



# **CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT:**

## **SHAPING EUROPE'S FUTURE**

### **THE WHEEL 2016 - 2017**

Project funded by the European Parliament

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# OVERVIEW

***The Wheel's Shaping Europe's Future Project 2016/17*** aimed to bring the European dimension alive in our national discourse and to encourage and enable greater engagement between citizens and the European Parliament. The principal objectives of the project were to provide forums to facilitate civil society organisations to engage with European Parliamentarians on **three themes:**

1. Social Issues
2. Environmental Sustainability issues
3. Civil Society Issues.

The project aimed to

- Raise awareness among civil society organisations of the impact of the European Parliament's work in Irish people's lives and of existing opportunities to input into the processes of the European Parliament
- Provide new regional forums for civil society to deepen its engagement with the European parliament
- Create new and sustainable channels for dialogue and co-operation between the European Parliament and Irish Civil Society organisations
- Identify policy change required to maximise engagement between civil society and the European Parliament
- Promote the importance of active European citizenship and the importance of civil society organisations participating in deliberative democratic approaches to decision-making
- Explore how better understandings of issues related to social, environmental and civil-society themes can be adequately addressed by the Parliament at a European level
- Sustain continuing dialogue between the European Parliament, MEP's and civil society that will lead to greater trust, transparency, understanding, cooperation and participation into the future.

## Overview

Forums were held in the three European constituencies of Dublin, Midlands-North West and Ireland South, bringing together civil society groups and MEPs to engage in the themes identified and discuss how these issues can be progressed by the Parliament at a European level and what relevance this has to people's lives locally. Linked to these fora were training workshops with civil society organisations on the European Parliament, European funding and how they can engage with the processes of the institution to be a driver of change.

Twelve events were hosted from October 2016 - May 2017 involving 301 citizens. Please see Appendix 1 for a breakdown of each event, attendance, constituency and MEPs that engaged with citizens.

For participating civil society organisations, the forums and practical workshops resulted in:

- Progression of the three themes (social issues, environment, civil society issues) and practical actions to help suggestions be implemented
- Learning through dialogue on how the themes can be better addressed by the Parliament at a European level
- Greater understanding of the workings of the EU and how the European Parliament, in particular, functions
- Increased knowledge and capacity on how to engage with the parliament more effectively
- The fostering of a dialogue between the European Parliament, its MEPs and civil society that will lead to greater trust, transparency, understanding, cooperation and participation into the future.

The Wheel delivered four forums on **Civil Society Issues** and partnered with EAPN, the European Anti Poverty Network

Ireland, to facilitate forums on **Social Issues** and with the Irish Environmental Pillar (or Irish Environmental Network) to facilitate forums on **Environmental Issues**.

We include below a report on the outcomes of the engagement in Ireland between the European Parliament, civil society and citizens. The report includes many recommendations on how two-way communication between the European Parliament, civil society and individual citizens can be improved and how both groups can become more engaged with decision making, with a special focus on improving deliberative processes.



# REPORTS FROM THE SHAPING EUROPE'S FUTURE DIALOGUES

## STRAND ONE: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

### Civil Society and Europe

The Wheel delivered four forums on **Civil Society Issues** at which many issues relating to the quality of our democracy and the European dimension were made. Points made in the general discussions included:

**Europe Today:** A perception emerged that the European Union is not sufficiently democratic, that it is unwieldy and that the European Commission “calls the shots”. It was also acknowledged that the European Parliament is more powerful than people appreciate (in areas such as Environment policy) and that the Parliament can veto the Commission. In terms of Ireland’s place within the EU, the need to be aware that “Ireland is not as important in Europe as we think we are” was identified.

**Citizens:** The question was raised about what the European Parliament does to strengthen links with citizens. How can the Parliament reconnect with citizens? There was general agreement that:

- While Parliament must keep trying to connect with citizens all the time, it was acknowledged that it is difficult to do. Participants felt that the media does not cover developments unless a negative issues arises.
- A greater focus on social media is a good way to engage citizens and the European Parliament needs to develop this more.
- Communications strategies need to address the fact that a lot of the work of the Parliament is very technical. The challenge is how to make it interesting (e.g. food labelling;



## Strand One: Civil Society and The European Parliament

reserve funds). Parliament needs to communicate more effectively the fact that many protections that people take for granted are dependent upon and led by the EU.

- More initiatives like the *Shaping Europe's Future* programme are needed.

**Lobby Your MEP:** A challenge was presented for civil society colleagues to proactively engage with European representatives and take an interest in what is going on at the European level. Citizens and civil society need to "Lobby Your MEP". Effective European-level working is a *two-way process*. There is a responsibility on the public and on public-representatives.

**Migration:** With regard to the refugee and migration crisis, it was noted that while Ireland is not affected to same extent as other countries, a key focus is needed on border security, refugee reception and supports for migrants.

**Education:** We urgently need better education for Irish people about the European Union so as to:

- Get people involved and informed
- Secure greater ownership of the European Union by citizens
- Ensure more involvement in decisions at early stages before major decisions are made on behalf of Irish people.

**Brexit** was a huge issue in all discussions, dominating everything else. One event was held near the border of Northern Ireland, which added particular depth to the discussion on Brexit. Points made across all four of The Wheel's events included:



- Article 50 was intended to be a deterrent to countries removing themselves from the EU. The two years provided for exit of UK is not realistic.

## Strand One: Civil Society and The European Parliament

- The Good Friday Agreement must not be affected and rights for people all over the island of Ireland must be protected.
- The continuation of North-South bodies and cross-border European programmes and related grants is a priority that must be fought for. Cross-border work currently funded through the PEACE and Interreg programmes must not be negatively affected. What will take their place?
- Civil society must speak out for the concerns of Ireland and Northern Ireland. A hard border that affects the ability of people to move around must be avoided. Transport links could be disrupted and transport could become more expensive. It must be ensured that rural Ireland does not suffer due to effects on farming and the agri-food industry. Will Ireland be more isolated physically and economically? We need to minimize the negative impact on community relations in border communities and counties.
- Discussions revealed that the biggest danger of a hard Brexit is that people will become simply overwhelmed by it. It was noted that while a gloomy picture of Brexit can be painted, agreements have been reached with countries like Norway and Switzerland before and this gives hope that a solution will be found. However, it was also noted that EU approval is needed for a Norway solution to happen.
- The impact on trade agreements could be very negative for Ireland, given the UK is the number one trading partner.
- Once the UK leaves the European Union, Ireland will be the only English-language country amongst the member states. While this could be an opportunity, have we thought about what this means, given the nation's poor record in foreign language learning? What are the implications for primary and secondary schools?





### European Projects and Funding

Matters related to European projects and how Irish civil society groups can increase their success in securing European funding were an important part of the programme. Participants and speakers stated that historically Ireland has not performed very well in securing funding from certain



European programmes and we should aim to improve this. Regarding Horizon 2020, Ireland is doing well in the private and academic sectors but not in the civil society sector. It was acknowledged that there is a lot of work involved in accessing Horizon 2020 but groups could consider becoming partners, especially now that solving 'societal challenges' is central to the aims of the programme.

Issues that emerged from the participants' dialogue groups included:

**Transparency:** Concerns emerged about how EU programmes and funds have been managed in the past. Transparency is required so that the Irish government does not "siphon-off" European funding that should be made available to the community and voluntary sector. We need more transparency overall in the management of funds.

**Bureaucracy:** Many participants felt that European funding is too bureaucratic. LEADER and other funds are deemed more suitable for larger organisations. The question was raised about how smaller organisations can access funding. The application processes and jargon is considered so hard to navigate that it creates a need to hire professionals to write project proposals. Smaller organisations felt it too difficult to compete with

## Strand One: Civil Society and The European Parliament

proposals prepared by expensive consultants or experienced grant writers within larger organisations. The majority of groups felt the decision to centralise LEADER, Peace, Interreg and social inclusion programmes should be reversed.

**Timelines:** The long timelines involved in grants being paid by European programmes was considered an obstacle to the running of projects at local level. Organisations need sufficient cashflow to fund projects while awaiting drawdown.

**Strategic Approach:** It was recognised that developing a European-level approach to an organisation's work is a strategic decision to be taken at senior management and board level. This is because successful European projects can involve releasing staff to participate in exchanges and overseas work activities which can have an impact on core business. It was suggested that organisations need to evaluate the long-term potential value and impact European level working could have on their work. This can be done via a *European Development Plan*.



**Business Linking:** Linking in with the business community was seen as a great idea. Business lobby groups such as the Institute of Small to Medium Enterprises, Chambers Ireland, Small Firms Association and Business in the Community were all mentioned as possible entry points. It was noted that there are a number of consultancies in Ireland that help companies



## Strand One: Civil Society and The European Parliament

- Proposal-writing workshops and training, especially outside Dublin
- Mentorship support
- Linking European policy to project ideas
- Online partner search and EU project database
- Networking with Higher Educational Institutes
- Financial support for study tours to Brussels/Europe
- Advice on securing matched funding
- Jargon buster/language ideas for proposals
- Impact measurement and evaluation methods
- Advance notice on calls for proposals so organisations can be prepared
- Better website materials and online resources
- EU audit and budget advice.

Given The Wheel's work in European funding advice and support, it was suggested that they could work with partners to do research on value for money, or the human, social, economic value or impact of European Funded civil-society programmes. Advocating for a support fund for the sector from the Irish government, for matched funding, was also proposed.

Also, a social finance solution to help fund professional advice on applications and the costs of co-funding was suggested. The establishment of European Commission offices outside of Dublin, to appeal to rural communities, was suggested in events that took place outside Dublin.

## STRAND TWO: SOCIAL ISSUES

### The EU, it's Parliament and the fight against poverty

Groups working to address poverty and social exclusion participated in this strand of the programme, which aimed at providing an opportunity to:

- i. Build the capacity of participants to understand the role of the EU and particularly the European Parliament, in building a more social Europe
- ii. Engage directly in a discussion with MEPs on key issues and concerns for them around social issues and the EU.

The events provided participants with the opportunity to build their understanding of the EU but, more importantly to link it to their everyday work and experience. It also gave them the chance to explore the key issues facing organisations working to address poverty and the role the European Parliament plays in addressing these issues.

The value and role of MEPs was discussed and it was noted that over 50% of national legislation emanated from the EU. To influence this at EU level involves compromise and so MEPs have to be active to influence it. MEPs also need to maintain a meaningful link with citizens and keep their feet on the ground.

The imbalance of economic and social policy was also a big issue. MEPs who participated noted that following the financial crisis and Brexit, there is a renewed focus on social issues in the EU and on achieving the *Europe 2020* targets. Some MEPs note that the goal of the EU was prosperity for all and that the focus of the EU is now back on this, with social inclusion being prioritised.

## Strand Two: Social Issues

Throughout the three social issue forums, discussions revolved around:

**Values:** How much do values get reflected and influence the policy and work of the European Parliament and MEPs own input? How can we raise the visibility of equality issues in relation to gender, racism and older people and people with disabilities?



**Communication, consultation, visibility and consultation:** How can we better communicate to people about the EU? The importance of a local consultation on the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* was highlighted.

**Work:** Working conditions were of concern to many participants. This related to activation supports for people who were unemployed including the adequacy of welfare supports. The declining quality of working conditions and increase in zero-hour contracts are issues for many people. In region of the Northwest, it was pointed out by some participants that Tús<sup>1</sup> workers are doing work that should be fully paid jobs. The possibility of a basic income was also raised.

**Brexit, the Border and the identity-crisis and decline of the North West:** It was felt that Brexit increases the challenges for the North-West where there is an ongoing decline. It was felt that there is also an identity crisis for communities around the border who are currently seamlessly connected to those across the border – but who may be negatively affected by Brexit.

**Racism:** It was felt that there is an increase in racism and a sense that some people see it as being more acceptable. People who are victims feel more powerless.

1. The Tús initiative is a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people in the Republic of Ireland.



**Services:** There was discussion about the adequacy of education, domestic violence services, housing and homelessness services, and the funding of community groups in relation to equality and poverty. What can the EU do about our negative two-tier health system and our housing crisis?



**Work:** Concerns raised included precarious work and its implications; activation policy and increased conditionality; and policy driven by the needs of the market rather than people. The *Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)* and the over-focus on administration and under-emphasis on pre-development for participants was also noted.

**Migration:** There were concerns over a greater “fortress Europe” and a failure to address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. The Irish opt-out from the *Reception Conditions Directive* and not allowing asylum seekers to work was also raised.

**A range of other issues were also raised and explored including:**

- **Lack of economic and social balance with** the economic dominating and causing negative social outcomes.
- **Lack of openness, transparency, accountability and responsibility** at all levels of society and in the economy, as well as a lack of adequate information for EU citizens.
- **Equality:** Including gender equality, equal pay and affordability of childcare.
- **Tendering** and how to ensure human rights are respected and the social and environmental impact of spending is taken into consideration.
- **Rural development** and how it is undermined by national policy e.g. the depletion of services.

## Strand Two: Social Issues

- The importance of **autonomous community development** and how it is seen as having been eroded. It is felt that the focus has moved to job activation and other issues facing disadvantaged communities are not being addressed. Communities feel they are not getting proper supports.
- A move to a **business model of numbers and regulation** and away from a community model. Participants felt that there has been a move from a bottom-up model to priorities being dictated by Government.
- Regarding EU action on **violence against women**, it was noted that at national level there have been cuts to the budgets for Ireland's Rape Crisis Centres.
- The **right to work of asylum seekers**. Asylum Seekers are still in the Irish *Direct Provision System* with no right to work. Ireland has opted out of EU's *Reception Conditions Directive* which was deemed to not fit well with our values as a country. Although seeking protection in Ireland, it is felt that people are losing their dignity and being denied basic human rights.

### STRAND THREE: THE EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL PILLAR

#### Right to Know, Right to Act: Your rights as a European Citizen

The Environmental Pillar in Ireland, or Irish Environmental Network, held five events as part of the programme. The title of each event was 'Right to Know, Right to Act: Your rights as European Citizen' and each seminar agenda included a discussions on the following three areas:

1. The European institutions, the environment and the citizen
2. Accessing information on the Environment
3. The circular economy and the Eco-Design Directive.

The main points of note that emerged from the meetings were:

**Engagement with the EU:** Participants were interested to learn of the various ways they can interact with European institutions, from contacting MEPs to signing European Citizens Initiatives and even launching their own petitions.



**Values, roles and responsibilities:** Participants engaged in lively dialogue at every seminar on the values of the European Union, the roles and responsibilities of our domestic government and the European institutions, and how they overlap and interact.

**Balance of Power:** Diverse views as to the value of the European Union emerged. Participants not only entered into productive debate with speakers and the attending MEPs, but also with each other during seminars. Attendees with more knowledge on the EU provided their views as to the make-up of the Union and the balance of power between the Irish government and the European institutions.

## Strand Three: Environmental Issues

**Aarhus Convention:** A small yet vocal number of participants were very familiar with the workings of the EU and *Access to Information on the Environment (Aarhus Convention or AIE)*. As a result, very high-level discussions were held in relation to the EU institutions and the various treaties and how they related to Ireland. The workings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) were also discussed. The presentations on AIE developed into a heated but good natured debate on the use, and abuse of AIE by both citizens and authorities.

**Citizens' Information on the Environment:** Participants learned how they can use European legislation to make requests to Irish and European institutions to access information on the environment.

**Access to Justice Rights:** Despite the superior knowledge of many attendees about various environmental issues in Ireland, the majority were distinctly unaware of the **Aarhus Convention** and the rights it provides to access information about the environment and participate in decision-making. Many attendees were particularly interested to learn that the Aarhus Convention stipulates the right of access to justice in environmental matters, as several attendees had brought legal cases or were thinking of bringing legal cases in relation to environmental issues.

**Practical Guidance:** Participants were shown how the provisions for access to information on the environment contained in the Convention (as expressed in Directive 2003/4/EC) work in practice. This included step-by-step guidance on how to make use of the Irish Regulations. At each of the five events, participants showed a great interest in this and all received a template on how to make use of the Aarhus Convention.

**Visibility:** It was noted that people tend to see only the examples of the EU acting on high-level financial or political subjects - the work that the EU does to protect and enhance our everyday lives does not get much coverage or publicity.

**Circular Economy:** Presentations and inputs from speakers on this subject were well received, perhaps because a large proportion of attendees were older or retired people who could relate to the principles of reusing and repairing more easily than the younger participants. An interesting result from all five discussions was that people agreed that the circular economy is an area where action needs to be taken at the highest level, in order for these concepts to work. They agreed that the EU is doing great work in spearheading the circular economy and had an overall more positive view of the EU, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Circular Economy, and especially the Eco-Design Directive.

**Environmental Pillar:** The structures and role of the pillar was described at every event, focussing on the Pillar's relationship with the institutions of the EU, and in particular with that of the Parliament.

# LEARNINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The *Shaping Europe's Future* project represents a very successful and very rich encounter between civil society and the European Parliament, European institutions, MEPs and the European Union as a whole.

The participation of 301 citizens and intense engagement and debate during the 12 events around Ireland showed the hunger for information that exists. Communities sought information and advice on how they can better engage with the European Parliament and indeed all other European institutions on social, civil society and environmental issues. Civil society explored how it can better participation in projects funded by European programmes, in order to advance its work.

The breadth of experience of the people participating in this project was noteworthy. From small community groups, to large charity organisations to individuals with a social enterprise idea, many different perspectives were represented. From many discussions it was clear that the major issues facing Europe (e.g. migration, Brexit, security, the future of Europe) are exercising the minds of those involved in the Irish voluntary sector. Along with this, citizens with very different experiences of European-level engagement participated. It was interesting to hear the experiences of groups involved in national and transnational European projects, for example. For the most part the consensus seemed to be that groups should consider building European partnerships and applying for European funding, but be aware of the complexity involved. There was a positive response to suggestions of more structured support for civil society entrants to this field, including providing specific support for applications, mentoring, networking and linking groups together for collaboration.

By way of illustrating the immediate impact of the project overall, at one of the environmental events participants reflected on



their own wastage of food and packaging and decided to take immediate action. Following this discussion and as the event was finishing, the group asked the management of the venue if they could acquire food boxes so that unconsumed sandwiches and biscuits from the meeting could be donated to a local day centre that provides food support to local disadvantaged groups. Citizens that had never met each other before worked together to prevent waste and help others and also suggested ways in which they could integrate this approach into their daily lives.

Additionally, the rapporteur at the Environmental events reports has since received emails from several attendees seeking advice on how to use *Access to Information on the Environment* requests to access documents from public institutions and semi-state bodies on issues such as wind energy policy and air pollution. The Wheel also translated discussions that took place at its project events into action. In June, The Wheel held a training workshop on European partnership building for civil society organisations involving 33 participants, many of whom had participated in *Shaping Europe's Future* event.

MEPs participating in the project reported how useful they had found the activity and what a positive contribution it had made in bringing them closer to civil society, citizens and real issues at the local level. New relationships have been forged that will be outlast the project itself and commitments for participation in future initiatives are in place.

All participants reflected on the need for ongoing engagement between civil society and MEPs and the European Parliament to be sustained and for further projects of this type to be organized in the future. It was felt that the need for this type of project is central to addressing the communications challenge that the Parliament - and the European Union itself - faces.





## APPENDIX ONE: EVENTS

Organised By	Event Title	Date	Location	Constituency	MEP	Theme	No. of Citizens
The Wheel	Interactive Discussion on European Policy and Funding	9/12/2016	Dublin	Dublin	Nessa Childers	Civil Society	28
The Wheel	Interactive Discussion on European Policy and Funding	24/2/2017	Cork	South	Deirdre Clune	Civil Society	30
IEN	Right to Know, Right to Act	3/3/2017	Dublin	Dublin	Lynn Boylan	Environmental	37
The Wheel	Interactive Discussion on European Policy and Funding	7/4/2017	Limerick	South	Sean Kelly	Civil Society	25
The Wheel	Interactive Discussion on European Policy and Funding	21/7/2017	Monaghan	Midlands-North West	Matt Carthy	Civil Society	33
EAPN	The EU, It's Parliament and the Fight Against Poverty	28/4/2017	Dublin	Dublin	Lynn Boylan	Social Inclusion	24
IEN	Right to Know, Right to Act	28/4/2017	Cork	South	Líadh Ní Ríada	Environmental	28
EAPN	The EU, It's Parliament and the Fight Against Poverty	5/5/2017	Sligo	Midlands-North West	Marian Harkin	Social Inclusion	16
IEN	Right to Know, Right to Act	5/5/2017	Limerick	South	Líadh Ní Ríada	Environmental	15
IEN	Right to Know, Right to Act	19/5/2017	Athlone	Midlands-North West	Mairead McGuinness	Environmental	12
IEN	Right to Know, Right to Act	26/5/2017	Galway	Midlands-North West	Mairead McGuinness	Environmental	38
EAPN	The EU, It's Parliament and the Fight Against Poverty	26/5/2017	Waterford	South	Sean Kelly	Social Inclusion	15
<b>Total</b>							<b>301</b>











Environmental Pillar  
Working for a sustainable future



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