



Taking Ownership: Consumer Control

Early advocates of Independent Living (IL) believed that service providers reinforced the dependency of people with disabilities who used their services. To break the cycle of dependency, the IL movement advocated that people with disabilities, their families and supporters must be empowered and supported in the knowledge that they have the right to choice and control in every aspect of their lives. They explained that people need to have confidence in their abilities, and they need to know that they are the experts in their personal needs, wants, ambitions and dreams.

The term “consumer” describes a person who makes a choice in selecting a product or service. For example, many Leaders receiving Direct Payments through Áiseanna Tacaíochta (ÁT), manage their own Personal Assistance (PA) services, a key tool in facilitating access to Independent Living. Leaders use Direct Payments to custom-build their support around their needs and wants so that they have a life that is not only self-directed, but open, flexible and spontaneous! Ideally, Leaders will build a relationship of trust and equality with their PA and communicate the ideas of IL through their interactions.

The IL movement supports innovations such as Direct Payments and individualised funding methods; however, it also promotes other methods of empowerment which use the consumer concept within the service provision system. Many organisations offer different options and programmes which put the consumer at the centre: these can be called consumer-directed services, personal goal-setting or person-centred planning. For example, some service providers enable the person – or consumer - to take part in hiring, choosing and interviewing the staff who will work with them. The consumer may also manage the staff's work hours, annual leave arrangements and more. In this way, the service provider recognises and endorses that disability is more than just a medical need. The role of the service provider is to assist and empower consumers so that they experience choice and control in their own lives.

While these cases can be seen as steps towards consumer control, there should be more involved. Real consumer control means that people with disabilities and their families are involved in every aspect of the service provider organisation. They influence its direction by being active board members. They oversee its work and actions by putting in place and monitoring policies and taking on various staff roles, including management positions.

In order to help the consumer, Centres for Independent Living (CILs) provide a range of services, including skills training, information provision, advocacy and peer support. They can refer consumers to other agencies and community organisations for further support.