

Taskforce on Active Citizenship: *Public Consultation Paper*

“Together, We’re Better”

consultation



Taskforce on
active
citizenship

TASCFHÓRSA UM SHAORÁNACHT GHNÍOMHACH

Introduction



Mary Davis

The 2003 Special Olympic World Games was one of the most recent and most dramatic examples of the depth and wealth of the civic spirit that still exists in Ireland today. It was a striking example of the willingness of people from all walks of life to give their time, talent and enthusiasm to community endeavour. And perhaps even more striking was the sense of reward people derived from doing this. As the CEO of Special Olympics Ireland, I am keenly aware that in today's society the most difficult thing for people to give is their time. However, as the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D., recently pointed out "the quality of life in society and the ultimate health of our communities depends on the willingness of people to become involved and active."

In short it is our belief that "Together, We're Better". And with that in mind the Taoiseach has set up the Taskforce on Active Citizenship. The aims of the Taskforce are to:

- consider the extent to which people in Ireland play an active role as members of their communities and society;
- identify factors affecting the level and nature of active citizenship in different areas of Irish life;
- suggest ways in which people can be encouraged and supported to play an active role.

The Taskforce is interested in hearing your views on what it means to be an active citizen in today's Ireland and how that can contribute to a better quality of life for everyone.

There are a number of questions for your consideration outlined in this document on the nature of active citizenship. As well as seeking your written contributions, the Taskforce will be organising a number of seminars around the country to tease out the topic.

We are hoping for contributions from as wide a spectrum as possible. You may wish to check out the more detailed terms of reference of the Taskforce and the background discussion paper on our website www.activecitizen.ie

I would encourage you to take the time to think about *Active Citizenship* and let us have your views by **29 September, 2006**, at the latest. Thank you for your interest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Davis', written in a cursive style.

Working together to make a positive difference...

While there are different definitions of what it means to be an active citizen, it can include:

- **civic participation:** for example voting in elections, contacting a local councillor or T.D. about an issue of public interest or attending a public meeting;
- **formal volunteering/community involvement:** unpaid help through a group or organisation;
- **informal volunteering:** unpaid help to an individual or others who are either members of your family or otherwise.

For the purposes of this consultation it is proposed to focus mainly on the first two areas of active citizenship: civic participation and formal volunteering/community involvement.

People working together whether as residents living in a particular place or as members of some community with a shared identity can make a difference. But, too often, people can feel taken for granted, ignored or excluded. Others may feel 'what is the point' or 'I don't have time' or 'I don't know how or where to begin'.

In the past families were seen as the main givers of care and educators of our young people. However, we are more aware than ever of the role of other institutions in providing essential services and care – to the young, the old, the sick and those in need of any kind. No one institution can do it all – whether it is the State, businesses, families or local

communities. Each part of society has its own resources to draw on and its own reason to play a role.

Many significant problems can be solved when individuals and organisations work together and include all concerned in making and implementing decisions. Such involvement can also generate networks of support and connection that make all the difference. It is possible, for example, that communities in which there are strong local connections of trust and where 'people look out for each other' sustain a better quality of life compared to others.

Also, when communities are linked to other communities – for example disadvantaged ones with more advantaged ones – it is possible to get better information, engage more effectively with the political system and generate new talent and energy. A healthy and varied range of voluntary and community organisations is good for democracy. An inclusive range of engagement is also highly desirable so that all groups including the nine grounds covered under equality legislation (gender, marital status, age, disability, race, religion, sexual orientation, family status or membership of the Travelling community) have the opportunity, recognition and support to engage.

Over to you...

- 1** *For you, what does it mean to be an 'active citizen'?*
- 2** *Do some people feel excluded from active citizenship and why?*

What does it mean to be a citizen in today's Ireland?

The face of Ireland is changing. There is a welcome growth in diversity of cultures, lifestyles and backgrounds. This calls for both respect and tolerance of difference, as well as greater attention to common purpose and shared values and identity in those areas critical to democracy and social cohesion. In fast-changing times we should take our place in Europe and the World as a confident society that respects difference and makes the best use of the talent, energy and vision of all its people.

Hence, being a citizen is more than just eligibility for a particular type of passport. **Being an active citizen is about how we live in a community with rights and responsibilities.** We are responsible for neighbourhoods, families, schools, workplaces – through the time we spend in voluntary effort, the taxes we pay to keep public services going and the care we give to others in families and beyond.

We need to recognise the specific value of being active in various types of community groups as well as civic engagement in local, national and international issues.

Over to you...

3 *Do you feel strongly part of a community – location, parish, sports association, language/cultural group, trade union or corporate interest etc?*

4 *Do you believe that with other people in the area where you live you can make a difference to the quality of life of people around you?*

5 *How can active citizenship help to include newcomers in a changing Ireland?*

What barriers are there to 'active citizenship'?

Most have benefited from recent economic development. Unemployment, poverty and involuntary emigration are much lower than in the past. Yet, poverty and exclusion persist in many areas. Also, people – including people who are very well-off economically – seem to have less time than before. The time spent travelling, working and doing other things such as shopping has increased.

At the same time, events such as the Special Olympics in 2003 as well as the on-going levels of participation in sports at a local and national level suggest that there is a lot of engagement and goodwill – if it can be tapped and people are asked and enabled to play a role. Also, local events, the arts, sports etc can trigger great interest and involvement.

Many claim that it is increasingly difficult to get people to join organisations, to come out and give a hand or take responsibility for organising activities. Is this really true? Or, is it possible that people are giving time in other ways? What do you think?

Over to you...

6 *From your experience, is there less volunteering and civic engagement than in the past? What do you think are the main reasons for this?*

7 *How do you think people could be encouraged and supported to be more active citizens?*

Young People

The future is in the hands of our young citizens. Through an active role in communities and in politics young people can help revitalise organisations and have an impact. To do this they need both encouragement and opportunity to share their skills and insights. There are ways in which schools and youth organisations can contribute more directly to volunteering in the community through programmes that make the link from formal and non-formal education to community service.

Over to you...

8 *How could we further develop a sense of active citizenship amongst young people in Ireland?*

The role of schools and other centres of learning

Education is a vital part of everyone's life. For most of the years through childhood and beyond we spend a lot of time in school or college. What we learn there and who we associate with can leave a profound influence on our attitude and behaviour for life. This experience along with what we learn in families, youth organisations, communities and workplaces enables us to be socially active. Education doesn't end when a person leaves school or college, and adult education is an example of how people can draw on their own experience of life to enrich learning and make new discoveries.

Over to you...

9 *What role can education play in promoting active citizenship and how?*

Voter Participation

A healthy democracy relies on citizens who are well informed, interested and engaged. It is also linked to a shared sense of empowerment – that a person feels they can make a difference by voting.

There has been much discussion about a lack of engagement in politics, including lower rates of turnout in elections.

For example, research in 2004 found that approximately one in four of 18-24 year olds were not registered to vote. Given the relatively low level of political participation and voting in particular areas of disadvantage and among some groups there is a need to consider barriers in terms of interest, opportunity and capacity for civic engagement.

Over to you...

10 *What steps do you think can be taken to promote greater participation in elections and other forms of civic engagement?*

Older People

Older citizens have accumulated a great deal of experience and skills which they can make available to the community. However, research has indicated lower rates of community involvement by older people. Given growing awareness of demographic changes, there may be scope for encouraging more active engagement by older people.

Over to you...

11 *How do you think older people can be encouraged and supported to participate more actively in community and society?*

Media

The media play a major role in giving people information about what's happening in their community and in shaping views and expectations about citizenship. The internet and other new technologies are also changing how we get information and communicate with each other.

Over to you...

12 *What role can the media, including the internet and other new technologies, play in promoting active citizenship?*

Corporate Citizenship

Many commercial enterprises see that their role extends beyond making money to making a contribution to society and communities – as corporate citizens. For example, many organisations encourage their staff to be involved in local communities, volunteering and outreach to members of disadvantaged communities. Often people discover new opportunities for voluntary engagement through education or the workplace.

Over to you...

13 *What role can the corporate sector (including public sector organisations) play in promoting active citizenship? How can this be encouraged and supported?*

Communities

There is a large and varied range of communities and groups: from sports clubs to human rights organisations to self-help groups to support networks. Based on the good will and enthusiasm of people who enjoy giving their time and sharing their skills, this sector provides a huge contribution to society and economic prosperity that is difficult to measure or account for.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in investment in public services and community supports. Nonetheless, many people believe that further supports for communities would in turn help to stimulate a greater level of voluntary contribution through that sector.

There may also be ways to encourage people to more readily volunteer time and effort to different organisations. For example, many people report that being asked was crucial to the beginning of their involvement. At the same time, a limited commitment over a fixed period of time or for a particular event can be more attractive than an open-ended commitment which people may not feel ready to make.

Over to you...

14 *What types of support do communities require to increase levels of participation and involvement?*

15 *How can communities be encouraged to identify the unique strengths and skills of their own members and to draw upon them for their own benefit?*

16 *How can Government – including Local Government – work more effectively with communities to help them organise effectively?*

The Experience of Community and Voluntary Organisations...

As well as the views of individuals, the Taskforce also wants to learn about the experience of organisations in the community and voluntary sectors:

Over to you...

17 *What are the main challenges in establishing and running a community or voluntary organisation in Ireland today?*

18

Does your organisation, or do organisations in your sector, find it harder to recruit and keep volunteers than in the past? If so, why and how can this trend be reversed?

19

How can the State support and encourage community and voluntary organisations?

Summary

In thinking about what motivates people to be active in their communities we need to take into account the vastly changed circumstances of 21st Century Ireland. We need to consider a new and more inclusive context in which individuals are members of many different communities or networks, have a variety of needs and concerns and are enabled to give of their time, skills and effort.

To help us in its work, **the Taskforce would value your views on all the questions posed, or on any other related issues. Please submit your views by 29 September 2006.**

How to get your views to us...

You can:

- email your views to: **info@activecitizen.ie**
- fill in the form online at **www.activecitizen.ie**
- complete the attached questionnaire and post it to the address below. If there is not enough space in the box provided, please write any supplementary views on a piece of paper and include it with the form and return it to us.

If you have any questions, please contact us at:

Taskforce on Active Citizenship

2-4 Merrion Row

Dublin 2.

Phone: (01) 6194330

Fax: (01) 6194340

Submissions received may be made publicly available, including under Freedom of Information legislation.