Citizens **Information** Board
information · advice · advocacy

Volunteering in Citizens Information Services

The role and contribution of volunteers

Executive Summary

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In early 2009 the Citizens Information Board (CIB) commissioned research on the role and contribution of volunteers in Citizens Information Services (CISs). The aim of the research was to profile volunteers in CISs and to inform CIB and CIS strategic thinking in relation to the use of volunteers. A team of researchers from the Centre for Nonprofit Management at Trinity College Dublin were commissioned to carry out the research.

The primary function of the Citizens Information Board (CIB) is the provision of information, advice and advocacy services to the public. Under the legislation[1], the mandate of the Citizens Information Board is:

» To ensure that individuals have access to accurate, comprehensive and clear information relating to public and social services

» To assist and support individuals, in particular those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options

» To promote greater accessibility, co-ordination and public awareness of social services

» To support, promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight issues which are of concern to users of those services

» To support the provision of, or directly provide advocacy services for people with a disability

» To support the provision of the Money Advice and Budgeting[2] Service (MABS)

The services provided by CIB act as an important bridge between the citizen, and public and social services. CIB is funded by the Department of Social Protection to carry out this mandate. CIB delivers on its remit via direct provision, by supporting a network of delivery partners and by funding targeted projects.

1   The Comhairle Act 2000, the Citizens Information Act 2007, and the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2008.

2   In 2009 the Board was assigned responsibility for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS).

It delivers information directly to the public via web-based information (citizensinformation.ie, microsites, assistireland.ie), periodicals and other publications. The Citizens Information Board provides direct funding and core developmental supports to:

» The network of 42 Citizens Information Services (CISs)

» The Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS)

» The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)

» Advocacy pilot projects for people with disabilities in the community and voluntary sector

» The Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS)

The Citizens Information Board also delivers on its remit through targeted project funding, where services are provided by a third party or partnership of organisations.

In particular CIB carries out its information provision role through a three-channel approach: the Citizens Information website (citizensinformation.ie), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS); and the nationwide network of Citizens Information Services (CIS).

Context of research

Information, advice and advocacy are delivered to members of the public through 42 Citizen Information Services, comprising 110 Citizens Information Centres and 152 outreach services (262 locations in total). In 2009, there were 685,778 CIS users. All CISs have information workers[3] (paid or volunteer) whose function is to provide relevant information to the public, interpret it when necessary and make representation with or on behalf of clients as appropriate. There are over 1,000 CIS volunteers providing some 2,700 hours of direct service to the public weekly[4]. This represents one third of the hours delivered by the service. The number of volunteers working in the service increased by 8% in 2009. CISs also engage in social policy work by identifying situations arising from queries and highlighting issues which are of concern to users of State services.

CISs are organised and developed around local voluntary Boards of Management and there is a significant volunteer involvement in CIS Boards of Management around the country.

The present study focuses only on the role of volunteers in day-to-day delivery of information, advice and advocacy services, not on volunteer Board Members although some volunteers perform both roles.

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3   In general we use the term information provider to describe CIS staff – paid or volunteer – who provide information to the public. In this report we use the term paid staff when we wish to distinguish between paid and volunteer information providers.

4   In 2009 there were 1,175 volunteers in Citizens Information Services providing the equivalent of 107.28 whole-time equivalent posts. There were 104.5 whole-time equivalent paid information officer posts and 97 whole-time equivalent scheme workers (Community Employment, Jobs Initiative and other job scheme workers).

Methodology

At the outset this study had two key objectives. Firstly, CIB were interested in obtaining an overview of the current deployment of volunteers in CISs as well as a profile of CIS volunteers. Secondly, CIB required research that would address a number of objectives including:

» Identifying the advantages and disadvantages of volunteer information providers

» Identifying the blocks/barriers to recruiting and retaining volunteers

» Exploring how volunteering could be developed and enhanced to support the CIB three-channel approach

» Proposing initiatives to enhance recruitment and support of volunteers in CISs

» Setting out guidelines for matching the skills of volunteers to the different aspects of the service, that is, information, advice, advocacy and social policy work

» Identifying training and other supports required to implement an agreed volunteer strategy

» Informing Citizen Information Board and CIS strategic thinking in relation to the use of volunteers and making recommendations arising from the findings

Based on the objectives of the study a multi-stage, multi-method approach was utilised for the research project. The research was divided into the following stages:

Stage I: Secondary Research: Literature Review: Compilation of existing data and literature from a volunteering perspective in order to locate the research within the general context of research conducted to date as well as the policy framework for voluntary activity in Ireland.

Stage II: Quantitative Element: This involved a nationwide online survey of volunteers in the CIS in order to present an overview of the deployment of volunteers in the service and to provide a profile of those volunteers.

Stage III: Qualitative Element: Focus group discussions with CIS Development Managers, paid staff and volunteers in order to explore the role and contribution of volunteers from all perspectives and to further tease out the topic areas addressed in the online survey. In addition interviews with identified key stakeholders and informants were also carried out.

Stage I: Secondary Research: Literature Review

Most definitions of volunteering include these elements: a commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society, local communities and other causes that is undertaken of a person's free will without payment. In Ireland research shows that volunteering can also encompass the idea of membership of a group. Therefore definitions of volunteering should also reflect the different types of organisations in which volunteers are engaged. The importance of volunteering for social services organisations is noted in the report. Since volunteers can represent both a

community and an organisation they can serve as an important link between organisations and communities. Volunteering, therefore, is important as a means of expression for individuals, social groups and communities. The rise of rights organisations and communities of interest have been important domains for self-expression as well as for advocacy and challenging social norms.

Volunteering can address social needs and reflect social norms. Even though the nature of volunteering and how it is exhibited may change over time (for example, the traditional value system of charity which informed voluntary action in Ireland) an individual's and community's need for self-expression is a significant aspect of volunteering that does not change over time.

Recent literature on volunteering has divided volunteering styles (including motivations for volunteering) into two main strands:

1) Identification with communities of interest – this is a collective style of volunteering where volunteers have a strong sense of personal responsibility to their community and are primarily concerned with 'giving back' to the community'. In the past CIS volunteers emerged from a strong community ethos.

2) The need for individual expression, often called the 'reflexive' mode – this style of volunteering is more personal and individual and volunteers are seeking to learn something or make some gain for themselves through volunteering.

Research also shows that the profile of volunteers is changing and volunteers may be engaging in short bursts of voluntary activity, rather than signing up to an organisation for life (NCV 2002). In addition an emerging trend of a reflexive style of volunteering can be seen, which may present a challenge for community-based organisations like CISs.

Evolution of the Citizens Information Service

During the late 1960s the need for the public to have easily accessible information on entitlement and services was recognised. Some voluntary bodies responded to this need by developing their own information services. Muintir na Tire was involved in the setting up of the first community information centres which were in Carlow and Tipperary. Cork was established through a different process as a Citizens Advice Bureau shortly afterwards.

The National Social Service Council[5], established in 1971, took on the role of promoting and developing a network of voluntary information services. In 1974 the Government requested the National Social Service Council to act as the central body for the development of Community Information Centres (later renamed Citizens Information Centres (CICs)). The CIC from the outset was modelled very closely on the Citizens Advice Bureau in the UK. The structures, emphasis on community representation and reliance

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5   The organisation was later renamed the National Social Service Board. In 2000 it was merged with the National Rehabilitation Board to form Comhairle which was renamed the Citizens Information Board in 2007.

on volunteers were similar. Later a significant development was the emergence of full-time county-wide key Citizens Information Centres which then evolved into Citizens Information Services (CISs). Each CIS covered a geographical region and consisted of a number of Citizens Information Centres (CICs). This model is still in use today.

During the 1990s, as part of the development of full-time services, the National Social Service Board identified the need to fund the deployment of paid staff in CISs to work side by side with volunteers on the basis that information provision was becoming more complex and demanding and that volunteers working only a small number of hours a week could not be expected to keep pace with a changing context. Funding was initially provided for the employment of development managers and subsequently for paid information workers. CISs also began to recruit staff under CE and Jobs Initiative schemes. Some CISs developed without involving volunteers in information provision while others retained some volunteers and others a strong complement of volunteers.

The structure of Citizens Information Services today

The Citizens Information Service today is staffed by paid staff, volunteers and scheme workers. The day-to-day running of each service is the responsibility of Development Managers who report to voluntary Boards of Management. Across the Service volunteers deliver, on average, three hours service each per week. This means that the 1,175 volunteers currently working in the Service

deliver roughly one third of the total hours delivered by the Service (with another two thirds delivered by paid staff and scheme workers). At the same time they represent over 75% of the staff of the Service. Clearly there is a resource implication for management and training of these numbers of volunteers. However there is also considerable variation in the use of volunteers across CISs with some relying almost wholly on paid staff and scheme workers, and other using a very large complement of volunteers to deliver services.

In conclusion voluntary action and volunteering have played a core role in the historical development of the service. This voluntary action has had a strong local identity in many instances and the varied origins of CISs have given rise to variations in practice and culture across the service.

Comparative models

This chapter also looks at citizens' information services in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. Looking across these models we can see that culturally and historically the emergence of information services in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and Scotland differ to the emergence of the services in Ireland. However there are a number of specific practices around the role and contribution made by volunteers in those information services which could provide useful models for the CIS to consider in the development of volunteers in the service. For example, in Ireland volunteers play three key roles in the service while in the UK, NI and Scotland many more roles where volunteers

make a contribution were identified. CIB and the CIS could explore other possible roles that volunteers could play in the service and become more innovative about their use of volunteers in the overall service.

Stage II: Key Findings – Quantitative Online Survey

This is the first large-scale survey of volunteers to be undertaken by the Citizens Information Board. In total 437 (over 40%) volunteers completed a comprehensive online questionnaire about the role and contribution of volunteers in the CIS.

The survey of volunteers has produced data on the demographic make-up of the CIS volunteer cohort, their experience of volunteering in the CIS, their perception of their role and functioning, and their engagement with the various elements of the training programme. Below is a summary of the key findings from the survey.

Profile of CIS volunteers

The findings suggest that volunteers are more likely to be Irish, female, married and aged 45 years or older. This profile generally matches the profile of volunteers found in Census 2006 (volunteers are generally from the professional and middle classes, and from those aged 35 and older). However the percentage of women working as volunteers in the Citizens Information Service (78%) differs from the national profile which is split evenly between men and women.

Volunteers have been living in their locality for more than 11 years (over 77%), tend to be either retired or working full-time in the home (50% retired and 20% working in the home) and have professional or third-level qualifications. More than half the volunteers in the CIS have been volunteering on a weekly basis for up five years giving between three and five hours per week. Twenty-eight percent have volunteered for 6-14 years and almost 20% have volunteered for 15 years or more.

The majority of volunteers (90.9%) were of Irish nationality and the remainder were non-Irish nationals. This breakdown reflects the population as a whole based on the most recent data available from the Central Statistics Office. Few have dependent children, probably due to the age profile (just over 20%), and the vast majority do not have any special needs (over 95%).

Training and information provision

In general volunteers were satisfied with the induction and training they received in the CIS. However only 16% per cent of volunteers in the service had completed FETAC accredited training so there appears to be a large number of volunteers who are not trained to FETAC levels of accreditation. (This may be partially explained by the time commitment required to do the training compared to the number of hours worked by an average volunteer. In addition longer-serving volunteers tend to be less interested in accreditation and some volunteers already offer expertise in a particular area such as the law and do not seek further accreditation.) In addition to formal training, the most

common forms of support that volunteers received were 'working as a pair with a more experienced person' and 'newsletters and other communication methods'.

Volunteer information providers stated that they were most knowledgeable about 'information provision' and the 'provision of advice' aspects of the service. They indicated that they were less knowledgeable about the 'social policy feedback' and 'provision of advocacy' aspects. Looking at the information sources that volunteer information providers use, the most common included the Citizens Information website and relevant government publications and websites. The volunteers stated that they found it easy to access information on the Citizens Information website and were happy to use this source. According to the volunteers the most important support in helping them to answer customers queries were CIS paid staff, other volunteers and specialist support from voluntary agencies.

Attitudes to their role and the Citizens Information Service

Respondents were also asked a number of attitudinal questions about their perception of their role and the work of the service.

The CIS volunteers who took part in this study saw their role as one of connecting the local community with the services provided by the CIS and stated that their belief in the importance of the work carried out by the CIS was a key factor in their decision to become a volunteer. Volunteers in this study indicated that, if they were unhappy with any aspect of

their work in the CIS, there was someone they could talk to. They also believed that they were kept informed about developments in their CIS. On the other hand, many had never been in touch with CIB in Dublin as they felt they did not need to in order to carry out their work in their CIS.

The volunteers felt their contribution was valued by all – customers, paid staff and other volunteers. Finally, they also stated that the CIS would not be able to continue to operate fully without volunteers, that they felt that a strong community ethos would continue to influence the work of the CIS and that the CIS would need to play a greater role in supporting marginalised groups, such as people with language problems and people with intellectual disabilities.

Stage III: Key Findings – Qualitative research

As stated earlier, focus group discussions with volunteers and paid staff (eight in total) and key informant face-to-face interviews (10 in total) were also conducted. The focus group work has enabled a deeper exploration of issues regarding:

i)   The role and functioning of volunteers within the CIS

ii) Their relevance in the context of the challenges of increasing service demand and information complexity now facing the CIS

iii) The possible shape and management of the volunteer contribution to the future delivery of a national CIS.

The views expressed in the focus groups are both subjective and particular and may, or may not, reflect accurately, either views held more widely within the Citizen's Information Service or the empirical reality across the Service. What this qualitative work does offer is a sense of the range and depth of perceptions regarding the present functioning and future possibilities of volunteers within the Service. Where generalisations were expressed by participants in focus groups they were inevitably accompanied by caveats regarding variation across individual CICs. The main lines of distinction drawn were:

i)   Between volunteer-led CICs and those led by paid staff

ii) Between CICs originating within the community (often prior to the establishment of a CIS) and those originating outside the community and placed within it

iii) Between urban and rural CICS

Despite differences in how services are delivered and of culture in different CISs volunteers, paid staff and development managers were all insistent that from a client's perspective volunteer-based information provision should be indistinguishable from that provided by paid staff[6]. Within the volunteer focus groups the model of combined volunteer and paid information officers was argued to be a valuable delivery model, and one that was preferable to the volunteer only model.

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6   There is no basis from this research for any distinction between the quality of information provision by volunteers and paid information staff.

Key findings of the qualitative research

Key findings included:

» A deep commitment on the part of the volunteers and staff of the CISs, and of the staff of CIB, to the provision of a quality information and advice service at the point of need.

» A clear and articulated commitment by CIB to the centrality of the volunteer contribution in the local delivery of Citizens Information and advice services.

» A shared concern across the Citizens Information Service with the quality and consistency of service provision and with how best to achieve and maintain improvements in service provision.

» A very good relationship that typically exists between volunteers and paid staff within the CISs.

» A widespread view regarding the particular value and effectiveness of a mixed volunteer and paid staff model of information and advice delivery at local level.

» A broad recognition that information and advice provision is becoming increasingly complex and varied, that the demand for services is increasing, and, that under these conditions, the present approach to volunteer recruitment, development, and role performance may not be enough.

» A growing recognition that increased unemployment levels in Ireland has potentially generated a large new pool of possible volunteers for the service.

Such common ground offers a firm basis for addressing the future development of the role of volunteers within the Citizens Information Service.

The focus group discussions also identified some issues to be addressed:

1) There are tensions in the relationships between CIB and CISs. These tensions appear to have their origins in the historical development of the various elements of the Citizens Information Service and in the identification of individuals with their local service. These tensions may also relate to an anti-managerialism which can occur in voluntary organisations. Some volunteers show a lack of awareness of how the three Citizens Information delivery strands (website, telephone service and CISs) make up a single response to the national requirement for the provision of information, advice and advocacy.

2) There are organisational issues across the service which relate to the inter-play of statutory responsibilities on the part of CIB, historical independence on the part of CISs, and the funding relationship between CIB and the CISs. For example many staff and volunteers are unclear as to whether it is the CIB role to support volunteers in any direct way or whether it is a function of the local CIS with backup resources from CIB.

3) There are challenges and concerns in relation to developing and ensuring consistent and uniform levels of service provision across the Service. These

concerns are heightened in the face of increased demand, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for information and advice services during the current economic downturn. At present there is no systematic means of measuring the quality of information provision within and throughout the service. In addition the provision of advocacy by volunteers is regarded differently by different CISs.

4) These issues (1-3 above) invariably impact on the experience of volunteers within the service and their perception of their relationship with CIB.

Recommendations

Under the leadership of the Citizens Information Board, the Citizens Information Service has developed into a well regarded national service. The extensive network of CISs is united by a commitment to service delivery and ongoing development. This work is strongly supported by the volunteers in the service, and in some instances is dependant on volunteers for delivery.

The environment in which the Citizens Information Service operates is very dynamic. The present economic recession, as well as the previous economic boom, has given rise to an increasing demand for Citizens Information Services and increasingly complex information needs which present challenges.

These environmental challenges are being met by a strategic focus on placing the citizen at the centre of the organisational endeavour. In turn, this focus places increased emphasis

on co-ordination across the service and on working in partnership. At an operational level this is leading to the development of universal standards of service delivery and evaluation, as well as the development of new advocacy services.

Historically and in current practice there is a principled attachment to a substantial volunteer involvement in the Citizens Information Service. There is no necessary contradiction between the idea of a volunteer-based service provision and the delivery of high and universal standards of service. However there are substantial costs associated with the training and management of volunteers which need to be fully acknowledged.

The continuing importance of such voluntary action in the future delivery and development of the service may be considered as a matter of principle and necessity. However voluntary action that remains local in its orientation and direction will find it difficult to play an ongoing role as the Citizens Information Service works towards developing the consistency and quality of its service. The importance of the present contribution and future potential contribution of volunteers needs to be articulated at national level as well as at local level. At present there does not appear to be a shared meaning around volunteering and the use of volunteers across the service as a whole. It is important that such a shared meaning in relation to the role of volunteers within the service is generated and fostered across the service as a whole.

Linking the CIS volunteer role to active citizenship

We propose that CIB consider the merits of placing the concept of citizenship at the heart of the identity of the Citizens Information Service. The concept of citizenship, in its balancing of rights and responsibilities, strikes a position between the voluntary agency and that of the State agency. Citizenship, not only places the concerns of the citizen as 'client' at the heart of the organisational endeavour, but serves also to recognise the appropriateness and legitimacy of the actions of the citizen as 'volunteer' within the service.

In this scenario the Citizens Information Service is seen to be for citizens, informed by citizens, run by citizens. With such an identity, the Citizens Information Service is placed within the public imagination as an organisational expression of citizenship in practice. This identification with the national community will support the sense of belonging to a national rather than a localised citizen information endeavour.

Positioning the concept of citizenship as an important element in the organisational identity of the Citizens Information Service is consistent with the intention set out in the CIB Strategic Plan 2009-2012 to 'actively play our part in achieving the Government's vision for a more citizen-centred public service' (CIB 2009: 10). It is consistent also with Strategic Priority 3, namely, 'to serve as a pivotal and trusted intermediary between citizens and public services' (CIB 2009: 20).

Therefore we propose an integrated series of actions aimed at:

» Articulating an organisational identity for the Citizens Information Service as a national service which encompasses CISs, volunteers, paid staff and clients.

» Generating a shared meaning across the service delivery partners that clarifies all the operational steps needed to deliver on a shared strategy, particularly in relation to service quality within a citizen-centred approach. This shared meaning should be maintained through improved communication throughout the service.

» Developing and instituting a national volunteer strategy, designed to support operational requirements, that is characterised by multiple roles, targeted recruitment, specialised training and attention to volunteer biographies.

These actions should be framed and carried out in a manner which is consistent with, and directly supportive of, the key priorities and associated operational goals of the Citizen Information Board and its service delivery partners, as set out in their Strategic Plan 2009-2012.

The recommendations are set out in greater detail in Chapter Five and are presented here under four specific headings:

1. Creating elements of a shared meaning across the Citizens Information Service

» Articulate a CIB commitment to volunteer involvement in the service as both a principle and a necessity.

» Clarify and promote the integrated nature of the three- channel approach to information provision in providing a national service at the point of need.

» Promote the essential unity of the service, whilst recognising a range of origins and associated loyalties within the CISs

» Develop the idea of citizenship as the underlying value of the Service, uniting staff, volunteers and clients in the exercising of rights and responsibilities.

» Create and promote a stronger national identity for the Citizens Information Service.

» Re-envision the potential range of roles of volunteers within the Service.

» Institute and lead, through CIB, the development of a national volunteer strategy for the Service, consistent with the Strategic Plan 2009-2012.

2. Operational elements of a volunteer strategy

» The expansion of volunteer roles and the specification of a number of volunteer roles within the Service, including related training requirements.

» The institution of a national volunteer recruitment strategy directed to the specified roles.

» The enlargement of the CIB Training Programme, to cater for the increased training needs of additional volunteer roles.

» The creation of a volunteer database (the capacity is already present in the Oyster data collection system).

3. Attending to the volunteer experience

» Forging a sense among volunteers that they belong to a national cohort.

» Instituting a national volunteer service recognition system.

» Instituting a volunteer e-zine to support the sense of national cohort and to provide a platform for the sharing of experiences and knowledge.

» Support volunteers in the development and advancement of their own volunteer biography or 'career path' within the organisation.

4. Structural adjustments proposed for implementation

» Assigning responsibility at a management level within CIB, supported by a dedicated Volunteer Development Team and budget line.

» Deepening the processes of collaborative development between CIB and the CISs.

» Assigning specific responsibility for volunteer development to the Development Managers within the CISs.

» Instituting the role of volunteer co-ordinator at CIS/CIC level, where there is a large number of volunteers.

» Consider the structural approach to be taken to the possible involvement of volunteers in the development of advocacy services and social policy.

We present these recommendations recognising that the Citizens Information Service is a system where change requires discussion, and the realignment of people, and that variation across the service delivery partners may mean that such change moves at different speeds in different quarters. All these proposals are ultimately directed towards one end, that is, the agreement nationally of the form and standard of a service that is supported centrally and delivered locally.

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

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