

Comhairle

Submission to Task Force on Active Citizenship

Introduction

Comhairle welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the deliberations of the Task Force on Active Citizenship. The primary function of Comhairle is the provision of information, advice and advocacy in the broad area of social services. The agency has a statutory role to assist and support people, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social and civil services¹. Comhairle has a number of other functions, including supporting, promoting and developing the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and highlighting issues which are of concern to users of those services. It also has a role in supporting the development of voluntary bodies² providing social services.

Comhairle has identified four strategic priorities for the period 2006-2009³:

- producing high quality information on all aspects of civil and social services;
- ensuring the delivery of information, advice and advocacy services through web-based, phone and face-to-face delivery channels;
- developing and facilitating advocacy services, particularly for people with disabilities and influencing policy developments;
- enhancing accessibility to information, advice and advocacy services with particular reference to vulnerable groups and those most in need.

This submission follows the structure of the consultation questionnaire. A number of questions relating to individual or local experience were deemed not relevant to Comhairle and were not specifically addressed.

Factors which Impact on Active Citizenship

Feedback from Citizens Information Services points to a range and variety of factors which impact on people's ability to participate effectively in society and which need to be acknowledged in addressing the question of active citizenship. The main factors that impact on people's ability to participate in society include socio-economic background, education, language skills and IT competency. Despite the emphasis in recent years on the concept of inclusiveness, it is not at all clear that equality of access to decision-making

¹ Comhairle is involved in the development of Citizens Information Services (CIS), including the development and support of the nation-wide network of Citizen Information Centres (CICs), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS) and the Oasis Website. The total number of queries to all CISs in 2005 was 733,879. The number of queries to the Citizens Information Phone Service in 2005 was 87,923.

² The Comhairle Social Mentor Programme offers organisational development support to the community and voluntary sector through a network of volunteer mentors. The Programme supported 40 organisations within the voluntary and community sector in 2005. Comhairle also provides a Resource Database for the Voluntary and Community Sector and publishes a Directory of National Voluntary Agencies.

³ Comhairle, *Citizens Information Strategic Plan 2006-2009*

has improved significantly for some categories of the population. Inequality of access based on ability/disability, age, class, ethnic origin and geographical location continue to persist.

People's access to social services, and, consequently, their ability to be active citizens, is affected by their ability to negotiate their way around the service delivery system, inter and intra-agency referral practices and the actual availability of appropriate services and benefits. An underlying issue in many of the queries to CICs is that the supports available (e.g. income supports home care supports) are simply inadequate to meet need. Many people struggling to 'make ends meet' on a week-to-week basis and/or, for example, coping with the challenges of full-time caring or meeting the additional costs arising from disability may have real difficulty with the concept of active citizenship. Also, active citizenship may have little meaning for people who cannot get appropriate housing.

Q. 1 What does it mean to be an 'active citizen'?

Active citizenship is about all sections of the community partaking in and contributing to society in accordance with their abilities. It is about individuals taking responsibility for shaping society and its underlying values. This is the essence of participatory democracy. Active citizenship implies an opportunity for all people to participate in decisions which affect their lives. It is based on the premise that people want to avail of such opportunities and that there are adequate structures in place for this to happen. It also assumes that an inclusive society requires the active involvement and participation of all its members irrespective of location or socio-economic status.

Questions relating to active citizenship are closely related to the issue of social inclusion. Social exclusion refers not only to insufficient income, and/or non-participation in working life or inequality of access to housing, health and social services, but also to the related factor of an inability to partake in the democratic decisions of society. Active citizenship implies an ability to shape decisions which affect one's life and operates on the premise that people can see that there is a benefit to being actively involved. Active citizenship involves people identifying their own service needs and influencing and shaping the broader social policies which affect their lives. People need to be enabled to have meaningful involvement, particularly at local level, in shaping the processes and decisions which affect their lives.

The components of active citizenship can be summarised as:

- individuals and communities fully recognising and implementing their civil responsibilities;
- opportunities for involvement in valued aspects of life and society;
- engagement by all citizens in meaningful activities;
- meaningful social relationships;

- a sense of control over the decisions that affect one's life.

Q. 2 Do some people feel excluded from active citizenship and why?

People who cannot influence social policy decisions that directly affect their lives *de facto* feel excluded from active citizenship. Citizen involvement that may contribute to society as a whole is less likely to have resonance for people on the margins. Involvement that is likely to bring about a short-term change in their own lives or a change in their local community is more likely to be attractive to people.

Issues arise for some people because of the lack of clarity about rights and entitlements to services and benefits, the complexity of the administrative system which frequently involves repeat assessments, moving between different agencies and between different sections within agencies, delays in processing applications and paucity of information on progress in particular instances. Difficulties sometimes arise due to the fact that a benefit or service is discretionary and/or that entitlement was dependent on the availability of funding at a particular point in time. All of these issues are likely to result in some feeling of powerlessness.

People are not always able to engage in society in a manner which enables them to have a sense of belonging on the one hand while at the same time making a valuable contribution to the social fabric. For example, in a culture which emphasises and cherishes work (in the labour market), inevitably there is a lower status conferred on those outside the labour force (whether working in the home or as volunteers in the community).

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

Currently, migrant workers can be excluded from accessing employment services, life long learning opportunities and on the job training. Some have difficulty having their qualifications recognised and some experience difficulty in enforcing their employment rights. Significant problems have been highlighted in respect of family re-unification for migrant workers. These factors almost certainly contribute to a feeling of being 'on the outside' and impact negatively on the integration of migrant workers and their families in Ireland.

Non-working spouses of migrant workers, the vast majority of whom are women, are likely to feel excluded. The problem is exacerbated in cases where the person speaks little or no English and has difficulty in engaging with the local community. This may result in isolation, little opportunity for integration and a related poor quality of life.

In order to deal with such difficulties, there is a need for:

- better opportunities for inclusive networking at local level;
- more language training classes;

- broader access to training and education for foreign nationals;
- encouragement of foreign nationals to become active volunteers in their local communities;
- a more inclusive approach to family re-unification.

Q. 6 Is there less volunteering and civic engagement than in the past?

The Report *Tipping the Balance* (National Committee on Volunteering 2002) highlights Irish society's ongoing dependence on volunteering. The report notes that volunteers are playing an increasingly important role in service management. It is acknowledged that volunteer managers now have responsibilities as employers and financial managers and suggests that the burden of such responsibilities can sap the energy and initiative that is so vital to a vibrant and inclusive voluntary sector.

- There is a need for further research to explore issues of recruitment, organisational capacity, accountability and overall standards in the voluntary sector;
- Additional and ongoing capacity-building relating to the roles and responsibilities of management boards is vital in order to encourage representatives from target groups to become involved at this level.

Q.7 How could people be encouraged and supported to be more active citizens?

There is a need to improve the image of volunteering itself as a social activity and to ensure that outdated connotations of 'charity', 'welfare' and 'do-gooders' are removed. This requires the promotion of 'volunteering' as a fundamental act of citizenship through which individuals can choose to exercise their right to participate and to express a sense of shared responsibility. This method of exercising citizenship needs to be learned and acquired by young people. There is a need to create a climate where people are both encouraged and feel the need to become involved in the community across a wide spectrum of activities, social cultural, sport, service provision and community development.

The participatory democracy deficit needs to be addressed at local level through the introduction of educational and awareness programmes and through the putting in place of additional mechanisms for meaningful, effective and ongoing consultation with local communities.

Promoting active citizenship needs to be addressed at a number of levels in order to ensure that there is a prevailing climate where unpaid work is recognised and appreciated by both the community and the State:

- (i) There should be structures in place to provide training and support for volunteers commensurate with responsibilities. This should be accompanied by accreditation as appropriate.

- (ii) Volunteering as a concept and a key component of active citizenship should be given much greater priority in the school curriculum;
- (iii) Statutory bodies need to ensure that adequate funding is provided for essential services delivered by voluntary bodies. Funding should be at a level which eliminates the necessity for volunteers to have to engage in fundraising when the latter is clearly not their motive for volunteering.
- (iv) Additional mechanisms at local level are required to match would-be volunteers with volunteering opportunities.
- (v) The establishment of additional merit/citizen award schemes for volunteers would be likely to enhance the opportunities and contribution of volunteers.
- (vi) There is a need to provide additional resources for models of volunteering that are innovative, inclusive and responsive to need.
- (vii) An effective voluntary/statutory partnership is the only viable context for developing a stronger system of volunteering. This needs to be further enhanced in accordance with the principles set out the White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity*.
- (viii) The option of continuing social welfare credits for certain categories of people engaged in voluntary activity should be explored further.

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

The concept of older people working as mentors to younger, less experienced people is one that could potentially be applied much more widely than is currently the case – in business settings, schools and colleges, local community development initiatives, training and development programmes and, very importantly, in the work of voluntary bodies.

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

In a culture which values, emphasises and cherishes work (in the labour market) and related career paths, inevitably there is a lower status conferred on those outside the labour force. This lower status also tends to apply to people who are not currently or were never actually in the structured workforce (e.g. people working full-time in the home). It is likely that there is a tacit uncritical acceptance by all age groups of certain processes which result in disengagement, lessened role status and an under-utilisation of the valuable skills and experiences of all unpaid work whether in the home or on a voluntary basis.

School curricula could do much more to give young people a broader understanding of work and a broader perspective on how people can contribute to society.

Q. 11 How can older people be encouraged and supported to participate more effectively in society?

There are many ways in which older people can contribute to active citizenship and in so doing to the social and economic well-being of the nation:

- retired people working with voluntary/community organizations and related matching of their skill sets with the needs of organisations
- working in schools in varying capacities, e.g. in Transition Year, pre-employment courses or with individual students in a one-to-one support/counseling role;
- working with and supporting younger parents who are experiencing difficulties in coping;
- working with children/younger people in, for example, the development of various art forms and traditional crafts;
- health promotion by older people for older people;
- information provision;

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

Research shows that the main digital divides in Ireland are demarcated along the lines of age, education, social class and economic status.

Active consideration should be given to interventions mediated through all stages of the education system and more opportunities should be provided for second-chance education for those that have left the system. A targeted provision of computer centres and training programmes in disadvantaged areas would be required to address the growing digital divide.

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

Providing care in the home, whether for small children, dependent older people or people with disabilities of whatever age, is a key element in the debate on active citizenship. The relationship between care provided in the home by family members, the formal economy and the related intervention and support strategies that are put in place is central to active citizenship and is a key policy issue. Many people, particularly women, take on dual responsibilities - caring within the family and contributing to economic growth through participation in the workforce. Care in the home differs from other economic activities in that it involves the development of personal relationships, which limits its potential for productivity increases. As a result, so-called 'non-economic' processes may be invisible and not included in the overall assessment of economic output. This has major implications for inclusiveness and citizenship.

In practice, many employers do little or nothing to take account of the family lives of their workers. For example, there is little employer provision for child care and, also, in many instances there is no provision to replace a worker who is absent for family reasons. The availability and cost of childcare is also a key issue for working parents.

The promotion and support of flexible work arrangements needs to be pursued as a matter of urgency in the context of promoting active citizenship.

Employment policies should work towards raising awareness among the social partners and business organisations about the potential benefits to society of implementing flexible work arrangements, including more job sharing and eworking. Specific ework initiatives that enable sustainable work-family interactions should be explored and promoted.

The introduction of a legal entitlement to part-time work for parents with very young children should be considered.

Q. 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?

The challenge for local communities and local partnerships is to ensure that all citizens - taxpayers, social welfare recipients, workers, students, people with disabilities, members of the Travelling community, workers, foreign nationals – have a voice. Voluntary/community organisations have a crucial role to play in this regard in their capacity highlighting locality related issues or tapping into the concerns of sectoral interests.

Networks such as CICs are in a position to identify the concerns of individual citizens and accordingly to provide feedback to policy-makers about how policies and practices are impacting on people's lives - anomalies, inadequate service provision, emerging trends in particular areas and discrepancies between Government stated policy and citizen reality.

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

The lack of integration within and between the various Government Departments and statutory agencies which administer social services is a particular problem for people who experience difficulties in accessing social services.

Initiatives such as the SMI, Customer Services Action Plans and various partnership mechanisms have created a better context for the public to engage in policy development. However, additional consultation and feedback mechanisms are required, particularly at local level, for service users to channel their views and experiences. Care must be taken to ensure that an approach to user involvement in service development based on the notion of a well-informed and articulate public does not lead to the further exclusion of those citizens whose needs are least often articulated.

Q. 17 What are the main challenges in establishing and running a community or voluntary organisation in Ireland to-day?

Additional Supports

It is likely that there is considerable duplication of effort and initiatives by voluntary/community organizations without the benefit of learning from each other's experiences.

Mechanisms need to be put in place to encourage and support voluntary/community organizations to share resources and experiences across communities.

Integrated Supports

Voluntary/community organizations have increasing demands **in** relation to legal and technical requirements. This puts significant pressures on some organizations, particularly smaller organizations involved in service delivery.

'Resource pools' should be established to provide services to groups as required on the basis that every organization does not have to be a repository for all the required skill sets.

Funding

Criteria for funding voluntary/community organisations should be clearly stated and should take account of a wide range of factors, as follows:

- the provision of adequate support structures for volunteers both as management committee members and as service providers;
- the extent, nature and quality of services provided;
- the need to provide for medium and long-term planning/funding by voluntary and community groups;
- the training and skill development needs of all staff (paid and voluntary) and management committees;
- the need for evaluation and impact assessment;
- capacity-building among voluntary and community organisations to engage in a partnership approach to planning and policy-making;
- the elimination of local and regional discrepancies in levels and methods of funding;
- a funding policy which minimises dysfunctional competition and eliminates the practice of re-focusing services to draw down funding;
- the need for voluntary and community organisations to have an acceptable balance between service provision/development activities and fundraising requirements.

Q.18 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?

The CIS service is organised and developed around local voluntary Boards of Management and there is a significant volunteer involvement around the country in this regard. However, Boards of Management have increasing responsibilities as employers which puts a high level of demand on volunteers. To date, CISs have generally been able to recruit the necessary complement of volunteers to manage the service.

CISs have different experiences and perspectives on the role and potential of volunteers in the provision of information, advice and advocacy services. In the past all CISs relied heavily on volunteers. Currently, some CISs have a high complement of volunteers and operate on the basis that volunteers can provide a high quality and professional service. Other CISs have a different view and believe that the CIC service can only be adequately provided by paid staff.

The successful recruitment and retention of volunteers is likely to be related to the following factors:

- (i) a meaningful role;
- (ii) adequate training and support structures;
- (iii) clarity about the respective roles of paid staff and volunteers;
- (iv) a clear description of job and related expectations.

Q. 19 How can the State support and encourage community and voluntary organisations?

- (i) The underlying principles and framework for developing and supporting community and voluntary organisations has been adequately set out in the White Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity*. An Implementation Plan for delivering on this framework should be put in place as part of the Active Citizenship initiative.
- (ii) *Tipping the Balance*, (National Committee on Volunteering 2002) contains a comprehensive range of recommendations in relation to volunteering policy and infrastructure. These recommendations should be evaluated by the Task Force with a view to their implementation on a phased basis.
- (iii) Some stronger mechanisms are required at local level to ensure greater collaboration between voluntary/community organisations

engaged in service delivery and between such organisations and the statutory sector.