address related issues of stigmatization and isolation among lone parents.. This project will be evaluated in its final year (2007) to identify mainstreaming options.
- The Women Together Network is a national network set up by Schizophrenia Ireland for women with mental health issues. Supported by Combat Poverty under the 2005-7, '*Building Healthy Communities Initiative*', the network

seeks to support women to research the idea of a recovery pathway and also develop their personal recovery plans.

10.3. Family Support Agency

The agency is responsible for the provision of a family mediation service, the support, promotion and development of marriage and relationship counselling and other family supports, and the Family Community Resource programme. The Agency's responsibilities also include undertaking research, providing and disseminating information about parenting and family issues, and providing information to the Minister on matters relating to families. The Agency's main services, all of which are inclusive of people with disabilities, are as follows:-

- Core Funding of Family and Community Services Resource Centres.
- Grants to voluntary and community organisations providing marriage, relationship, child and bereavement counselling services and other family supports.
- A direct nationwide Family Mediation Service.
- Research into matters related to the Agency's functions or such other matters as the Minister may request.
- Information on matters related to the Agency's functions.

The Family Support Agency's first Strategic Plan, which was developed in consultation with its stakeholders, sets out five key Strategic Priorities for the Agency.

- Support and strengthen families through the delivery of high quality support services for families throughout the country.
- Foster a supportive community environment for families in partnership with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors.
- Contribute to the effectiveness of family policy and services by undertaking or commissioning research into matters related to the Agency's functions or such other matters as the Minister may request.
- Promote the Family Support Agency as a key provider of support services and related information for families in Ireland.
- Create an environment which recognises the value of Family Support Agency staff and supports their continuing development.

The culture and service of the Family Support Agency are shaped by a number of key values, including the following:

- Accessible Services - An open door to individuals and families in the community to accessible, needs-based support services for families.

- Strong Partnerships - Maintaining and building strong working partnerships with relevant Government Departments and Agencies, with the social partners and with voluntary and community organisations and networks supporting the family in Ireland.
- Inclusiveness - Support services for families recognising and respecting diversity.

10.3.1. Actions in relation to people with disabilities

Family Resource Centres are inclusive of everyone in the community in which they are based - this includes people with disabilities. The services provided by Family Resource Centres uphold the community development ethos and the principle of inclusiveness, both central to the Agency's values. The Special Support Agency, DESSA (Disability, Equality Specialist Support Agency), is contracted by the Family Support Agency to work with Family Resource Centres. In developing actions and ways of working to ensure the active involvement and inclusion of people with disabilities, in 2003, DESSA established a formalised working relationship with the Family Resource Centre National Forum. During 2004 and 2005, DESSA, in consultation with the Forum, carried out a research project to examine issues of disability and family support with Family Resource Centres. This research has assisted DESSA in identifying appropriate strategies in meeting the needs of people with disabilities, their families and carers.

Having regard to its services the FSA will build upon its existing service delivery and research programme and have specific regard to those services affecting families with family members with disabilities.

10.4. The Pensions Board

The Pension Board is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Pensions Act which concerns the security and development of occupational pensions and for the development of occupational pensions. In addition to the Board's regulatory and information functions, the Board has a role in advising the Minister on all matters relating to functions assigned to the Board under the Pensions Acts, and on matters relating to pensions generally.

The on-going work reviewing levels of coverage and adequacy by occupational and personal pension provision is underpinned by guiding principles which include the principle of inclusiveness, to ensure that there are no unintended exclusions.

The National Pensions Review, launched in January 2006, contains proposals designed to "deliver on the commitment to ensure an adequate retirement income for all" and is currently being considered by Government. The report reviewed agreed pension targets, reviewed current coverage and adequacy and considered options to sustain the State pension and to meet supplementary pension targets. It is available on the board's website (www.pensionsboard.ie). The Board has also commissioned a report on income continuance plans which was forwarded to

the Minister and which is available on the board's website. The Board is committed to continuing to ensure that the principle of inclusiveness guides our work over the period of the Plan.

10.5. The Office of the Pensions Ombudsman

The office principal function is to investigate complaints of injustice due to maladministration, disputes of fact or law, in occupational pension schemes. The Pensions Ombudsman is a statutory officer and exercises his functions independently. He reports to the Houses of the Oireachtas. The on-going work of the office and in the context of the people with disabilities is underpinned by guiding principles which include the principle of inclusiveness, to ensure that there are no unintended exclusions

10.6. The Reach Agency

Reports to the Department, has as its aims to radically improve the quality of service to personal and business customers of Government and to develop and deploy the Public Services Broker (PSB) to help agencies achieve that improvement. In particular, REACH is to develop and implement an integrated set of processes, systems and procedures to provide a standard means of access to public services, known as the Public Services Broker (PSB).

The development of integrated public service has a particular significance for persons with disabilities. In this regard, the future development of integrated public services will ensure that accessibility to such services prioritises the needs of people with disabilities

10.7. Monitoring and Review

The Department will co-ordinate and review the progress made by the agencies under its aegis in respect of this Sectoral Plan. Additionally, all agencies will detail in their annual reports and published strategies specific actions and initiatives undertaken in developing their services for people with disabilities.

11. Organisational Disability Awareness & Capacity Building

11.1. Introduction

The Department recognises that raising disability awareness and capacity building of expertise throughout the organisation and agencies under its remit, is fundamental to the successful implementation of this and subsequent Sectoral plans. In this regard, the Department proposes to undertake a series of activities and initiatives.

11.2. Mental Health Awareness

As at April 2006, there are 2,164 frontline staff working in the Department's Regional structure in the provision of customer services delivery across the nationwide local office, field services and facilitation networks.

The Regional Director's Office (RDO) provides ongoing support and direction to these staff to enable them perform their duties efficiently and effectively. As part of this remit, in consultation with staff and management, it regularly reviews the training available to ensure that new requirements which emerge within a changing work environment are matched by the timely delivery of appropriate training or information awareness sessions.

A number of submissions were received by the RDO for specific training for staff to increase their understanding of mental health issues in order to help equip them with the knowledge and skills required to deal more effectively with customers with mental Health issues. As a response to this identified training need, the RDO and Mental Health Ireland (MHI) is providing awareness sessions to frontline staff.

The objective of the course is to afford staff with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the issues associated with mental ill health and mental illness. This heightened awareness is aimed at assisting staff to engage and interact more meaningfully with customers with mental illness in the future. Similarly it will enable the Department to foster local contacts and networks with other agencies for the purposes of making appropriate referrals and providing an enhanced information service to customers.

In light of the preparation of the Sectoral Plan the RDO and MHI will continue to work in partnership towards the refinement of course content and structure. Modifications suggested during the evaluation were taken into account and have been incorporated as appropriate. The shared objective has been to design a generic programme which would be made more widely available to Regional staff on a nationwide basis. The course content which sets out to achieve the following:

- Raise awareness of the interrelationship between mental and physical health
- Create a greater understanding of what is meant by mental health, mental ill health and mental illness
- Increase knowledge of the nature and systems of the main forms of mental illness
- Help staff recognise when a customer is on medication and explore the appropriate responses

- Cover the main elements of the Mental Health Act 2001
- Provide details of the statutory mental health services and local voluntary mental health organisations
- Assist participants translate the theory into practice through group discussions on relevant work-related case studies

It is envisaged that approximately 400 frontline staff from various offices will attend these sessions in 2006.

11.3. Diversity Training

The Department's Staff Development Unit are co coordinating the roll out of a 'Diversity Awareness' training programme. The training has been developed to help participants relate to diversity as an individual, rather than an abstract concept and to help people understand diversity as a personal issue.

The content of the course includes defining diversity, exploring the dimensions of diversity, exploring culture and the dimensions of cultures. In 2006 approximately 200 will receive this training. The training programme will be rolled to further staff throughout 2007.

11.4. Disability Awareness Training

The other initiatives that will be undertaken include:

- A training needs analysis for Disability awareness will be undertaken for 2007

for frontline staff by the Department's Staff Development Unit

- Disability awareness training for all staff of Information Services Division is being scheduled for 2006. Similarly all staff assigned to the administration of the Disability Allowance, Invalidity pension and Carer's Allowance benefits schemes will receive advanced disability awareness training during 2006/2007.

- A deafness awareness course is being held by the National Association of the Deaf for selected Departmental staff.

- Provide training for staff based in Personnel/HR on the "reasonable accommodation" aspects of equality legislation, this in turn will be reflected in training and additional awareness raising measures for managers.

- A training programme aimed at all Senior Managers within the Department is scheduled for the period of this plan. The programme is specifically aimed at a creating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the issues associated with Disability management in the workplace, disability awareness, best practice and disability policy development and impact assessment.

A summary of the activities scheduled for progression over the period of the plan are detailed in Table 11.1. These activities are designed to complement the initiatives outlined in Section 8 with regard to the Human Resource function.

Table 11.1		
Objective	Actions	Performance Indicator/ Outcome Measures
Ensure organisational disability awareness is enhanced throughout DSFA and at senior managerial level.	Undertake a Senior Managerial Disability training programme	Training programme complete by 2007. Number of senior managers trained
	Undertake Disability awareness training needs analysis for DSFA staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need analysis completed Quarter 1 2007. • Training programme devised • Rollout of training programme • Number of staff trained 2007/2009
	Complete: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health Awareness training programme • Diversity Awareness training programme. • Disability awareness training of disability scheme and information services staff 	Number of courses held and number of staff trained. Evaluation of and feedback from programme(s) 2006/2007.

12. Complaints & Redress Procedures

12.1. Introduction

Provision has been made in the Disability Act for the provision of a complaints procedure. Accordingly, the Department is making specific provision for a system of complaint and redress as required under sections 26 and 39 of the Disability Act 2005. The Department will ensure that over and above its existing Social Welfare Appeals and Customer Comments and Complaints systems, an adequate complaints and redress structure for people with disabilities be put in place to deal with issues concerning access for the full complement of services administered by Department and the agencies under its aegis.

12.2. Social Welfare Appeals Process

The services for which the Department is responsible provide essential supports to people, including people with disabilities, who have recourse to them. In this regard, one of the guiding principles identified in the Department's Strategy of Statement is the recognition of the need for fairness and mutual respect through having an independent adjudication system for those who are dissatisfied with a decision made on their entitlements.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office provides that independent system. Any person who is dissatisfied with a decision in their case can appeal to that office where their case will be dealt with by an Appeals Officer. In addition to catering for decisions given on statutory schemes and services for which

the Department is responsible, the Social Welfare Appeals Office also includes a right of Appeal in respect of certain decisions made by the Health Services Executive with regard to Supplementary Welfare Allowance

12.3. Customer Comments and Complaints System

Within the framework of its existing Customer Action Plan (2004/2007) the Department already operates a system of comment and complaints. The primary objective of this system is to maintain a well publicised, accessible, transparent and simple to use process for dealing with comments and complaints about the quality of service provided. Within all Departmental offices the system is publicised and a formal system of reporting and follow up actions have been established. All comments and complaints received by service users are to be dealt within 15 working days. All comments and complaints generated by the system are monitored on a regular basis.

12.4 Complaint and Redress System

In line with the requirements of the Disability Act 2005 (sections 26 and 39) the Department and agencies under its remit are formalising procedures that will be available to persons who consider that they have been adversely affected by any failure on the part of the Department or its agencies to comply with any aspect of the legislation.

In drawing up procedures in accordance with the legislative provisions the Department

and its agencies have taken account of *The Ombudsman's Guide to Internal Complaints Systems* (<http://www.ombudsman.ie>)

To ensure a degree of consistency across the Department in relation to the complaints procedures, senior officials will in the first instance be authorised in the capacity of Access and Inquiry Officers. Accordingly, any complaint with regard to these provisions should be forwarded to the senior officials responsible for accessibility matters who, in turn, will consider the matters complained of and, if necessary, will bring forward proposals to change the operational procedures to ensure improved access to services. The duly authorised Access and Inquiry Officers will in the exercise of their functions have regard to the following Ombudsman publication (available at <http://www.ombudsman.ie>): *The Ombudsman's Guide to the Provision of Redress*.

A person dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaint in relation to the accessibility of social welfare services will be entitled to appeal the outcome to the Office of the Ombudsman. Section 40 of the Disability Act 2005 relates to the application of the Ombudsman Act 1980. In this regard, it should be noted that the Ombudsman's role covers complaints about all bodies, organisations and other persons to which the Plan applies.

The Ombudsman has underscored the importance of preventing a breakdown in communications between public bodies and their customers in dealing with complaints before those complaints reach her Office.

Many complaints could and should be easily and speedily settled at a very early stage by the Department or agencies themselves.

All such procedures and structures, prepared in accordance with the above, shall be published by the Department or public bodies, and shall include the following:

- The procedures for the making and investigation of complaints and such other matters relating to complaints as are considered appropriate,
- The name and contact details for the person(s) within the Department or its agencies, to whom complaints may be addressed. A person, or persons, so nominated shall be referred to as "complaints officers" responsible for the conduct of investigations in accordance with the above-mentioned procedures, and independent in the performance of his or her functions.
- Publication of the system on the Department's and relevant agencies websites and through other appropriate media.
- The complaints and redress system details will be made available to relevant disability groups and organisations.
- Procedures and structures, prepared in accordance with the above, will be required to be finalised not later than September 2006.

- A person may make a complaint to the Ombudsman in relation to a decision of an access/inquiry officer in relation to these provisions. Procedures prepared in accordance with the above shall make provision for informing all complainants of this right.
- Officers duly appointed and who carry out a complaints investigation function under this plan will be required to report to annually in relation to complaints concerning alleged non-compliance with the provisions of this plan, and the changes brought forward, or proposed, to ensure improved access to the services covered by this plan.

In conclusion, the Department and its agencies will review this complaint and redress system over the period of this sectoral and in light of experience gained and having regard to the level of and nature of the complaints received. The review will inform whether modification or amendment to the system will necessarily be required.

13. Resources, Review, Monitoring and Implementation Sectoral Plan

13.1. Introduction

The Department will actively review and monitor progress in implementing its Sectoral Plan. Accordingly, the Department has put in place a framework to facilitate internal, external and cross Departmental review and monitoring of the Plan and its implementation.

13.2. Financial Resources

The financial resources required for social insurance and social assistance schemes for payments to people with disabilities are provided by way of the annual Departmental estimates process. The schemes and services aimed at people with disabilities are essentially demand led and consequently, the issue of financial allocations becoming exhausted during the period of this plan does not arise.

Improvements in schemes services, including increase in weekly payments, are issues for determination in a budgetary context. Every effort will be made by the Department to provide best estimates of likely demand for its disability targeted services with a view to providing accurate financial forecasts for their development.

In the context of organisational developments and compliance with the provisions of the Disability Act 2005, the Department and agencies will make appropriate provision in the context of their administrative budgets for commitments to be met and finalised.

13.3. Internal Review & Monitoring

In the first instance, the Department will review and monitor the plan's implementation through its Business and Strategic Planning processes. Annual reviews are undertaken by all relevant business units and this will include updates on relevant actions contained in this Sectoral Plan. The Department will also seek reports as appropriate from agencies under its aegis for this purpose. Any further review of the Department's Strategy will also reflect the commitments and actions detailed in the Sectoral Plan. Additionally, a monitoring committee of senior officials is being established to review and monitor the progress made by relevant business divisions and agencies. This committee will report as appropriate to the DSFA Top Management team and Policy Committee which is chaired by the Secretary General and by extension to the Minister.

13.4. External Monitoring Mechanisms

The Department is committed to a process of ongoing consultation with people with disabilities. The Department of Social And Family Affairs will continue to participate in interdepartmental co-ordinating and monitoring structures for the National Disability Strategy, including the sectoral plans under the Disability Act, 2005. It will also participate in arrangements to be put in place to ensure a continued constructive relationship with stakeholders in relation to progress on the National Disability Strategy as a whole. This will

include bi-annual meetings between senior officials and other stakeholders in line with the commitments contained in the social partnership agreement, *'Towards 2016'*

As part of that process the Department will continue to consult with the Disability Sector through the Department's Disability Consultative Forum, with regard to and progress made on its Sectoral Plan.

The Forum meets on a quarterly basis and it is proposed to review progress on the Sectoral Plan's implementation on annual basis. The Department also proposes to comprehensively update and review its plan with the National Disability Authority on an annual basis.

13.5. Cross Departmental Monitoring

As part of the preparation for the publication of this sectoral plan, the Department met with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Health and Children to discuss the issues of mutual concern in relation to service provision for people with disabilities. In the interest of best reflecting the commitment to co-operation, a protocol has been agreed with each Department (*see section 6*). These protocols identify relevant key objectives drawn from this Department's Statement of Strategy in relation to people with disabilities and actions which require cross-departmental co-operation. The actions agreed in these protocols will be similarly incorporated into the sectoral plans of the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

A monitoring mechanism has been agreed with each of the other Departments for these protocols by means of regular bi-lateral meetings to assess progress which will, in turn, feed into the internal and external monitoring processes for the overall sectoral plan.

13.6. Reporting Arrangements & Timeframe

In addition to the structures put in place for the review and monitoring of the plan a formalised time bound reporting system will also be established. The Department will review progress on its sectoral plan on annual basis and this will be formally reported in the Department's Annual Reports 2006 to 2009. At the end of 2009 a formal review of the plan will be published in line with the recommendations made by the National Disability Authority.

Appendix 1

Department of Social and Family Affairs Position Audit

Part 1	
1	Are protocols and procedures in place for dealing with customers with disability?
2	Is there a system in place to identify customers with a disability who have special requirements?
3	Have you established a customer service system, which includes:
3a	Customer Panel?
3b	Complaints procedures?
3c	Customer feedback, including improvement suggestions?
3d	Do these include comments on the physical environment of your office?
4	Have you used this system to consider, and where appropriate, utilise customer feedback for:
4a	Updating policies, procedures and practices?
4b	Dealing with complaints?
4c	Dealing with negative attitudes within the organisation?
4d	Building on good practice?
4e	Identifying potential improvements to the physical accessibility of and within your office?
4f	Identifying potential increased usage of adaptive technology in your office?
5	Do you use this system to implement reasonable improvements to:
5a	The physical accessibility and the general environment of your office?
5b	The availability of adaptive technology?
5c	Is it able to identify requests and the action taken?
5d	Are written records kept?
6	Do you keep statistics on the numbers of customers with disability who have special requirements who interact with your office?
7	Do all staff understand their responsibilities and the provisions of the Disability Act 2005?
8	Have all staff been informed of the provisions and requirements of the Disability Act 2005 in relation to the services they administer?
9	Has disability awareness training been received by all staff, especially those in direct contact with the public?
10	If you answered yes to the previous question - Is this training designed to be specifically relevant to the issues they are likely to encounter?
11	Is an accurate record of disability training maintained?
12	Have you made future plans for Disability Awareness training? If yes, please attach a copy.
13	Is guidance provided to your staff regarding dealing with requests for alternative accessible formats, e.g. large print, audio tape/CD and Braille?
14	Is there awareness in your office of the facility within the Department to print forms/information leaflets in Braille?
15	Is there a dedicated telephone contact number in place for people with disability who have special requirements?

continued...	
16	Have staff been made aware of the recent enhancements to Infosys which may indicate a customer's special needs? (O/N 71/05 refers)
17	Have you any plans to improve the services to people with disability? If yes, please attach a copy.
Part 2a - Physical Access	
18	Where car parking is available, is there a designated parking area for disabled customers?
19	Is your office accessible to customers using wheelchairs?
20	If your office operates a service to the public that is situated on an upper floor, is there a wheelchair accessible lift in the building?
21	If not, do you have any other arrangements in place?
22	Are the emergency exits in your building accessible to wheelchair users?
23	Do customers have access to a receptionist /information desk/ services officer at all times when your office is open to the public?
24	Is your office signage in large print and displayed appropriately?
25	Is there a specific sign to guide customers with special needs towards personal assistance in your office?
Part 2b - Customer Service	
26	Can a customer make a claim that will be processed in your office via the Department's Website?
27	Can a customer make a claim by telephone call to your office?
28a	In your office, do staff who require access to the Dept's website to provide quality customer service have such access?
28b	If not, how many staff do not have such access?
28c	Are there plans to make it available to all staff in your office by end 2006?
29	Is there a facility for staff to personally assist customers with the completion of forms when they call to your office?
30	Are staff encouraged to do so?
31	Are all Claim Forms / Information Leaflets available in Large Print from your office?
32	Are all Claim Forms / Information Leaflets available in Braille from your office?
33	Does your office have a Braille printer?
34	In your office can staff access forms or information in Braille on behalf of customers should they require it?
35	Does your office offer alternative accessible formats such as CDs, Audio tapes, DVDs, CD-ROMs, etc to assist customers in making a claim?

continued...	
36	Has your office been requested to furnish forms/ information through assisted technology in the past 12mths?
37a	Does the PC based JAWS system operate in your office?
37b	If not, would you consider making a business case for its installation in your office?
38a	Does the Loop system operate in your office?
38b	If not, would you consider making a business case for its installation in your office?
39	Is there a Sign Language Communicator available?
40	If not, does your office have other arrangements in place?
41	Is there awareness in your office that only Claim Forms / Information Leaflet which have been checked by Information Section / NALA for their Literacy and plain English content, etc. are to be used?
42	Are all requests for any additional information required made in writing to the customer?
43	Are decisions communicated to customers in writing only?
44	Can the customer ask your staff to contact them by phone?
Part 3a - Ongoing communications with customers with identified special needs	
45	In your office, when a customer's special requirements have been identified, are steps taken to ensure that ongoing communications with that customer are in the format most appropriate to his/her needs?
46	Are details of a customer's communications needs recorded locally?
47	Do you have a facility to issue Mailshot details in Braille?

Appendix 2

Social Insurance Payments

1. Disability Benefit

Disability Benefit

- 1.1 Disability Benefit (DB) is a PRSI-based weekly payment payable to qualified insured people aged under 66 years who are unfit for work due to illness. This payment is administered by DSFA.

Contribution Conditions

- 1.2 To qualify, a person must have -
- at least 52 PRSI contribution paid since first starting work, and
 - at least 39 contributions paid or credited (at least 13 of which must be paid) in the relevant tax year, or
 - 26 weeks PRSI paid in the relevant income tax year and 26 weeks PRSI paid in the tax year immediately before the relevant income tax year.

Proof of Incapacity for Work

- 1.3 Medical certificates from the claimant's doctor confirming incapacity for work must be submitted on a regular basis (usually weekly) and claimants may also be requested to attend for medical examination by a Medical Assessor of the DSFA.

Duration of Payment

- 1.4 DB is paid on the basis of a 6-day week (Sundays are not included). Normally DB is not payable for the first 3 days of illness (known as "waiting days"). Where a person has less than 260 PRSI contributions paid (5 full years), DB is payable for up to 52 weeks. At the end of this period, the claimant can re-qualify for benefit by making up an extra 13 paid contributions (or a smaller number if it brings your total to 260). Where at least 260 PRSI contributions have been paid since first starting work, DB can continue to be paid for as long as the person remains unfit for work and under age 66.

Rates of Payment

- 1.5 The rate of DB payable depends on the claimant's family size, circumstances and earnings. Payment is made up of a personal rate in respect of the claimant and additional increases may be payable in the case of qualified adults and qualified children. The current weekly rates of payment are - Personal Rate: €165.80; Increase for a qualified adult: €110.00; Increase for each qualified child: €16.80. Where a claimant's spouse or partner is not a qualified adult, increases in respect of qualified children are generally payable at half-rate, depending on the exact circumstances.

Where the claimant's average weekly earnings are below €150.00, the personal rate of DB and the increase in respect of a qualified adult are payable at reduced rates. Full-rate DB is payable where the claimant's average weekly earnings are €150.00 or over.

If a person is in receipt of a Widow/er's Pension, a One-Parent Family Payment or an analogous payment, then DB can be paid in addition for a period of up to 15 months where s/he has 260 PRSI contributions, otherwise for 12 months only if s/he has less than 260 PRSI contributions paid. DB is paid at ½ the personal rate in these circumstances and no increase in DB is payable in respect of qualified children. Where a person does not qualify for full rate of One-Parent Family Payment, the rate of DB payable may be 'topped up' to make up the deficit. In addition, if a person is getting either Blind Person's Pension or Orphan's Pension, then DB can also be paid in full for the duration of the illness including qualified dependents.

Taxation of DB

- 1.6 Disability Benefit payments (excluding any increases for qualified children) are regarded as taxable income. However, DB payments for the first 36 days (6 weeks) in each tax year are exempt from tax.

2. Invalidity Pension

Invalidity Pension

- 2.1 Invalidity Pension (IP) is payable to qualified insured people who are permanently incapable of work. This payment is administered by DSFA.

Contribution Conditions

- 2.2 To qualify, a person must have -
- at least 260 PRSI contributions paid since first starting work; and
 - at least 48 contributions paid or credited in the last complete tax year before the claim is made.

Proof of Permanent Incapacity for Work

- 2.3 In order to be regarded as being permanently incapable of work, a person must have been incapable of work for at least one year and likely to remain so incapable for at least a further year. In most cases applicants would have been in receipt of DB prior to claiming IP. Where a person can show that they are likely to remain incapable of work for life, IP may be paid to persons who have been incapable of work for less than one year.

Duration of Payment

- 2.4 Invalidity Pension is payable for as long as a person remains permanently incapable of work. Payment ceases, however, if the person is awarded

another social welfare pension, e.g. Old Age (Contributory), Retirement or Widow/er's (Contributory) Pension (with the exception of Disablement Pension).

Rates of Payment

- 2.5 The rate of IP payable depends on the claimant's family size and circumstances. Payment is made up of a personal rate in respect of the claimant and additional increases may be payable in the case of qualified adults and qualified children. The current weekly rates of payment are - Personal Rate: €171.30 (under 65 years), €193.30 (65 and over); Increase for a qualified adult: €122.20 (under 66 years), €149.30 (66 and over); Increase for each qualified child: €19.30. Where a claimant's spouse or partner is not a qualified adult, any increases in respect of qualified children are generally payable at half-rate. Additional allowances of €7.70 and €10.00, respectively are payable to Invalidity Pensioners who are living alone and pensioners aged 80 or over. An allowance of €12.70 is payable to Invalidity Pensioners who are living on certain offshore islands.

Taxation of IP

- 2.6 Income from Invalidity Pension is assessable for income tax purposes. However, if IP is the person's only income, it would be below the thresholds for the payment of income tax.

3. Occupational Injuries Benefits

- 3.1 The Occupational Injuries Benefits (OIB) scheme is administered by DSFA and comprises a range of following payments for people who are injured or disabled in the course of their work, or who contract a prescribed occupational disease:-

- Injury Benefit;
- Disablement Benefit;
- Death Benefits;
- Cost of Medical Care.

Contribution Conditions for Occupational Injury Benefits

- 3.2 There are no contribution conditions applying to the OIB schemes. Once the accident or prescribed disease arises out of and in the course of employment which is insurable for OIB purposes, the person is covered for Occupational Injuries Benefits. In addition, accidents which occur while a person is travelling directly to or from work are deemed to be occupational accidents.

3.3 Injury Benefit

- 3.3.1 This is a weekly payment payable to people who are unfit for work due to an accident at work or who have contracted a prescribed work-related disease.

Proof of Incapacity for Work

- 3.3.2** Medical certificates from the claimant's doctor confirming incapacity for work must be submitted on a regular basis and claimants may also be requested to attend for medical examination by a Medical Assessor of the DSFA.

Not all accidents at work result in immediate illness or disablement. In such cases, in order to protect future rights to benefit, a person can apply for a declaration that the accident happened at work.

Duration of Payment

- 3.3.3** As in the case of Disability Benefit, Injury Benefit is not normally paid for the first 3 days (known as "waiting days"). Payment can last for a maximum of 26 weeks from the date of the accident or the onset of the disease. People who are still incapable of work after 26 weeks may be entitled to Disability Benefit or, if they do not qualify for DB or IP and are permanently incapable of work, they may be entitled to Unemployability Supplement (see section 3.5 below).

Rates of Payment

- 3.3.4** The rates of Injury Benefit payable are the same as the rates of payment for Disability Benefit, including the increases for qualified adults and qualified children (as outlined in paragraph 1.5 above). Unlike Disability Benefit, the rates of Injury Benefit are not affected by the level of the claimant's earnings.

If a person is getting a Widow/er's Pension, a One-Parent Family Payment or other analogous payment, Injury Benefit can be paid in addition. Injury Benefit is paid at $\frac{1}{2}$ the personal rate in these circumstances and no increase in Injury Benefit is payable in respect of child dependants. In cases where less than the full rate of Widow/er's/One Parent Family payment is being paid, more than half rate Injury Benefit can be payable. In addition, if a person is getting either Blind Person's Pension or Orphan's Pension, Injury Benefit can also be paid in full for the duration of the illness or 26 weeks, whichever is the shorter.

Taxation of Injury Benefit

- 3.3.5** Injury Benefit is taxable on the same basis as Disability Benefit.

3.4 Disablement Benefit

- 3.4.1** Disablement Benefit is paid where an insured person suffers loss of physical or mental faculty as a result of an accident at work or through contracting a prescribed occupational disease. The level of the payment awarded depends on the degree of loss of faculty, which is medically assessed. Assessments of less than 10% are paid by way of a lump sum (known as a Disablement Gratuity), assessments of between 10% and 19% are paid by lump sum or by pension (known as Disablement Pension) and assessments of 20% or more are paid by way of a

pension. Disablement Benefit differs fundamentally from other social welfare income support payments in that it is not an income maintenance payment. Accordingly, Disablement Benefit can be paid in addition to other social welfare payments such as DB and IP and can also be paid where a person continues to work.

Loss of Faculty

- 3.4.2** All claimants for Disablement Benefit must be examined by a Medical Assessor to determine the degree of disablement. This medical assessment is specially designed to determine loss of faculty by comparing the client with a person of their own age and sex in normal health.

Even if the person is not immediately incapacitated as a result of the occupational accident or disease, claimants can safeguard their future right to Disablement Benefit by notifying their employers about the accident or disease and by applying to the DSFA for a declaration that the accident or disease arose out of or in the course of employment.

Duration of Payment

- 3.4.3** If a person is unable to work as a result of the occupational accident or disease, then Injury Benefit should be claimed for the first 26 weeks. Disablement Benefit is not payable during this 26 week period. However, if a person continues to be able to work following the occupational

accident or disease, Disablement Benefit can be paid from the Friday after the 4th day subsequent to the accident or contraction of the prescribed disease.

Rates of Payment

- 3.4.4** Disablement assessments of less than 20% are normally paid by way of a lump sum Disablement Gratuity. Assessments of 20% or more are paid by way of a weekly or monthly Disablement Pension. The maximum Disablement Gratuity which is paid for life awards of 19%, is €13,780. Proportionate Disablement Gratuities are paid for assessments of between 1% and 18%. The maximum Disablement Pension, which is paid for awards of 100% is €196.90 a week. Proportionate Disablement Pensions are paid, in 10% bands, for assessments of between 20% and 90%. For life awards of between 10% and 19%, a Disablement Pension can be awarded in lieu of a Disablement Gratuity.

Increases in Disablement Pension

- 3.4.5** Increases in Disablement Pension can be paid in certain cases -
- If a Disablement Pensioner is permanently incapable of work and does not qualify for DB or IP, an Unemployability Supplement may be payable (see section 3.5 below).

- If an Unemployability Supplement is paid to a Disablement Pensioner, further increases may be paid in respect of a qualified adult and qualified children.
- If a Disablement Pensioner requires constant care and attention, a Constant Attendance Allowance may be payable (see section 3.6 below).

Taxation of Disablement Benefit

- 3.4.6** Disablement Gratuity payments are exempt from tax. However, income from Disablement Pension is fully taxable.

3.5 Unemployability Supplement

- 3.5.1** Unemployability Supplement (US) may be paid as an increase in Disablement Pension if a person is permanently incapable of work as a result of an occupational accident or disease and does not qualify for any other social welfare payment, such as Disability Benefit, Invalidity Pension or Disability Allowance.

Duration of Payment

- 3.5.2** Unemployability Supplement is payable from the date of qualification for Disablement Pension and continues for life, provided the person remains permanently incapable of work as a consequence of the occupational injury or disease.

Rates of Payment

- 3.5.3** The rate of payment for US is the same as for Disability Benefit (see paragraph 1.5 above). Where a person in receipt of US has qualified dependants, then the Disablement Benefit which that person is receiving, may be increased in respect of those dependants. The rates of increases for qualified adults and qualified children in this case are the same as those applying under the Disability Benefit scheme. In addition, an allowance of €7.70 a week is payable to a recipient of Unemployability Supplement who is living alone. An allowance of €12.70 is also payable to recipients of Unemployability Supplement who are living on certain offshore islands.

If a person is in receipt of a Widow/er's Pension, a One-Parent Family Payment or other analogous payment, then US can be paid in addition for a period of up to 15 months. US is paid at ½ the personal rate in these circumstances and no increase is payable in respect of child dependants. In addition, if a person is getting either Blind Person's Pension or Orphan's Pension, then US can also be paid in full for the period of incapacity.

Taxation of US

- 3.5.4** Income from Unemployability Supplement payments is fully taxable.

3.6 Constant Attendance Allowance

3.6.1 Where the degree of disablement is assessed at between 50% and 100% and the person has been certified as being in need of constant care and attention, an increase in the weekly Disablement Pension, known as Constant Attendance Allowance, may be payable.

Duration of Payment

3.6.2 Constant Attendance Allowance continues to be paid for as long as the person requires constant care and attention. However, payment ceases for any period during which the claimant is an in-patient in a hospital or similar institution.

Rate of Payment

3.6.3 Constant Attendance Allowance is payable at a rate of €180.70 a week.

Taxation of Constant Attendance Allowance

3.6.4 Constant Attendance Allowance payments are taxable.

3.7 Death Benefits

3.7.1 If a person dies as a result of an accident at work or as a result of an occupational disease, Death Benefit may be payable to that person's dependants. In addition, Death Benefit may be paid, regardless of the cause of death, if a person was getting Disablement Pension assessed at 50% or more at the time of death. Death Benefits include

Widow/er's and Orphan's Pensions and a Funeral Grant. In addition, a Dependant Parent's Pension may be paid where a parent had been wholly or mainly maintained by the deceased. A Dependant Parent's Pension may be paid in respect of each parent and the rate of pension payable depends on whether the deceased was single or married.

Rates of Payment

3.7.2 The current weekly rate of Death Benefit Widow/er's Pension is €194.60 for those under 66 years and €197.70 for those aged 66 and over, with increases of €21.60 in respect of each qualified child. The maximum rate of Death Benefit Dependant Parent's Pension is €194.60 (€197.70 for those aged 66 or over) with a reduced pension of €102.80 payable depending on the circumstances. An additional €7.70 a week is paid where the pensioner is aged 66 or over and living alone. Recipients aged 66 or over and who live on certain offshore islands receive an additional payment of €12.70. The weekly rate of Death Benefit Orphan's Pension is €141.80. A Funeral Grant of €635.00 is payable in a lump sum towards the cost of funeral expenses.

Taxation of Death Benefits

3.7.3 Death Benefit Pensions for Widows, Widowers, Orphans and Dependant Parents are fully taxable. However, the funeral grant is not taxable.

3.8 Cost of Medical Care

People who are injured at work or who contract a prescribed occupational disease can claim the cost of certain expenses in respect of medical care and attention, which are not already covered by the Health Service Executive or under the Treatment Benefit Scheme operated by the DSFA. These expenses include costs incurred in visiting doctors and on prescriptions, the cost of certain medical appliances and certain dental and optical treatment.

4. Carer's Benefit

Carer's Benefit

4.1 Carer's Benefit (CB) is a payment made to insured persons who leave the workforce to care for a person(s) in need of full-time care and attention. [Under Carer's Leave Legislation, a person may be entitled to unpaid temporary leave from his/her employment to provide care to a person(s).]

Qualifying Conditions

4.2 A person will qualify if he/she (the carer) -

- is aged 16 or over
- has been employed (in the state) for the previous three month period
- satisfies the PRSI contribution conditions
- gives up employment to care for a person(s) on a full time basis (this employment must have been for a minimum of 17 hours per week or 34 hours per fortnight)

- takes up limited self employment, or is not employed or engaged in training/education outside the home for more than 15 hours per week
- is living in the state
- is not living in a hospital, convalescent home or other similar institution and

The person(s) being cared for is/are:

- so disabled as to require full-time care and attention (medical certification is required)
- not normally living in a hospital, home or other similar institution
- not already receiving full time care and attention within his/her residence from another person.

Contribution Conditions

4.3 For a first claim the person must have

- 156 contributions paid since entry into insurable employment and
 - (a) 39 contributions paid in the Relevant Tax Year
 - or
 - (b) 39 contributions paid in the 12 month period before commencement of the Carer's Benefit
 - or
 - (c) 26 contributions paid in the Relevant Tax Year and 26 contributions paid in the Relevant Tax Year prior to that.

PRSI contribution classes A, B, C, D, H and E count.

For second and subsequent claims:

- the person does not need to satisfy the PRSI contribution conditions again.
- The person does not need to satisfy the employment conditions in the three month period prior to commencement of the claim if he/she was in receipt of Carer's Benefit within this three month period.

Duration of Payment

- 4.4 Carer's Benefit can be paid for a total period of 104 weeks for each person being cared for. This may be claimed as a single continuous period or in separate periods up to a total of 104 weeks and subject to a minimum of 6 weeks for any given period. If more than one person is being cared for the person may receive payment for each care recipient for 104 weeks. This may result in the care periods overlapping or running concurrently.

In the event that the person being cared for dies, Carer's Benefit will continue to be paid for 6 weeks following the person's death. A bereavement grant of €635 may also be payable.

Rates of Payment

- 4.5 The payment is made up of a weekly personal payment for the person and additional amounts for his/her child dependents. Where a person is caring

for one person the weekly personal rate of payment is €180.70. If a person is providing care to more than one person he/she may be entitled to an extra 50% of the personal rate (i.e. €271.10 per week). The full rate increase for a qualified child, which is payable when the person is single widowed or separated is €16.80 per week. Where the person is living with his/her spouse/partner a half rate increase (€8.40 per week) may be payable.

Credited contributions (credits) will be awarded automatically for the period in which the person is in receipt of Carer's Benefit. These are awarded at the same rate as the person's last paid contribution.

Recipients of Carer's Benefit automatically receive a Respite Care Grant in respect of each person for whom they are providing full time care and attention. This is an annual payment of €1,200 in respect of each person being cared for.

Taxation of CB

- 4.6 Carer's Benefit is assessable as income for tax purposes.

Social Assistance Payments

5. Disability Allowance (Formerly DPMA)

Disability Allowance

- 5.1 Disability Allowance (DA) is a means-tested payment which is administered by DSFA and paid to people between the ages of 16 and 66 years who, by virtue of a specified disability, are substantially disadvantaged in undertaking work which would otherwise be suitable, having regard to the person's age, experience and qualifications. A specified disability is defined in regulations to mean an injury, disease, congenital deformity or physical or mental illness or defect, which has continued or may be expected to continue for at least one year. Unlike other social welfare payments, entitlement to Disability Allowance can be affected by the person's residency in an institution. However, since August, 1999, existing recipients of Disability Allowance who are living at home and who move into residential settings are entitled to retain their DA payments.

Proof of Substantial Disablement in Undertaking Employment

- 5.2 This is normally done through the submission of medical reports from the claimant's doctor, with supporting consultants' reports, where necessary. The claimant may also be required to attend for a medical examination by a Medical Assessor of the DSFA.

Duration of Payment

- 5.3 Disability Allowance continues to be paid up to the age of 66 years, as long as the person continues to satisfy the qualifying conditions.

Rates of Payment

- 5.4 The rate of payment depends on the claimant's family size, circumstances and means. The current maximum rates of Disability Allowance are the same as the maximum weekly rates of Disability Benefit, outlined in paragraph 1.5 above. An additional allowance of €7.70 is payable to recipients of Disability Allowance who are living alone. An allowance of €12.70 is also payable to recipients of Disability Allowance who are living on certain offshore islands.

Taxation of DA

- 5.5 Disability Allowance is not taxable.

6. Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate)

6.1 Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate)

Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate) was introduced with effect from June 2005 and replaced the former spending allowances paid by the Health Services Executive to people in residential care who are not eligible for Disability Allowance, by virtue of this residency. Since August 1999, existing recipients of Disability Allowance who are living at home and who move into residential

settings are entitled to retain their Disability Allowance.

6.2 Proof of Substantial Disablement in Undertaking Employment

Requirement is for short certification only by an Area Medical Officer of the Health Services Executive or General Practitioner attached to each residential location, confirming that the person would have medically qualified for Disability Allowance but for the existence of the residential disqualification. This certification outlines the diagnosis and when the condition commenced.

6.3 Duration of Payment

Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate) continues to be paid up to age 66 years, subject to the person continuing to satisfy the qualifying conditions.

6.4 Rates of Payment

The rate of payment for Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate) is €35 per week.

6.5 Taxation of DA (PER)

Disability Allowance (Personal Expenses Rate) is not taxable

7. Blind Person's Pension

Blind Person's Pension

7.1 This is a means-tested pension which is administered by DSFA and payable to blind or partially sighted people who are 18 years and over and are so blind that they cannot perform work for which eyesight is essential or cannot continue in their ordinary occupation.

Proof of Blindness

7.2 Registration with the National Council for the Blind (NCBI) is usually accepted as satisfying the blindness condition. Where a person is not registered with the NCBI, they are required to submit a medical report from an ophthalmic surgeon or from an optometrist.

Duration of Payment

7.3 Blind Person's Pension continues to be paid for as long as the claimant satisfies the qualifying conditions. However, Blind Person's Pension ceases if the person is awarded certain other social welfare pensions, e.g. Old Age (Contributory), Retirement or Invalidity Pension.

Rates of Payment

7.4 The rates of payment depend on the claimant's family size, circumstances and means. The current maximum personal rate is €165.80 in the case of a person under 66 years of age and €182.00 where the person is aged 66 and over. A weekly increase

of €110.00 may be payable in respect of a qualified adult under age 66 and €120.30 per week where the qualified adult is age 66 or over. €16.80 is payable in respect of each qualified child. Where a claimant's spouse or partner is not a qualified adult, any increases in respect of qualified children are generally payable at half-rate. Additional allowances of €7.70 and €10.00, respectively are payable to Blind Pensioners who are living alone and pensioners aged 80 or over. An allowance of €12.70 is also payable to Blind Pensioners who live on certain offshore islands. A Blind Pensioner under age 66 may also be entitled to receive any one of the following payments in full provided they satisfy the relevant qualifying conditions; Disability Benefit, Unemployment Benefit, Maternity Benefit, Adoptive Benefit, Health and Safety Benefit, Injury Benefit, Widow/er's Contributory Pension, Widow/er's Non-Contributory Pension or One-Parent Family Payment.

Taxation of Blind Person's Pension

- 7.5 Blind Person's Pension is fully taxable.

8. Carer's Allowance

Carer's Allowance

- 8.1 Carer's Allowance (CA) is a payment for carers who look after certain people in need of full-time care and attention.

Qualifying Conditions

- 8.2 A person will qualify if he/she (the carer):

- is aged 18 or over;
- satisfies a means test;
- lives with the person he/she is looking after or can be contacted quickly by a direct system of communication (for example telephone or alarm) between his/her home and the home of the person he/she is caring for;
- cares for the person on a full-time basis;
- takes up limited self-employment, or is not employed or engaged in training/education outside the home for more than 15 hours a week;
- satisfies the Habitual Residence Condition; and
- does not live in a hospital, convalescent home or other similar institution.

In addition, the person being cared for must:

- be so disabled as to need full-time care and attention (medical certification is required);
- not normally live in a hospital, home or other similar institution; and
- be aged 16 or over (or aged under 16 if Domiciliary Care Allowance is being paid for them by the Health Service Executive);
- not already be receiving full time care and attention within their own home from another person.

Duration of Payment

- 8.3** The payment will continue as long as the person continues to satisfy the qualifying conditions. In the event that the person being cared for dies, Carer's Allowance will continue to be paid for 6 weeks following the person's death. A bereavement grant of €635 may also be payable.

Rates of Payment

- 8.4** The payment is made up of a personal rate and additional amounts for the person's child dependant(s). The level of payment depends on the person's means. The current maximum rate of payment is €180 per week where the carer is looking after one person or €270 per week where the carer is looking after more than one person. Carers aged over 66 receive an additional €20 per week when caring for one person or €30 per week when caring for more than one person. Recipients of Carer's Allowance aged over 80 receive a further €10 per week. An increase of €16.80 per week may be payable in respect of each qualified child where the recipient is single, widowed or separated. Where the person is living with his/her spouse or partner the increase which may be payable in respect of each qualified child is €8.40 per week. There is an increase of €12.70 per week for recipients of Carer's Allowance aged 66 or over who live on certain offshore islands.

Recipients of Carer's Allowance automatically receive a Respite Care Grant in respect of each person for whom they are providing full time care and attention. This is an annual payment of €1,200 in respect of each person being cared for. Recipients of the Carer's Allowance may also qualify for a Free Travel Pass; Electricity, Natural Gas or Bottled Gas Refill Allowance; a Free Television Licence; and a Telephone Allowance.

Recipients of Carer's Allowance may be awarded credited contributions (credits) for the period of caring. However, recipients who are not eligible for credits he/she may qualify to have "homemaking years" taken into account for Old Age Contributory Pension purposes.

Taxation of CA

- 8.5** Income from Carer's Allowance is regarded as income for tax purposes.

9. Respite Care Grant

Respite Care Grant

- 9.1 The Respite Care Grant (RCG) is an annual payment for carers who look after certain people in need of full-time care and attention. The payment is made regardless of the carer's means but is subject to certain conditions.

Qualifying Conditions

- 9.2 A person will qualify if he/she (the carer):
- is aged 16 or over;
 - is ordinarily resident in the state;
 - expects to care for the person on a full-time basis;
 - cares for the person for at least six months - this period of care must include the first Thursday in June;
 - lives with the person he/she is looking after or can be contacted quickly by a direct system of communication (for example telephone or alarm) between his/her home and the home of the person he/she is caring for;
 - is not working outside the home for more than 15 hours per week;
 - is not getting or entitled to Unemployment Benefit or Unemployment Assistance or signing for Unemployment Credits;
 - is not living in a hospital, convalescent home or similar institution.

In addition, the person being cared for must:

- be so disabled as to need full-time care and attention (medical certification is required);
- not normally live in a hospital, home or other similar institution; and
- not receive full-time care and attention within their home from another person.

Duration of Payment

- 9.3 The payment is made once a year (in June).

Rates of Payment

- 9.4 From June 2006 the Respite Care Grant is €1,200 for each person the recipient is caring for.

10. Supplementary Welfare Allowance

Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA)

- 10.1 The supplementary welfare allowance scheme is administered by the Health Service Executive (HSE), under the general direction and control of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. The scheme is the 'safety net' within the overall social welfare system in that it can, subject to conditions, provide assistance to persons in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and/or those of their dependents. The scheme is made up of a number of component parts:

- basic weekly payments,
- rent and mortgage interest supplements,
- diet supplements,
- other supplements,
- exceptional needs payments and
- urgent needs payments.

SWA is not normally paid to persons in full-time employment, full-time education or who are directly involved in trade disputes.

While not specifically targeted at people who are sick or people with disabilities, the SWA scheme can nevertheless provide income support for those who are short-term ill and who do not qualify for DB or Invalidity Pension. In addition, SWA can be paid pending the payment of other social welfare payments, such as DB, IP, DA etc.

In addition the HSE also administer the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance scheme in parallel with the SWA scheme. The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a one-off payment to eligible families to assist with the extra costs when their children start school each autumn.

Proof of Illness

- 10.2 Medical certificates from the claimant's doctor confirming incapacity must be submitted on a regular basis to the Community Welfare Officer.

Duration of Payment

- 10.3 Payment of SWA can continue for as long as the claimant continues to fulfill the conditions for the scheme.

Rates of Payment

- 10.4 The rates of payment depend on the claimant's family size, circumstances and means. The current maximum personal payment is €165.80 per week, with increases of €110.00 for a qualified adult and €16.80 for each qualified child.

Taxation of SWA

- 10.5 All payments under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, whether by way of basic SWA payments, rent and mortgage supplements, exceptional needs payments etc. are not subject to income tax.

11. Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance

Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance

- 11.1 The Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance (IDMA) is a means-tested payment which is available from the Health Service Executive (HSE) for people aged 16 years and over and who are unable to make reasonable and proper provision for their own maintenance or the maintenance of their dependants because they are undergoing treatment for a specified infectious disease.

Proof of Infectious Disease

- 11.2 Notification from the claimant's doctor confirming that the claimant has a specified infectious disease is required.

Duration of Payment

- 11.3 The Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance continues to be paid for as long as claimants are undergoing treatment to the satisfaction of the HSE and are thereby prevented from making reasonable and proper provision for their own maintenance and the maintenance of their dependants. It is also available to carriers of infectious diseases who, through taking precautions against the spread of infection, are rendered incapable of carrying out their ordinary occupation and are therefore, unable to make reasonable and proper provision for their own maintenance and the maintenance of their dependants. However, this Allowance ceases if the person is awarded another social welfare payment, e.g. Old Age Pension at 66 years of age.

Rates of Payment

- 11.4 The rate of payment of the IDMA depends on the claimant's family size, circumstances, means and whether the claimant or the spouse is receiving in-patient services. The current maximum personal rate is €165.80, with an increase of €110.00 paid in respect of a qualified adult and €16.80 in respect of each qualified

child under 16 years. €64.50 is paid in respect of a dependant (other than a spouse) aged 16 and over. Additional increases may be paid in certain cases where a helper is employed to take care of dependants or towards housing costs.

Taxation of Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance

- 11.5 The Infectious Diseases Maintenance Allowance is fully taxable.

12. Blind Welfare Allowance

Blind Welfare Allowance

- 12.1 This is a means-tested payment available from the Health Service Executive (HSE) to provide supplementary financial support to unemployed blind or visually impaired persons aged 16 years and over receiving certain social welfare payments, e.g. Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Blind Person's Pension, Old Age (Non-Contributory) Pension or Disability Benefit or an equivalent payment from another country. The HSE operates this scheme in conjunction with the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. The allowance is not paid to people in full-time residential care.

Proof of Blindness

- 12.2 Registration with the National Council for the Blind is usually accepted as satisfying the blindness condition. Where a person is not registered with the National Council for the

Blind, they are required to submit a medical report from an ophthalmic surgeon.

Duration of Payment

- 12.3 The Blind Welfare Allowance continues for as long as the claimant satisfies the qualifying conditions.

Rates of Payment

- 12.4 The rate of allowance depends on the claimant's family size, circumstances and means. A supplementary allowance of €6.20 a week is payable in addition to Disability Allowance to blind people over 16 years and under 18 years in respect of a qualified adult, while €3.90 a week is payable in respect of each qualified child. A supplementary allowance of €51.60 a week is payable in addition to a Blind Person's Pension, Disability Benefit, Invalidity Pension, Disability Allowance etc., in the case of a blind pensioner aged 18 and over, €103.20 is payable in the case of a blind couple and €4.40 is payable in respect of each qualified child.

Taxation of Blind Welfare Allowance

- 12.5 The Blind Welfare Allowance is fully taxable.

Current Organisational Targets

Activity	Standards	Claim Volume
State (Old Age) Contributory Pension	55% in 6 weeks	14,000
State (Old Age) Non-Contributory Pension	65% in 8 weeks	11,500
Retirement Pension	80% in 5 weeks	14,000
Blind Person's Pension	65% in 8 weeks	220
Disability Allowance	70% in 9 weeks	12,000
Carers Allowance	70% in 9 weeks	6,000
Disability Benefit	90% in 1 week	200,000
Invalidity Pension	70% in 9 weeks	7,500
Occupational Injury Benefit	80% in 4 weeks	18,000
Child Benefit	90% in 1 week	168,000
Free Electricity/Gas Allowance	70% in 7 weeks	39,000
Free Telephone Allowance	70% in 7 weeks	49,000
Free Travel - New Pass	90% in 4 weeks	16,000
Unemployment Benefit	85% in 2 weeks	120,000
Unemployment Assistance	70% in 2 weeks	120,000
Treatment Benefit	90% in 2 weeks	684,000
Widow/er's Contributory Pension	80% in 5 weeks	8,500
Widow/er's Non-Contributory Pension	75% in 8 weeks	1,300
One-Parent Family Payment	55% in 8 weeks	13,560
Telephone Service	90% of calls to be answered within 10 seconds	
Replies to Public Representatives	80% within 3 working weeks	
Issue of Contribution Records to Members of Public	60% in 5 days	
Issue of Claim Arrears Payments	80% within 3 weeks of claim being put in payment	
Customer Satisfaction	90% overall satisfaction with service delivery	

