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Henry C.
Tierney

Foreword

NCBI was founded in 1931 and as we are now celebrating our 75th year it is only appropriate that we review our beginnings and re-call the developments that have occurred in the intervening years.

The climate in which we are now working is clearly very different from that which existed when the founding members set out to establish services with an emphasis on people who were blind. Consequently, in the year of our 75th anniversary, it is timely to reassess the direction of the organisation and to create a framework to take us into the future. This is the essence of what is intended in our strategic plan, which is presented in the following pages.

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland was founded by Alice Armitage in 1931 with the purpose of alleviating poverty among the people who were blind in Ireland at that time. NCBI's work was carried out by means of direct assistance in the form of cash and material grants, e.g. food and fuel, as well as the

creation of income-generating schemes such as craft industries. NCBI also employed 'Home Teachers for the Blind' who were trained in teaching communication skills to people who were blind. The foregoing mirrored the then levels of service interventions in the UK.

The 1980s saw a shift in this focus with the recognition that the issues surrounding disability were much broader than those perceived by our founders and could no longer be met solely by the founding approach to our work.

New service developments in the early 80s included the employment of people from a social work background who were subsequently trained by NCBI in rehabilitation skills. As we move forward in the 21st century, this approach to staffing our service delivery will remain at the heart of current and future ways of delivering our services, substantially augmented by staff from other disciplines, by peer developed services and by volunteer activity. We have moved from our charitable foundations right through to a social and transactional model for interpreting disability.

Historically, NCBI provided services to individuals who were blind or vision impaired and their families. These have, however, been complimented in more recent years by the development of a range of services to the public at large, the aim of which is to educate and advocate for the rights of people with a vision disability, including their accommodation within a barrier free environment.

As part of these developments, NCBI addressed one

of the most disabling aspects of blindness and vision impairment, i.e. access to the printed word and its pathways to education, literature, and culture, when, in 1988, it took under its wing the library services of the Irish Association for the Blind. Since then NCBI has continued to develop and expand this service through the provision of an expansive library and reading service to people who are blind or vision impaired in Braille and voice recorded formats. In addition to providing a library service directly to individuals, NCBI today contributes to the increasing demand for accessible information through our media conversion service to public and private bodies.

The other more recent shift in service provision has been in the area of low vision services. Traditionally, we provided services to people who were legally blind, a definition which was developed by the Blind Persons Act of 1920, in order to set the medical criterion for eligibility to financial benefits. However, with an increased body of research indicating the negative impact of vision loss on quality of life and the positive impact of early intervention, NCBI has developed a range of services to people who heretofore would not qualify on medical grounds. This area of low vision rehabilitation allows for people to adjust in a planned way to the potential deterioration of their quality of sight without a commensurate reduction in their quality of life.

NCBI is guided by the World Health Organisation's definition of a person with low vision as being 'someone who has an impairment of visual functioning even after

treatment and/or standard refractive correction, but who uses, or is potentially able to use, vision for the planning and/or execution of a task’.

NCBI has in the past delivered a range of services to people who are blind or vision impaired to enable them to develop the skills and techniques necessary to fully participate in society, and will continue to do so into the future. We will, however, equally commit to reducing misconceptions and prejudices and in building capacity in areas which tackle the ‘real problems of blindness’.

One of the areas in which we have invested a considerable amount of energy over the years has been that of fundraising as a resource for the development of services. As we have moved into what can be viewed as a more modern type of statutorily-funded service provision, it could be said that many of the funding issues have been addressed through the current funding arrangements with the HSE. However, NCBI’s ability to develop and to innovate new services continues to rely on our capacity to generate fundraised income.

This strategic plan is accompanied by other significant changes in how the agency now represents itself, such as a new logo, new website and the rebranding of the organisation to NCBI (from National Council for the Blind of Ireland). The strapline which follows NCBI, ‘working for people living with sight loss’, is intended to indicate the broad and inclusive nature of our services to people with sight loss. These combined changes are all part of a process towards the presentation of a more modern image of an evolving organisation.

We acknowledge with deep appreciation all those who took the time and effort to give their considered opinions, in meetings, surveys and discussions, about the future direction of NCBI. We trust that you will find that this strategic plan reflects the essence of these measured contributions.

We also recognise that various challenges may be faced as we work towards the realisation of our vision. At times considerable effort will be required as we move towards a more effective way of working. However we have considerable trust in the expertise and professionalism of all our key stakeholders to ensure that what we have set out is achievable.

Henry C. Tierney

Chairperson

NCBI's vision, mission and values statements

NCBI's vision statement is intended to provide direction and purpose to everything we do. It is a description of a desired outcome that should inspire and energise us all in our work. Vision and mission statements are complementary to each other. While the vision statement presents an ideal purpose for our work and gives a direction to our ultimate destination, the mission statement represents our chosen path to get there.

NCBI's vision

For people who are blind or vision impaired to have the same opportunities, rights and choices as others to fully participate in society.

NCBI's mission

To enable people who are blind or vision impaired to overcome the barriers that impede their independence and participation in society.

NCBI's values

NCBI's core values give effect to our vision, permeate our mission and inform all of our actions to ensure that we achieve the highest standards in everything we do.

Values statement

Inclusive approach

NCBI listens to those who use our services, to staff members, volunteers and all other stakeholders and collaborates in the design and delivery of our services and related activities.

Choice

NCBI acknowledges and respects the right of people to make choices about their lives. We strive to support people who are blind or vision impaired in exercising this right.

Openness and accountability

NCBI carries out its work in an open manner and is accountable to all stakeholders for our actions and decisions.

Pursuit of excellence

NCBI is committed to attaining excellence in everything we do through our policies and staff practices.

Strategic goals

NCBI's mission will be implemented through the pursuit of the six strategic goals outlined below

Service delivery goal

To deliver quality nationwide services which are relevant and innovative.

Collaboration goal

To provide services in partnership with those who use them and, where appropriate, to collaborate with other organisations in promoting the well-being, social and cultural inclusion, and the economic independence of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Research goal

To support and/or conduct research relating to vision loss in order to ensure the continued provision of innovative and relevant services by NCBI and the public and private sectors as a whole,

as well as the development of eye health initiatives.

Accessibility goal

To work toward a barrier-free environment, by providing expertise, education and assistance in making buildings, services, technologies and information accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Advocacy goal

To pursue the elimination of discrimination based on vision loss by influencing public policy and increasing public awareness.

Professionalism goal

To foster the highest level of staff performance in a progressive workplace through continuous learning and professional development.



**Desmond P.
Kenny**

Introduction

This strategic document reflects the key issues and priorities identified by the NCBI Board, staff and service users, which will shape and drive NCBI's development into the future.

This strategy contains six goals, which derive their consistency from NCBI's vision;

'For people who are blind or vision impaired to have the same opportunities, rights and choices as others to fully participate in society.'

Themes, key activities and supporting actions are assigned to each strategic goal to guide us in the effective implementation of this plan and also to provide the basis for measurable outcomes.

Heretofore, NCBI has responded to the increased demands and expectations of stakeholders by developing new initiatives and by restructuring or improving the capacity of existing services. The combination of increasing numbers of people requiring our services and the demands that will be made from statutory and funding agencies for higher accountability have made it necessary for NCBI to develop a more systematic, considered and structured blueprint to manage the future.

Implementation of this strategic plan will take place over a five year period beginning in early 2007. In terms

of planning and forecasting, this is a relatively long time. As with any strategic plan, this document draws on work already in progress and will initiate projects which will extend beyond 2012. It will be supported by annual business plans which will outline the resourcing strategies required to support its effective implementation.

This strategic plan is intended to provide a framework for our organisation's development into the future and, as such, attempts to predict and plan for the likely realities facing the organisation over the next five years. These include a changing political, economic and social climate, major technological advances, as well as an increasing number of people accessing NCBI services.

Should recent trends continue, NCBI's service user base is set to increase significantly because, in addition to more people presenting with age-related sight conditions, NCBI now offers services to people who have not yet reached the point of being registrable as 'blind'.

The next part of the introduction presents an overview of the trends, forces, and events likely to have a social, technological, economic, environmental and political (legislative) impact on people who are blind or vision impaired in Ireland and on their services over the next five years.

Social factors

Demographic changes significantly influence the way in which society is organised and consequently impact on the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired and on the nature of services required.

Those factors most likely to impact in the future are

- the increasing age of the population.
- the rise in immigration.
- the increase in the number of people moving to cities and towns.

Increasing age of the population

Increased longevity is the greatest achievement of the twentieth century, one which is welcomed and celebrated. However it brings with it a number of challenges, particularly when it is accompanied by a decline in health or an increase in disabling conditions. It has long been established that age is a risk factor in certain eye conditions. A study carried out by NCBI to identify the trends in relation to eye conditions which led people to register between 1996 and 2003 showed an increase of 113% in those experiencing age-related macular degeneration (accounting for 25% of the registered number in 2003). Glaucoma represented 12% of the register the same year. As of the beginning of 2007, there are no treatments on the horizon that might significantly reduce the numbers experiencing sight loss.

As NCBI works with ever increasing numbers of older people who are registered as blind, as well as those with low vision, the size of the organisation's database of service users is increasing at an estimated rate of 12% year-on-year.

Based on past growth in the number of NCBI service users, as well as demographic trends, 25,000 blind or vision impaired people are likely to be availing of NCBI services by 2015. This does not take into account the estimated increase in the number of people aged over 65, by as much as 200% over the next 30 years and 300% over the next 50 years.

Rise in immigration

The number of immigrants coming to Ireland from in excess of 110 countries presents new challenges to NCBI. This potential new service user base, whose first language will not be English, will include those with a pre-disposition to conditions such as glaucoma. We will also potentially be working with families of children who are likely to have incurred sight loss from diseases such as Rubella - controlled up to now in Western society by immunisation programmes.

Increase in the number of people moving to cities and towns

As younger people move to towns and cities in ever increasing numbers, they leave behind, in rural Ireland, parents who will face an old age without immediate family supports available to them. The creation of

near ghost towns and villages, where people are only found in the evening, or at weekends and holiday periods, means that there may be little support from neighbours in times of need. It also poses difficulties for the providers of personal social services as there is a reduced pool of people from which to recruit those who could work as home helps and personal assistants. These factors, combined with poor public transport and a reduction in local services such as Post Offices and banks, serve to further isolate older people in rural communities. Consequently, older people, some of whom are vulnerable, may experience minimal social contacts and have a limited social network.

Technological factors

Technology has in many ways revolutionised the way in which we live our lives. Its usage has permeated every aspect of life, from work to home to school to leisure. IT is playing an ever-increasing role in facilitating the independence and inclusion of people who are blind or vision impaired.

As technology is a bridge to participation in society, it also can be a barrier to inclusion. Good practice amongst the providers and managers of the pathways to digital information and communications must be fostered and supported to ensure that their services are accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired. The informed application of technology by businesses and service providers alike will ensure that their services are universally accessible

In addition, technology must be seen as a work tool, occupying a more central position in NCBI's planning and delivery of services. We must learn to predict and cope with technological changes that could fundamentally alter the way in which NCBI works and provides key services.

Economic factors

In a climate where the competition for resources is keen there will always be difficulties in getting funders to recognise what services should be offered by NCBI and for which NCBI should receive full statutory funding. Persuasion by way of lobbying may need to be conducted in company with other organisations working in the area of vision impairment or blindness. Health-funded services for people who are blind or vision impaired are perceived by NCBI as being low in funding priorities relative to other disability service categories. Also, the compartmentalisation of funding streams within the health sector is leading to inequities which will worsen in time if not addressed.

The restriction of funding for disability related services to people under the age of 65 adversely affects people with vision impairment in later years. NCBI believes that government should pay particular attention to ensuring that older people with significant sight loss access the necessary services and that as an organisation we are not limited in this service provision through lack of funding.

As a voluntary organisation, NCBI will continue to

require an income from fundraising. In so doing, NCBI must strike a balance between the financial needs of the agency and its attempt to create a more enlightened view of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Competition in the area of fundraising is becoming more intense, with innovation and novelty having to contend with obvious public fatigue. There are over 8,000 charities registered with the Revenue Commissioners which engage in fundraising and contend for public attention.

NCBI aims to continue to manage our donor and fundraised income to pilot innovative schemes, to fund research and to manage capital projects in the form of new facilities that will offer new services.

If statutory funding falls short for agreed core services, and if donor and fundraised income need to be applied to the delivery of existing services, it is not inconceivable that NCBI will be confronted with the need to make difficult choices in order to achieve balanced budgets.

Renewed effort must be put into the re-organisation of local fundraising in tandem with the growth of local volunteer programmes. The current reliance on overseas events will see income decline as competition from other charities increases in an area of fundraising in which NCBI once led the way. Our innovative talents must be refocused towards rebuilding simple as well as complex systems of income generation for NCBI.

Environmental factors

NCBI operates in an environment where a range of statutory and voluntary organisations provide health and personal social services to people with disabilities, including people with vision loss. This environment is constantly changing and evolving. NCBI recognises the value of working in partnerships and in the effective coordination of services. We will seek to avoid unnecessary duplication of services as well as unproductive competition and will work towards the development and management of positive working relationships with other organisations working in the area of vision impairment and blindness.

Generic service providers may also compete with NCBI if they believe that some of their provisions can achieve better economies of scale for people who are blind or vision impaired.

NCBI will have to respond to the reality that there are service providers in the community who will be in a position to supply components of services to people who are blind or vision impaired. NCBI must provide a bridge for service users to these services and develop relationships with their providers to ensure that services become and remain user friendly to people who are blind or vision impaired, as they may extend the quantity of services available to this segment of the population.

Political factors

Legislative changes within the last decade have brought an acknowledgement of disability as a social issue with the consequent recognition of the lack of inclusion of this sector of the population within our society. Some of the legislative enactments which impact on people who are blind or vision impaired are the Equal Status Act 2000, The Education of People with Special Needs Act 2004, National Disability Strategy 2006-2016 and the Disability Act 2005 as well as the HSE Reform Programme.

During the currency of this strategic plan we will also see the enactment of regulations governing charities. NCBI welcomes this last development as being long overdue but acknowledges that regulation brings with it uncertain times while the legislation is being interpreted into practice.

NCBI recognises that the exclusion and disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities are as a result of the social, economic and material barriers created by the world in which they live and must be challenged if people who are blind or vision impaired are to have the same opportunities, rights and choices as others to fully participate in society. We have a significant role to play in advocating for the removal of these barriers with public relations and 'lobbying' being the primary tools for the achievement of this goal.

The foregoing concludes the brief analysis of the main factors likely to be of concern to NCBI as we move forward. The future will present both challenges and opportunities. The challenges must be managed so as to become surmountable, while the opportunities must be evaluated as potential new avenues of work for NCBI.

Desmond P. Kenny

Chief Executive Officer.

A black and white close-up portrait of George Harrison. He is an elderly man with white hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a striped collared shirt and a dark sweater. The background is solid black.

George Harrison

Service Delivery Goal

To provide quality nationwide services which are relevant and innovative.

Themes and directions

NCBI is the major provider of disability related services to people who are blind or vision impaired living in Ireland. The provision of services has and will continue to be the basis for the existence of this organisation and as such requires considerable attention. The successes achieved in our other goals will ultimately impact on the quality and quantity of the services delivered both directly and indirectly to people who are blind or vision impaired throughout Ireland.

NCBI will work together with the people who use our services and staff to develop nationally consistent outcome measurements to evaluate the relevance of our services for each person. One of the ways we can do this is by using technology to maximum advantage by the further development of our Management and Tracking System (MATS) into a fully comprehensive Contact Relations Management System (CRMS). This will result in a service user-focused, technology-based system of case management.

Based on this information we will develop new and innovative services to meet the identified needs of our service user base.

Key activity 1: We will provide services of the highest quality to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Audit regional services to ensure quality and consistency throughout NCBI, and to support this work through the establishment of a 'quality office'.
- Develop and implement an evidence-based system, whereby people who use the services of NCBI may assess their experience of service provision and measure the outcome/impact of the interaction. (CRMs)
- Benchmark our services against international best practice in both the range and delivery of systems for services across the life cycle of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Key activity 2: We will plan developments to ensure equitable access to all services.

Supporting actions:

- Develop fully equipped resource centres in each of the four HSE regions, to be known as regional centres.
- Ensure availability of all NCBI services from these centres.

- Provide for centre-based, individual and group training in all aspects of support and rehabilitation.
- Offer a comprehensive display of adaptive aids and assistive devices.
- Develop local satellite centres in larger towns and cities as resources and funding permit to support regional centres.

Key activity 3: We will offer services and programmes appropriate to the needs of people at different stages in the life cycle.

Supporting actions:

- Provide services which embrace vision rehabilitation, recreation and leisure, education, vocational and employment support, technology provision, community awareness and environmental access.
- Design new services for blind or vision impaired people who are older. These services will mesh with local and age provisions of the HSE and other service providers.
- Acquire a knowledge and expertise in the issues relating to people who experience deaf-blindness and/or multiple disability, towards ensuring that a range of holistic services are available to them.
- Recruit key staff members and source expertise to

ensure that a holistic service is available from NCBI and/or other agencies to children who are blind or vision impaired.

Key activity 4: We will ensure that the principles and practices of Person Centred Planning become an integral part of NCBI's work.

Supporting actions:

- Develop a way of working which will guarantee that service users participate in decisions about the services they receive and the way they have them delivered.
- Introduce an effective method of assessment to establish what each service user perceives as being essential to the promotion of their well being and quality of life.
- Develop a method of working whereby a plan of action linked to desired outcomes based on assessment will be agreed.

Key activity 5: We will provide new and innovative services based on identified need through a rigorous consultation process.

Supporting actions:

- Further develop a volunteer corps as an additional support service to work alongside NCBI paid staff as colleagues.
- Innovate new peer support services to be co-ordinated and supported by NCBI frontline staff.
- Provide a range of services with a fee for service approach which will help meet the costs of NCBI supporting third-party obligations under the provisions of The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and The Disability Act 2005.
- Develop a call-centre contact type service which will allow NCBI to offer services over an extended day of 13 hours and into weekends.
- Develop an integrated digital library system (IDLS) which will put in place new systems and methodologies to integrate and streamline the Library's present work and also to create new services for service users in all user profiles.
- Develop the provision of indirect services in media format conversion to meet the anticipated rapid growth in the future.
- Promote and encourage the use of Braille as a literacy tool.

Ciarán O'Brien



Collaboration Goal

To provide services in partnership with those who use them and, where appropriate, to collaborate with other organisations in promoting the well-being, social and cultural inclusion, and the economic independence, of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Themes and directions

NCBI service delivery is based upon the highest possible principles of customer care in which the users of NCBI services will be afforded every opportunity to voice their opinions on the appropriateness to them of NCBI's services. NCBI will also design, in collaboration with people who are blind or vision impaired, methods for improving services and, as appropriate, introduce new, more relevant, services.

In externalising this approach to working partnerships and collaborations, NCBI will work towards the creation of a network of like-minded agencies that have the information and expertise to provide timely and substantive policy input to the NCBI, the community, and all levels of government.

Essential partners will include other organisations working in the area of vision impairment and blindness, as well as interested individuals, coalitions, professional organisations, and pan-disability groups. Together, we should create a vocal, influential network to challenge the barriers to inclusion that currently exist.

Key activity 1: We will establish a framework for consultation with people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Consult with purpose and at regular intervals with persons who are blind or vision impaired on their view of the type and nature of services provided by NCBI.
- Develop a system of service user feedback in the course of service delivery.
- Establish four regional consultative forums to be comprised of blind or vision impaired people and volunteer representation to feed into NCBI policy formulation.
- Review NCBI's governance to ensure that blind or vision impaired people contribute to NCBI, through their expertise and from their unique experiences as blind or vision impaired people.

Key activity 2: We will collaborate and develop working relationships with external agencies/organisations.

Supporting actions:

- Regularly review NCBI services to determine if there are any that NCBI should consider mainstreaming, transferring to or sharing with other service providers.
- Formalise our working relationships with other organisations to directly benefit the service user as well as to support NCBI's advocacy work on behalf of people who are blind or vision impaired.
- Strengthen links with mainstream equality and human rights agencies to advocate for full inclusion. In so doing we must ensure that NCBI does not take on a role that is not fully ours but the responsibility of all of Irish society.
- Establish a network of sight loss organisations for the purposes of collectively advancing the mutual interests we share for people who are blind or vision impaired in specific and general ways.

Key activity 3: Develop a seamless eye care and visual rehabilitation pathway to ensure timely and relevant information to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Research people's experiences of receiving information and referral.
- Educate and inform ophthalmic, health professionals and other agencies so that they can give potential service users accurate information and make appropriate and timely onward referrals.
- Develop strong links with health and ophthalmic services to ensure highest levels of eye health care and the promotion of information regarding preventable sight loss.
- Develop a programme of awareness to ensure that potential service users and the public at large are informed about sight loss issues and rehabilitation services available.

A black and white portrait of a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a denim jacket and large, ornate earrings. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark.

Luminita Covaci

Research Goal

To support and/or conduct research relating to vision loss to ensure the continued provision of innovative and relevant services by NCBI and the public and private sectors as a whole, as well as the development of eye health initiatives.

Themes and Directions

Our goals in research are to manage knowledge to support NCBI's service mission to provide relevant and innovative services; and also to inform people about vision rehabilitation as well as the causes, prevention, and treatment of blindness and significant sight loss.

Through research, both primary and secondary, we will improve our understanding of the impact of vision loss, deepen the body of knowledge about blindness and vision loss in Ireland, and provide statistical information about the prevalence of significant sight loss.

This research will be used to support our attempts at influencing public policy in the areas of education,

employment, health services, income maintenance, etc. Given the correlation between ageing and vision loss, research will also be important to our ability to advocate with governments for the future needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. The effectiveness of our advocacy efforts will be enhanced by the development of solid research and deeper understanding about the costs of 'blindness', to the individual and to society. In this work we shall collaborate with, or augment research carried out by, the National Disability Authority (NDA).

Expanding our research partnerships with Fighting Blindness and the academic and medical communities is essential and will be handled through the NCBI charitable foundation which will stimulate and support planned research.

Key activity 1: We will create an internal quality data collection system to inform future developments.

Supporting actions:

- Develop a comprehensive CRMS (contact record management system) throughout the agency capturing information on an ongoing basis from people who use the NCBI's services to determine their appropriateness and adequacy.
- Manage this knowledge to support NCBI's service mission to provide relevant, specialised services

nationwide, which enable people who are blind or vision impaired to overcome the barriers that impede their independence and participation in society.

- Evaluate the degree to which developments are based upon knowledge acquired through research.

Key activity 2: We will keep abreast of national and international research to inform us of current trends and developments.

Supporting actions:

- Create a database and links to research libraries to ensure that we remain up to date with relevant research and make this information available through one Irish source.
- Improve our understanding of vision loss and deepen the body of knowledge about blindness and vision impairment.
- Benchmark our developments against current international best practice initiatives.

Key activity 3: We will manage this knowledge for the benefit of all people who are blind or vision impaired and the public at large.

Supporting actions:

- Provide information on the impact of vision loss and the rehabilitative process.
- Raise the profile of the issue of eye health care and the causes of preventable vision loss through annual campaigns.
- Using research outcomes, advocate with government for the future needs of people who are blind or vision impaired as they experience various stages in the life cycle, particularly aging.
- Have ongoing, active collaboration with other organisations working in the area of vision impairment and sight loss and the academic and medical communities.
- Report annually on planned research funded through the NCBI Charitable Foundation.

Lutelo Bika



Accessibility Goal

To work towards a barrier-free environment, by providing expertise, education and assistance in making buildings, services, technologies and information accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Themes and Directions

Historically, the bulk of NCBI services has been comprised of services delivered directly to the individual and his or her family. That will continue to be the trend as we look to future service directions but to that familiar approach will be added a range of indirect services, the purpose of which is to make the environment more accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired.

The environment within which we live is no longer just a matter of streetscapes and public buildings. It also includes the electronic notices and digital access points to goods and services on which we have come to rely as essential contributors to our lifestyles, and as gateways to information and plug-in points for leisure and recreation.

NCBI must promote a better understanding of these points of interaction with society and ensure that they remain as open avenues to full participation for people who are blind

or vision impaired and are not obstructed by ignorance or indifference. NCBI must advocate the principles of good practice and offer supports and tangible assistance to achieve the goal of full accessibility.

The commitment of resources to this goal is an investment in the future as much as it obtains benefits in the present. We may never become aware of some of the positive outcomes of our awareness-raising programmes, which may well result in competition for scarce resources between the demonstrable outcomes of direct services as distinct from the more intangible results in this area of activity.

Key activity 1: We will develop methods of working that will ensure a consistent focus on the issues of accessibility facing people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Consistently audit the built and electronic environments to identify barriers to access and work towards their elimination.
- Develop and annually prioritise programmes of information or actions to improve awareness of the issues around accessibility.
- Continuously monitor the availability of the necessary equipment and devices which enable access

to information for people who are blind or vision impaired.

- Remain conversant with trends in technology and provide a gateway to new devices and systems, providing advice and training as appropriate.

Key activity 2: We will work in partnership with others, including public and private bodies, to ensure that a barrier-free environment exists for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Develop local groups of people who are blind or vision impaired along with volunteers to audit the accessibility of the local environment. These will be trained and supported to become advocates for best practice to meet NCBI's accessibility goal.
- Identify areas of collaborative work with other disability agencies which will further the objectives of this goal.
- Lobby for the provision of supports and services, free of charge, which reduce the barriers to information and opportunity, and otherwise compensate for the disadvantages of sight loss, particularly in the areas of technology and PA services.

Eileen Brown



Advocacy Goal

To pursue the elimination of discrimination based on vision loss by influencing public policy and increasing public awareness.

Themes and Directions

Partnerships and collaboration are a critical success factor for our advocacy efforts. Working with other equality-seeking groups will strengthen our voice and help ensure that issues of blindness and vision impairment are recognised and included in the government policy agenda.

Over the next five years, our key advocacy goal is to ensure that governments recognise that vision rehabilitation, adaptive technology, and library and information services are as essential as any other health or social service — and therefore warrant direct government support and funding through an integrated approach of all Government departments.

Key activity 1: We will work to influence public policy as part of a consistent approach to the elimination of discrimination.

Supporting actions:

- Establish a proactive and ongoing public affairs programme which integrates with the work of other bodies and agencies in the pursuance of our advocacy goals.
- Be proactive in areas that ensure that people who are blind and vision impaired receive an education commensurate with their abilities, obtain work to the level of their competencies and expectations and enjoy all of the rights of citizenship.
- Explore the potential for creating local volunteer action groups of people who are blind and vision impaired and other volunteers.

Key activity 2: We will develop a programme of public awareness to inform on issues relating to vision loss.

Supporting actions:

- Build up appropriate resources for information dissemination, awareness and training, to engage selected audiences, remembering that some of those audiences will not regard English as their preferred language of communication.
- Develop the use of NCBI's website as a structured information and promotion resource.
- Promote personal profile campaigns in which people who are blind and vision impaired identify what it means for them to live with and to overcome the obstacles confronted by sight loss.
- Promote the abilities of people who are blind and vision impaired.
- Implement awareness programmes with employers to enhance equal opportunities for blind or vision impaired people by assisting in removing policy, programme and attitudinal barriers to their employment.

Cliona Liddy



Professionalism Goal

To foster the highest level of staff performance in a progressive workplace, through continuous learning and professional development.

Themes and Directions

NCBI works in a competitive environment where staffing levels are set by our funders with reference to historical budgets. It is in the present climate of hard-won resources that NCBI must find and commit financial resources to the professional development and continued learning of NCBI staff. Professional development and training are essential to our ability to offer effective, high quality and contemporary services. We must increase our ability to recruit, train and retain dedicated staff, particularly as vision rehabilitation is a specialised area and there is not a ready trained pool of people from which we can recruit.

Due to the increase in the number of people accessing our services over the past number of years, frontline staff have been faced with ever larger caseloads. Over each year of the plan, as resources allow, we aim to progressively increase the staff to service user ratio for frontline staff. The effect of this will be to improve the quality of service afforded to each person with whom we work.

Key activity 1: We will provide a professional service of the highest level, which meets the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Supporting actions:

- Identify a focussed approach that will ensure service delivery is guided by service user and staff inputs with quality output measurements.
- Benchmark the efficiency and effectiveness of services and processes against comparable international organisations and communicate the results.
- Further develop NCBI's accredited training in the different aspects of vision loss and rehabilitation and ensure its availability to those who require this knowledge.
- Link staff recruitment and training to service delivery standards.
- Establish continuous professional development programmes for all staff to ensure that they remain conversant with trends and developments in the areas within which NCBI works.

Key activity 2: We will ensure that as an organisation we provide the necessary supports to employees to ensure their maximum contribution to the achievement of our vision.

Supporting actions:

- Provide a vision rehabilitation library resource to encourage ongoing professional development supported by regular in-service training.
- Ensure that an employee care ethos pervades NCBI and that staff have available adequate supports and supervision to retain NCBI in the high rankings of a preferred employer of choice.
- Conduct periodic surveys with staff to obtain their insights for improvements in NCBI's behaviour as a concerned and progressive employer and service provider.
- Where feasible, extend the scope and supports for home working throughout the agency so as to maximise the efficiencies from the use of properties and to ensure that employees benefit from a more balanced work lifestyle.
- Use positive discrimination in the employment of people with appropriate qualifications and expertise who are blind or vision impaired.

Key activity 3: We will consult on and implement the structural changes necessary to give full effect to this strategic plan.

Supporting actions:

- Evaluate the adequacy and efficiency of NCBI structure against this strategic plan.
- Seek additional resources to allow for an increase in staffing levels to ensure a high quality of service delivery.
- Adopt a personal outcomes measures approach to quality check service delivery from the perspective of the service user.
- Develop a technology blueprint to address the development and ,where appropriate, the integration of information systems such as fundraising development, finance, human resources, library systems, service user relations management, technical aids, employment, NCBI facilities' management, document management, and the constituent databases.
- Extend membership of NCBI (company) to people who are blind or vision impaired who use our services.

Conclusion

The foregoing represents NCBI's vision and outline plan for service delivery over the five years 2007 to 2012. Each year a business plan will be prepared which will identify specific work to be undertaken to implement the strategy.

For this strategic plan to work, it must be adopted by the staff of NCBI as a mirror in which our best endeavours are reflected on behalf of our service users. The service user will be given a new position of prominence in the delivery of all of our services. We must learn to listen better to one another and to our service users.

To create an effective voice for people who are blind or vision impaired means learning to collaborate with others and setting aside partisan ways of working in favour of a collective influence on the issues which require attention.

Achieving all aspects of the strategic plan is highly dependent on increasing the available resources of finance and staff to meet the supporting actions set out in our six strategic goals. We will have to bridge a considerable performance gap between where NCBI is today and where we want it to be in five years from now.

How will we know that NCBI is making progress towards achieving our vision that people who are blind or vision impaired have the same opportunities, rights and choices as others to fully participate in society?

NCBI will know that we are making progress towards answering the above question when more people who are blind or vision impaired are:

- Accessing the necessary services and supports to assist in the timely achievement of developmental milestones in early childhood.
- Achieving in education in accordance with their individual potential.
- Participating equally in higher education and adult learning.
- Contributing to the workforce and receiving appropriate remuneration.
- Participating actively in family life and civil society.
- Experiencing improvements in physical and mental health.
- Actively engaging in sport, recreation, culture, and politics.
- Enjoying old-age while benefiting from supporting services that take account of sight loss.

We must also be able to measure progress on the implementation of our strategic plan, particularly our priority commitments, as expressed in our six strategic goals. We will develop an evaluation framework which will include performance indicators, service user satisfaction ratings, recognised standards for programme evaluation, and financial measurements. A strategic plan progress report will be prepared by

the CEO within the first quarter of the year following each year of the plan. This progress report will be published in our annual report and will be available on our web site.

We could have opted, in planning terms, for a less ambitious future for NCBI but that would have delivered short on the expectations of those who use and look to NCBI services to enable them to overcome the barriers that impede their independence and participation in society. If NCBI is to continue to make a real difference in support of people who are blind or vision impaired, we must continue to be ambitious on their behalf and raise our service horizons to maximise the benefits and opportunities arising from Ireland's progression towards becoming a more inclusive society for all of its citizens, including those who are vision impaired or who are blind.