



Taskforce on
active
citizenship

TASCFHÓRSA UM SHAORÁNACHT GHNÍOMHACH



Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship



Ten Guiding Principles for Active Citizenship

- Active Citizenship concerns **everyone**.
- We all have **rights and responsibilities** as members of different communities: family, neighbourhood, shared interest, national, European and global.
- Active Citizenship is based on the values of **inclusion, equality** and **solidarity** with those who are disadvantaged.
- Strong and healthy communities welcome and value **diversity** in cultural expression, values and lifestyles.
- **Openness, accountability** and **trust** will help maximise participation in the democratic and decision-making process.
- Subsidiarity is a foundation of active and engaged citizens – by **enabling** and **empowering** decision-making as close to the citizen as possible.
- Respectful **dialogue** allows Government, citizens and communities to seek the common good while acknowledging differences.
- A successful society depends on **partnership** - with citizens, civil society, elected public representatives, the public service, businesses and trade unions all contributing in different ways.
- Active citizens are made not born – **lifelong learning** allows us to develop and grow at each stage of our lives.
- Active Citizenship needs **leadership** - and we are all potential leaders in our communities.

Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship

March 2007

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Taoiseach's Foreword



I am delighted to welcome this Report by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship.

I would like to commend Mary Davis and the members of the Taskforce for their commitment in completing their work and producing such a good quality report within a tight timeframe.

I established the Taskforce on Active Citizenship in April, 2006 to lead a “national conversation” on the extent to which citizens engage in the issues that affect them and their communities – in effect, to establish what ‘Active Citizenship’ means to people in the changed country that is Ireland today.

The Taskforce conducted a widespread and varied consultation process across the country and I feel this effort, coupled with the extensive research they have undertaken, captures the sense of what is happening in Irish communities today.

The efforts of the Taskforce have stimulated a wide-ranging debate on the issue of Active Citizenship and this, in itself, is an important outcome. I know that their efforts have inspired many people and organisations to reflect on their own roles and opportunities, and I hope that publication of this report will act as encouragement for many others.

The Taskforce outlines the rights and responsibilities we all have to ensure that we continue to develop and grow as a country of strong, civic-minded, independent citizens. They have formulated many worthwhile recommendations which will assist the Government and other stakeholders in promoting a continued sense of community and greater engagement with civic and democratic processes.

We in the Government welcome their analysis and are committed to working to implement the many worthwhile recommendations from this Report. We will endeavour to build on the momentum established by the Taskforce in partnership with all interested parties.

In essence, Active Citizenship is about shared values and pride of place and country. In the past we took some of these things for granted, but in today's World we need to invest more time and effort in articulating and nurturing these values. I believe that this Report provides us with important directions on how we can do this in the years ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Bertie Ahern'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

Bertie Ahern, T.D.

Taoiseach

Message from the Taskforce on Active Citizenship

Active Citizenship is not a new idea. As we all know, in its simplest form, it is about how we play an active role in our families, neighbourhoods, communities, voluntary organisations, workplaces and political structures.

We belong to a community or communities. In these communities we have rights and responsibilities to be active – to care for ourselves and others.

As Irish society matures, and experiences much greater diversity in terms of values, lifestyles and choices, we need to envision different pathways of Active Citizenship. Citizens living in 21st Century Ireland no longer necessarily share the same cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Some concerns have also been expressed about the extent of community involvement and spirit of engagement and participation because of the many different types of pressure on people today.

However, as the Taskforce travelled around the country and met with, and listened to, thousands of people who have experience and ideas on the issue, we found a huge number of positive messages about what is happening – with many inspiring stories of individuals and organisations contributing to the well-being of the community.

While there is little evidence, therefore, of a decline in the quantity of voluntary activity, there has been a strong and worrying decline in voting in elections, a key indicator of civic engagement. We also found a sense of unease about changes in the nature of participation – and our sense of community – and the effect these changes may have in the years ahead.

We did find a great deal of untapped potential – opportunities to improve the quality of life in Ireland through more, and better quality, engagement by citizens in shaping what happens in their neighbourhoods, communities and society as a whole.

There is a lot of academic literature and international research on Active Citizenship and other related concepts. We have not explored this in detail in this Report because we wanted it to be as short and accessible as possible. We have, however, published some separate background papers for those who want to read about the subject in greater detail.

In this Report, we set out our vision of what it means to be an active citizen – and how individuals might be supported and encouraged to be active citizens. This is a big task – and we don't pretend to have all the answers. Progress will need continued support from all sectors of society.

We also make recommendations to Government. Rather than trying to cover every possible factor which affects Active Citizenship, we have focused on a limited number of specific actions which we believe will make a difference.

The next challenge is to implement these recommendations – and to do this by working in partnership with key stakeholders in the different sectors who participated in the work of the Taskforce. We have proposed the structures needed to take forward this work.

Active Citizenship is not just for someone else – it is for each one of us as well as for Government, business, the media, unions and various other organisations – it is about how we engage with each other and create together a set of shared values for a better society.

We would like to thank everyone who consulted or engaged with us in whatever way for their time and effort.

We appreciate very much your involvement.

Finally, we would like to thank the Secretariat of the Taskforce for their commitment and support throughout the process.

Mary Davis (Chairperson), David Begg, John Bennett, Fr. Harry Bohan, Caroline Casey, Mary Cunningham, Arthur Duignan, Cllr. John Gallahue, Gerry Kearney, Seán Kelly, MaighrÉad Martin, Seamus McAleavey, Dermot McCarthy, Sr. Bernadette MacMahon, Sylvia Meehan, The Venerable David Pierpoint, Dr. Mary Redmond and John Trethowan.



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Background Papers:

We have also published a number of background papers including:

- **Statistical Evidence on active Citizenship in Ireland** – an overview of the evidence regarding trends in participation across the main areas of civic life including results from a survey on Active Citizenship commissioned by the Taskforce
- The **Concept of Active Citizenship** - considers the notion of Active Citizenship and traces some of its origins across different fields from political science to philosophy and sociology
- **Faith Communities Research Paper** - a research paper on Active Citizenship in faith communities prepared by the Council for Research and Development, a Commission of the Irish Bishops' Conference on behalf of the Taskforce
- **Report on the Public Consultation Process** - we published a separate report summarising the findings of the consultation process in November 2006
- **Background Working Paper: Public Consultation Process 'Together We're Better'** – produced in conjunction with the public consultation paper, July 2006
- **'Together We're Better': Public Consultation Paper** - document produced by the Taskforce which posed questions on Active Citizenship in Ireland, July 2006

The background working papers and documents outlined above are available on www.activecitizen.ie

1. Our vision for Active Citizenship

Irish society is changing rapidly

Twenty years ago Ireland looked like a different world. The Internet was unheard of. Mobile phones were a possession for the rare few. Peace on the island of Ireland seemed far off. Unemployment stood at one in six of the labour force and poverty was more widespread. Emigration had peaked and very few new people came to live in Ireland. Third level education was for a minority of young people. Lifestyles and values were very different too.

Huge progress has been made in the intervening period. Many of the social, economic and cultural changes are welcome. Some changes are less welcome, especially those that may have eroded aspects of community spirit and human well-being. For example, concerns exist about the level of inequality in Irish society, and its impact on solidarity between individuals and communities. It is not obvious that we are, today, more caring, engaged, friendly, relaxed and happier than we were in the recent past. The evidence is mixed, as will be seen later in this Report.

Yet, almost no-one wishes to go back to a previous world where economic scarcity and limited opportunities imposed serious restrictions on the capacity of people to live life responsibly and to the full. Today, community development in Ireland is better financed by State agencies. Although fewer social services in areas such as health, education, youth work and poverty alleviation are undertaken by religious organisations or interests, the role of the voluntary and non-profit sector has grown. There are generally better conditions of health and education as well as availability of information and knowledge. Citizens expect more and are better informed about their rights.

Individuals have greater freedom to choose their own roles and identities in communities, workplaces and families. Commitments and identities are more likely to be determined by individuals themselves than being fixed by

some traditional and permanent community or group to which they belong. There is a much greater diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Hence, in thinking about what motivates people to be active in their societies, it is important to take into account the vastly changed circumstances of 21st Century Ireland.

Our vision for Active Citizenship

The challenge and vision of Active Citizenship transcends short-term structures, political philosophies and party political interests. It is based on a genuinely embracing and inclusive vision aimed at a full realisation of democratic values and community capabilities for sustainable well-being in a new Ireland.

By embracing the values and behaviours of Active Citizenship we all have the potential to contribute, in our own ways, to the well-being of Irish society. What sort of society do we want for the future - our future in what sort of world? And what sort of economy, education system, community development, governance do we want and need? A 'civic republican' perspective emphasises the individual's sense of social concern as a member of a political community. We believe that the age-old principles of democracy should form the bedrock values guiding us towards the future: liberty, equality and solidarity. These values are both a means to realising a more just, open and inclusive society as well as ends in themselves.

Broader than just a narrow legal definition of citizenship, such as appears on a passport, being an active citizen implies that we are aware and responsible members of a community. We can belong to a community in which there are many communities – sometimes with divergent values and identities – but all sharing some common sense of responsibility and shared

civic space. Indeed, developments such as the Good Friday Agreement and increased migration have extended traditional notions of Irishness.

Irish citizens are also citizens of the **European Union**. This dimension of citizenship, with associated rights and obligations, is of growing importance. We need to develop our understanding of the European dimension of Active Citizenship, between and among the people of Europe, within a European Union that is democratic and outward-looking, and which is strengthened and enriched through its cultural diversity. We can also learn a great deal from other European countries, many of which have longer experience of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Responsibilities as well as rights...

The Taskforce believes that Active Citizenship implies duties as well as rights and that everyone has both a responsibility and a right to contribute fully to society in Ireland, through an active and continuing engagement.

As citizens we enjoy the right to dignity, respect and protection. But, for every right there is a responsibility on the part of someone to act out of awareness and care for the welfare of fellow citizens. These responsibilities are shared between ordinary citizens, communities, minority groups, voluntary and community organisations, businesses and Government. How exactly these responsibilities are shared out is a matter for a democratic society to decide on. While Government has an important role to play, it cannot do it all. Neither can the responsibility of community services and social protection be left to voluntary effort alone. Indeed, voluntary effort must go hand in hand with Government support and provision.

Active Citizenship is about **engagement, participation** in society and valuing contributions made by individuals, whether they are employed or outside the traditional workforce. In practical terms, this engagement and participation may mean membership of a resident's association or political party or lobby group, or volunteering to help out in a local sports club, or caring for a family member or neighbour, or simply being active and caring about the local neighbourhood, the environment as well as larger global and national issues.

In our view, being an Active Citizen means being aware of, and caring about, the welfare of fellow citizens, recognising that we live as members of communities and therefore depend on others in our daily lives. Active Citizens:

- support and become involved in different types of voluntary and community activities
- respect and listen to those with different views from their own
- play their part in making decisions on issues that affect themselves and others, in particular by participating in the democratic process
- respect ethnic and cultural diversity and are open to change
- welcome new people who come to live in Ireland

2. Why does Active Citizenship matter?

There is a lot of evidence about the benefits of social networks and engagement. Active involvement in communities is generally beneficial. High levels of civic engagement and vibrant communities:

- help to address more effectively many social and economic problems, as individuals and civic organisations are involved in finding and implementing solutions
- create real economic and social benefits as high levels of interpersonal trust reduce the costs associated with extensive rules, contracts, litigation and bureaucracy
- generate networks of support and connection, both within social groups and across groups
- benefit the individuals who participate in voluntary activities and community organisations
- strengthen the quality of decision-making through the democratic process and the sense of belonging of individuals and communities
- lead to a healthy and varied range of voluntary and community organisations which is good for democracy

However, it is important not to interpret all types of social connection as positive. Some forms of community engagement and bonding may be insular, regressive and excluding.

Ultimately, **Active Citizenship is about the underlying values which shape behaviour by individuals as members of communities.** Active citizens help shape strong, healthy, inclusive societies. By looking beyond our purely private roles and rights as consumers to our active roles and responsibilities as citizens, society as a whole benefits.

3. What was the role of the Taskforce?

In recent years, concerns have been expressed about trends in the level and nature of Active Citizenship in Ireland, especially given the rapid economic and social change.

An important part of the Taskforce's role was to review the trends in civic engagement in Ireland and talk to people and organisations about their experiences. The Taoiseach asked us to start a **national conversation** on Active Citizenship: what it means? how strong is it in Ireland today? how can it be supported and promoted into the future?

To do this, we organised a major public consultation process during July to October 2006, which included:

- over 1,150 submissions (written or online) based on a series of nineteen questions posed in a consultation paper
- seven public consultation seminars around the country attended by nearly 950 people
- the Community and Voluntary Fora in each county/city were invited to consult their members and makes submissions
- two seminars for young people on the theme of Active Citizenship and production of a youth-friendly version of the consultation paper
- a plenary meeting of the National Forum on Europe
- a roundtable meeting with public service and non-governmental representatives from Northern Ireland
- a meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

In addition, the Taskforce established five Sub-Committees in the areas of:

- Sporting, Community and Environment
- Cultural, Youth, Older Persons and Ethnic Minorities
- Professional, Occupational and Corporate
- Service Delivery, Caring and Religious
- Political, Voter Participation and Education

These had direct consultations with a range of relevant organisations in each sector.

In carrying out our work we have sought to build upon, and develop, previous relevant reports and studies, including:

- 'Volunteers and Volunteering in Ireland' (2005) - Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sports, Tourism, Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs
- 'Engaging Citizens: The Case for Democratic Renewal in Ireland' - Report of the Democracy Commission (2005)
- 'The Policy Implications of Social Capital' (No. 28) - Report of the National Economic & Social Forum (2003)
- 'Tipping the Balance' - Report of the National Committee on Volunteering in Ireland (2002)
- 'White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationships between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector' (2000)

The Taskforce was delighted with the very high level and constructive nature of the response to the consultation and would like to sincerely thank everyone who participated in it.

With their help we believe that a 'national conversation' on these issues has begun, which has prompted discussions, and action, amongst different individuals and organisations which will generate benefits in the years ahead.

4. What we found...

Our discussions with a wide range of groups and individuals provided us with a great deal of insight about the current nature and level of Active Citizenship. They also provided us with many useful new ideas and suggestions for how it can be promoted and encouraged into the future. It is not possible to comprehensively report on over 1,000 submissions and other contributions at regional seminars, as well as sub-committee consultations during the Autumn of 2006 in this Report. The Taskforce has published a separate report on the consultation process which is available at www.activecitizen.ie. However, a number of key messages did emerge and are summarised here, along with some findings from a specially commissioned Survey of Civic Engagement undertaken by the ESRI¹ for the Taskforce as well as a parish-based survey undertaken by the Council for Research and Development, a Commission of the Irish Bishops' Conference.

There is strong interest in the topic of Active Citizenship...

A very large number of people responded positively and constructively to the consultation process and to the establishment of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship. Among them there is a strong commitment to the deepening and widening of Active Citizenship and civic participation and a clear willingness to participate in measures to achieve this. Although most people thought volunteering was declining, when asked about their own organisation only one half said that it had become more difficult to recruit new volunteers.

...while at the same time some scepticism was apparent in relation to the usefulness of previous consultations in terms of changes implemented

Despite their positive outlook, many participants had been involved in consultation exercises about similar issues and are frustrated by a perceived lack of implementation and follow through on previous reports and initiatives.

But, there was a strong shared view on what the issues were...

Despite the diversity among participants in the process there was a strong shared view on what the barriers to Active Citizenship and civic participation were and what needs to be done to support it in the future. Chiefly among these were obstacles in terms of time, new patterns of work and leisure as well as changing values and choices. Practical barriers such as insurance, bureaucratic burdens and lack of facilities also emerged. At the same time, many felt that the goodwill and large-scale voluntary effort apparent on the ground is not properly harnessed or valued. Many felt cut off from decision-making – getting involved didn't make the difference it could or should make in their view.

More factual or statistical information is needed to assess these claims. At least two key issues or questions have emerged in recent years:

- Is Active Citizenship/social capital declining as it seems to be in some other countries?²
- How do we compare with other countries in terms of volunteering, membership of community organisations, voting, trust etc?

¹ The Survey tracked trends in civic engagement among persons aged 16 and over since the last similar Survey in 2002, as well as patterns of engagement by age, gender, location and socio-economic background. Further information can be obtained from 'Statistical Evidence on active Citizenship in Ireland' at www.activecitizen.ie

² Notably the United States of America. Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

International comparisons of Active Citizenship are difficult to make. What indicators are available suggest that Ireland is:

- average to slightly below average in terms of reported group membership and volunteering across OECD countries³, but
- rich in terms of informal social networks compared to many other economically developed countries

Active Citizenship is changing and not necessarily declining...

In terms of trends over time, there is no clear evidence that people are less involved than before. In fact, the Survey of Civic Engagement commissioned by the Taskforce showed an apparent increase in both volunteering and community involvement in the four years since the last such survey was conducted here in Ireland. The ESRI Survey showed:

- Increases in the proportions of people in the adult population who say they do unpaid and regular volunteering outside the home or were actively involved in the community in the previous 12 months (Chart 1)
- Overall stability in the pattern of active engagement by type of organisation with some continuing to account for much of community involvement – sporting, community, social-help volunteering and religious (Table 1)

But, for every adult involved in their community, there are at least two others who are not. An estimated two million adults (or nearly two thirds of the adult population) are not actively involved in their community. It is estimated that nearly two thirds of all adults (63%) were not involved in some form of ‘civic activity’ such as attending a public meeting, joining an

action group, contacting an organisation or public representative over some issue, contacting the media, etc.



Of course, Active Citizenship is more than just volunteering or being active in communities – vital as these are to the health of any community or democracy. Active Citizenship is about how people engage in the political and decision-making process at various levels; how well they are informed or enabled to be active and how various groups can be effectively included. The ESRI Survey found:

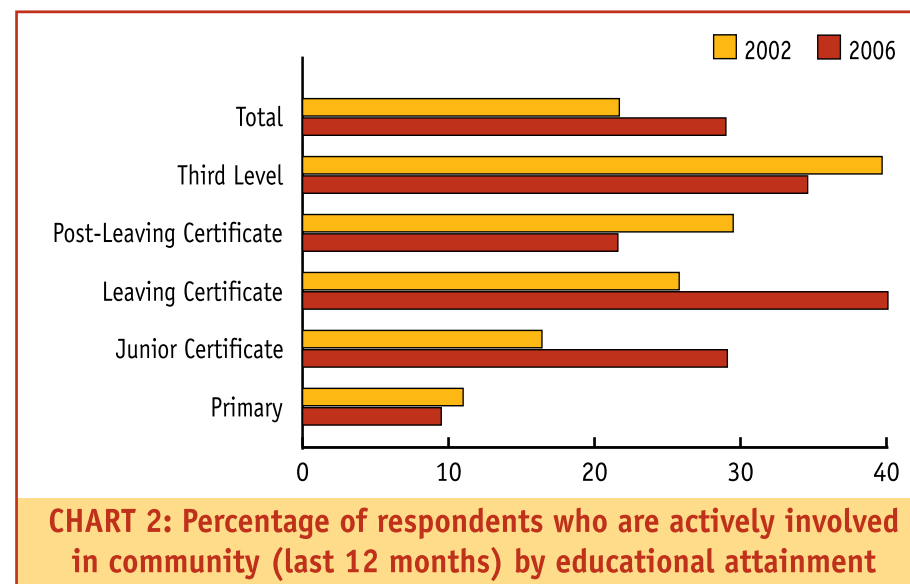
- 38% reporting that they were interested in politics (either ‘definitely’ or ‘somewhat’)
- a majority (54%) saying that they thought that they could influence decisions at the local level
- a 76% registration rate for voting among the 20-29 age group⁴

³ However, membership of groups is higher here, than in most European countries. National Economic and Social Forum (2003) *The Policy Implications of Social Capital*, Forum Report No. 28.

⁴ This figure may include some who did not realise that their registration information was incorrect or out of date.

Organisational type	2002	2006
Sports	26.4	24.8
Community/Residents Association	9.2	14.3
Social welfare services (elderly, disability, deprived)	10.8	12.2
Religious or Church organisations	20.2	10.9
Voluntary organisations on health	3.9	4.7
Education	0.7	4.3
Youth work	3.9	4.3
Other Groups	3.0	4.3
Schools/Parents associations/Board of Management	5.1	4.3
Recreation	3.2	3.0
Women's groups	1.8	2.4
Political parties/groups	2.1	2.4
Third World/human rights	1.1	1.9
Trade Unions	1.6	1.7
Arts, Culture, music	2.1	1.5
Local community action (poverty, employment, housing, racial equality)	1.1	0.9
Professional associations	3.4	0.2
Conservation, environment, ecology, animal rights	0.2	0.2
Missing/Don't know	0.0	1.7
Total	100	100

TABLE 1: Trends in Active Community Engagement by Organisational Type, 2002-2006



...and a strong emphasis on values of inclusiveness and justice came to the fore

In the view of many submissions to the Taskforce, Active Citizenship should be clearly based on values of equality, inclusiveness, non-discrimination and diversity. It should also encompass rights for residents including contributing to the broad development of public services and being involved in decisions which affect them. Just as important as the level or trend in Active Citizenship, we need to be concerned about which groups are active. In the ESRI Survey, lower rates of engagement were found among those over the age of 65, those not in the labour force or at study (especially homemakers), people on low income (less than €300 per week), persons living in urban areas and those who left school early (Chart 2). Lower rates of volunteering (15%) were also found among newcomers (those who stated

their nationality as other than Irish) compared to the rest of the population (24%).⁵

The unique contribution of many different types of voluntary and community organisations needs to be better acknowledged and supported...

Voluntary and community organisations were seen by many contributors as the backbone of Active Citizenship, with the ability to achieve trust, cohesion and confidence in ways that government cannot achieve on its own. Encouragement for Active Citizenship requires support for these organisations in a way that ensures their effectiveness, transparency and accountability. Religious organisations and Churches continue to play an important role in terms of social support, service delivery in key areas as well as altruistic behaviour at neighbourhood or family levels – among the basic building blocks of civic behaviour and attitude. The parish-based Survey found that whereas social as well as religious changes have weakened the link between households and their parishes/local faith-based communities, faith-based communities can still provide an important social support network for many groups in the population – not least newcomers.

Most commentators agreed that volunteering has been changing in very significant ways...

The nature of volunteering is changing with a greater emphasis on responsibilities and skills. There is also a sense of unease about how wider changes in the economy and society will impact on voluntary activity and our sense of community in the years ahead. New ways need to be developed to attract, support and recognise the role of volunteers and to support the organisations they are involved with.

Planning of the built environment as well as issues around local facilities were often mentioned as real barriers to more effective engagement...

New housing developments are not taking account of the needs of people and communities for transport, common areas, open spaces and community facilities. In this context it is difficult for people to feel respected or included or to inculcate a sense of community or citizenship – there is a need for reform of Local Government and planning.

And there was a clear lack of confidence in some public consultation structures...

There is cynicism and a lack of confidence in democratic and some other consultative structures, particularly at local level, with individuals and organisations not feeling that they are genuinely listened to and this is exacerbated by the focus in public services on *customers* rather than *citizens*.

Community, voluntary and public authority activities need to be co-ordinated better with more sharing of information and coherence...

There is abundant evidence of activity at community, county, regional and national level in the general areas of Active Citizenship both by government and non-government organisations. Yet no one body has an overview of this activity and there are no effective mechanisms for sharing information or learning from experience.

⁵ Even though higher rates of 'civic activity' (attending meetings etc) were found among newcomers (43%) compared to the rest of the population (37%).

Education and learning in the community has a key role...

Active Citizenship will not achieve its full potential without a concerted and consistent effort to address current obstacles to it at political, governmental, sectoral, community, organisational and individual levels. Education, both formal and non-formal, and capacity building is key to this, through a system of lifelong learning opportunities in the community, classroom and workplace.

...as well as enterprises and public sector organisations...

To be effective the public sector requires clear direction, capacity building and resources. Private bodies, both as employers and policy shapers, also have a role which is currently undeveloped in the area of Active Citizenship.

With the need for a suitable framework for ensuring change happens...

Ultimately, the achievement of a strong citizenry requires a coherent and comprehensive approach so that the various strands can work in harmony to achieve its objectives. This needs to be managed and many respondents recommended that a single Department have responsibility for leading the initiative. A clear conclusion from the consultations is that we need better and more relevant knowledge to link communities to the public service as well as learn from community practice on the ground. We need to be particularly attentive to how it is changing and how particular groups in society are effectively excluded from Active Citizenship.

5. Playing our part together

Active Citizenship, by its nature, starts with individuals. While the Government can facilitate, encourage and support it, ultimately Active Citizenship is about how each one of us can play a responsible role wherever we are and whatever our age, status or roles in life.

Equally, Government policy is only effective to the extent that it is developed and implemented in co-operation with many different stakeholders who play important roles in Irish society.

In short, Active Citizenship is not just ‘for someone else’ – it is for each one of us - as well as for the Government, business, unions and other organisations.

We make a series of recommendations to Government in section 6. However, this Report is also addressed to the many thousands of organisations and networks, as well as individuals, who make up the communities in which we all live. Each of us has a part to play.

Each individual should consider their own opportunities for participation...

Active Citizenship takes many forms and many people undertake vital activity in support of their communities, for example, caring for one’s own family or keeping an eye out in the neighbourhood. Active Citizenship can also be very rewarding, in terms of personal development and making friends, as well as the satisfaction of giving back to the community and contributing to the common good.

The Taskforce encourages people to consider how they can become more engaged in their own community, for example:

- To spend at least one percent of your time doing some form of community service or activity outside the home that you enjoy. This means just under two hours a week volunteering, coaching, organising or giving a helping hand somewhere. Or alternatively, just the equivalent of a week’s work once a year for a one-off project or activity
- To join an activity or group which is working to improve the life of your neighbourhood or tackle some issue in Ireland or overseas. This might mean joining a residents’ association, a community development project or a political party

Organisations may also need to consider the way they work...

Active Citizenship also involves the estimated 20,000 organisations and groups that exist in the community and voluntary sector in the State. These cover everything from local parish-based groups to sporting organisations, political parties, lobby groups, women’s groups, adult learning networks, hobby groups, etc. There is a huge diversity of organisations with a variety of goals, working methods and composition.

Is it an issue whether organisations are making the effort to welcome new people? In our consultations, we heard that many organisations don’t make enough effort to welcome new members. A special effort could be made

to welcome, invite and enable newcomers to play an active role. This may relieve long-serving members or volunteers who can feel over-stretched and ill-supported.

The Taskforce encourages groups/organisations to consider some of the following issues:

- To what extent can new people be encouraged to be involved and responsible in organisations – are they encouraged, trained, recognised?
- Are people from ethnic and cultural minorities particularly welcome?
- Are volunteers effectively thanked and recognised in our organisations?
- Could new and better forms of ‘time limited commitment’ be developed and how?

Participation in the workplace...

For many people their place of work is a focal point for civic engagement, ranging from trade union membership to social and sporting societies, to informal support networks. For example, over 800,000 people are members of unions affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. As the world of work evolves in an era of globalised competition and the knowledge economy, organisations need to develop a more participatory approach to allow employees contribute in a climate of innovation and learning. By embracing such a culture of partnership, we can greatly strengthen the individual’s opportunities for meaningful engagement both in the workplace and in other areas of their lives.

Individual businesses can also have a greater impact...

The corporate sector – small and large – has an important role in promoting Active Citizenship. Businesses already make a significant contribution, and in our consultations, we identified a great willingness by business to play an even more active and positive role in the wider community, while recognising that this must always take place within the context of commercial pressures.

This can involve direct contributions of financial or other resources, support for employees who act as volunteers inside or outside company time, or just building links between a business and individuals or communities experiencing needs or disadvantage. Whilst some businesses have responded to such needs on a spontaneous basis, an increasing number of companies have a formal Corporate Social Responsibility programme involving policies towards their customers, employees, suppliers, environment and communities.

The increased contribution of the business sector is likely to be particularly effective at local level through partnerships with local communities, voluntary groups, schools, etc.

The Taskforce encourages individual businesses to pursue actively opportunities for engagement with the community. For example, this could include:

- supporting specific community projects or voluntary activities
- facilitating periodic secondments of staff to various community and voluntary organisations

...and this could be strategically supported across the business sector

A range of organisations (for example, Business in the Community and Junior Achievement) already promote and support community engagement by the business sector. However the Taskforce believes that there is scope for stronger mechanisms to connect individual businesses with suitable opportunities for engagement.

Likewise, there is scope for professional representative organizations, for example, in the legal and accountancy professions, to promote community engagement throughout their membership. In particular, the Taskforce welcomes a number of projects underway in the legal profession arising from discussions during the consultation process.

The Taskforce therefore calls on the business sector, building on existing initiatives and organisations in this arena, to:

- develop initiatives similar to 'Board Match' that connect the skills and resources in the corporate sector with suitable community and voluntary organisations
- support this by developing a database of needs and opportunities for community engagement at local level
- adopt a system of accreditation and recognition of community engagement by organisations in the business sector and amongst professional firms

We believe that the Active Citizenship Office (see section 7 below) should work with relevant organisations in the business sector to implement initiatives of this nature.

There is also potential for increased philanthropic activity...

As a consequence of Ireland's relatively recent economic success, there is growing interest in the potential for philanthropy to support community-based activities.

The Taskforce believes that, as with the business sector, there is a need to strategically support philanthropic activity to channel its potential contribution. The Government recently established a Philanthropy Forum involving representatives of philanthropic organisations and relevant Departments which will help to facilitate this through constructive dialogue within the sector and with Government.

The media has the capacity to raise awareness and encourage involvement, especially at a local and community level...

The media helps shape national debates on vital issues of concern to citizens. The media can also cater for particular minority groups (cultural, linguistic, etc.) and provide them with a greater sense of identity, together with a visibility and connection to the wider community.

In particular, the media can play an important role in providing (i) a platform for debate and exchange of views, values and positions (ii) education and (iii) information on opportunities to be more active in

the community. Examples include electronic local notice boards, teletext, weekly Active Citizenship columns in the national papers, local community papers, news and current affairs programmes on local and community radio, virtual community networks and local radio networks. The latter can help, in particular, to connect older people and housebound to local events including, for example, religious services. The media also has the potential to hinder Active Citizenship by, for example, restricting the voices contributing to public debate or stigmatising particular groups. Diversity within the media sector, including a continued strong public service ethos within Irish broadcasting, is therefore of great importance.

Innovative projects in which community development and Active Citizenship are presented as something attractive, real and personal could spark public debate and interest. The RTÉ programme series in the Autumn of 2006, 'Community Challenge', provided an example of how to raise awareness and interest.

The Taskforce believes that the media has the capacity to raise awareness of, and encourage, Active Citizenship. The Taskforce believes that there is an opportunity for the media:

- to promote awareness of community-based activity through, for example, greater coverage of community and voluntary activities in national and local media
- to explore new and innovative ways of connecting and engaging communities, for example, through use of web-based fora and networks, 'Community Challenge'-type events, locally-based media output and new programme initiatives through the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland's Sound and Vision Fund.

These, and similar initiatives should be supported under both the Guiding Principles which apply to RTÉ given its public service remit, and through the news and current affairs obligations of the local and community broadcasting sector.

There is also a need for the community sector to communicate its role and achievements more effectively and positively to the media, for example, through providing regular information via community and voluntary umbrella/representative organisations. We recognise that this poses a challenge for those organisations in terms of the resources and capability to fulfil that role and appropriate support will be required.

Building this partnership approach

Arising from its consultation with different sectors, the Taskforce believes that there is untapped potential amongst stakeholders who are willing to contribute to a greater extent to the shared objectives we have described.

What is required is a further dialogue and development of mechanisms which capture and mobilise the different sectors, as well as maintaining the public debate and focus on the issues raised.

This should be a core role of the Active Citizenship Office proposed (see section 7), building on the contacts already initiated by the Taskforce.

6. Recommendations to Government

Our consultations and research have identified a wide range of ways in which public policy affects Active Citizenship. Some of these factors are about underlying trends in the economy and society, for example, work-life balance and levels of participation in the labour market.

In addition, many citizens and communities feel that they have little influence over areas that matter directly to their quality of life due to a perceived gap between them and the decision-making process. This can mean a reluctance to get involved not only because ‘they don’t have time’ but because they think that ‘it has little or no impact’.

In considering ways to improve Active Citizenship, it has been necessary, therefore, to keep in mind this wider context of economic development, social equality, accountability and transparency of Government. However, in casting our recommendations, our focus has been on more specific policy interventions to facilitate, encourage and support Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship and public service can go hand in hand...

One concern that emerged from the consultations was that too much emphasis on volunteering and civic engagement could take the focus away from public provision of services to meet the legitimate concerns, needs and rights of various communities.

There is no contradiction between high quality public services and high levels of volunteerism and civic engagement. In fact, there is some evidence that growing social inequality and exclusion, to which inadequate public provision can give rise, undermines civic engagement in the long run. People are more prepared to be involved and to trust others if there is a more inclusive, supporting and fairer context. In this regard, it is worth

noting that the highest rates, internationally, of civic engagement and interpersonal trust are in Scandinavia, where there are also high levels of social provision, demonstrating that these are not mutually exclusive.

Potential for North-South Co-operation...

An important aspect of the Taskforce’s consultation process and discussions was the all-island dimension of Active Citizenship, which is particularly relevant given that many community, sporting and other organisations operate on an all-island basis, while both parts of the island face many of the same challenges in terms of levels and trends of civic engagement.

In the view of the Taskforce, there is a great deal of scope for mutual learning and sharing of experience, joint initiatives in particular areas, and promotion of ongoing dialogue between relevant parties in the public service and wider civil society.

With the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive the Government should seek to enhance North-South co-operation in as many areas as possible, and in particular implementation of this Report’s recommendations should take account of the opportunities to proactively develop such an all-island approach.

To facilitate this, the Active Citizenship Office, in developing its implementation plan, should have a dialogue with relevant bodies in Northern Ireland to explore these opportunities in more detail. It should also explore the potential for a joint conference which would facilitate a wider discussion on the Taskforce’s report as well as provisions in the National Development Plan for all-island funding in the area of community infrastructure.

North-South Consultative Forum

The Good Friday Agreement provided that consideration be given to the establishment of an Independent Consultative Forum appointed by the two administrations, North and South, and representatives of civil society on the island. The St. Andrew's Agreement of October 2006 provides that the Northern Ireland Executive would support the establishment of the Forum.

The Taskforce believes that such a Forum should be established at an early date and as soon as practicable in the context of ongoing political developments in Northern Ireland. In our view, the Forum would be a suitable mechanism for dialogue on Active Citizenship in both parts of the island building on the consultations and discussions initiated by the Taskforce.

Five thematic areas...

In developing our recommendations, we have focused on five key themes which reflect what emerged in the course of the national and regional consultations. These are:

- (i) Participation in the Democratic Process**
- (ii) The Public Service and Citizens**
- (iii) Community Engagement, and Promoting a Sense of Community**
- (iv) Education for Citizenship**
- (v) Ethnic and Cultural Diversity and the Challenge of Engaging Newcomers**

Other themes emerged during the consultations and these are reflected in the report of the consultation process (available at www.activecitizen.ie). However, one way or another, every group in the population is confronted with the need for education, inclusion, engagement and empowerment – all of which need to be addressed in a joined-up way and not just piecemeal over different agencies and fragmented policy initiatives.

(i) Participation in the Democratic Process

A healthy democracy relies on citizens who are well informed, interested and engaged. It is also linked to a shared sense of empowerment – we can make a difference by voting, joining, speaking, writing or organising.

There is a clear and growing problem about the level of participation in the democratic process, in particular amongst younger people, including students living away from home and disadvantaged groups. Low levels of voter participation are not just a concern in their own right, but also because they strike at the very foundations of Active Citizenship. One way to encourage participation by younger people is through Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament for 12-18 year olds) and Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils) which are under the auspices of the Office of the Minister for Children.

However there is a need to consider barriers in terms of interest, information, opportunity and capacity for civic engagement. Lack of interest may not be the barrier to greater civic engagement so much as a lack of confidence on the part of citizens that their efforts and time will have an impact, as well as practical difficulties in terms of registration and access.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission with a mandate to:
 - encourage everyone who is eligible to register and vote in elections through (i) organisation e.g. timing of voting, postal voting and (ii) appropriate publicity campaigns, explanatory material
 - support voter education programmes (i) through the formal education system and (ii) in community, adult education and other settings, with special priority for persons in disadvantaged areas, young people and the growing ethnic and cultural diversity in Ireland
 - provide data, research and analysis on the issue of political engagement and awareness
- the mandate of the Commission should also include either direct oversight of the voter registration process, or an advisory role in relation to management of the register. In this context, the potential of the use of Personal Public Service Numbers (PPSN) to maintain an up-to-date register should be pursued

(ii) The Public Service and Citizens

Civic engagement can only be sustained if people believe that they can influence decision-making and that their views are taken into account. A sense of citizenship amongst all those in public service positions will be reflected in a willingness to serve fellow citizens fairly and with courtesy. Transparency and accountability in decision-making will enhance the State's relationship with its citizens.

There is a need, therefore, to promote awareness and understanding amongst public service organisations about how to engage more effectively with citizens and community and voluntary organisations. This should be reflected in the ethos and practices of public service organisations at all

levels, including how they consult and engage with local communities and individuals. This should build on public service reforms of recent years including the Quality Customer Service initiative which encourages consultation with the public as part of the Customer Charter process, Freedom of Information legislation and the Guidelines on Consultation for Public Service Organisations, as well as the participative approach to policy-making which has evolved under Social Partnership.

This would also be facilitated by more effective structures at local level for engaging communities (see section 7 below).

The Taskforce recommends:

- that this ethos of public service, based on respect for each citizen, needs to be reinforced and strengthened and continue to be a core objective of public service reforms. This should include a renewed emphasis on effective consultation with associated training for public servants

At a more specific level, there is much that public authorities can do to support community engagement and volunteering. In particular they must avoid creating barriers or obstacles which hinder such activity and this was a consistent theme of all our consultations.

As our society becomes more litigious, the level of insurance costs and fear of litigation has become a growing barrier for many community and voluntary groups. The Taskforce believes there should be continued efforts to reduce insurance costs and minimise litigation. The Taskforce welcomes the work done by the National Irish Community and Voluntary Fora in developing a group insurance scheme for all members of local Community and Voluntary Fora. Membership of the local Forum is open to any community and voluntary group engaged in voluntary activity. Experience of the insurance scheme to date shows insurance being obtained with minimum administration and has resulted in considerably cheaper premium costs.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that the group insurance scheme open to members of Local Community and Voluntary Fora should be promoted widely amongst relevant organisations and groups

The Taskforce also welcomes the Law Reform Commission’s current examination of a number of aspects of the legal duty of care and the associated standard of care imposed on those who provide voluntary services, and has made an input to its work. A related concern is the availability and timeliness of the Garda vetting service for volunteers. The Taskforce supports the continued rollout and enhancement of this service by the Gardaí.

A major and growing issue is the need for proportionality in the burden of regulatory and financial compliance required of community and voluntary organisations. While there will always be a need for appropriate accountability and transparency, especially where public funding is concerned, the Taskforce is concerned that this is becoming a significant burden, particularly for smaller and more informal groups.

The Taskforce recommends:

- an initiative to help community and voluntary organisations meet compliance costs (i) when providing programme funding, to include assistance towards meeting those costs, especially in the case of small organisations and (ii) ensuring that compliance costs are proportionate and that administrative burdens on community and voluntary organisations are streamlined and standardised across the public service to the greatest extent possible

Ireland has a vibrant network of community and voluntary organisations active in many spheres of public life including the Social Partnership

process. However, the health of the sector cannot be taken for granted in light of the change in Irish society as well as the barriers and concerns identified in the consultation process.

Ongoing dialogue between the public service and the community and voluntary sector will also help to minimise these barriers and improve mutual understanding. The Active Citizenship Office and Consultative Forum (see section 7 below) will therefore have an important role in facilitating a continuous partnership approach to these challenges and maintaining and enhancing the health of the community and voluntary sector.

A particular issue highlighted consistently during our consultations was training, which is of growing importance given the greater expectations of volunteers and standards required of host organisations.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that funding schemes be strengthened to support capacity development amongst community and voluntary organisations particularly in the area of training at both national and local level

The Taskforce is seeking (see section 5 above) to promote stronger links between businesses and community and voluntary organisations, including supporting voluntary activity by employees, and believes that new mechanisms to promote and facilitate such engagement are required. The Taskforce believes that this approach should also be supported in the public service and this would build connections between the public and community spheres.

There is also the potential to draw on the experience and capability of older citizens to a greater extent. One way to do this is to build links between retired people and organisations such as those in community and voluntary sector, educational sector, youth sector and many others.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that a programme be introduced in the public service to promote community engagement and participation. This should include
 - (i) recognising and providing some time-off for volunteering effort and
 - (ii) treating verifiable areas of community activity and volunteering as relevant items for inclusion and recognition in job applications and evaluations of job performance. This could also promote engagement for people as they move into retirement through pre-retirement courses

(iii) Community Engagement and Promoting a Sense of Community

The Taskforce has a concern that while many communities retain a strong sense of identity and interconnectedness, people are less likely to know their neighbours and identify with their neighbourhood than in the past. This appears to be a particular issue in newer urban and suburban communities.

The Government cannot create a sense of community, but it has a vital role in supporting community engagement. Its role should not be to direct, but rather to facilitate and support – where necessary – local community initiative.

It is also important to encourage communities to draw on their own unique capabilities and strengths – and not look only at deficits and needs. All communities have talent and ability – for example, in the areas of arts, culture, music and sport. However, communities vary in the extent to which they can access financial, human and social resources. The Government could help generate a focus on community engagement, working with communities and other stakeholders to create awareness and mobilise resources, drawing on the many existing successful initiatives.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the adoption and promotion of a National Active Citizenship theme each year to stimulate local initiatives and events, e.g. ‘get to know your neighbours’, ‘support for older people’. The themes would be selected to mobilise and motivate local community activity, drawing on existing community resources and initiatives. This initiative would culminate in an Active Citizenship Week which would be a focal point for local community engagement

It is also important for the State to formally recognise those who do become involved and contribute to communities, and society as a whole, by making an exceptional contribution as active citizens. While a number of schemes exist to recognise outstanding achievements in different walks of life, Ireland is one of the few countries without a formal State awards system. Such a system could build on the Young Citizens’ Awards presented by the President during the European Year of Citizenship through Education in 2005.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that National Presidential Citizen Awards should be introduced to recognise outstanding contributions to civic and community life. These would be awarded to a limited number of people selected by an independent process based on nominations by members of the public. Presentation of the Awards could act as a focal point for the Active Citizenship Week

A consistent theme during our consultations was that the perceived distance between the citizen and local authority was too great – particularly but not exclusively in urban areas. The Taskforce believes that stronger locally based structures, such as community councils and residents’ associations, can act as a form of self-organised and ‘bottom up’ form of local democracy and deliberation.

The Taskforce believes that there is a need to develop and strengthen community councils, residents' associations and similar local representative structures. This would support a stronger voice for local communities in decisions affecting them.

The Taskforce recognises that this raises important and complex issues about the nature and role and structures of local government in a country with very centralised policy-making and service delivery systems. However, we make recommendations in the implementation section (see section 7 below) about progressing this agenda.

The Taskforce also believes that there is a need for better mechanisms and structures to connect people willing to become engaged in community activities with suitable opportunities.

The Taskforce welcomes the establishment of a number of Volunteer Centres around the country to promote and support volunteering and provide information on volunteering opportunities, and is aware of many other initiatives and organisations doing similar valuable work. The Taskforce supports the intention that a Volunteer Centre should be established in every county. They should also work in co-operation with other local structures, business organisations and Local Authorities to maximise their impact.

A related issue is the failure of the planning system to take sufficient account of the needs of people and communities, especially in relation to community facilities and local services. This can have a significant negative impact on people's sense of community and creates practical barriers to participation. In this context, the Taskforce notes the draft Development Plan Guidelines for Planning Authorities which emphasise the need for development plans to set out strategic vision for areas based on proper planning and sustainable development.

The Taskforce recognises that there are no quick-fix solutions to the difficulties of planning for strong communities in the context of a rapidly growing population and pressures on the availability of essential public services. It supports the growing emphasis on sustainable communities at policy level, including through the National Spatial Strategy, and believes that these should be translated consistently into development plans and planning decisions. Better public transport remains a key long-term requirement for sustainable communities and Active Citizenship. In all cases, strong and genuine input from the local community is essential and inclusive and genuine consultation needs to become the norm. Provision of community and recreational facilities must be a core requirement for all major new housing developments.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that Local Authorities should prioritise the provision of community and recreational facilities as part of Development Plans and subsequent planning decisions. An audit of implementation of this approach should be carried out by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and revised legislation introduced if necessary

It is also unclear that community-based facilities, where they do exist, are being sufficiently utilised as a resource for different types of community activity.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that an audit should be undertaken by end-2008 by Local Authorities through the County/City Development Boards of existing community facilities available for voluntary, sporting, civic or recreational activities to identify (i) gaps in availability based on the needs of the local communities and (ii) opportunities for improved use/sharing of existing facilities

- that better use should be made of schools at evening and weekend time to act as community hubs - facilitating, for example, adult education, literacy programmes, various community activities and services. As a first step, a pilot should be undertaken in a number of post-primary schools in partnership with the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund

(iv) Education for Citizenship

Education is a vital part of everyone's life and what we learn and who we associate with can have a profound influence on our attitude and behaviour for life. Of course, education does not end when a person leaves school or college. Adult education is an example of how people can draw on their own experience of life to enrich learning and make new discoveries.

A crucial factor in the contribution of education to Active Citizenship is the way in which values are 'caught' and not just 'taught' in the course of learning. Schools and colleges are places where people learn about behaviour, dialogue, decision-making as well as a range of skills, knowledge and attributes that enable people to act as thinking, critical, responsible and caring citizens in a democratic society.

But, if learning does not cease after completion of school neither does it begin with schooling. Families are the first, and probably main place, where young people learn the craft of Active Citizenship by learning to communicate, live with others and interpret the world around them. For many people, their best opportunities for learning arise in the youth and adult education sectors. The education system cannot be expected to resolve issues which are the result of wider societal factors.

There are many excellent examples of education for Active Citizenship at various levels of the education system and the Taskforce believes that these have the potential to play a greater role in the future, especially in a more

diverse and fast-changing country.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the expansion of education for citizenship in the school system and in the youth and adult education sectors, and in particular:
 - ensure that every Transition Year student has the opportunity to take part in an active learning community-based project, building on existing programmes such as the Young Social Innovators (YSI). To contribute to this, participation in YSI should be increased incrementally to make it available to a larger percentage of Transition Year students
 - strengthen the status and role of the CSPE programme in the junior cycle and introduce a citizenship programme as an exam subject at senior cycle
 - include workshops on Active Citizenship/Voter Education as a constituent element in Adult/Community Education Programmes

A strong theme that emerged in our consultations was that, beyond any specific programme or intervention to enhance Active Citizenship, the role of school ethos and social equality were crucial in providing the right context. The Taskforce, therefore, welcomes the progress in rollout of Student Councils and supports their extension to all second level schools by 2009, with more effective support to ensure that they are enabled to have a real influence on decision-making.

The term 'service learning' has been used in some Third Level colleges in recent years. This involves building community service and volunteering into curriculum and assessment in the formal education sector. Along with teaching and learning, 'community outreach' and business-education links are acknowledged by many Higher Education institutions internationally as a core function of what educational institutions should be doing.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) should lead an initiative, with appropriate resources, to promote, support and link together citizenship initiatives across the Higher Education sector, including ‘service learning’ and volunteering by students

There is a range of very successful initiatives to encourage young people to become involved in community and voluntary activities in order to enhance their personal development and help create a sense of social awareness. A prominent example is the Gaisce or the President’s Award which is awarded to young people who complete agreed individual challenges in the areas of personal skills, community involvement, physical recreation and venture activities.

However, the Taskforce believes that there is the potential to develop a national programme, which would complement and build on these and become, over time, a standard which a significant percentage of young adults would aspire to achieve in the course of their education or early working career.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the development of a certificate/award (complementing Gaisce awards) which would be earned through completing at least three months volunteering or community involvement activity (in Ireland or overseas). This could be done, for example, through a 3-month/year ‘civic engagement’ gap during further education or the early stages of working life

(v) Ethnic and Cultural Diversity and the Challenge of Engaging Newcomers

Ireland has experienced a rapid increase in inward migration in recent years, reflecting economic success and reversing historic patterns of emigration. This welcome shift is an opportunity to put the values of Active Citizenship into practice by proactively embracing this new diversity in Irish society and tackling racism and discrimination at all levels.

Of course, diversity is not just about ethnic or cultural minorities and newcomers to Ireland, but covers a wide range of groups who can be excluded for reasons of difference, for example, older people or people with a disability. This needs to be reflected in policies at all levels, drawing on the existing framework of equality legislation and policies.

However, at this time Ireland faces a particular challenge to reflect on how best to welcome, integrate and activate its ethnic and cultural minorities (including those who chose to live here but without a change of legal citizenship status). A balance is required between integration and absorption of norms of civic behaviour here, on the one hand, and on the other respect for difference in cultures, language and customs.

Where individuals and families chose to live here they assume rights and responsibilities like the rest of the population. Cultural differences need to be balanced against agreement to live by the norms of the host country including abiding by its democracy, tolerance and civic co-operation. At the same time, newcomers may have much to bring to Irish society by their varied cultural experiences that enrich and re-invigorate Irish society.

The Taskforce therefore supports, in line with commitments in Towards 2016, development of a comprehensive policy on integration of migrant

communities to Ireland, in consultation with relevant stakeholders. This should include specific measures to promote and support their involvement in civil society. This will need to address issues such as language training and should also explore innovative measures like mentoring by people from the local community.

This should draw on international experiences, some of which use Active Citizenship as a driver of their integration policies. The Taskforce believes that the approach recommended in this Report, with its emphasis on rights and responsibilities, respect for diversity and promoting participation at all levels, offers one foundation stone for integration policy in the years ahead. The Active Citizenship Office proposed could play a useful role in supporting this approach.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that all forms of community and voluntary organisations should be encouraged to undertake proactive initiatives to reach out and engage with newcomers to Irish society. This should be incentivised appropriately through Government funding programmes

Many people coming to live in Ireland will not seek Irish citizenship in a legal sense, but should be given greater security and certainty about their right to stay and live here with their families. This will support their sense of belonging to Irish society.

In the case where newcomers wish to assume the legal status of Irish citizens, there is a need to understand the meaning of such status beyond its mere legal aspects. In this new context, there is a need to provide a more formal expression of citizenship as a valued status which carries with it rights and obligations, involving a commitment to shared common values.

There is a need to provide greater clarity and certainty around the process of becoming an Irish citizen, to encourage newcomers to Ireland to become citizens as an expression of their membership of Irish society, and to celebrate the commitment involved in becoming an Irish citizen.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that a formal ceremony should be introduced which would mark someone's admission to Irish citizenship and allow them to publicly demonstrate their commitment to Ireland
- that information material and short education courses should be developed on Irish citizenship, which would encompass Irish history, democratic institutions, culture, language and traditions, and be made widely available

Appropriate information material and education courses could, once developed and established, become a more structured part of the process of becoming an Irish citizen. It is possible that this could include completion of an appropriate course as a criterion, or requirement, for admission to citizenship.

As well as a ceremony to mark someone's admission to Irish citizenship, the Taskforce believes there would be merit in introducing a similar ceremony when a person reaches the age of 18. This would create a link with the entitlement to vote as well as building awareness of the other features of citizenship. A ceremony could be organised in schools as well as in other settings outside the formal education system.

7. Implementation

The Taskforce believes that the state of Active Citizenship should be a national priority. At a time of great change in Irish society, we need to mobilise public service organisations and a wider set of stakeholders. This focus on Active Citizenship requires joined-up thinking and serious investment in terms of people, time and support.

Active Citizenship Office

To provide this leadership, support and facilitation the Taskforce recommends that:

- an Active Citizenship Office should be established to lead the implementation of the Taskforce's recommendations. This should be established on a non-statutory basis as a cross-departmental team with staff co-located from relevant Departments, as well as appropriate external expertise and support
- given the significance and cross-Government nature of Active Citizenship, the Office should report to the Taoiseach who, in the Taskforce's view, would be best placed to ensure continued prioritisation of the agenda, perhaps through chairing a Cabinet Committee of relevant Ministers

The Office should be overseen by an Implementation Steering Group comprising senior representatives from relevant sectors.

The Office's role should be to:

- (i) develop a three-year implementation plan for the Taskforce's recommendations in consultation with key stakeholders; the implementation plan would identify responsibility for action under each recommendation

- (ii) work with relevant stakeholders, including the business sector and professional bodies, to implement initiatives in support of Active Citizenship, including proposals arising from the Taskforce's report where appropriate
- (iii) prepare an Annual Report on progress in implementing the Taskforce report which would be submitted to the Taoiseach; this Annual Report would also be submitted for discussion and consideration at the relevant Oireachtas Committee
- (iv) convene a Consultative Forum to allow for continued dialogue with representatives of community and voluntary organisations on the issues raised during the Taskforce's work, as well as other issues of concern. This should meet twice yearly and allow for constructive engagement with relevant Government Departments. It should include representatives from the community and voluntary pillar under Social Partnership and the National Community and Voluntary Fora
- (v) engage in dialogue with relevant bodies in Northern Ireland to explore opportunities for mutual learning, and joint initiatives in particular areas
- (vi) promote and disseminate research and analysis on Active Citizenship, in particular through supporting the establishment of an Observatory on Active Citizenship
- (vii) consider how to support awareness of Active Citizenship through the media, reflecting the Taskforce's findings

While most of the recommendations of the Taskforce will need to be implemented through core Departmental budgets, the Office should have a ring-fenced budget to pursue specific initiatives identified in the

implementation plan. The Office should also explore the scope to draw on support available from philanthropic and business sources for appropriate programmes and initiatives it pursues.

The role of the Office should be independently reviewed after a three-year period.

Local Civic Participation

A significant issue to emerge during the Taskforce's consultations and discussions is a democratic deficit at local level due to a perceived absence of meaningful opportunities for civic participation in decision-making about local issues. This relates to two connected concerns: the ability of communities to effectively influence decisions taken by statutory bodies and the availability of suitable mechanisms to channel civic energy in tackling local needs.

The Taskforce recognises that Ireland already has quite an extensive range of local government, and local and community development structures. Indeed, many of our recommendations aim to support good quality engagement between the citizen and these existing structures.

Although valid arguments exist for a new, sub-county tier of democratic institutions, this would require consensus on a major programme of reform, including a significant decentralisation of decision-making power and associated reform of revenue-raising capabilities at local level.

Endorsing the report of the Democracy Commission (2005), the Taskforce believes there is a need for more research and public debate on the merits of a reform programme of that nature, in order to build a greater degree of understanding of the potential merits of such an approach.

While encouraging such public debate, the Taskforce also believes that there are pragmatic measures which can be taken in the short-to medium-term by building on and enhancing existing mechanisms, in particular the Community and Voluntary Fora established in each Local Authority.

The Fora were set up in 2000 in line with guidelines from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Membership of the Fora is inclusive and drawn from across the broad range of community/voluntary organisations in the county/city. The Fora are required to operate in a democratic and transparent fashion and are supported by funding from the Department.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the County/City Community and Voluntary Fora in each Local Authority should be strengthened and renewed with additional support as required; in particular, they should be organised on the basis of local electoral areas (where this isn't already the case) and these local area fora should be renamed the Civic Fora
- public agencies at local level should be required to consult the Civic Fora in relation to the development and implementation of their policies at local level
- all Local Authority Area Committees should, in line with guidelines issued by the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government, include representatives of the Civic Fora for the purpose of community development and also contributing to the work of the County/City Development Board. The Taskforce recommends that this requirement to engage with the Fora should be expanded to further issues

As well as enhancing the Community and Voluntary Fora, there are also a range of community councils, residents' associations and similar local participative structures operating locally.

The Taskforce recommends:

- that where such local structures exist, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government should request Local Authorities to provide recognition under the Local Government Act 2001, where appropriate
- that where there are identifiable gaps in local community structures (particularly in new and fast-growing urban and suburban communities), Local Authorities should support the establishment of local civic participation structures; a support scheme, including seed funding, should be made available for this purpose through the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
- that challenge funding should be made available through County/City Development Boards to match locally raised funding (including a substantial percentage of non-statutory funding) for suitable projects. This funding could be targeted, in particular, at projects which mobilise communities and local businesses around specific local needs and, in particular, to encourage use of Community Fund provisions, and following a local plebiscite, Community Initiative Schemes
- that Local Authorities should experiment with other forms and modes of local democracy which facilitate community engagement, including use of new technologies, citizens' juries and specific youth-focused engagement

The Taskforce recommends that this initiative is taken forward by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in conjunction with Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Active Citizenship Office. It should provide an opportunity for learning in order to share good practice across different local authorities and communities.

Research on Civic Engagement

In the course of its work, the Taskforce has come to the conclusion that there is a need for more ongoing analysis and research on civic engagement in Ireland. This will facilitate better monitoring of progress and trends, which will in turn allow policies to be developed and refined. This should include development of new statistical sources. To contribute to this, it is recommended that Ireland should participate in the 2009 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Study.

The Taskforce recommends:

- the establishment of a National Observatory on Active Citizenship to act as a focal point for such research, drawing together key research findings, statistical trends, new indicators and qualitative research and community-based action research – locally, nationally and internationally including EU. It would also seek to engage in a more collaborative and mutually beneficial way with various communities

Such an Observatory could be located within a lead Higher Education institution. It would be based on a network of communities, researchers and higher education institutions. It would identify emerging issues of public concern in relation to Active Citizenship and commission independent research and public information dissemination. It could also assist in

the development of new forms of scholarship and research partnerships directly relevant to Active Citizenship. It would operate in an all-island and European context.

8. Monitoring progress...

We recognise that Active Citizenship is, by its nature, difficult to measure, and targets like these don't reflect the quality or nature of engagement. Nonetheless the Taskforce believes that it is important to set some benchmarks of progress.

The Taskforce recommends:

Setting a number of ambitious but realisable targets to work towards over the coming years as follows:

- to increase the pool of people active in their community by 60,000 each year for the next three years⁶
- to increase the number of adults engaged in at least one form of 'civic activity' by 60,000 each year for the next three years⁷
- to reach, by the end of the current decade, a level of at least 60% voter turnout amongst the 18-24 year olds (it has been under 50% in recent elections)
- to increase the level of voter participation from the CSO estimate of 75.5% in the General Election of 2002 to at least 80% in all future General Elections, with targeting of areas of exceptionally low turnout
- to increase the proportion of adults saying that they agree with the statement that they 'can influence decisions affecting your local area' from 54% in 2006 to 65% in 2010

⁶ This would increase the estimated proportion of the adult population active in their community whether as volunteers or members of associations from 33% to 36% (based on the 2006 Survey of Civic Engagement - SCE). The Census of Population 2006 will yield somewhat different estimates as the question on volunteering differed from that used in the SCE.

⁷ Increasing from 37% to 40% the proportion of adults involved in at least one of seven possible areas of 'civic engagement': Attended a public meeting; joined an action group of any kind; contacted an appropriate organisation to deal with a particular problem (e.g. a local county council or residents association); contacted a T.D, public official or local representative; undertaken unpaid voluntary work in a political party; written to a newspaper; or contacted or appeared on radio/TV.

Appendix

The Taskforce's terms of reference were:

- to review the evidence regarding trends in citizen participation across the main areas of civic, community, cultural, occupational and recreational life in Ireland
- to examine those trends in the context of international experience and analysis
- to review the experience of organisations involved in the political, caring, community, professional and occupational, cultural, sporting and religious dimensions of Irish life regarding influences, both positive and negative, on levels of citizen participation and engagement, and
- to recommend measures which could be taken as part of public policy to facilitate and encourage (i) a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of Irish life and (ii) the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture

Membership of the Taskforce:

Ms. Mary Davis (Chairperson)	Chief Executive, Special Olympics Ireland
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Mr. John Bennett	Former Disability Officer, University College Dublin
Fr. Harry Bohan	Diocese of Killaloe and Céifin Centre for Values-led Change
Ms. Elaine Bradshaw*	Chairperson, Keep Kilkenny Beautiful
Ms. Caroline Casey	Chief Executive, The Aisling Foundation
Ms. Mary Cunningham	Director, National Youth Council of Ireland

Mr. Arthur Duignan	Assistant Director, CREATE
Cllr. John Gallahue	Former member of the Governing Body, Limerick Institute of Technology
Mr. Gerry Kearney	Secretary General, Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs
Mr. Sean Kelly	Executive Chairman, Irish Institute of Sport
Ms. Maighr�ad Martin	Cathaoirleach, Foras na Gaeilge
Mr. Seamus McAleavey	Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
Mr. Dermot McCarthy	Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach
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Ms. Sylvia Meehan	Senior Citizens Parliament
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The Venerable David Pierpoint	Archdeacon of Dublin
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*Resigned due to personal reasons

