

Border People –Progress Report – June/Dec 2009

In the second half of 2009 the development of Border People website has continued in its second phase in partnership with the North South Ministerial Council funded under INTERREG IVA and managed by the SEUPB. The site currently has 352 pages of information with 977 external links to other sources of public information north and south such as income tax, social welfare benefits, child benefit, maternity and redundancy information to name a few of the most used sections.

The Information

By far the most arduous and time consuming task of the Border People project is keeping the data contained therein up-to-date. Public sector information is naturally in a continuous state of flux but in the current economic environment particularly in the south which has triggered three severe budgets in 12 months only serves to increase the burden of maintaining Border People information. Following Budget 2010 yesterday and a preliminary review of the detail, some of the pages that will be updated are mortgage interest relief, car scrapage scheme, child benefit, VRT, carbon tax, job seekers allowance, farm income levy, rent supplement, dental and optical benefit schemes, and prescription charge for medical card holders.

User Groups

At the User Group meeting held in May 2008, during the first phase of Border People, User Group members helped to influence the nature, scope and effectiveness of the website and provided advice on information needs and possible future developments. One of the main issues for future development highlighted at that meeting was the need to address the lack of accurate, up-to-date data about the extent of cross-border mobility – and a topic which keeps coming up. The lack of an accurate, in-depth understanding on cross-border mobility groups within the island was considered by the User Group to be the “major missing element in the overall picture”. To further explore this issue Steve MacFeely, Director of Business Statistics from CSO gave a presentation "Cross-border measurement - challenges and developments". Ms Fiona Johnston of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) looked at the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS), a dedicated website providing access to local area statistics across Northern Ireland, and how it might link into a cross-border system.

The next user group meeting on the 14 December 2009, in the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Dundalk, titled “The Cross Border Consumer”, will look at some of the issues for the consumer when shopping over the border. This is timely considering the huge increase in cross-border retail traffic so much so that the Minister for Finance in the south has reduced the excise duty on alcohol and reduced VAT by half a percent. There are three speakers confirmed Antoinette McKeown, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Consumer Council, Caroline Curneen, PR and Marketing Manager from the European Consumer Centre in Ireland, and Andrew Mawhinney, Town Centre Commercial Manager, Dundalk

Marketing

After a competitive tendering process, the 30 month contract for the off-line marketing of Border People was awarded to Web-Shandwick/INC Marketing. The marketing strategy targets specific events in the border region when there is an increased movement of people over the border such as Christmas shopping in Newry, the Halloween festival in Derry, and colleges in the border region at the start of the academic school year. Following feedback from the last steering group meeting resources for advertising in Further Education Colleges in the border region have been reallocated to extending the period of display of the bill-boards during high foot-fall events such as Christmas shopping in Newry and Derry for the second and third year of the contract.

Hits

Since April 2009 there have been over 300,000 hits per month which has been increasing steadily over the two years since a standing start in September 2007. While there has been a huge increase in general in the number of hits on public sector websites in this period this increase is in part at least to the summer marketing campaign – a time when traditionally there would be a drop in the number of hits. In line with this there has been a steady flow of queries to Border People (approx. 10 by email and 10 by phone per month). This has increased slightly since the suspension of the BorderWise project.

Also 40 people have submitted their email address through the Border People home page to be kept informed of any major changes or updates. These people are also invited to User Group meetings.

NI Direct

The launch of NI Direct in the summer provides an opportunity to streamline the “Northern” information to one destination. Following a meeting with Jim Hamilton, NI Direct Manager in the Department of Finance and Personnel it was agreed that where it is appropriate and meaningful they will allow links to Border People from the NI Direct website. The task of identifying those links has begun.

Banking Review

A review of the cross-border banking information provided on Border People is almost complete. This hugely popular section of the website which provides a comparative table of typical cross-border transaction charges is just over a year old and considering the disruption in the banking sector recently is due for review.

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