

The National Citizens Information Services Strategy 2025 – 2027

Connecting Citizens

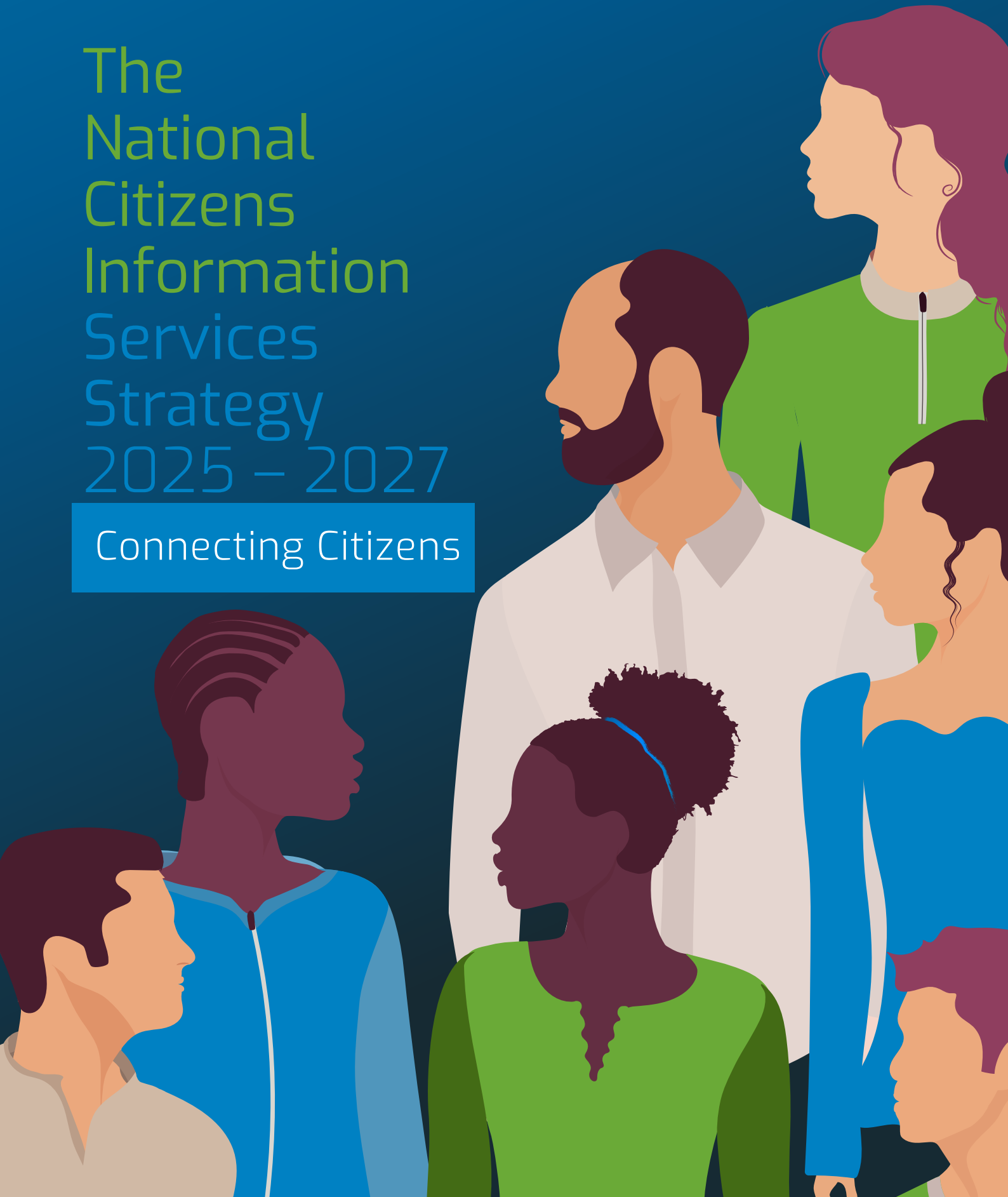


Table of Contents

01	Foreword
03	Introduction
04	Engagement Process
06	Vision, Mission and Values
08	Our Findings
13	Strategic Pillars
19	Implementation



Foreword

Mary Curran:	Chair North Connacht and Ulster Citizens Information Service
Anne Leahy:	Chair South Connacht Citizens Information Service
Judy Dunne:	Chair North Dublin Citizens Information Service
Philip Byrne:	Chair Dublin South Citizens Information Service
Hugh Farrell:	Chair North Leinster Citizens Information Service
Tom Walsh:	Chair South Leinster Citizens Information Service
Martin Quinn:	Chair North Munster Citizens Information Service
Niall Cremen:	Chair South Munster Citizens Information Service

My query was quite complicated, but the help I got was knowledgeable. They understood my issues and were very professional. I went home that day feeling like my life had been sorted out. A great service, I so needed.

The Citizens Information Service Network (CIS network) is made up of 8 Individual CIS companies supported and fully funded by the Citizen Information Board (CIB). Each Citizens Information Service covers a geographical area within its region. The 8 regional CIS companies cover the following areas: North Dublin, Dublin South, North Connacht & Ulster, North Leinster, North Munster, South Connacht, South Leinster and South Munster, facilitating both rural and urban areas, delivering a service through a network of Citizen Information Centres (CICs).

Since 1974, we have provided advice and support to help people navigate life's challenges. We have helped millions of people with free, independent and impartial one-to-one information, advice and advocacy. We have remained embedded in our community throughout the country and our volunteer roots remain close to our heart. We have not only helped people individually but also ensured that the government changed its policies, so it meets the changing needs of the people it serves through our social policy remit. The CIS has always adapted and changed to meet its clients' needs. COVID-19 is a perfect example of how the services came together and cooperated for the good of the people of Ireland. Consequently, we have seen how working together achieved better outcomes. It has become clear that it is time to develop a national strategy alliance. Hence, the first-ever CIS National Strategy was commissioned.

In developing the National Citizens Information Service strategy for the next three cycles (2025, 2026 and 2027), we sought to consult with a wide range of stakeholders so that they could help us identify the priorities over the next three years.

Staff includes core funded staff, scheme staff and volunteers.

OpenTalk, consultants, were contracted by the CIS companies to support the development of our strategy. The engagement process involved all the staffing streams of the service; the core-funded employees, scheme worker employees and volunteers, and representatives from the CIS company boards and external stakeholders, including the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and other organisations that partner with CIS.

Throughout the engagement process, a recurring theme emerged around the high regard in which CIS service is held and the passion with which staff undertake the work. Much feedback focused on what services should be provided to clients and the impact of those services on our clients' lives. We recognise that our current environment is resulting in highly complex issues for people. The CIS is now experiencing unprecedented complexities as the people we service try to navigate an increasingly complicated environment. This experience also highlights opportunities to deepen our connections with partners and stakeholders in service provision and in recognising our strength of having local and community connections.

Throughout the engagement process, comments were shared by internal and external parties about the highly skilled, dedicated and adaptable nature of all our staff, on whom the service depends.

However, the deep and wide concern that core-funded employees have about the resources being stretched, their terms and conditions not being aligned to the wider public sector and the implications of the challenging work environment for employees' health and wellbeing, remain important hurdles to address.

It is the staff and management, working cohesively together across the eight companies, who will deliver on the aspirations, focus and priorities of CIS, as outlined in this strategic plan.

The objective of this first-ever collaborative strategy is to unify the vision, mission, values and priorities across the 8 CIS companies, to achieve the best possible service, resulting in improved outcomes for CIS customers.



Introduction

The eight regional CIS companies provide the public with information, advice and advocacy services about their rights and entitlements. The CIB funds and supports the services and thus the CIS and the CIB have a joint aspiration to provide the best possible service to the public.

CIB provides oversight and infrastructure for the Service Delivery Companies, including ICT support. In turn, the CIS companies provide frontline services to the public, and it is this interaction with the public that sees CIB's legislative mandate come to life. CIB manages the formal relationship with us, the 8 CIS companies, through a Service Level Agreement.

CIB's strategy for 2023 – 2026 is part of a longer-term plan to achieve its vision over the next three strategy cycles. CIB is an important stakeholder in the CIS services, and its strategy is one of the main cornerstone documents that influence our Strategy: **Connecting Citizens**.

Agreed project objectives

- * **A national CIS-endorsed strategic framework named Connecting Citizens**
- * **An agreed vision, mission, set of values and key priorities for the next strategic cycle spanning 2025, 2026 and 2027.**
- * **All 8 companies use an agreed annual action plan template to deliver the strategy over the 3 years.**
- * **Companies to start the process of planning using this collaborative strategic framework to guide consistency in approach, also allowing for the specific needs each company/region (A template has been provided as part of this process).**



Engagement Process

People



Our staff members are at the core of ensuring the achievement of the CIS strategy. Staff includes core-funded employees, scheme workers and volunteer service delivery staff and our volunteer board members. At our heart, from our earliest days, the CIS has included volunteers working alongside paid colleagues – a key element of how we operate includes the amazing power of volunteering. We will continue to develop our volunteering models to maintain this contribution to our service, and the connection this provides to our citizens.

Connecting Citizens. The support of the board members and staff is essential to the successful delivery of the initiatives in this strategy. The following engagement process was implemented with our people.

- * 4 cross-regional online workshops, involving 80+ people, representing a range of roles in each company (January)
- * Online survey of all CIS core-funded employees, scheme employees and volunteers (February)
- * Regional Managers & Chairs of Board discussion (February)
- * Follow-up emails/contacts
- * 9 external stakeholder interviews
- * Facilitators session in advance of Croke Park
- * 280+ attendees at the Croke Park event – Core funded employees, scheme workers and volunteer engagement/review (May)
- * Chairs of Boards discussion (April)
- * Regular steering group & planning meetings

OpenTalk met with representatives of each organisation listed below for conversations lasting 45 – 90 minutes. We had a standard protocol, which enabled discussions to unfold in a way that made sense for each of the stakeholder groups.

Stakeholders

MABS

Threshold

Immigrant Council of Ireland

FLAC

CIPS

Library Services

Inclusion Ireland

Irish Traveller Movement

CIB

Treoir



Vision, Mission & Values



Our Vision

Our Vision

A society where everybody has access to free, impartial and up-to-date information, advice and advocacy to secure their rights and entitlements.



Our Mission

Our Mission

Empowering people to make informed decisions by providing free, impartial and up-to-date information, advice and advocacy on their rights and entitlements.



Our Values

Our Values

- * People-centred
- * Empowering
- * Trustworthy
- * Independent
- * Accessible



People-centred

We at the CIS, place the person at the centre of our service delivery. We see the whole picture, rather than one isolated problem. We prioritise what is best for the person needing support, and we design our services in a way that puts people's needs first.



Empowering

The CIS is committed to empowering and supporting people to make informed decisions to reach a desired outcome. We know we can make the biggest difference for people we support only when we work alongside our clients.



Trustworthy

The CIS continues to create a space of trust where people feel safe and free from judgement. We are knowledgeable and experienced and provide expert information to help people navigate complicated problems. We are proud that people trust us and recommend us.



Independent

The CIS is committed to remaining independent of government services and is embedded in the communities we serve. We aim to help our communities thrive. We work with others who want to shape a society where people face far fewer problems. We recognise that the people in our organisation; our paid, scheme and volunteer staff and board members are our most vital resources.

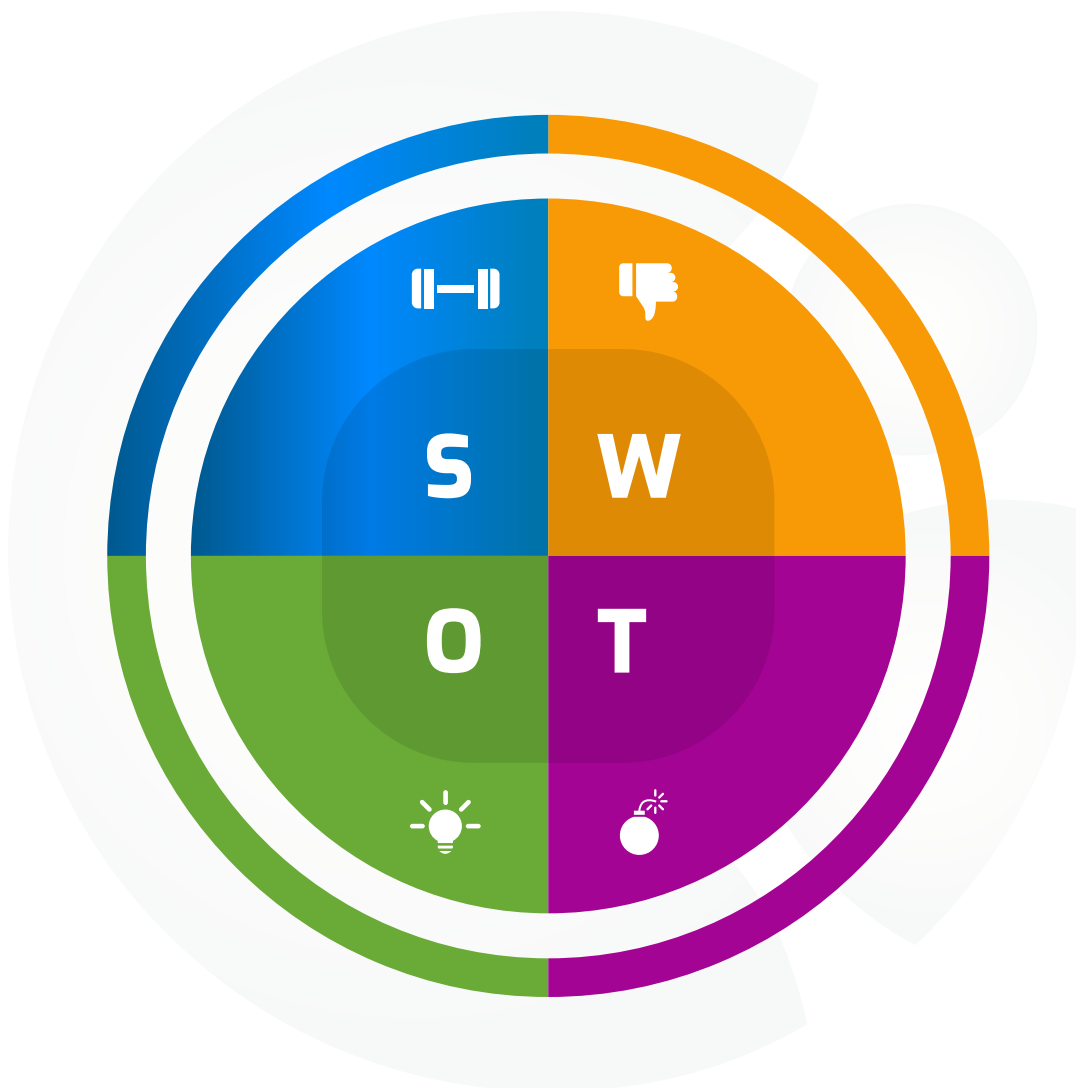


Accessible

The CIS is committed to creating a space where people can have equal access to our services, without discrimination, either remotely or in person. We recognise that inequalities are entrenched in our society; so we work to remove barriers, design inclusive approaches and meet the needs of marginalised groups.

Our Findings

Between January and May 2024, we reviewed our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats from both internal and external perspectives. Feedback identified many strengths to draw upon and several areas for improvement, which feed into the strategic priorities. Nevertheless, Feedback is set against a challenging backdrop. Significant feedback focused on the challenges of the evolving nature of and increased demand for the service, which impacts the service users and how the service should be delivered. The fast pace of change requires a speedier integration of technology where necessary. There were also many calls for a more consistent approach across the companies to several issues, like a Digital Help Service, maintaining standards and ensuring accountability. We received very diverse and useful views during this process, which are set out below. This helped us to identify our four strategic pillars. Service Delivery, People, Strengthening the Organisation and Collaboration.



Internal perspectives

Strengths

- ✓ Independent, trustworthy access to information on a broad range of issues - "almost a one-stop shop".
- ✓ Strong network, reinforced with good regional structure/collaboration.
- ✓ Fact-based action and strong advocacy expertise.
- ✓ Personal connection, offering in-person non-judgemental, professional support to anyone who contacts the service.
- ✓ Exceptional service, well valued and liked by the public.
- ✓ Staff are versatile, highly knowledgeable / skilled problem solvers.
- ✓ Website is brilliant - respected and trusted by professional bodies and users.
- ✓ Outreach programmes, e.g. prisons, schools respond to local needs
- ✓ Strong empathy and understanding of our clients.
- ✓ Strong value on social justice.

The service was excellent and gave me confidence to deal with my issue. They reassured me of my position at work. They alleviated my stress, and overall, it was a very positive experience.

Opportunities

Service delivery

- ✓ Identify clear priorities and own sense of direction.
- ✓ Define clearly CIS's advocacy approach, including standards.
- ✓ Remain the personal touch/interface between government services and the public, providing a strong customer service
- ✓ All 8 companies work, cooperatively, at a national level to achieve common goals using regional specialities/expertise, e.g. building cohesive approach to standards.
- ✓ Embrace technology and particularly AI - for the purpose of making work practices easier in certain areas (e.g. repeatable tasks) or translation services freeing up time resources for more value-added activities

Communications & Value

- ✓ Enhance communications and demonstrate impact & value, reframing the relationships.
- ✓ Streamline and target activities and smarter work patterns e.g. collaboration, digital help service.
- ✓ Build a consistent approach to stronger staff support.

Building relationships

- ✓ Position ourselves as the organisation that helps people deal with government departments.
- ✓ Strengthen in-person accessibility.
- ✓ Strengthen community outreach e.g. prisons, schools.

Internal perspectives

Weaknesses

Service delivery

- ✓ “We are everything for everyone” – “jack of all trades”. Responsive with no clear focus, sense of direction.
- ✓ Very busy, stretched/time poor, looking for resources, lost many volunteers and organisational knowledge.
- ✓ Geographical spread of some locations challenging and suggests an urban/rural divide.
- ✓ Lack of consistency across service delivery.

Value and positioning

- ✓ Poor government/public service understanding of what we do.
- ✓ Not yet able to support clients access their government digital portals.
- ✓ Challenge in communicating what CIS does and value the service brings.

Staff and capability

- ✓ Lack of comprehensive training plan for staff.
- ✓ Work locations, conditions and pay.
- ✓ Because personal values are intertwined with activities and the way the service is provided, it can make it difficult to focus on what service is needed.

Threats

Strategic direction

- ✓ Unclear of own ‘north star’ / direction.
- ✓ Other agencies are starting to move into the CIS space, especially around delivering digital help services.

Staff and capability

- ✓ Retaining and recruiting staff difficult unless issues around pay/conditions linked to the public service are resolved.
- ✓ Not staying in touch with the locality, through volunteers.
- ✓ Increasing complexity of issues and expectations, involves more time – need more resources to provide robust service
- ✓ Lack of staff to enable the services to run full time drop in services in conjunction with representative advocacy services.

They gave me a lot of information that I could not understand online. It was great to talk with someone to clarify issues. They were a great help and very knowledgeable.

External perspectives

Strengths

People

- ✓ Excellent people (staff & volunteers) – enormous skills base
- ✓ Work very hard with limited resources
- ✓ Responsive, professional, willing to flex and expand knowledge
- ✓ 'Always learning' culture
- ✓ Independent, quality advice / knowledge

Service

- ✓ Invaluable / excellent website - very comprehensive and easily accessed and understood, trustworthy source of information – the 'go to' site for many including professionals and partners – confidence in accuracy
- ✓ Good local network and good footprint in community / regions
- ✓ Wide network of connections across a range of services; CIS provides a gateway to FLAC services.
- ✓ Good examples of services targeting specific marginalised groups (in specific areas of stakeholders' areas or interest)- e.g. Clondalkin for Traveller community (dedicated CIS person), CIC within the deaf village, national prison service outreach.
- ✓ Strong capabilities in interpreting government information
- ✓ Basis for good collaboration and joined-up thinking

Value

- ✓ Strong brand recognition
- ✓ Would be a huge loss to society if it didn't exist
- ✓ Critical role in the "access to justice" journey.

Opportunities

People and resources Service

- ✓ Develop a shared vision and mission for the service
- ✓ Standardise approaches, e.g. morning drop-ins/afternoon drop-ins
- ✓ More face-to-face advocacy support and social policy work

Communications and value

- ✓ Proactively promote value and activities, targeting communications
- ✓ Integrate Plain/Clear English approach to make information more accessible
- ✓ Be more proactive about removing barriers people may experience in accessing services (as defined by the Public Sector Duty)

Relationships

- ✓ Collaborate more with purpose and consistency
- ✓ Improve two-way flow of information between agencies and CIS
- ✓ Provide feedback to agencies on how their input added value in this process, as a stepping stone to more proactive engagement in general
- ✓ Engage with CIB to ensure smooth communications

External perspectives

Weaknesses

- ✓ Poor visibility of CIS beyond website and thus poor understanding of breadth of CIS expertise and value.
- ✓ Lack of a standardised/consistent approach to service access and delivery.
- ✓ No digital help service despite the Irish Government's priority to drive the delivery of 90% of its government services online by 2030.
- ✓ Lack of systematic approach to communications and partner engagement
 - things fall between the cracks.
- ✓ Perceived reliance on volunteers to deliver service.

It made me more aware and less afraid to tackle issues, gave me more confidence, and it was great to talk to someone to simplify and double-check wording on some forms.

Threats

- ✓ Not embracing technology speedily enough for clients, particularly digital help service and AI interpretation services.
- ✓ Difficulty coordinating across 8 independent companies; so no one clear driver or way to promote all the 8 companies.
- ✓ Lack of integration necessary for raising CIS profile and understanding of value across society.
- ✓ Difficulty negotiating for better resources and better pay.

They helped me with a matter that I did not want to discuss with anybody else and that was totally confidential

Strategic Pillars

We'll build on our strengths and experience but also take action to enable us to transform together to shape a society where we are Connecting Citizens and where people face far fewer problems. It is essential that we understand and build the conditions critical for success. We will need to continually build and develop these areas in the years ahead. To this end, we have identified 4 strategic pillars which we will be focusing on over the next three years.

1. Service Delivery



- Face-to-face support
- Broaden Reach

2. People



- Promote a Positive Workplace Environment
- Continual Staff Development

3. Strengthen the Organisation



- Social Impact measurement
- Governance and Standards
- External communications and positioning

4. Collaboration



- Strengthen the Internal collaboration with the CIS network
- Strengthen CIB collaboration

Our business is to provide people with face to face information, advice and advocacy services. It is the bread and butter of what we do. However, it is not simple to do that. It is complex and skills driven. The CIS strives to continue to do this in the context of continuous improvement and by putting the people that use our service at the centre of everything we do. We will adapt to this digital world and become a critical enabler, providing people we support with access to their digital government services so that no person is left behind.

Face-to-face support

Face-to-face support is the primary function of our service. This is the core principle which underpins the service offer we give the client. We will strive to provide that option via the drop-in service or face-to-face appointments.

If the client cannot meet us face-to-face, the service will then offer an alternative that suits the client's needs, such as a callback or a virtual face-to-face appointment.

An increase in drop-in hours is possible while recognising this is resource dependent.

Develop and implement a digital help service across the network.

Develop and grow capabilities and services and make empowerment and representative advocacy a core activity.

Build a cohesive understanding of what advocacy means to the CIS and in practice at local level and standardise that across the network.

Strengthen the referral approach. Be clear when providing signposts to other services and when the CIS can provide support directly to the client, make decisions more quickly.

Broaden Reach

Connect better locally with external stakeholders e.g. Money Advice and Budgeting Services (MABs) and the National Advocacy Services (NAS), Intreo, Prison Services, County Councils, Partnership companies, HSE, Ombudsman, IHREC, FLAC, Threshold, Treoir and Housing Authorities.

Strengthen access to and support from vital services, rights and processes, for example, Free Legal Advice Centres, Prison Services, Irish Human Rights and Equality Authority, Voluntary Assistance Scheme (VAS), etc.

Run specialised clinics

Get back into the community and engage community projects with minority groups.

At our heart, we are about helping people and from our earliest days, this has included scheme workers and volunteers working alongside paid colleagues. We also value our volunteer board members who ensure the proper governance of the services. We will continue to develop these models to maintain our service and the connection this provides to our communities. We also want to make the workplace positive, vibrant, dynamic and a place of growth for our people. We have a lot of talented people, and we need to retain the knowledge base we have within the service while at the same time attract people from across the whole community. We strive to make the CIS an engaging place to work, where people feel enriched because of their work. We will continue to build a positive and purpose-driven culture with values that the staff can connect to so that they are supported to be resilient and can provide leadership for their communities.

Positive workplace environment

Agree to a leadership and management culture that is relevant for all companies and will support the strategy.

Build a culture based on empowerment, trust, openness and collaboration, allowing people to take ownership of work by providing solutions and outcomes.

Remain an attractive workplace/employer of choice.

Develop a flexible working environment.

Implement a national internal communication system focusing on communicating the CIS vision, mission and values.

Develop more opportunities for shared learning, connection, coming together and building team spirit to support sharing information collectively.

Staff development

Staff includes all our staff streams, that is, paid, scheme workers and volunteer staff.

Increase the number of paid Information Officers (IO) in each centre across the country to an agreed minimum baseline.

Extend, where necessary, the position of paid senior IO beyond the current four Dublin-based offices.

Where necessary, develop the role of a corporate manager.

Develop a national training calendar and be more structured and systematic about Learning and Development (L&D) /training, including refresher training, e.g. advocacy and Electronic Case Management System (ECMS) and personal development. Also include a national staff induction programme and a Continuing Personal Development (CPD) training model.

Clarify career paths and progression options.

Pursue accredited training for all our staff, where appropriate.

Explore a range of development options, including, e.g. internal trainers who can go between regional companies, shadowing and enhancing staff mobility.

Even though we work one-on-one with each person who comes into the service, we understand that change must happen at the policy level for it to be truly effective. To address complex social challenges, we must work in partnership with CIB and other organisations to ensure we can advocate for change at the national level, thus reaching beyond the people we meet face-to-face. To be effective at this, we must strengthen the organisation. This means investment in our brand, building on our long track record as a trusted advisor, to reach new audiences.

Impact measurement occupies a central place in strengthening the organisation. The fundamental purpose of the service is to improve people's lives, strengthen communities and bring about positive societal change. The impact is the change that has occurred in people's lives because of using the CIS service, whether positive or negative; it informs our decision-making. A positive impact will allow us to continue to develop the path we are on, while a negative impact will result in our making changes. Therefore, impact measurement must be assessed to determine whether we are making a positive social impact in line with our stated vision and mission.

Social Impact measurement

Reframe how we measure and view measurement, rather than just measuring outputs and monetary measures, and focus more on social impact measurement.

Develop an impact-oriented culture, which should influence the implementation of this strategy over a three-year planning period.

Champion the interests of citizens and consumers by monitoring issues across all relevant external policy areas and developing and adapting our position in response, using data from information advice and advocacy provision as key points of evidence. We call this our social policy returns.

Understanding the implications of policy proposals and being effective influencers for delivering change.

Developing effective and appropriate strategies and policies to bring about change.

Governance and Standards

Committing to a robust Governance Framework across the CIS network.

Developing robust service delivery standards across the network.

Commitment to the consistent recording of our work across the network to improve data capture and sharing, ensuring greater consistency in evidence-based decision-making and improving speed of service/access.

Monitoring and maintaining consistent high-quality advice across the network, addressing issues where they arise.

Committing to a quality review measurement programme across all aspects of service delivery and reporting on CIS quality performance.

External communications and positioning

Developing a brand position and corporate narrative for the network, with positive outcomes for citizens at its core.

Protecting the brand from reputational damage and issues that may reduce trust in the network.

Strengthen mutual understanding and relationship with the Citizens Information Board (CIB).

Strengthen mutual understanding and relationship with Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS).

Building awareness and understanding of the work of the network and encouraging engagement in a way that demonstrates our value.

Be more proactive with external communications to position the CIS as a trusted service by increasing our national visibility and ensuring a wider understanding of CIS work, value to society and understanding of our empowerment and representational work.

The CIC sent us in the right direction with our query and this put us at ease and took my stress out of an already stressful period.

Pillar 4

Collaboration

We know we can make the biggest difference for people we support only when we work alongside others. We work in partnership across our network as one service and with others who want to shape a society where people face far fewer problems.

Strengthen Internal collaboration with the CIS network.

Speak with a single voice on behalf of the network to improve outcomes for citizens.

Work more interactively and more as a unified network, rather than as separate companies by establishing cross-regional working groups on themes such as National Training, National Public Relations (PR), National Development Planning, National Staffing Strategy, National Volunteering, National Prison Service, CIS Strategy Implementation and the Digital Help Project.

Strengthen CIS and CIB collaboration

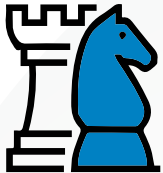
Work alongside CIB on national working groups such as Advocacy Development, Quality and Customer Care and Oyster Working Group.

I feel great confidence in the service and many times they have helped me. I would have been lost without them.



Implementation

The implementation of the CIS strategy: Connecting Citizens will involve the cooperation of the entire network and will be monitored by the boards of the companies. The business planning structure is outlined below.



Strategy

CIS strategy: Connecting Citizens outlines the Vision, Mission, Values and Strategic Pillars for CIS Network



Action plans

An annual action plan for each CIS Company will be utilised to set out priorities and actions for each year which will be linked to the CIS strategic Plan



Annual Finances

Flat or reduced annual funding and high inflation are shrinking our resources. We need to put a strong focus on the financial sustainability of the service: managing our running costs to stay competitive, making sure funders fully understand the value we deliver. We will be using our collective resources responsibly to achieve the best impact in the most sustainable way



Project Planning Business Cases

The companies will come together annually to review progress and identify agreed projects that specific funding will be requested for from CIB or other funding sources.

I went into the CIC very emotionally vulnerable, and they helped me so much with my issues, both practically and socially. I would have been lost without help that day.

The cooperation of the 8 Citizens Information Companies will be crucial to the successful delivery of the strategic initiatives in this plan.

