



Working for Change:

Updated 2002

A Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland

Brian Harvey

Combat Poverty Agency
*working against poverty and
inequality in Ireland*



working for change

A Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland

Brian Harvey



First published, 1998

2nd edition, 2002

Brian Harvey is an independent research consultant

© Combat Poverty Agency 1998

The views expressed in this publication are the author's and not
necessarily those of the Combat Poverty Agency.

ISBN 1 871643 95 3

contents

Part 1: Working for change

Preface	1
Author's note	2

1 Introduction to the political and administrative system in Ireland 3

1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Improved access to decision-making	4
1.3 Distinctive characteristics of the Irish political system	5

2 Getting to know the system 9

2.1 Oireachtas	9
2.2 Taoiseach	17
2.3 Government, cabinet, Government Ministers	17
2.4 President	19
2.5 Government Departments	20
2.6 Local authorities	22
2.7 National agreements	28
2.8 Consultative, advisory and monitoring bodies	29
2.9 Semi-state bodies	32
2.10 Political parties	33
2.11 Courts	34
2.12 Ombudsman services	36
2.13 North-South institutions	39
2.14 European Union	40



Case study

contents

Influencing policy through the Budget	11
Using the monitoring system	30
Foreign comparison to spur domestic change	41
Using Europe to change Irish social welfare law	42
Legal action in Europe for legal aid in Ireland	45
NGOs put Irish government in the dock before the UN	45
Dundalk campaign for smog-free air	49
The Free Legal Advice Centres	49
Research first	50
Using expert opinion	50
Knowing your facts	52
Research the area	52
Research makes policy	52
Back to basics	53
Making research, conferences go far	55
Research makes the argument	56
National day of action	59
Artistic direct action	59
The cyberpicket	60
The on-line petition	60
The walk-out	61
Keeping up the pressure	61
Asking the people their views	62
The Irish Foreign Adoption Group – never giving up	63
Diplomatic skills	64
Being up to date	65
Use of research to build support	66
Strategic alliance for adult literacy	67
Knowing the issues, building alliances	67

Case study

contents

Interpreting the unemployment figures for the media	68
From media influence to political influence	69
Media highlighting disadvantage	70
Building a broad alliance to restore VTOS	84
Reaching deep into government to promote adult literacy	86
Getting the social economy on to the agenda	87
Reviews as an instrument of change – Travellers signing on	88
Getting basic income on to the agenda	89
Influencing government through state bodies	90
Getting rural social exclusion up the agenda	91
Implementing the Status of Children Act, 1987	92
Outside to insider group	93
Finding champions within government	94
Private member's Bill	96
Using experience to make better legislation	96
Amending a Bill in the Seanad	97
Amending the Refugee Bill in the Seanad	97
Councillors helping in the Health Boards	98
Overcoming fear	99
Ministerial meeting	100
Getting the Department to fund a new type of service	101
Who is responsible?	102
Finding the right person	103
Presentation to Oireachtas committee	105
Talking to the key people	106
Making reports work effectively at local level	107

contents

3 Devising a strategy 47

3.1	Setting clear objectives	48
3.2	Using information, documentation and research to influence decision-making	49
3.3	Presenting one's case effectively	53
3.4	Resources to fund policy work	55
3.5	Protests, direct action and other strategies	56
3.6	Personal skills to influence decision-makers	59
3.7	Networking and coalition-building to influence policy	64
3.8	Devising a media strategy	65
3.9	Using publications, newsletters to influence policy and decisions	72
3.10	The mailing list	74
3.11	Devising an information strategy	75

4 Applying the strategy 83

4.1	Where and how policy is made	83
4.2	Persuading appropriate people that a problem exists	85
4.3	Shaping the response of government	87
4.4	Ensuring a decision is implemented	90
4.5	Maintaining one's influence on the system	91
4.6	Working with public representatives	94
4.7	Working with public bodies	101
4.8	Working with the consultative process	103

Acknowledgements	108
------------------	-----

Part II: Directory

A directory of organisations, agencies and departments is published separately to accompany this guide.

Preface

The Combat Poverty Agency is committed to producing and promoting resource materials for the community and voluntary sector. The purpose of this guide *Working for Change – a Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland* is to provide a handbook for voluntary and community organisations in Ireland on how to influence the policy-making process. The guide is targeted at community development groups and organisations active in the struggle against poverty and social exclusion, for example in the areas of unemployment and labour market issues, educational disadvantage, local and community development, urban and rural poverty, housing policy, drugs, work with women and community arts. It is designed for national organisations and local community groups.

It must be stressed that this book is a guide, not a blueprint. It is designed to be of assistance to groups seeking to bring about change and to demonstrate, through a number of case studies, how policy can be influenced. The guide is accompanied by a directory of policy-making bodies and information sources. This is published separately.

An important part of the guide is the inclusion of case studies. Their purpose is to bring a practical dimension to this publication. These are designed to be illustrative only and should not be taken as complete, definitive histories of the stories in question. Of necessity, they illustrate examples where voluntary and community organisations have succeeded in changing or modifying policy, or, at least, made some progress in getting a hearing for their viewpoint. For every such success, there must be examples where groups have not influenced policy or the authorities in the way they would have liked. Finally, the comment should be made that the case studies inevitably simplify complex issues. In each one, there may be many actors and people involved and it is always difficult to know whose intervention was actually decisive.

This is the second edition of *Working for Change*. Information on the political and administrative system has been updated. The case studies have been left largely as they were. Even though events have moved on in many of the cases studied, the lessons which they illustrate remain the same.

Chapter 1 introduces the Irish political system and its relationship with voluntary and community organisations working to overcome poverty and social exclusion. Chapter 2, *Getting to Know the System*, outlines and describes the key elements of the Irish political and administrative system from the Oireachtas to ombudsman services and concludes by taking a quick look at the European Union. Chapter 3, *Devising a Strategy*, starts from the perspective of a voluntary or community organisation setting out to influence the political system, examining such questions as setting objectives,

1

Chapter 1 *Introduction to the Political and Administrative System in Ireland* introduces the Irish political system and its relationship with voluntary and community organisations working to overcome poverty and social exclusion.

2

Chapter 2 *Getting to Know the System*, outlines and describes the key elements of the Irish political and administrative system from the Oireachtas to ombudsman services and concludes by taking a quick look at the European Union.

3

Chapter 3 *Getting Organised* starts from the perspective of a voluntary or community organisation setting out to influence the political system, examining such questions as setting objectives, finding resources and networking and goes on to look at media strategies and mailing lists.

4

Chapter 4 *Getting Results* examines how a group or organisation can effectively work with the political system, public representatives and public bodies.

Finally, a **Directory** to accompany this guide is published separately. This provides a listing of those groups likely to be most relevant to voluntary and community organisations wishing to influence the political and administrative system.



Several readers provided comment on the draft text and their help was very much valued. They were:

Bernadine Brady, Mel Cousins, Niall Crowley, Barry Cullen, Eithne FitzGerald, Anne Gallagher, Mary Higgins, Liz Leonard, Frank Litton and Mary Murphy.

Within the Combat Poverty Agency itself I would especially like to thank

Clare Farrell, June Meehan, Jim Walsh and Helen Johnston for their comments and assistance.

finding resources and networking; and goes on to look at media strategies and mailing lists. Chapter 4 is entitled *Applying the Strategy* and it examines how a group or organisation may effectively work with the political system, public representatives and public bodies. Finally, the *Directory*, published separately, provides a listing of those groups likely to be most relevant to voluntary and community organisations wishing to influence the political and administrative system.

Author's note

The author would very much like to acknowledge those who contributed to this research through the provision of information or through assistance with the case studies. Their names are listed at the end.



Information provided in the Directory is intended to be as accurate and up to date as possible at time of going to press. Any changes or corrections are welcome for future editions and readers are invited to contact the Combat Poverty Agency with fresh information and ideas.

Introduction to the Political and Administrative System in Ireland

1.1 Introduction

Voluntary organisations and community groups have become increasingly aware of the links between decisions taken by government and the authorities on the one hand and the situation of the groups with which they are working on the other. Poverty is directly related to the way our economic system operates and the way the resources of the state are allocated. Poverty has much to do with who has access to power, who influences decisions and who has the resources and skills to lobby successfully and who does not. Indeed, it is possible to define poverty as a group's lack of influence over the decisions which affect it. Powerful groups in society are rarely poor.

Despite the activities of voluntary organisations, community groups and campaigning organisations, poverty remains a serious, persistent problem in modern Irish society. Fundamental inequalities in Irish society are remarkably impervious to change. Individual problems remain intractable, such as long-term unemployment, the living conditions of Travellers, homelessness and discrimination against women, to name just a few. Often, it seems that groups working for change can, at best, only achieve marginal improvements. It may also take a long time.

In theory, it is open for any citizen to make a case to government for changes in policies. In theory, the government listens carefully, weighs options and makes the best decision for everyone. In reality, one's ability to influence decisions is dependent on other factors – social class, status, money, recognition, knowing the policy-makers, understanding how the system works and communicating one's message in an articulate and effective manner.

Policy-making is the term ascribed to the process whereby the government and the authorities reach decisions, set out priorities, satisfy competing interest groups and lay down the underlying approaches to their work. The taking of decisions in any democratic society involves the complex interplay of many groups – government ministers, civil servants, politicians, media and lobby



Growing consultation with the voluntary and community sectors

Consultation with and involvement of the voluntary and community sector, users of services and those with first-hand experience of poverty has been a central feature of the development of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Sharing in Progress – the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 1997

The state acknowledges the role of the voluntary sector in contributing to policy making and the pursuit of common objectives. The state will ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to give effect to this.

The White Paper
Supporting Voluntary Activity, 2000

The white paper proposes:

- Voluntary activity units in certain government departments
- A set of joint principles to govern the relationships between the state and the community and voluntary sector

groups. It is rarely a clean, clear-cut process where we can see all the participants in the open at every stage. The decisions taken at the end of a process are often quite different from the ones anticipated at the very beginning. Although problems can be quickly identified, sometimes its full dimensions and solutions only emerge in the course of time. Quite often, decisions are not taken at all, despite much activity taking place, the process ending with government either delaying a decision, shelving it or passing the problem on to someone else. In many cases, it is difficult to make out who or what has had the decisive influence in getting something done, or, in some cases, making sure something is not done. Strategies which work in one area do not necessarily work in another.

Many voluntary organisations and community groups are now involved in trying to influence policy-makers and decision-makers. Their activities cross a wide range, such as:

- At local level, community groups trying to get much-needed services into their areas;
- At local and regional level, community groups trying to get health boards and other statutory agencies to devise responses to acute social problems, such as drugs and educational under-achievement;
- At national level, voluntary organisations attempting to get government committees to recommend changes in policy that vitally affect their members; or arguing for changes in economic and budgetary policy so as to make Ireland a more inclusive society.

The purpose of this guide is to provide information and resources so that this task may be undertaken more effectively.

1.2 Improved access to decision-making

This is a good time for voluntary organisations and community groups to influence the decision-making process in Ireland. The voluntary and community sectors have consolidated, have become more professional in their approach and have attracted levels of staff, volunteers and equipment that would have been difficult to imagine twenty years ago. The role of voluntary and community organisations is now recognised at national level, with voluntary and community organisations participating as a social partner in the national agreement, *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. The government White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* lays down the principle that the strengthening of the role of voluntary

and community organisations is part of citizenship and of building a more participatory democracy. The White Paper expects government departments and agencies to be much more responsive to the sector. However, the jury is still out on whether these developments will lead to real, long-term change.

There have been political changes which make the decision-making machine more accessible, such as the growth of Oireachtas committees. Governments have made increasing use of consultative bodies, task forces and fora in their work. Abroad, Ireland has taken on a wider range of international obligations, especially under the conventions of the United Nations and the Council of Europe. There are requirements on our government to report on how it fulfils these obligations. These provide opportunities for non-governmental organisations to issue rival reports. Many voluntary organisations have joined networks of European organisations which open up new channels of information and influence.

1.3 Distinctive characteristics of the Irish political system

Although the Irish political system shares many common characteristics with Britain and our constitution shares some with the United States, both are distinctive. Some of these characteristics, such as accessibility and the localised role of public representatives, may work to the advantage of voluntary and community organisations; others to their disadvantage, such as poor resources and secretiveness.

- Accessibility

Although the Irish state is a centralised one, Ireland has a relatively accessible political system. It is relatively easy for an individual, a community group or a voluntary organisation to get in contact with and meet a member of the Dáil, senator or councillor. The level of contact between the public representative and individuals and groups in each constituency is quite high. Most public representatives live in their constituencies and make themselves accessible through their clinics. Some voluntary organisations are on first-name terms with their public representatives – something which would be quite unheard-of in continental Europe and amazes voluntary and community organisations there.

Charities

campaigning and influencing policy

12345
67890

Many voluntary organisations have a **charity number** (sometimes called a CHY number) given to them by the Revenue Commissions which provides certain tax exemptions (e.g. corporation tax). This may be provided for organisations deemed to be entirely charitable and having, as their objectives, the relief of poverty, the advancement of education or religion and other purposes of a charitable nature beneficial to the community. About 5,100 bodies have such exemption. Sometimes this is termed, not always accurately, as charitable status. Charities may not engage directly in explicitly political, especially party political, activities, though there are no known cases of organisations having their status affected as a result of their broader work alerting public attention to the problems of poverty.





- A localised role for public representatives

Under proportional representation, deputies are under pressure at election times not just from candidates from the other parties, but also from their own parties. They must be able to show an ability to produce the best local service and be prompt and effective in dealing with constituency enquiries. Politicians who have a reputation of always being away in Dublin, never in the constituency and who don't meet people or answer letters or phone calls may not be re-elected. Voters value politicians whom they can contact easily, who get things done locally and who are seen to be busy on their behalf. The downside to this is that the same politicians who are attending to local business don't have much time left to be legislators or deal seriously with national policy issues.

- A poorly resourced system

An important negative characteristic of the Irish political system is that it is poorly resourced by public funds. Neither deputies nor senators are allocated researchers or policy advisors and they must do all this work themselves. The larger political parties have a small number of research staff, but they primarily work for the party leader or opposition spokespersons. As a result, the ordinary member of the Oireachtas is poorly equipped to research subjects in detail, draft legislation or make in-depth policy contributions. Because they lack their own research facilities, most deputies or senators are delighted to receive information, commentary and analysis on important issues from voluntary organisations and community groups, as they don't have the resources to do this work themselves.

The problem of under-resourcing is probably worse in local government. Councillors are expected to do their own secretarial work and they do not have any research facilities. The local authorities, although they carry out development and planning tasks, do not have research departments to assist them in planning the other aspects of their work. The level of documentation which they produce about their own work is limited. Unlike deputies and senators, councillors are unpaid, though they do receive travel and attendance allowances.

The political system in Leinster House is one which is not only under-resourced but severely overloaded, like most political systems everywhere, with thousands of groups, organisations and interests clamouring for attention. The average deputy or senator, often the primary target for the interest of the voluntary or community organisation, has a huge range of tasks to attend to in a given day – answering letters and phone calls; making representations on behalf of constituents to ministers or civil servants; attending to the needs of the party at national and branch level; showing school tours around; getting through a

mound of documentation as it comes in; and attending the house to speak or to vote. The nature of this hectic schedule has important implications for how voluntary and community groups should approach the public representative in question.

- Secretive system

Although some parts of the Irish political and administrative system are highly visible and open to public scrutiny (e.g. the Oireachtas), other parts are not. For example, cabinet discussions and the nature of many important government decisions are still confidential. Traditionally, governments and some statutory bodies failed or refused to publish many important research reports, evaluations and documentation. This created a situation in which a substantial amount of decision-making and the basis on which it was made was concealed from public view.

This situation may change, over time, with the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act (see chapter 2).

The guide now provides a description of the Irish political and administrative system.



Getting to Know the System

The political system in Ireland is not static. Over the past twenty years, new parties have risen to the fore; the way in which the state bodies do their business has changed significantly; and the culture of public administration has altered with freedom of information legislation and new ideas of strategic management. It will certainly continue to change.

This chapter describes the functions and roles of the main centres of power where decisions are made in Ireland, namely:

- The Oireachtas
- The Taoiseach
- Government and government ministers
- The civil service
- Local authorities
- National agreements
- Consultative and advisory bodies
- Semi-state bodies
- Political parties
- Implementation bodies
- The courts
- North-South bodies
- Ombudsman services

2.1 Oireachtas

The centre of power in Ireland is the Oireachtas, or Parliament. Many people refer to it as 'the Dáil', but this is misleading. The Oireachtas actually consists of three parts, although it is true that the Dáil is the most important of them. The Oireachtas has three houses – the President, the Seanad [Senate] and the Dáil. Each has an important role to play in our system of government. The role of each is determined by the 1937 Constitution, which lays down the authority of the different parts of the Oireachtas and the balance of powers between them.

The Dáil has 166 deputies or TDs (Teachta Dála), elected in a general election which must take place every five years. The function of the Dáil is to elect a government and Taoiseach (Prime Minister), pass the budget and enact legislation.

The

Oireachtas

President

Signs legislation, but may refer legislation to Supreme Court

Seanad

Debates and passes legislation
Debates issues of current concern

Dáil

Elects or dismisses Taoiseach and government
Debates and passes legislation
Approves budget
Debates issues of concern



Who makes up the Seanad?

The Seanad has an unusual composition. Forty-three members are elected on what is called the panel system. There are five panels (Cultural/Educational, Agricultural, Labour, Industrial and Commercial, Administrative). Nominations may be made by professional bodies and, in the case of some panels, by voluntary organisations (One applies to the clerk of the Seanad to register as a nominating body); and by members of the Oireachtas.

The electorate comprises new members of the Dáil, outgoing members of the Seanad, and all county councillors. Six members are elected by university graduates: three from Dublin University (Trinity College) constituency and three from the colleges of the National University (the university colleges of Dublin, Cork, Galway and Maynooth). Finally, eleven are appointed by the new Taoiseach.

Documents that shape overall government policy

- Party manifesto
- Programme for government
- National agreement

The Dáil must sit in Dublin and is located in Leinster House, Kildare St, Dublin. Its sessions are open to the press and (with a ticket from a TD) members of the public. It has the power to over-rule the Seanad.

The upper house of the Oireachtas is the Seanad. A new Seanad is elected soon after each Dáil election is completed. The Seanad has 60 members, eleven of whom are appointed by the Taoiseach, the others being elected by electoral colleges. Although it is less powerful than the Dáil, its importance is often underestimated. Legislation approved by the Dáil must also be debated and approved by the Seanad. The Seanad is considered to play an important role as a forum for raising and exploring social and other issues. In certain areas, the Seanad has equal powers to that of the Dáil (e.g. to annul statutory instruments).

The third house of the Oireachtas is the President. This post was traditionally considered to be essentially ceremonial. In practice, the presidency can have an important role in shaping public opinion and articulating popular concerns. The actual parliamentary powers of the President are limited. A President may:

- Refer a Bill passed by the Oireachtas to the Supreme Court to test its constitutionality;
- Refer a Bill to the people for referendum, following petition by a majority of the Seanad and a third of the Dáil;
- Address the Oireachtas on a matter of national concern;
- Refuse a dissolution of the Dáil, asking a divided Dáil to try again to find a new Taoiseach.

There is no provision in Ireland for a vice-president. When there is a vacancy, presidential powers are exercised by a commission consisting of the Chief Justice and the speakers of the other two houses – the Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad.

Some of the key roles of the Oireachtas are now described.

Electing a Taoiseach, government

Following a general election and after electing a chairperson or speaker (Ceann Comhairle), the main task of the Dáil is to elect a new government. Once elected, the Taoiseach names a team of senior ministers, who are approved by the Dáil and then appointed by the President; and then ministers of state. Governments may last several years, although it is not unusual for the Taoiseach to change ministers from time to time, a process sometimes referred to as 'reshuffling the cabinet'.

From the point of view of policy, each government is guided by its party manifesto and its programme for government. The programme is a document which is agreed by the government party or parties at the time of the general election (For the period 1997-2002, this was called *An Action Programme for the Millennium*). Governments are also generally bound by the national agreement between government and the social partners then in force or agreed for the next period of time (*Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*, 2000-2), even if the agreement may have been made by a previous government. Any newly elected government will follow a mixture of its own new policies and many of those of the outgoing government.

The process of electing a government is mirrored by the opposition parties. They appoint 'front bench spokespersons' (so-called because they sit on the front seats in their party's place in the Dáil) to follow the work of individual ministers and cross-examine them for their inadequacies and expose their short-comings. If there are several parties in opposition, then one government minister may have several opposition shadows.

Documents which shape overall government policy:

- Party manifesto
- Programme for government
- National agreement

Passing the budget

The prime task of any government is to pass its programme of public spending and taxation, for without this the country cannot function.

Firstly, each government department prepares estimates of the activities, projects and spending it would like to support in the following year. There is then a period of negotiation with the Department of Finance, which scrutinises each departmental programme carefully and tries to curtail spending. The outcome of these negotiations is then confirmed by the cabinet, which also resolves any final areas of disagreements between departments. Once agreed, the outline estimates of spending are then published. These are formally called 'the estimates'. They are normally divided between the largest part, current spending (day-to-day expenses) and capital spending (e.g. new buildings, hospitals etc). The amounts are listed under about 50 main headings or 'votes' which coincide with the main spending programmes of government departments and state agencies.

The budget



Case study:

Influencing policy through the budget

Many voluntary organisations send in pre-budget submissions to the Minister for Finance. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has sent in submissions for many years and is often invited by the media to comment on the budget when it is published. It is unclear if the pre-budget submissions have much influence in changing national budgetary strategy, but some low-cost reforms proposed by the Society in pre-budget submissions have come into effect:

- Bringing forward the payments for school uniforms to early August, rather than early September, in order to prevent needy families using money-lenders to bridge the gap;
- Free book rental in disadvantaged schools;
- Free TV licence for older people;
- Exemption from payment of exam fees by students who hold medical cards or are dependent on a parent who is a holder of a medical card.

The stages of legislation

1 Bill is published and circulated

2 Approved in principle.
A member may speak only once.

3 Also called committee stage.
A member may introduce amendments. Bill is discussed line by line. A member may speak frequently. Generally done by committee, sometimes the whole house.

4 Government may present considered amendments.
Opposition may present amendments again.

5 Bill is confirmed.

Second, several weeks later, the Minister for Finance presents the budget to the Dáil, outlining how the government plans to get money in so as to meet these estimates. The budget may involve changes in taxation. The budget is then approved by the Dáil in stages, the immediate tax measures first, the general provisions second, and the social welfare provisions third.

The general and specific measures of the budget are implemented in a Finance Bill and the social welfare measures in a separate Social Welfare Bill (These sometimes include details not announced in the budget speech or subsequent modifications). The debate on the budget provides the opportunity for the Dáil, its parties and individual deputies to comment on all aspects of economic policy. The Seanad also discusses the budget but it may not amend the budget. If the budget fails to pass the Dáil, it is expected that the government will resign and call a general election (This happened in early 1982). Both the Finance Bill and the Social Welfare Bill provide opportunities for groups to lobby on the details of changes in budgetary policy, though such efforts have generally been more successful on the Finance Bill.

Legislation

The second function of a government is to pass legislation. Legislation may be divided into primary legislation (Bills which become Acts and are law) and secondary legislation (detailed regulations which have legal effect). Although these are not formal categories, legislation ranges from the enabling (permitting agencies or bodies to take certain action), to mandatory (requiring agencies to do certain things), to the prohibitive (e.g. changes in the criminal law). Some legislation is implemented by state agencies and local government; some by the police and the courts.

Debates on new draft laws (Bills) take up a considerable part of the time of the Dáil. About 40 Bills may be passed by the Oireachtas each year, covering such diverse issues as crime, environmental protection, the promotion of trade and industry, workers' rights, the welfare of children or regulations governing the operation of state bodies. Most Bills are introduced by the government. Since the 1970s, there has been a tradition of individual members or opposition parties introducing legislation. Since the 1990s, governments have been increasingly prepared to adopt such Bills and, often with amendments, pass them into law.

Most Bills are introduced in the Dáil, though some start life in the Seanad instead. Bills must be approved by both houses or be deemed to be so approved. A Bill amended by the Seanad goes

back to the Dáil, which can eventually overrule the Seanad. Any one deputy or senator may introduce an amendment. Once passed by the Dáil and Seanad, a Bill is sent to the President for signature. The President may refer it to the Supreme Court to test its constitutionality (This has been done several times) or refer it to the people on the petition of half the Seanad and one-third of the members of the Dáil (This procedure has never been followed yet). Once a Bill is signed, it is termed an Act, dated to the year of its signing (not the year when the Bill was introduced).

All Bills go through five stages, in both houses. Traditionally, the third stage was considered by all members in a full session. Although this may still happen, it is now the norm for each Bill to go to a committee. These committees meet outside the Dáil chamber. They cover different subject areas, the intention being to draw in deputies interested in specialising in that subject. These committees consider and amend the Bill point by point. Once they have finished, the Bill is then 'reported back' and sent for fourth and fifth stages which are normally very short and only a formality (called the report and final stages). It is unusual for Bills to be amended on the fourth or fifth stages, though the opposition may sometimes press the point on a much-disputed Bill.

Bills are normally guided through each house by the minister responsible. The minister introduces the Bill, speaks about its virtues and, during committee stage, decides whether to accept amendments or not. The committee stage can be quite lively, with opposition deputies trying to persuade the minister to accept their amendments, or, if not, trying to get on-the-record commitments from him or her about how the Bill will operate. The minister is normally assisted by a small number of senior civil servants who sit close by to provide advice during the debate (they may whisper to the minister but not contribute to the debate). The same procedure is followed in the Seanad, where ministers must also steer their Bills through the house. Sometimes, during committee stage, a minister will give a commitment to look at a particular issue again and come back with a government amendment on the fourth stage.

In addition to Bills, the Oireachtas must approve secondary legislation. These are regulations (called statutory instruments and ministerial orders) issued by ministers to govern, in detail, the work of their departments. Several hundred are issued each year, covering such diverse areas as minimum temperatures in nursing homes, shipping fees, aviation standards, product safety, and the length of the fishing season for particular species. Such regulations are announced by the minister in writing on the order paper of the Dáil and, unless revoked, are automatically deemed to be

Oireachtas

Committees of the 28th Dáil

Joint committees

(members from Dáil and Seanad)

- Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Broadcasting and Parliamentary Information
- Consolidation Bills
- Education and Science
- Enterprise and Small Business
- Environment and Local Government
- European Affairs
- Social, Community and Family Affairs
- Finance and the Public Service
- Foreign Affairs
- Health & Children
- Heritage and the Irish language
- Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights
- Public Enterprise and Transport
- Tourism, Sport and Recreation
- Committee on Public Accounts (Dáil only)
- The committees of the 29th Dáil are due to be announced in Autumn 2002

Parliamentary

Questions

Priority
Oral
Written

Checklist for asking questions:

What is the purpose of asking the question?

What information is sought?

Priority, oral or written?

How can it extract the maximum response?

Who is the best deputy to ask the question?

Some recent questions

- To ask the Minister for Health what consideration has he given to the submission of the Hyperactive Attention Deficit Disorder Family Support Group
- To ask the Minister for Education & Science will he establish a national literacy committee
- To ask the Minister for Education & Science what schools are taking part in the *Breaking the Cycle* programme
- To ask the Minister for Health & Children the proportion of our gross domestic product spent on health services over the past four years
- To ask the Minister for Tourism, Sport & Recreation the position regarding the URBAN II programme
- To ask the Minister for Education & Science about his plans to make secondary schools wheelchair accessible

passed within 21 sitting days. It is most unusual for a regulation to be debated, still less vetoed or revoked, so it is a passive rather than an active process. Either house may annul a statutory instrument by a simple majority.

Accountability and debate

The third main function of the Oireachtas is a broader one concerning accountability and debate. Time is set aside for questions and debates so that issues may be raised and ministers may be made accountable. A number of mechanisms exist for ministers to be cross-examined about their work, for governments to be questioned about their record and for new issues to be brought to the surface.

- Questions

In the Dáil, an hour is normally set aside each day so that ministers may answer questions on matters that concern their brief.

Questions go to the different ministers in rotation, so that each minister may expect to answer questions every month or so.

Questions may be divided into priority, oral and written, all being listed on the order paper on the appropriate day. There is also a procedure for the leaders of the main political parties to question the Taoiseach and only the Taoiseach (These are called 'leaders' questions'). In responding to oral questions, the minister will be cross-examined by the deputy who asked the question and other deputies until the Ceann Comhairle rules that there has been sufficient discussion on the issue and the house moves on to the next question. Five priority questions may be asked each day.

These are allocated to the opposition parties according to their size. Only the questioner is expected to ask supplementary questions to cross-examine the minister concerned (though sometimes other deputies interject). The remainder of ordinary oral questions then follows. Generally, the time allocated to each is much shorter, but other deputies join in the process of cross-examining a minister. Written questions must be answered within three sitting days. They are not debated, though they always go on the formal, published record of the house like the others.

Questions are asked in order to get information from ministers about their policies or the administration of their department, or to get statistical data that may not be otherwise published. Questions are unlikely, on their own, to change policy, but repeated questioning of a minister around a particular issue or set of issues can embarrass him or her, send strong signals of public concern, sow doubt or unease about particular policies and find weaknesses in the basis on which policies are devised.

Questions can be an effective means of lobbying and pressuring ministers and their departments, though there are advantages and disadvantages to each.

With oral questions, ministers can be cross-examined on the spot. Written questions are a fast procedure, though the responses can sometimes be evasive and unhelpful. Questions may not be asked outside the time when the Dáil is sitting and may not be asked in the Seanad. About 20 oral questions are answered each day and those not reached may be reallocated for written answer.

Deputies are happy to ask questions. It provides a service without committing them personally to a particular line of policy or action. Each deputy may ask unlimited numbers of written questions, but the same question may not be asked again for another six months. (This is not strictly observed). Most parliamentary questions are asked because groups or individuals have requested deputies to act on their behalf ('There's a story behind each question', one political commentator once observed). Organisations can make a general request to a deputy to ask a question (though they should be very clear about the information they are seeking). More skilled groups offer to write the text themselves.

- Debates

Both houses make provision for debates on issues of current concern. This is done in several ways. A single member may ask for the house to be adjourned to debate a matter of urgent national importance (In the Dáil, this is called a 'standing order 31'). Doing so is at the discretion of the Ceann Comhairle or the Cathaoirleach and is normally refused. However, the member concerned may get some favourable publicity for having tried to do so. More likely to succeed is a procedure called private notice questions. The purpose of this procedure is to facilitate a debate on a prominent, urgent matter of national concern raised by several deputies which could not be otherwise speedily debated or discussed. Such notices must be lodged on the day of the intended debate. Accepting private notice questions is at the discretion of the Ceann Comhairle. There may be none for weeks and then several. When one is allowed, the minister responds and a short debate follows (about half an hour).

Formal motions may be put down for a formal debate. The time for such debates is allocated between the different party blocks. Private member's time is generally allocated for a couple of hours twice a week. Each party normally gets a block of time every two or three months. Debates are not a priority in the Dáil or Seanad's work, though they are not an unimportant way whereby issues and problems may be articulated. The exception is a confidence motion in the government, which automatically supersedes any other business (If it is carried, the government is expected to resign, as happened in late 1982).

Examples of private notice questions

- Crisis in the airline industry
- Threat from Sellafield

Examples of debates

- The housing crisis
- Inequality in education
- Child welfare services
- Quality of health services
- Progress of the National Development Plan
- State of rural development

Some recent motions (Dáil)

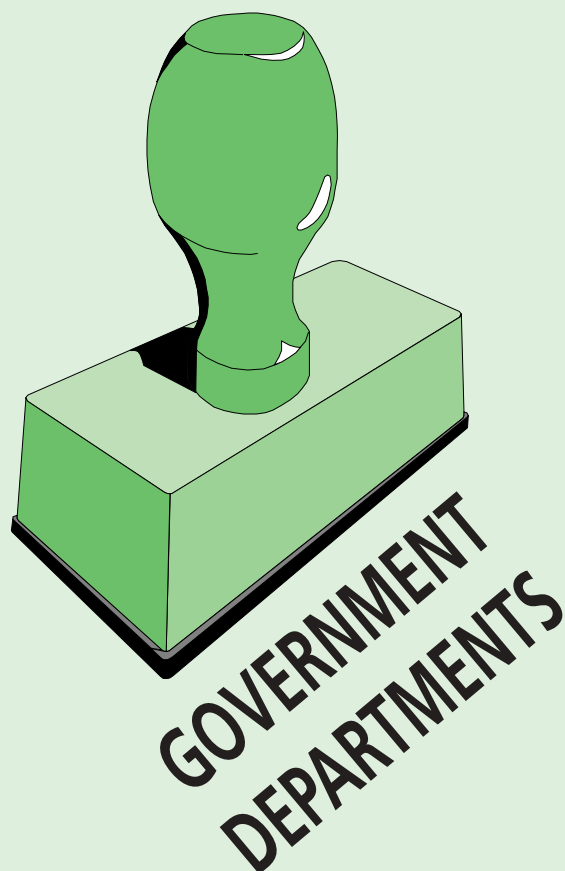
- Traffic conditions in Dublin
- Support for Louth residents against Sellafield
- National Lottery
- Ombudsman's report

Some recent motions (Seanad)

- Government policy on disability
- Ombudsman's report

Some recent adjournment debates

- Treatment of asylum seekers (Dáil)
- Factory closures and job losses (Dáil)
- School building projects (Seanad)
- Speech therapy services (Dáil)



Government

Minister
– special advisors

Minister of State

Secretary General

Divisions

Units, sections

What type of motion is debated? As a general statement, government parties tend to put down motions congratulating the government on its performance while opposition parties use debating time to raise issues which concern them. Naturally, they tend to be more critical. A vote is normally taken at the end of each such debate (Unsurprisingly, the government normally wins). At first sight, such debates may seem to be a futile exercise. However, well presented opposition motions can put ministers under a lot of pressure. Worse, government deputies may express their sympathy for some of the criticisms made by the opposition. The minister must respond to criticism and can be often pressured into giving commitments for improvements.

- Adjournment debates

At the end of each daily session of the Dáil and Seanad, there is an adjournment debate. Any deputy or senator may put down a motion for an issue of public administration to be discussed. The motion must be phrased in such a way as to raise a matter of administration, not policy, and generally begins with the words 'The need for the Minister for X to ensure that...' The norm is for four such motions to be taken each day. If a motion is accepted (the ruling is made by the Ceann Comhairle or in the Seanad by the Cathaoirleach) then the member has five minutes or so to make the case. The minister must then respond, though there is no subsequent exchange of views. Adjournment debates are an effective means of keeping the pressure on ministers and their departments on a given issue, obtaining commitments and getting issues put on the record. They are not always an effective means of getting media publicity, because they often take place late at night when the journalists have gone home. Because adjournment debates are taken only after the other debates have ended and often late at night, they can be an irritant for ministers and civil servants. Motions for the adjournment must be submitted by noon the previous day. This enables moderately urgent issues to be raised speedily.

The Dáil and Seanad transact a miscellany of other business, such as approving treaties, selecting delegates for international missions or organisations, appointing tribunals, receiving foreign dignitaries (e.g. President Clinton, the German Chancellor), debating the most recent European summit or taking reports from ministers on current issues. The Dáil and Seanad are generally in session from the end of January to the end of March; from the end of April to the end of June; and from early October to mid-December. Neither house sits on weekends or Mondays. Sitting hours are normally 2:30pm till late (Tuesday); 10:30am till late (Wednesday) and 10:30am to 5pm on Thursday. The Dáil may sometimes work till 8pm or 9pm, sometimes even into the early hours. Friday sittings are infrequent and there is no question time that day.

2.2 Taoiseach

The most important person in the political decision-making machinery is the Taoiseach, normally the leader of the governing party or the main party of government. The Taoiseach has the ultimate responsibility for all government policy and, in practice, the Taoiseach takes particular responsibility for national economic strategy, the security of the state and Northern Ireland policy. The actual powers of the Taoiseach are to choose government ministers (though they must be approved by the Dáil and are, in turn, appointed by the President), to call a general election (with the consent of the President, which is normally given) and to chair the cabinet. It is this role, as chairperson of the government, that puts the Taoiseach in a strong position to lead and to steer an agenda through government. Different Taoisigh interpret their roles in different ways, some seeing themselves as chairing a cabinet, others as adopting a much more forward leadership role. In addition to his national role, the Taoiseach is specifically responsible for the actions of the Department of the Taoiseach.

Second in line to the Taoiseach is the Tánaiste. In a coalition government, this position is normally held by the leader of the second largest party. The Tánaiste chairs the cabinet and answers to the Dáil in the absence of the Taoiseach (for example, if he or she is out of the country on business). Should both be absent, the Minister for Finance is the next most senior minister.

2.3 Government, cabinet, government ministers

When people talk of the 'the government', they normally refer to the men and women of the cabinet. After each general election, photographs are taken of 'the new government' of cabinet ministers, eagerly ready for their new tasks and responsibilities. Under the Constitution, Ireland must have a government of not less than seven and not more than 15 ministers. These are the full-rank government ministers selected by the Taoiseach, approved by the Dáil and confirmed by the President. Some may run more than one department at a time.

Each minister heads up a government department and is responsible for the actions of that department. Ministers are expected, with the assistance of their civil servants, to develop policy. Some have been noted social reformers. The government, or the cabinet, normally meets every week and takes the main decisions of national importance. Individual ministers must bring

Cabinet

Sub-committees

- Northern Ireland
- Social Exclusion and Drugs
- Infrastructural Development and Public Private Partnerships
- Policy for Children

important decisions (e.g. proposed legislation, major policy proposals, white papers, big projects) concerning their own departments to the cabinet for approval. This normally takes the form of a Memorandum for government which outlines the proposal, its costs and implications. Memoranda are first circulated to other government departments and ministers for their comments or observations (informally called 'obs'). This stage provides an opportunity for other departments to amend, improve, better co-ordinate, or in extreme cases hold up the proposals of other departments.

There is normally a queue of such decisions going to cabinet for decision. Indeed, a log-jam here can slow down the process of policy-making at a crucial stage. The deliberations of the cabinet are confidential: Ministers inform the Dáil of government decisions if and when they choose to or if asked about particular issues by the Dáil or the media. Apart from government ministers, the other people who normally attend cabinet meetings are the Attorney General, who is the legal advisor to the government and the secretary of the government, who is a senior civil servant. Since 1995, a junior minister belonging to a smaller coalition partner in government has also been in attendance (called a 'super junior'). Some important work of the government is carried out by cabinet sub-committees. These committees consist of groups of key ministers working together intensively on a particular problem either for a short period or on an on-going basis. They report back to the full cabinet on their progress and expect their colleagues to endorse their deliberations, conclusions and recommendations.

In addition to the ministers of the government, the Taoiseach appoints junior ministers. Formerly called parliamentary secretaries, these are now termed ministers of state, numbering 17. Each junior minister is assigned to a government department, some to more than one simultaneously. Each is termed 'minister of state at the department of...'. A minister of state normally has a defined set of responsibilities within a government department. The minister of state answers questions in the Dáil about these responsibilities and will stand in for the senior minister if absent. A minister of state may not attend cabinet meetings (unless as a 'super junior'). Successful ministers of state may become full government ministers later in their political careers.

An important innovation in government in the 1970s was that of political or special advisors (Some governments have developed more senior posts, that of programme managers). The idea behind the advisor was that ministers required external political advice and expertise additional to what senior civil servants could

provide. Advisors have an important role in ensuring that the minister's policy agenda has maximum impact and that it does not become delayed in the administrative machine. Because advisors have routine access to their minister, they are important points in the policy process.

The government also includes a range of oversight or watchdog bodies. Their duties range from ensuring that public money is spent for the purposes for which it is intended (Comptroller and Auditor General) to bodies for the protection of the citizen and consumer (e.g. Director of Consumer Affairs, Ombudsman, Data Protection Commissioner). Some are an integral part of the civil service, whilst others are bodies with their own powers and authority (e.g. Equality Authority, National Disability Authority).

See Oversight bodies, Directory, 2.1

2.4 President

The President's general role is to:

- Uphold the constitution;
- Sign Bills into law;
- Be commander in chief for the armed forces;
- Consider legislation for reference to the supreme court; and
- Represent the country abroad (though travel abroad is permitted only with the consent of the government).

The President may convene a meeting of the Oireachtas so as to address it on a matter of national importance (Mary Robinson convened the Oireachtas for addresses on Ireland's role in Europe and on emigration). The President is assisted and advised in these duties by the Council of State, which comprises ex-Taoisigh, senior justices and political figures and others chosen personally by the President (Presidents Robinson and McAleese appointed representatives of voluntary organisations). While the President may not directly address political questions, the President's activities may send out subtle but well understood political signals. In choosing to affirm the work of voluntary, community and women's organisations, including some which might have been hitherto politically unpopular, both our present and previous presidents have sent out important and positive messages about their value.

The President traditionally receives a range of information and documentation from official sources, but voluntary and community groups have encouraged recent presidents to address their concerns as well.

President's role in legislation

Bill ➡

President

Meet with Council of State

– Refer to supreme court?

– People, following

Oireachtas petition?

Signature

Civil service: general service grades (and staff numbers)

Secretary General (23)

Assistant Secretary (99)

Principal (417)

Assistant Principal (1,160)

Administrative Officer (126)

Higher Executive Officer (2,109)

Executive Officer (2,892)

Staff Officer (1,253)

Clerical Officer (9,358)

Note: these are general grades and do not include technical staff.

Government departments

Taoiseach

Finance

Foreign Affairs

Education and Science

Health and Children

Social and Family Affairs

Environment & Local
Government

Enterprise, Trade & Employment

Justice, Equality & Law Reform

Agriculture & Food

Defence

Arts, Sport & Tourism

Communications, Marine &
Natural Resources.

Transport

Community, Rural & Gaeltacht
Affairs

2.5 Government departments

Each minister is responsible for a government department.

The government department is the core of the civil service.

The question as to who really runs the country, the minister or the civil servants, has long been a focus of discussion for political scientists and the subject of political situation comedies (the most famous being the British television series *Yes, Minister*).

Departments are divided into divisions, sections and units, each with a set area of responsibility. For example, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has units for Planning, Pensions, Legislation, Voluntary and Community Services, International Affairs, Family Affairs, Short-Term Schemes and Long-Term Schemes (The department also has eight regions, broadly corresponding to those of the health board regions, with regional offices). Many voluntary organisations find that they have most of their dealings with one particular department and sometimes with one particular unit. Having a constructive relationship with that unit is therefore important.

Public officials who run the various departments are recruited by public examination and selected by an independent Appointments Commission. The civil service has a series of general service grades, the managerial positions rising from Executive Officer upward to Departmental Secretary General. A Principal Officer is normally responsible for a unit and is an important person in determining the thinking and policy of that unit. Below Principals are Assistant Principals and other grades.

While most of the work of government departments focuses on the administration of on-going services and entitlements, changes in services and policies are also an important part of their work. A more dynamic model of the role of the government department is now in development. Most departments now have a formal policy-making role and a planning department. Senior civil servants regularly discuss new policies with their minister and ministers of state. Under the Strategic Management Initiative, government departments (and other state agencies) have been required to draw up strategic plans and targets for their future development. This has gradually led to more planning, documentation and reporting. It is now much more common to see government services present their own strategic plans. These are important reference documents.

There are 15 government departments (though some titles represent several departments which have been merged or have changed names). All are headquartered in Dublin, though many have begun to devolve different parts of their work to other parts of the country (the Department of Education & Science is such an example). Politically, each is headed by a minister, in some cases assisted by one or more ministers of state. The administrative head is the Secretary General of the department. Departments vary in size, from those with large numbers of staff (e.g. Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs) to others which are quite small (e.g. Department of Tourism, Sport & Recreation). Some have responsibility for large numbers of semi-state bodies, others for very few.

The work of each government department is governed by legislation and circulars. Circulars are issued by departments instructing its units and subordinate bodies how to carry out their work. Although circulars are essentially procedural, many deal with issues which reflect policy questions. Generally each has a number, followed by the year in question (1/02, 2/02 etc). Some are termed guidelines (e.g. *Strategic Policy Committees – Guidelines for Establishment and Operation*). They do not have legal effect, but departments and the local authorities are expected to abide by them. These were not routinely made public although they are more available nowadays. Voluntary and community organisations may press for circulars to address issues which concern them. Examples are those issued by the Department of the Environment to local authorities about estate management and on procedures for assessing the level of homelessness.

Green papers and white papers

From time to time, ministers and their departments issue White Papers and Green Papers outlining their future development plans in particular areas.

- A Green Paper is a document for discussion.
- A White Paper indicates firm government intentions (though it can leave the door open for changes).

For example, the Green Paper on the voluntary sector *Supporting Voluntary Activity* (1997) outlined a series of proposals and ideas which became a policy framework and a set of decisions in the White Paper on the voluntary sector which was published three years later (also called *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, 2000). A similar process was followed in the case of adult education.

Examples of Green Papers

Green Paper on Basic Income

Green Paper on Abortion



Examples of White Papers

White Paper on Foreign Policy
(*Challenges and opportunities abroad*)

White Paper on Rural
Development (*Ensuring
the future*)

White Paper on Science,
Technology & Invention

White Paper on Early Childhood
Education (*Ready to learn*)

Local

Administration

Local Authorities (118)

Health Boards (7) Plus one Regional Health Authority with 3 Area Boards

Vocational Education Committees (39)

Harbour Commissions (30)

Regional Tourism Organisations (7)

Fisheries Boards (7)

Local Authorities

Regional Authorities

County Councils/City Councils/Borough Councils

Town Councils

2.6 Local authorities

Local authorities in Ireland comprise 29 county councils, 5 city councils, 5 borough councils and 79 town councils. They vary in size, city councils having between 15 and 52 members; county councils between 20 and 46 members; the town councils having nine each. Ireland is considered by outsiders to be a centralised state. Our local authorities have much less power than their continental counterparts. Despite that, local authorities are important centres of power, for they administer a number of essential services and have an important role in public administration, such as in roads, health, housing, environmental services (e.g. parks) and libraries. Each authority must devise a development plan every five years, which must be put on public display and invite submissions. The development plan deals mainly with physical planning, rezoning and new housing. Most of the officials of the local authorities are recruited through the Local Appointments Commission. Like the national civil service, they have grades, the most important of which is the city or county manager.

Each city authority elects a mayor while county councils elect a cathaoirleach. Each serves for a year at a time and has an important ceremonial role. These positions may now be popularly elected.

The local authorities are controlled by councillors, who are chosen in local government elections which are held every five years. There are 883 county and city councillors and 744 members of town councils. Turnout in local elections is quite low (49 per cent in 1999). Whilst the actions of the city or county manager and the officials are accountable to the councillors, in practice the managers and officials have scope to establish their own style, policies and approaches to many issues of local development. County council meetings are held every month. A certain amount of on-going work is carried out by committees of councillors, who report back or issue recommendations to the monthly council meeting. Council meetings are attended by the press and (with a ticket from a councillor) by members of the public.

Councillors are more important than this description suggests, as many are elected to represent the local authority on other local bodies (e.g. health boards, vocational education committees). Councillors comprise the electorate for most of the seats of the Seanad and many enter the councils in order to go on to a national political career.

In addition to local government, there are two regional councils, seven health boards, one regional health authority (the Eastern) with three area boards, 39 vocational education committees, 30 harbour commissions, seven regional tourism organisations and seven regional fisheries boards. The main elements of their work are now reviewed.

Current role and functions

Local authorities vary in size from some with large numbers of staff and sizeable budgets (for example Dublin City Council), to town commissions, which have extremely limited resources. Local authorities are responsible for the following main areas of work:

- Housing planning and provision;
- Non-national roads;
- Water supplies and sewerage;
- Fire and emergency services;
- Development in general and the development plan in particular;
- Environmental protection; and
- Recreation and amenities.

They are funded by central government, local charges and rates on businesses. Elected councillors are responsible for broad policy questions, the estimates, development plans, by-laws and nominations to other bodies (These are called reserved functions). All other decisions are made by the city or county manager and the staff. The manager may attend and speak at local authority meetings, but not vote.

The development plan is one of the most important functions of the local authority. Each local authority must prepare such a plan every five years, review comments and objections and then implement the plan. It may not grant planning permissions that contradict the plan, unless it has announced its intentions to do so and the change has the support of the elected councillors (called a material contravention). The local authority is the primary planning authority and has the power to approve, reject or approve with conditions all planning applications. Appeals may be made to an independent board, An Bord Pleanála.

Local authorities have an important role in the regulation and enforcement of environmental standards (e.g. noise, air, water pollution). Under the legislation which governs these standards (e.g. Public Health [Ireland] Act, 1878; Water Pollution Act, 1977; Air Pollution Act, 1987) there are procedures for making complaints to the local authorities when breaches may have occurred. This may result in a prosecution or the review of a pollution licence.

Responsibilities of councillors

(reserved functions)

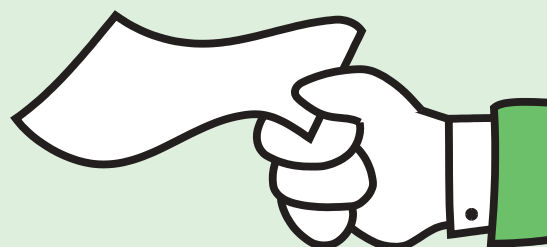
Policy

Estimates

Development plans

By-laws

Nominations



Details of the different departments of the local administration may best be found in the green pages at the beginning of each telephone directory.



In recent times, the work of the local authorities has brought them into closer contact with voluntary organisations and local communities.

- Under the Housing Act, 1988, local authorities are expected to consult with voluntary organisations in their area about the provision of social housing, especially for vulnerable groups such as homeless people. Consultative fora should be established.
- Under section 9 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, 1992, local authorities are expected to draw up plans for housing management, which may involve arrangements for the participation by local communities in the management of their estates.
- Under the Planning & Development Act, 2000, local authorities must take into account, in their planning, the needs of sustainable development, recreational amenities and the provision of community services. Local area development plans may be drawn up. Local authorities must set out a strategy for meeting all the housing needs in their areas, including of social housing (20 per cent of all housing must be social or affordable housing).

Under the *Programme for Economic and Social Progress* (PESP) (1992), the government began to develop a set of local, area-based responses to unemployment. What became known as the PESP or partnership companies were established. These were a strand of local development activity separate from local government. With resources from the structural funds, they subsequently expanded to 38 companies operating throughout disadvantaged areas of the country.

New structures

In 1996, the government announced, in the White Paper *Better Local Government*, a new structure for local government. Guidelines for these new developments were issued in 1999 (*Preparing the Ground: Guidelines for the Progress from Strategy Groups to County/City Development Boards*, 1999). These and other reforms established the following structure:

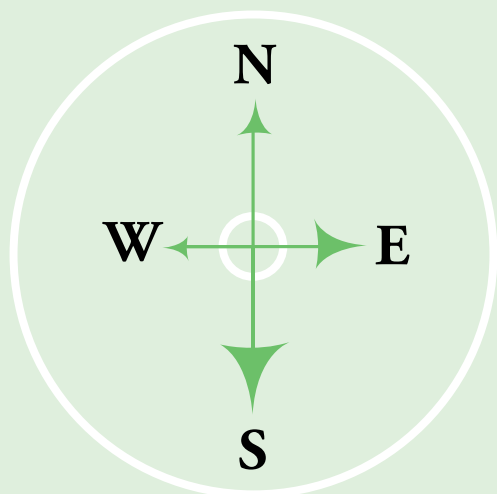
- Each city or county has a City or County Development Board of 25 members drawn from councillors and the social partners, including voluntary and community organisations. They are to be representative of local development bodies, e.g. the partnerships and rural development groups such as LEADER;
- There may be local committees for smaller areas, generally based on electoral wards.
- Social Inclusion Units have been set up as pilots in nine local authority areas to promote social inclusion.

- Each board is required to draw up a 3 to 5 year strategy for local economic, social and cultural development. The guidelines require an audit of existing facilities and services in each county and city area. These plans outline how such services should develop and sign up other statutory bodies (including local authorities, health boards and other government agencies) for their execution. They are expected to have a focus on social inclusion. Social inclusion working groups are to be appointed.
- The detailed policy-making work of the local authorities will be overseen by Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs). Each local authority is typically expected to have four or more SPCs. Suggested themes are:
 - Economic Development and Planning;
 - Environment;
 - Transport & Infrastructure;
 - Housing, Social and Cultural Development.
- Each SPC is headed by a Director of Services;
- The SPCs comprise elected representatives (two-thirds of their membership) and sectoral interests (one-third). Minimum membership is nine people;
- SPCs meet four or five times a year;
- The following are the sectors represented on the SPCs:
 - Agriculture and Farming;
 - Environment, Conservation and Culture;
 - Development and Construction;
 - Business and Commercial;
 - Trade Union;
 - Community, Voluntary & Disadvantaged.
- SPCs are expected to pay attention to gender balance, foster social inclusiveness in line with the principles of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and involve the community, voluntary and disadvantaged sector;
- In selecting external members of the SPCs, local authorities are expected to consult widely and give representative organisations the opportunity to nominate members under their own procedures. Their representatives should have a broad knowledge. Nominating groups should be representative, democratically run, accountable and with a broad (rather than single issue) remit;
- Local authorities may also establish area committees for detailed consultation at local level.

Further reading

*Strengthening Our Voice –
a Guide for Community Sector
Participation in Local
Decision-Making.*

From the Community Workers
Co-operative, 1st floor, Unit 4,
Tuam Road Centre, Tuam Rd,
Galway, tel 091.779 030,
fax 091.779 033,
e-mail: info@cwce.ie,
site: www.cwce.ie



Health board regions and their headquarters

North-Western: Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo (Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim)

North-Eastern: Cavan, Louth, Meath, Monaghan (Kells, Co. Meath)

Western: Galway, Mayo, Roscommon (Galway)

Mid-Western: Clare, Limerick, North Tipperary (Limerick)

Southern: Kerry, Cork (Cork)

South-Eastern: Carlow, Wexford, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford (Kilkenny)

Midland: Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath (Tullamore)

Eastern Regional Health Authority: Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow (Dublin)

Northern Area Health Board: (Swords, Co Dublin)

South Western Area Health Board: (Co. Kildare)

East Coast Area Health Board: (Bray, Co. Wicklow)

Further details in the directory

Regional authorities

Regional authorities were introduced in Ireland in 1994. They were established principally to oversee the structural funds in each region. Originally there were eight. In 2000, the government introduced a new tier of regional assemblies, reflecting the two new zones in which the structural funds operated:

- The Border, Midland and Western Assembly, based in Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon, with 29 members and
- The Southern and Eastern Assembly, with 41 members, based in Waterford.

The members are drawn from the county councils and other local authorities in the two respective areas. Their task is broadly to co-ordinate public services in each region and specifically to monitor the operation of the European Union structural funds. They have a small staff.

Health Boards

The health boards (introduced under the Health Act, 1970) comprise three categories of members: those appointed by the local authorities (Generally these are councillors and comprise half the board membership); people elected by the senior medical professions (e.g. doctors, pharmacists, dentists); and members appointed by the Minister for Health. Each board has between 27 and 35 members. The Eastern Health Board was restructured as the Eastern Regional Health Authority, with three area boards: the Northern, East Coast and South-Western. Each board is headed by a Chief Executive Officer. Health boards are funded mainly through block grants from the Department of Health & Children. Health boards meet monthly, their function being to:

- Develop policy;
- Approve plans;
- Discuss issues concerning the development of services in the region; and
- Approve accounts.

The management of each health board is carried out by a Chief Executive Officer. Traditionally, the services provided were divided into three broad programme areas:

- Community care;
- Hospital services; and
- Special services (e.g. for people with disabilities, older people and people with learning difficulties).

Recently, new programme areas and titles have been introduced as the health services have modernised (e.g. public health). These differ from one board to another. Health boards are significant funders of voluntary organisations through what are termed Section 65 grants, named after Section 65 of the Health Act, 1953, which permits boards to fund voluntary organisations providing health or related services. Some health boards have advisory committees for particular areas of work or services and these may include representatives of voluntary organisations.

Vocational Education Committees

Vocational Education Committees (VECs) provide a range of local educational services, schools and specialised services (e.g. adult education, youth services). There is a VEC for each county, for each of the large urban authorities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford) and for other designated urban areas (Bray, Drogheda, Dun Laoghaire, Galway, Sligo, Tralee and Wexford). Each VEC is headed by a Chief Executive Officer. Each VEC has not less than 14 members, of whom eight are appointed by the appropriate local authority. Each VEC school should be run by a committee comprising VEC members, parents and a teacher. VECs are funded by local rates and central government. Besides the provision of technical education, which is their main responsibility, VECs have also developed responsibilities for youth work and adult education. The only statutory youth service is in the Dublin area, the City of Dublin Youth Service Board. The development of adult education is the responsibility of adult education boards under the VEC.

Other local bodies

The seven regional fishery boards are responsible for the development of angling in their respective areas. They are co-ordinated nationally by the Central Fisheries Board. Their members are chosen by holders of fishing licences who vote in postal ballots. Harbour authorities are elected at the time of local elections and comprise representatives of the local authorities and commercial and labour interests, whose task it is to manage and develop seaports. Regional tourism authorities are established and funded by Bord Fáilte. Their job is to develop the tourism industry in their various regions (seven altogether).

Membership of health boards

- **Councillors**
- **Senior medical professions**
- **Appointed by Minister**



2.7 National agreements

National economic policy in Ireland has, in many important respects, been determined by national agreements between government, employers, farmers and trade unions (here called the 'social partners'). They are an important part of the national political landscape. They were introduced in the 1970s as a means of setting agreed wage rates and to prevent industrial and agricultural unrest. Starting with the *Programme for National Recovery* (1987), these agreements were expanded to take in wider economic and social issues, to become a potentially important instrument of national planning. Not only did the agreements cover an ever wider remit, but they began to involve a broader range of groups and organisations, including recently, the voluntary and community sector. Each programme lasts about three years.

Ever since *Partnership 2000*, community and voluntary organisations have been one of the four partners of the process. They participated in the subsequent agreement, the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. This is an agreement which specifies the broad parameters of economic and social policy and outlines government commitments on issues such as taxation, support for enterprise, social welfare and the development of agriculture. The *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* had four main headings or frameworks: living standards; enterprise; social inclusion and equality and adaptation to change. Under the programme, a large number of specialised working groups were set up to progress individual issues during the lifetime of the agreement. There were important procedures for the monitoring of the agreement (called Framework V):

- All parties meet annually, at a meeting chaired by the Taoiseach;
- There is on-going review by the Central Review Mechanism;
- The chairperson of the Central Review Mechanism may, following a request by one of the four pillars and in consultation with the others, call a special meeting;
- There are quarterly meetings of each of the four pillars;
- Progress is monitored by the National Economic and Social Forum;
- The four frameworks are monitored individually.

See Case study: *Using the monitoring system*

2.8 Consultative, advisory and monitoring bodies

In carrying out its work the government is advised by a range of advisory and policy-making bodies. These shape the broad framework of economic and social debate outside the Oireachtas, take in the views of the social partners, provide recommendations for government and can be a place where dissatisfaction with government may be voiced. **The National Economic and Social Development Office** is the umbrella body for a trinity of partnership bodies – the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP)

NESC

NESC was established in its present form in 1973 and is composed of representatives of government departments, the four social pillars and independently appointed members. Besides providing a forum where the social partners may raise contemporary economic and social issues, the secretariat of NESC has presented, over the years, a series of informative, lengthy and thoughtful research reports on new, intractable or difficult social policy questions (e.g. emigration, rural development).

NESF

The National Economic and Social Forum is a more recent (1993) means of consulting with a wider range of groups on economic and social questions. NESF has been important for bringing in those who had been traditionally outside the consultative process – women, youth, unemployed people, the elderly, those with a concern for the environment, people with a disability and the disadvantaged, their representatives being chosen by a range of designated organisations. In many ways, NESF paved the way for voluntary and community organisations to become the fourth partner. NESF has produced a series of reports and recommendations. Generally, they are shorter than those of NESC, emphasising policy more than research, with a stronger focus on social exclusion and unemployment. Recent areas of work have included the development of policies for social and affordable housing and the rehabilitation of ex-offenders.

NCP

The National Centre for Partnership and Performance was set up in 2002 to support and facilitate organisational change, based on partnership, to bring about improved performance and mutual gains and thus contribute to national competitiveness, better public services, higher living standards, a better quality of work life and the development of the workplace of the future.

Community Pillar

The community pillar, also known as the voluntary and community pillar, of the national agreement comprises the following eight organisations:

- Community Platform
- National Youth Council
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Centres for the Unemployed
- Protestant Aid
- Conference of Religious in Ireland
- Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
- National Women's Council of Ireland
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Community Platform

The Community Platform is an association of a broader range of voluntary and community organisations, which participate in the national agreement.

- Community Action Network
- Community Workers Co-operative
- European Anti-Poverty Network
- Focus on Children
- Forum of People with a Disability
- Gay & Lesbian Equality Network
- Irish Association of Older People
- Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas
- Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
- Irish Rural Link
- Irish Traveller Movement
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- National Women's Council of Ireland
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- One Parent Exchange Network
- Pavee Point
- Threshold
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Voluntary Drug Treatment Network
- Vincentian Partnership for Justice
- Women's Aid
- Irish Penal Reform Trust



Case study:

Using the monitoring system

When the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) became aware that Community Employment would be cut from 40,000 persons on the scheme to 32,000, they turned to the terms of the national agreement then in effect, the *Programme for Competitiveness and Work* (PCW) (This was before voluntary organisations became one of the pillars). The programme stipulated 40,000 for the scheme. The INOU protested, issued briefing papers to the press and encouraged their members to meet with their TDs. The INOU called a public demonstration outside the department's headquarters and over a thousand turned up. Finally, they asked the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to raise the matter at the Central Review Committee of the national agreement. The government was in no position to break the agreement and two weeks later the numbers were restored.

Membership of NESF

Oireachtas

Business, Trade Union, Farming Pillars

Non-Governmental Organisations

Government departments

Local Government

Independent members

Voluntary organisations represented on the National Economic and Social Forum have included:

- National Women's Council;
- Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed;
- National Youth Council of Ireland;
- Disability Federation of Ireland;
- An Taisce;
- Irish Travellers Movement;
- European Anti-Poverty Network;
- Community Workers' Co-operative.

The Centre will conduct research, identify best practice and develop new national strategies and new models for partnership in the workplace.

In addition to disseminating evidence and experience-based information on how partnership and change can contribute to productivity and competitiveness, the Centre will directly assist and support significant partnership initiatives.

Specialist advisory bodies

The government appoints a range of specialised advisory bodies which provide advice and recommendations. These may be sub-divided into several types:

- Temporary, once-off commissions, which have a limited time span and are required to produce a report within a given period of time. A recent example is the National Commission on a Minimum Wage;
- Advisory bodies, with a permanent or semi-permanent but advisory role. Examples are the National Council on Ageing and Older People and the Telephone Users Advisory Group;
- Permanent semi-state bodies which have a range of functions in the development of economic and social activity, but whose role also includes advising government on policy matters. An example is Comhairle, which advises the government on social welfare matters and develops citizen information services.

Advisory board and commission members are generally appointed by the minister responsible for the area of policy concerned.

The minister normally attempts to select representatives of the many interests or groups involved in the issue (e.g. professionals, experts and advocates), though it has also been common for ministers to appoint people as a reward for political loyalty.

As a general rule, membership of state advisory boards is honorary, members receiving only expenses, but such positions provide access to policy-making networks and influence.

Monitoring and implementation bodies

A growing feature of government in the past number of years has been the growth of monitoring and implementation bodies.

These arose from the recognition by government that it was not enough for governments to set up commissions, approve their reports and command departments and state agencies to carry out their recommendations. Increasingly, people in public administration began to notice how difficult it was to simply transmit decisions. They saw how good decisions could be impeded by the lack of resources or by weak political support and could be frustrated by bureaucrats, non-governmental organisations and well-placed elites which disapproved.

Unless specific mechanisms were in place to make sure recommendations were carried out, they might well gather dust.

Governments have increasingly begun to pay attention to devising mechanisms to ensure that policies, once adopted, are effective. Examples of implementation processes in action are the following:

- Soon after the second Commission on the Status of Women reported, the Department of Equality and Law Reform established a monitoring committee to see to the implementation of its 120 recommendations and to issue progress reports. Its 15 members were drawn from different departments and agencies – the Irish Farmers Association, the Irish Countrywomen's Association, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Women's Council and others;
- Later, implementation committees were set up to oversee the operation of other task forces, commissions and review groups, for example, to implement the report of the task force on the Travelling Community.

Considerable attention was given to the problem of implementation when the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) was devised by the government in 1997*. The strategy had a lengthy statement on how its recommendations would be implemented and progress checked. Another example of implementation bodies at work may be found in the national strategy against drugs. These comprise four main elements:

- Cabinet sub-committee on social exclusion, drugs and local development;
- The National Drugs Strategy Team;
- Fourteen local drugs task forces; and, more recently,
- Regional drugs task forces (see Directory for further details).

The purpose of the cabinet sub-committee (which is also responsible for the National Anti-Poverty Strategy) is to give political leadership to the fight against drugs, assess progress and resolve organisational problems that stand in the way of the resolution of the problem. The purpose of the National Drugs Strategy Team is to draw together a governmental, expert and non-governmental group to ensure the effective co-ordination of the government's strategy. The function of each local drugs task force is to develop local responses to the drugs problem in identifiable priority areas. Each local group is required to draw up a development plan which, following assessment, is to receive funding to develop a comprehensive set of local responses to the drugs problem.

* The National Anti-Poverty Strategy Review *Building an Inclusive Society*, Government of Ireland 2002 Dublin DSCFA.

advice & recommendations

Examples of some recent commission-type advisory bodies

- Expert working group on the integration of the tax and welfare system
- Commission on a minimum wage
- Commission on the information society
- Advisory group on the training of the disabled
- Special task force on children with dyslexia
- Commission on school accommodation
- Committee on deaf education
- Task force on the Traveller community
- Working group on the cost of disability
- Lifelong learning task force
- Committee on court practice & procedure
- Commission on the status of people with disabilities
- Review body on special education
- Working group on the social economy
- Working group on violence against women
- Review group on the needs and services for persons with physical and sensory disabilities
- National crime forum
- Task force on autism
- Working group on the adequacy of social welfare payments
- Public library policy review project
- Review of the school transport scheme
- Working group on foster care
- Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy
- One-parent family payment review group
- Task force on child and adolescent psychiatric services
- Task force on violence against women
- National coastal zone management strategy
- Group to examine the probation and welfare service

Institutional

Mechanisms for

the National

Anti-Poverty

Strategy

- Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, chaired by the Taoiseach
- Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion to support the Cabinet Committee;
- National Office for Social Inclusion, reporting to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, with a director and specialist staff. This will assume the functions of the original NAPS Unit. It will develop a data strategy and administer a research programme.
- Social Inclusion Units in Departments that have responsibility for advancing NAPS-related activities;
- NAPS Liaison Officers in other Government Departments, as is current practice;
- Social Inclusion Units in the local authorities on a phased basis, with strategies at local level;
- Social Inclusion Consultative Group, involving the social partners and anti-poverty experts, meeting twice a year;
- Annual Social Inclusion Forum convened by the National Economic and Social Forum;
- Combat Poverty Agency with a support, advisory, research, data role;
- The National Economic and Social Forum to monitor the social inclusion element of the national partnership agreements and give opinions on the strategy.

Note: The National Office for Social Inclusion will have responsibility for monitoring/evaluation requirements and an appropriate communications strategy.

2.9 Semi-state bodies

There are about 200 semi-state boards and bodies in Ireland. The concept of the semi-state body dates back to the 1920s, when the first Irish governments set up development agencies to oversee key national tasks (e.g. electrification by the Electricity Supply Board, development of air services through Aer Lingus). Since then, semi-state bodies have proliferated as the tasks of developing a modern society have become ever more complex. Semi-state bodies may be divided into three broad categories (though there may be some overlap between the three):

- **Commercial.** These are agencies designed to fulfill an economic, public service or developmental role in the economy. Examples are the Electricity Supply Board, Bord Gáis and Iarnród Éireann.
- **Regulatory and oversight.** These are bodies designed to set standards for the operation of an industry, occupation, profession or area of society or to oversee legislation. Examples are the Radiological Protection Institute, the National Milk Agency, the Opticians Board and the Environmental Protection Agency;
- **Promotional and advisory.** These are agencies designed to provide quality, professional advice on specialised areas of policy and to promote or support a particular aspect of public policy. Examples are the Energy Advisory Board, the Library Council and the Crafts Council.

Whilst government ministers appoint the boards of these bodies and have overall responsibility for their work, their day-to-day running is left to the bodies concerned. They may, within broad limits, develop their own policies and approaches to the areas of work for which they have responsibility. This gives them a certain independence from government, which from the point of view of voluntary and community organisations can be a mixed blessing. Semi-state bodies can play a valued developmental role, free from political interference, but, lacking direct responsibility to the Dáil, they may be difficult to hold to account. Some have the authority to make grants.

In the event, most have a strong sense of accountability and respond to public concerns. Most semi-state and advisory bodies issue annual reports and accounts and are reasonably accessible. Most have a staff structure modelled on civil service lines, though many recruit their staff from the open market. Most have their own headquarters buildings, nearly all in Dublin. They vary in size and approach, some of the smaller advisory or regulatory bodies having a mere handful of staff, while others, for example the commercial semi-state bodies, have thousands of workers.

All semi-state bodies are ultimately accountable to a department and government minister, with a civil servant or a section providing a line of communication into that department. Ministers and other politicians tend to listen carefully to what they say and they are routinely consulted in the broad policy areas affecting their field of work. Semi-state bodies may, therefore, provide an additional channel of communication whereby policy may be influenced.

Although membership of many state advisory bodies and semi-state boards is highly competitive, this is not always the case. Voluntary organisations rarely propose their own representatives for membership when vacancies arise. There is nothing to stop them from approaching the minister concerned and asking to be represented or have a candidate considered.

2.10 Political parties

Although political parties have a limited formal role in the government of the country, in practice their role is of enormous importance. The ideology of each party in government determines whether the government is likely to be sympathetic to a particular cause or not, especially in social policy matters. Party manifestos shape the programmes for government, which provide the overall policy framework for each new government. Lobbying groups which can get their key proposals included in a party manifesto (and the subsequent programme for government) have a substantial advantage in achieving their policy objectives if that party gets into government. Around the details and the margins of the big policy issues, parties compete with one another to satisfy or impress the different interest groups, including voluntary and community organisations, because their members have votes.

Government ministers, opposition spokespersons, deputies and senators also listen carefully to what their ordinary members are saying, whether that be at branch meeting, constituency level or further up (for example, national conference [árd-fheis]). They provide a useful test of what people want, or, for that matter, won't put up with, and enable new issues to surface inside the political process. The larger political parties are organised in branches which generally correspond to a parish or similar level (In Fianna Fáil, they are called cumann. The terminology varies from party to party). Each branch sends delegates to a constituency council which in turn elects delegates to a national council. Each large political party has a national headquarters, run by a general secretary, normally assisted by administrative staff. Some have research staff and each of the main parties has a youth wing with a youth officer. For their names to appear on the ballot paper, parties must register formally as political parties.



National political parties

Christian Solidarity Party
Communist Party of Ireland
Fianna Fáil
Fine Gael
Green Party
Labour Party
Natural Law Party
Progressive Democrats
Sinn Féin
Workers Party
Socialist Party

Local political parties

Cork City Ratepayers Party
Donegal Progressive Party

For addresses of political parties, see
Institute of Public Administration
Yearbook.

Whilst the most publicly visible activity of a party is to fight elections and amass the funds necessary to do so, policy discussions and debates are core activities of political parties, even though they may only be visible during the annual party conferences or when an issue becomes contentious. An important and often unappreciated feature of being in a political party is that one may meet politicians quite frequently. Deputies, senators and councillors try to get to branch meetings as often as they can and they are present at the higher levels of decision-making within the party (constituency council, national council). Parties have been trying to make themselves more accessible recently, with some running recruitment campaigns and others setting up attractive websites.

Traditionally, voluntary organisations interested in winning over political parties thought in terms of getting the annual conference to agree a particular policy. Once this happened, so the theory went, the party concerned was obliged to implement it in government or when it got into government. In practice, the party conference is now a much less important instrument of policy-making and more of a media event. Instead, policies are developed by study groups, activists interested in particular policies, youth wings, university branches and others and then circulated, gaining ground and acceptance depending on how vigorously they are promoted. For voluntary organisations, this can be a slow but effective way of influencing the decision-making process. One of the main benefits of working with activists or policy-makers in the parties is that the party activists often develop an interest in the issue concerned, sometimes a lifelong one, which they may be in a position to see through several years later.

2.11 Courts

The courts open a number of possibilities to influence policy and decisions. People have long used Irish courts either as a direct means of rectifying what they believe is an injustice or as an indirect means of highlighting a case or an issue. Cases must be taken by individuals, though they may be backed by voluntary or community organisations. Some lawyers have an interest in social justice issues and are prepared to be involved in this area of work.

The Irish legal system has always resisted being forced into a direct policy-making role. Nevertheless there are many aspects of policy where the interpretation by the courts of laws made by the Oireachtas (or the British administration before that) may be important. People have gone to court to challenge the operation of the social welfare system, planning decisions and other actions where they believe the authorities have acted unlawfully.

Some have managed to get injunctions or court orders against the actions of government, semi-state bodies or the local authorities to stop them doing something, following which the matter goes to court for a hearing. Sometimes, too, they have been disappointed. The Sinnott case (2001), in which the Supreme Court ruled that a severely disabled young man did not have a constitutional right to educational services, showed some of the limits of what could be achieved.

There are two main advantages to taking a court case.

First, the legal system can actually produce a change in policy where political action alone has been unsuccessful. The courts can make rulings that have materially improved the circumstances of the groups going to court. Second, a court case generates considerable publicity for a cause. Advocates have the opportunity to present their case in open court and can normally expect their viewpoint to be well publicised. The government or official side will be cross-examined and the weakness of its position may be highlighted. Activists working for homeless youngsters brought a string of cases to the courts to try to compel the health boards to provide appropriate accommodation for them.

The principal problems with taking court action are cost, speed and the danger of reversal. First, individuals have to bear the costs of taking such actions themselves and these costs can be very expensive (in the case of the High Court, several thousand euros a day). Should they lose, they must not only pay their own costs, but those of the winning party as well (though the judge may charge costs to the state if the matter is adjudged to be one of public interest, and some lawyers will take a case on a no-win, no-fee basis).

A second problem is speed. Although injunctions may be obtained speedily, court hearings take some time to be called. Some cases may drag on for years and may end less conclusively than the party which took the action had hoped they would. Third, governments may, following an unfavourable court outcome, appeal to a higher court (imposing further costs on those who took the case), or if they lose there, overturn the basis for the judgement by introducing new legislation.

To take a court case, an individual who believes that a public body has not followed lawfully proper procedure applies to the High Court for judicial review. The complainant is given the opportunity to state his or her case, as is the body concerned. The high court may not rule on the merits of the case, but only on the procedural question at issue. In the case of a public or private body acting in a way which abridges the rights of other citizens, a complainant may

e.g.

Some examples of court actions highlighting policy issues

- **Location and development of interpretative centres**
- **Appointments to the European Central Bank**
- **Right to vote for people with disabilities, prisoners**
- **Appeal systems for refugees**
- **Discrimination against gay people**

ask the court for an injunction. Assisted by a barrister, the complainant makes the case to the judge. If persuaded of the case, the judge issues an interim injunction (possibly for a week) against the body concerned until the matter comes to a hearing where the other side has the opportunity to make a defence.

The court may then issue an interlocutory injunction to stop the body while the case proceeds to a full hearing, which could be some months away.

For those who cannot afford legal aid, there are the services of the Legal Aid Board, which has centres in most counties of the country. There are several problems with Legal Aid Board services. The first main hurdle is that the board does not, as a general rule, support cases in which a group of people has an interest (In other countries, these are sometimes termed class actions). It may only support a case taken by an individual. Second, there may be delays in the law centres. The centres concentrate on family law cases. A person looking for help may still have to wait several months. Third, there is a very restrictive means test.

2.12 Ombudsman services

Since the 1980s, there has been a growth of ombudsman services. The office of the ombudsman was set up to investigate cases of alleged maladministration, inaction and delay by government departments, health boards and local authorities. Some important parts of the public service are still excluded from its operation, most prominently the Environmental Protection Agency.

Complaints about the administration of social welfare services are one of its main areas of activity. Although the ombudsman investigates individual complaints only, there is nothing to stop a voluntary organisation backing an individual in the course of a complaint, and voluntary and community organisations have met the office to discuss policy issues arising from public administration of government services. The office of the ombudsman is independent and appointed by the Oireachtas, not by a government minister. Where a pattern of problems emerges, the ombudsman often takes up, in the annual report, themes and issues which arise from these complaints. The report receives media coverage and is debated in the Oireachtas. Several other government departments operate quasi-judicial ombudsman type services, such as the Social Welfare Appeals Office and the Director of Consumer Affairs.

A number of private organisations have also developed ombudsman-type or complaint services. These include the banks (There is an ombudsman for the credit institutions); insurance

companies; the legal profession; and the media (Most papers have 'reader representatives'). Raidió Telefís Éireann, because it is a public broadcasting company, has a formal complaints procedure for people who feel broadcasting has been partial or unfair (the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, which also covers local radio). Again, these procedures are designed essentially for individual complaints, but groups have often publicised complaints made by individuals on behalf of their organisation, or with their encouragement. Even if complainants do not win their case, the associated publicity can ultimately have the effect of changing practices within government or private companies or deterring future malpractice. The outcomes of Broadcasting Complaint Commission decisions are published in the *RTÉ Guide*.

Freedom of Information Act

The Freedom of Information Act, 1997, has been in operation for several years now. The Act applies to government departments, public bodies operating directly under them (64 in all), health boards and local authorities. Its general purpose is to assert the right of citizens to access to official information, to the greatest extent possible. The Act establishes legal rights to access information held by public bodies; the right to have official information relating to oneself amended where it is incomplete, incorrect or misleading; and a legal right to obtain reasons for decisions affecting oneself.

All public bodies are required to publish a manual outlining their structure, organisation, functions, powers, duties and services; details of their records; details of the procedures for obtaining records; the names and designations of members of staff responsible for these records; and the rights of citizens to review and appeal. Such manuals should be widely available (e.g. in public libraries). The Act applies to all personal records (regardless of when created) and public records created after the commencement date of the Act (21 April 1998).

A person wishing to exercise the right of access under the Act must make a request in writing to the head of the public body concerned. It is important to state that the request is made under the Freedom of Information Act, to give sufficient detail for the record to be identified and specify the preferred form of access (e.g. photocopy or computer disk). The public body is expected to assist the requester in identifying the document. Requests must be acknowledged within two weeks and a decision one way or the other must be made within four weeks.

complaints or grievances

Office of the Ombudsman, 18 Lower Leeson St, Dublin 2, tel 678 5222 , LoCall 1890 223030, fax 661 0570, site: www.irlgov.ie/ombudsman

Office of Information Commissioner, 18 Lower Leeson St, Dublin 2, tel 678 5222, fax 661 0570, site: www.irlgov.ie/oic

Ombudsman of the Credit Institutions, 8 Adelaide Court, Adelaide Rd, Dublin 2, tel 478 3755, fax 478 0157, e-mail: ombudsman@creditombudsman.ie

Insurance Ombudsman of Ireland, 32 Upper Merrion St, Dublin 2 tel 662 0899, fax 662 0890, e-mail: enquiries@ombudsman-insurance.ie, site: www.insurance-ombudsman.ie

Broadcasting Complaints Commission, PO Box 913, Dublin 2, tel 676 7571

Legal Aid Board, St Stephen's Green House, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, tel 240 0900, fax 240 0972, e-mail: legalaidd@eircom.net

Office of the Director of Consumer Affairs, 4-5 Harcourt Rd, Dublin 2, tel 402 5500, fax 402 5501, complaints/enquiries tel 402 5555, e-mail: odea@entemp.ie, site: www.odea.ie, also at Norwich Union House, 89-90 South Mall, Cork, tel 021 427 4099, fax 021 427 4109


European Consumer Advice Shop, 13a Upper O'Connell St, Dublin 1, tel 809 0600, fax 809 0601, e-mail: ecic@indigo.ie, site: www.ecic.ie

Advertising Standards Authority, IPC House, 35-9 Shelbourne Rd, Dublin 4, tel 660 8766, fax 660 8113, e-mail: info@asai.ie, site: www.asai.ie

Social Welfare Appeals Office, D'Olier House, D'Olier St, Dublin 2, 671 8633, fax 671 8391

See *Directory*, for further information

Areas exempt from the Freedom of Information Act

- 
- Briefing material for the government prepared in the past five years;
 - Matters covered by cabinet confidentiality;
 - Legal professional privilege;
 - Deliberations of public bodies where disclosure would be contrary to the public interest;
 - Private papers of elected representatives;
 - Information whose disclosure would impair the enforcement of law or public safety; and information on defence, security, international relations or Northern Ireland whose disclosure would be contrary to the public interest. In these cases, ministerial certificates must be issued. The Gardaí are excluded from the operation of the Act;
 - Commercially sensitive information held by public bodies;
 - Third party access to personal information;
 - Information given to public bodies in confidence;
 - Research information on a public body;
 - Information on natural resources where disclosure would prejudice the well-being of our culture, heritage, natural resources, flora or fauna;
 - Financial and economic interest of public bodies where disclosure would have adverse effects on the state, disturb the business of the community or lead to loss by an individual;
 - Specific secrecy requirements in other legislation.

Requests for information may be refused if the record does not exist or cannot be found; if it is insufficiently identified; if it is of a voluminous nature; if it is likely to be published within the next 12 weeks; if the request is deemed frivolous or vexatious; or if fees have not been paid. Access may be deferred if the record concerned has been prepared for the Houses of the Oireachtas and is due to be released in the next five weeks in any case, or if it is a report on the performance of a public body.

Documents may be edited to delete exempt material. In the event of a request being refused, the applicant must be given the underlying reasons for the refusal to enable the applicant to make an informed decision about an appeal. Decisions to refuse documents are subject, in most cases, to internal review within three weeks. The purpose of this exercise is to provide an opportunity for the applicant to put forward fresh arguments and for public bodies to reconsider their initial decision. The requester must be informed of the outcome of the review. An unsuccessful applicant may, if dissatisfied, appeal to the Information Commissioner. The primary role of the commissioner is to review appealed decisions. The commissioner's decision is final, though one may appeal to the courts on a point of law. The office of Information Commissioner is an independent one, like that of the ombudsman. The commissioner has the power to seek documents, compel witnesses, make binding decisions (subject to review by the High Court on a point of law), and to review the operation of the Act and compliance by public bodies.

Public bodies may make charges for information requested under the Act. Only copying charges may apply in the case of personal records. For non-personal information, public bodies may charge the time spent in efficiently locating and copying records, based on a standard hourly rate. One may appeal against a proposal to charge an unreasonable rate. Charges may be waived where they are small, in issues of national importance, and where, in the case of personal information, such charges would not be reasonable in the light of the circumstances of the requester.

The opinions of observers are divided on the likely benefits of the Freedom of Information Act. Positively, it will bring Ireland into line with international practice and should create a spirit of greater openness in the public service. The onus will now be on public bodies to provide, rather than refuse, information. It should provide new access to policy-related information. Negatively, critics point to the extensive range of qualifications, reservations, exemptions and procedural hurdles which could make its operation of limited value.

2.13 North-South institutions

The Belfast agreement in 1998 was important, first and foremost, for establishing a process for bringing a permanent peace to the island, but second, for the establishment of new institutions which will grow in importance over the years. These structures are important both for government and non-governmental organisations. They represent a sizeable investment in public administration, with an anticipated budget of €71m and a staff of 880 people. The following implementation bodies have been established:

- Waterways Ireland Executive Agency
- Food Safety Promotion Board
- Trade & Business Development Body
- Special European Union Programmes Body
- North-South Language Body, Foras na Gaeilge
- Foyle, Carlingford & Irish Lights Commission.

Six matters were defined as co-operation areas, as follows:

- Transport
- Agriculture
- Education
- Health
- Environment
- Tourism.

In one of the co-operation areas, for example, a north-south co-operation body, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, has been set up to address inequalities in health (see Directory).

A British-Irish Council was set up and held its first meeting in 1999, selecting the following areas of work: drugs; social inclusion; environment; transport; and the knowledge economy. However, its work has had a low profile so far.

Part of the Belfast agreement involved the establishment of a new human rights framework. For the Republic, this means the domestication into Irish law of the *European Convention on Human Rights*; and the appointment of a Human Rights Commission. For voluntary and community organisations concerned with human rights and social rights, these are important developments. The legislation for the *European Convention on Human Rights* means that:

- The European convention is now domesticated into Irish law. It will be applicable to, but may not have the full force of, Irish law;
- The courts must interpret the law in a manner compatible with the convention;

- Organs of the state must, with the exception of the courts, perform their functions in accordance with the convention;
- Compensation may be provided for people who have suffered loss or damage as a result of their rights, under the convention, having been violated;
- The courts may declare Irish laws to be incompatible with the convention.

The Republic's Human Rights Commission was appointed before the legislation came into effect. Its role is to:

- Review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice in relation to human rights;
- Examine, if requested by a minister, legislative proposals for their implications for human rights;
- Consult with national and international bodies, as appropriate;
- Make recommendations to government, either on its own initiative or as requested, on measures to strengthen, protect or uphold human rights;
- Conduct enquiries as it sees fit;
- Prepare and publish reports on research or enquiries;
- Appear as *amicus curiae* (*friend of the court*) in court proceedings involving human rights;
- Participate in North/South committees with the commission in the North;
- Provide legal and other assistance;
- Institute proceedings for the purpose of obtaining relief in respect of any person or groups of persons.

2.14 European Union

The European Union has become increasingly important for voluntary organisations and community groups in Ireland – and is set to become even more important over the next number of years:

- The European Union is increasingly taking decisions which affect day-to-day life in Ireland and our economic and social policies. More and more political, social and economic decisions are taken by the member states acting together rather than by individual countries on their own. Decisions of the Council of Ministers, the Commission and other key European decision-making bodies set the tone more and more for decisions and actions by the Irish government;
- Irish law is increasingly European law. More and more legislation is passed by the Oireachtas so that we can fulfill our obligations under European directives;

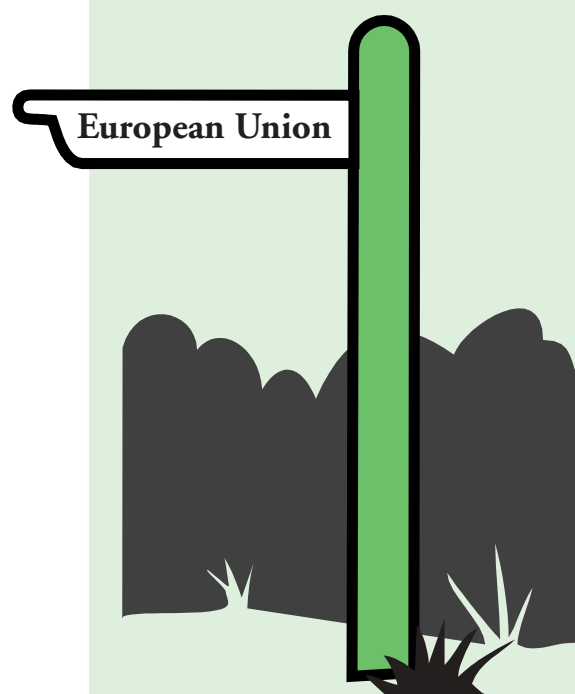
- Many voluntary organisations and community groups have attracted money under various European Union funding programmes, such as the structural funds;
- The European Union is now more involved in social policy issues and the struggle against social exclusion – though not as much as many would like;
- Many voluntary organisations and community groups have taken part in European activities in order to influence decision-making in Ireland. Some voluntary organisations and community groups have used Europe as a means of influencing the domestic decision-making environment, or even to embarrass the Irish political and administrative system to come into line with European standards. Irish governments and administrations like to be seen as good Europeans and as acting in line with developments in the other countries.

Whether one favours the process of European integration or not, it is an important feature of the Irish administrative and political system.

How decision-making in the European Union is different

Many books have been written about how to influence European decision-making and many more undoubtedly will be in the next number of years. As a result, only the briefest summary is given here of how to influence European decision-making. The decision-making process in Europe is different from Ireland, in a number of important ways. The main differences are as follows:

- Voluntary organisations and community groups must understand the level and nature of the European Union's competence in a given field of activity. This may vary enormously. The European Union acts strictly within the legal powers given it, having considerable authority in some areas (e.g. agriculture), a growing authority in new areas (e.g. consumer policy, health and education) but none in others (e.g. housing policy);
- The decision-making process within the European Union can be, in some respects, quite different from that in Ireland. Decisions are made in the course of complex procedures involving the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. The Commission, which is normally compared to the civil service, has the right to draw up and initiate legislation in its own right, unlike most domestic civil services. It is considered the engine of the European Union and as a result is the target of the attention of most organisations.



Case study:

Foreign comparison to spur domestic change

As part of its efforts to get Irish decision-makers to take literacy seriously, the National Adult Literacy Agency pressed for years for a proper measurement of literacy by international standards. Eventually, the Department of Education and Science agreed to participate in a study which was carried out under the auspices of the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The study, when eventually published, shocked the education community and found that among those countries which participated, Ireland experienced the highest incidence of illiteracy, with the exception of Poland. The Minister of State at once announced a budget increase for literacy work and that the issue would be addressed in a Green and later White Paper.

Case study:

Using Europe to change Irish social welfare law

When Ireland failed to implement the European directive on equal social welfare payments for men and women, the Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) helped women who had been denied their entitlements take a case against the Minister for Social Welfare. FLAC also made a complaint to the European Commission. The European Court of Justice ruled against Ireland and, as a result of that and other cases, a total of about €400m was paid to about 70,000 women who had suffered discrimination.

Ways of influencing Europe

Some voluntary organisations and community groups have approached the European institutions with the specific intention of promoting a change in policy. Whilst some have done so out of a general European policy concern, many have 'gone to Europe' because Irish governments have been unwilling to listen to them here. They calculate that an intervention by the Commission, the European Parliament or one of the other institutions, will promote a change which they have encouraged at home and possibly unblock a campaign which has failed to progress in Ireland. Again, it is important that they inform themselves carefully as to the way and manner in which Europe has the legal authority to deal with the issue which concerns them.

The European Union provides a number of points by which Irish citizens and organisations may influence the European process.

These are:

- Lobbying the Commission;
- Enlisting the support of Irish public representatives in the European institutions:
 - Members of the European Parliament (15);
 - Irish members of the Economic and Social Committee (9);
 - Our members of the Committee of the Regions (9);
- Making a complaint to the European Commission that one's rights under the European treaties have been abridged;
- Taking a case to the European Court of Justice;
- Petitioning the European Parliament;
- Making a complaint to the Commission which is simplicity itself. One writes a letter to its Dublin office and the Commission takes over from there;
- Using networks of European voluntary organisations to influence policy. About 200 such networks now exist, most having a small professional staff to lobby the European Commission, Parliament and other institutions (For example the European Anti-Poverty Network). Irish voluntary organisations are active members of European networks. These provide access to the European policy-makers in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg. There is a 'platform' of European social NGOs which attempts to influence the European Union toward stronger social policies; and a European Anti-Poverty Network which brings together national and international groups concerned with poverty and social exclusion in Europe.

Like a national parliament, the European Parliament is asked to approve legislation and the Union's budget. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) may ask questions in the parliament, contribute to debates and introduce resolutions and reports on issues of current concern.

The commissioning of reports is an important aspect of the work of the European Parliament. MEPs can ask for a report to be prepared on a particular topic. A rapporteur or reporter (a fellow MEP) is then appointed to research the issue and report back to the Parliament, normally several months later. This report will then propose a series of actions to be undertaken by all the European institutions. The report will normally include a resolution for adoption by the parliament; and an explanatory memorandum which outlines the research or policy findings and the detailed background to the report. Irish voluntary and community organisations have contacted rapporteurs in order to contribute to these reports which have, in turn, shaped European thinking on these issues for some time. The process of compiling reports gives MEPs the scope to develop particular interests and areas of expertise. Several Irish MEPs have made a name for themselves by pursuing issues in this way. Some groups in Ireland will quote European Parliament reports to support their case for change here.

Getting involved in the structural funds in Ireland

Ireland has been a substantial beneficiary of European Union funding. Almost all the funds go into national structural fund programmes devised between the Commission and the member governments of each state. These follow the priorities of each national government. A small proportion (5.35 per cent) goes to what are called the Community Initiative Programmes. These are essentially devised in Brussels and some are open to participation by non-governmental organisations (e.g. EQUAL, Peace programme). The structural funds can be important instruments in addressing social exclusion. Some structural fund programmes address social exclusion directly, some indirectly and others have the potential to do so.

Ways of influencing Europe



European Commission,
18 Dawson St, Dublin 2; tel 634 1111,
fax 623 1112; site: www.euireland.ie

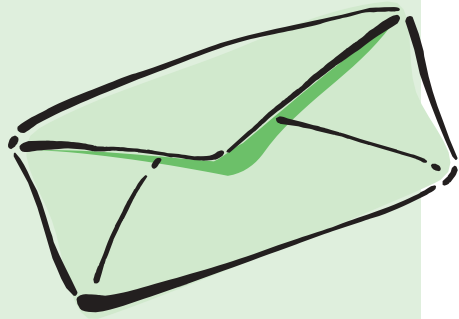
European Commission,
Windsor House, 9-15 Bedford St,
Belfast BT2 7EG, tel 028 90 240708,
fax 028 90 248241,
www.europa.eu.int/comm

European Parliament,
43 Molesworth St, Dublin 2,
tel 605 7900, fax 605 7999,
site: www.europarl.ie

European Anti-Poverty Network
(EAPN), Rue du Congres 37-41
B 1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel 322 230 4455, fax 322 230 9733,
e-mail: team@eapn.skynet.be,
site: www.eapn.org

The European Platform of Social
Non-Governmental Organisations
(NGOs) provides links to a range of
social policy voluntary organisations
in Europe: www.socialplatform.org

The Combined European Bureau for
Social Development provides
information on community
development in Europe and links to
community development
organisations: www.cebsd.org



MEPs can be contacted in their constituencies, like other public representatives; through the European Parliament office in Dublin; or through the European Parliament offices in Brussels, Belgium or Strasbourg, France. Most MEPs prefer to be contacted through the European Parliament office in Dublin, 43 Molesworth St, Dublin 2, tel 605 7900, fax 605 7999 www.europarl.ie



For a further explanation of the structural funds, see *A socially inclusive National Development Plan? A critical commentary to inform the community and voluntary sector*. Community Workers Co-operative, 1st floor, Unit 4, Tuam Road Centre, Tuam Road, Galway, tel 091.779030, fax 091.779033, e-mail: cwc@iol.ie.

Voluntary organisations and community groups have a keen interest in ensuring that the structural funds are effective in tackling problems of poverty. There are a number of European Union monitoring bodies in Ireland to oversee the operation of the structural funds. There is a monitoring committee for each of the five main operational programmes, one for each of the the Community Initiative Programmes. There are also four horizontal monitoring committees, dealing with the environment; equal opportunities and social exclusion; rural development; and employment and human resources. The monitoring committees comprise representatives of government departments, the various directorates of the European Commission, the traditional social partners and voluntary and community organisations.

The structural fund monitoring committees have been criticised for being over-wieldy, for being too large, for dealing with technical issues rather than policy questions and for meeting too infrequently to be of real value. Nevertheless, they provide a point whereby the operation of the structural funds may be questioned and where issues of how the funds are spent may be raised. The committees are required to carry out evaluations of the operation of the funds, both at their mid-term and at the end of the programming period.

Influencing policy further afield

Some Irish voluntary organisations and community groups have attempted to influence policy through Ireland's membership of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is a much older body than the European Union, dating to 1951, and has a much wider membership (e.g. Russia). Although politically much less powerful than the European Union, membership of the Council of Europe involves Ireland in a number of legal obligations (e.g. *European Convention on Human Rights* (1951), *European Social Charter* (1961)). These are actionable in the European Court of Human Rights. Some voluntary organisations and community groups have tried to influence policy further afield, for example in the United Nations (UN). These are mainly groups concerned with development or other international issues (e.g. human rights, welfare of children, disarmament).

Ireland is obliged, because it has signed a number of United Nations conventions (e.g. *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*; *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*; *Convention on the Rights of the Child*), to submit reports to the UN on its performance under these various international agreements. Most such reports are submitted at intervals of several years by the Department of Foreign Affairs, which, in turn, works with the department of government most involved in the issue. These reports are then scrutinised by UN committees, generally in Geneva or New York, which invite comments from non-governmental organisations from the countries concerned.

Some voluntary organisations have used these opportunities to challenge their national reports for not giving a true picture of the country. They have submitted what are called shadow reports, the upshot being that the Irish government has been summoned to explain itself. This can be quite troublesome to the Irish government and embarrassing when reported in the media. It can have the effect of encouraging a change in domestic policy, standards and practice. Under the Council of Europe *Convention on the Prevention of Torture*, voluntary organisations can invite in teams of inspectors without the government's permission. This is a sophisticated form of lobbying that requires a certain amount of research and investigation, but can prove to be effective. Some do so as an indirect, roundabout but effective means of influencing domestic policy.

Case studies:

Legal action in Europe for legal aid in Ireland

Although voluntary organisations and community groups in Ireland had begun to campaign for free legal aid for people who could not afford it as far back as 1969, little progress had been made by the late 1970s. Eventually a Cork woman took Ireland to the Council of Europe's European Court of Human Rights for its failure to provide free legal aid. The court ruled in her favour and, soon after, Ireland introduced a scheme of civil legal aid, finally put on a statutory basis in 1995 (Civil Legal Aid Act).

NGOs put Irish government in the dock before the UN

The Irish government is obliged, under the UN *Convention on Civil & Political Rights*, to file periodic reports on our observance of the convention. These periodic reports go to expert UN committees in Geneva for consideration. The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace decided to file its own shadow report, drawing attention to four areas where Ireland's record was of especial concern: prison conditions, Travellers, education and legal aid. The Department of Foreign Affairs was unenthusiastic to learn of this development. The Commission sent copies of its shadow report to the 18 or so experts of the UN committee whose task it was to scrutinise the official report. The Commission sent someone to Geneva to button-hole several of the experts before the hearing to remind them of the shadow report. The Irish government sent out the Attorney General to the hearing. When he got there, he informed the committee of a set of reforms 'just announced' by the Irish government.

Devising a strategy

So far, this guide has looked at the political system, how it operates and the opportunities it presents for voluntary organisations and community groups. Now is the time to examine how voluntary organisations and community groups may best mobilise themselves to devise a strategy to influence the political and administrative system. The key points in doing so are:

- Setting clear objectives;
- Using information, documentation and research to influence the decision-making process;
- Presenting one's case to decision and policy-makers;
- Getting the issue effectively on to the political agenda;
- Getting the issue discussed and debated; and
- Finding resources to support policy work.

The government has now accepted, in the White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, the principle that voluntary and community organisations should be consulted at a number of levels. Despite this, some voluntary and community organisations find it awkward to negotiate policy issues and to criticise statutory bodies which are also their main funders. This is of course difficult, but there are few examples of voluntary and community organisations suffering financially from making a contribution to policy-making. To the contrary, groups which make a sustained contribution to policy questions may win added respect and funding.

Ways voluntary organisations and community groups begin social and policy analysis

- 1 Stop and think!
- 2 Document the problem you are dealing with
- 3 Talk to other organisations in a similar situation
- 4 Ask other people, locally and further afield, what they think should be done
- 5 Ask people in local government, national government, experts
- 6 Ask national organisations concerned with the issue
- 7 Get a facilitator to work through the issue with you

Further reading

Clare Watson, Mícheál Ó Casla, Cristiona Ní Dhúrcáin: *Campaigns and how to win them*, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 1996, €10.60

John Curry: *Irish Social Services*, third edition, Institute of Public Administration, 1999, €12.06

Planning checklist for voluntary organisations and community groups

What is the problem, the difficulty, the issue?

Why is it a problem?

Why are its effects so serious?

What costs does it impose?

What do we want done about it?

Who do we want to do what?

Is this a problem of policy, the allocation of resources, procedures or what?

What are the benefits, to whom, if this problem is solved?

Checklist for launching a programme to influence decision-making

Have you agreed your objectives?

Have you assembled your case?

What is your programme, your specific proposals?

Whom do you plan to influence to do what?

Who are your supporters?

What are you going to do next?

Who is your contact person?

Do you have people, more research lined up, to come in later?

Have you a clear and agreed mandate from your members?

3.1 Setting clear objectives

Although this is a truism, the first problem a voluntary organisation or community group faces is defining the issue or problem which it is facing. Many efforts come to grief because voluntary organisations and community groups do not spend enough time defining their cause and do not put enough work into planning. This is understandable, for they often wish to rush into action and do not want to waste time. Campaigning is defined as 'a systematic course of purposeful action for a specified purpose'. In other words, it has precise aims and objectives and is pursued with a sense of a direction. 'Making people aware of a problem' or 'creating greater public awareness' is not campaigning.

For most voluntary organisations and community groups, policy issues arise in the normal course of their day-to-day work. As they come across problems and concerns, they begin to ask: Why is this a problem here? Who seems to have decided this and why? Is there anything that can be done about it? As a result, individuals, organisations and groups ask these questions and begin to think about how they can change things in the midst of all the other activities they are undertaking. Voluntary organisations and community groups have become much more experienced in planning their work and have begun to build influencing policy more and more into their everyday work. Community development projects have learned how to draw up area profiles and area plans, many of which confront the problems of lack of investment and services in their areas. This process provides a useful opportunity to reflect on:

- The links between local poverty and national policies;
- The area's crucial short and long-term needs;
- The most critical areas of under-investment;
- What actions could make the most difference to the area soonest and in the long term;
- The area's ability to influence the political and administrative system;
- The human resources of the area and the people involved in the project;
- Other priorities and objectives for the area.

The first and most important thing for a group to do is to define precisely what it wishes to achieve – in the short term (say, over the next number of months), the medium term and the long term (e.g. the next number of years). These definitions can be very useful in defining the various stages of a programme to influence policy.

Voluntary organisations and community groups must reach agreement between themselves as to the nature of the issue, before they try to convince others. The various options must be thoroughly thrashed out. They must win a mandate from their own communities and supporters on:

- The course or courses of action which they plan to pursue;
- The policies they are trying to change;
- Where they are directing their campaign;
- The style of the campaign (e.g. publicity, confrontation);
- Allies and supporters to be engaged.

People in the area like to know and are entitled to be aware of the possible consequences of what the group may do.

If groups do not win a clearly understood mandate for their engagement in the policy process, internal divisions may show up at a later date. This can be very destructive. Planning a programme to influence decision-making is one of the most difficult but important activities for a voluntary organisation or community group. Good advance planning can make all the difference between success and failure, between making the best use of one's energies or wasting effort.

3.2 Using information, documentation and research to influence decision-making

Good research, information or documentation is a pre-condition for any attempt by voluntary and community organisations to influence policy or decision-making. Research reports are generally given weight by the media and treated seriously by government departments, though on their own they will achieve very little.

One word of caution: research by itself will not change policy. Many research reports, particularly when not accompanied by follow-up strategies, have been ignored. It is better to view research as an important starting point for changing policy.

The term 'research' is, and should be seen as a broad one – information which sheds new light on a problem or an issue. It does not have to be overly sophisticated, full of complicated statistics or take five years to compile, though it must be accurate. Some voluntary organisations and community groups have managed to change policy with the use of very simple, basic, but telling research. Research reports may have added value if carried out by independent researchers.

Short-term and long-term objectives

Case studies:

Dundalk campaign for smog-free air

The Áit na nDaoine Community Development Project, Dundalk, Co. Louth, had been supporting a group of local people in Muirheavnamor concerned for some time about the level of asthmatic attacks in the area due to high levels of smog from coal-burning fires. The first thing they did was a survey, which found that 80 per cent of respondents said they had a breathing problem. The second issue they tackled was how air pollution was measured. The nearest air pollution meter was located on a sports hall in a relatively open area and its readings found that air pollution is within limits. The group argued for the monitor to be moved to the housing estate where more realistic measurements could be taken. The project got the urban district councillors on their side and the monitor was eventually moved. This was a first but important success for the group, its short-term objective, following which it went on to the bigger issue of getting smoke-free air in the town.

The Free Legal Advice Centres

The Free Legal Advice Centres have campaigned for legal aid and advice to be available for all citizens. In its 1993 annual report the organisation laid down what it wanted government to do for the next year: to clear the existing long waiting lists; to ensure there was a service in each county; and to put the scheme on a statutory basis. The short-term objectives were substantially achieved within four years.

Case studies:

Research first

Research can be useful in helping voluntary organisations and community groups sort out their objectives. When the Clondalkin Partnership decided to confront absenteeism in schools, it might have been easy just to campaign to get the Gardaí to enforce truancy regulations. Instead, they decided to research the subject to find out as precisely as possible why children were missing school.

The research came up with a complex set of results which pointed instead to the curriculum in schools and the roles of parents. The research led to a debate in the schools and the community about a more appropriate, sophisticated and effective response to absenteeism. Several new projects for early school intervention were designed.

Another phenomenon in Clondalkin was the growth of renting homes by commercial landlords.

The partnership decided to research the problem before taking action on it, inviting in Threshold, an organisation with research experience.

The partnership's hope was that independent research would find out if house rental was having a destabilising effect on the community.

Using expert opinion

The *We the people* Community Development project (Knocknaheeny/Hollyhill, Cork) has been attempting to get traffic calming introduced to estates terrorised by joy-riding. At one stage, they were told that ramps and other measures were impossible because the Bus Éireann bus could not travel over ramps and other measures. The project asked an engineer for his expert opinion as to whether this was the case or not. His research showed buses could travel over the traffic-calming measures.

Research is an essential element in influencing policy-makers, for a number of reasons. The authorities may have been genuinely unaware of the existence of a particular problem. Groups often forget that although the nature of the problem which they are addressing may be blindingly obvious to them, it is not necessarily so to others, nor is its size, scale or consequences. That is why groups must devote time to explaining why their problem is a problem, what effects it causes, how it could be remedied and the benefits of doing so.

Sometimes, voluntary organisations and community groups are told they are exaggerating, or that they are getting upset about one or two isolated instances, which prove nothing. Good research will establish the true nature of a problem or an issue. Research will point the way to solutions and can analyse ways in which similar problems have been overcome elsewhere.

Voluntary organisations and community groups will be asked for documentation sooner or later. They may be cross-examined about what they are saying sooner than they expect, so it is always better to be prepared. Groups may find out that some arguments which they had planned to use are in fact not sustainable. Voluntary organisations and community groups and their representatives must ensure that their research and information are always accurate, carefully presented and not exaggerated.



Thoroughness and attention to detail are essential. There are few quicker ways for a cause to be discredited than by presenting inaccurate or unreliable information. There is nothing worse for a public representative to argue a case for a group passionately, only to find that the facts have not been right. Facts alone will not convince people to change, but wrong facts can be fatal.

It is important that voluntary and community organisations make their research accessible to policy-makers and their own supporters, friends and allies. It is often useful to publish the key findings of research in a summary. This could be part of the main document, or published separately.

Community groups are likely, by definition, to be in the business of documenting the needs, problems and assets of their local area, often on an on-going basis. Again, this is essential if the group is to make a successful case for investment, for facilities, or for other needs to be met. There is a range of such documentary information which can be obtained from government information sources and state agencies. These can in turn be compared to national figures and standards. The Central Statistics Office divides the country into several thousand district electoral divisions (DEDs), each with a population of several thousand people and can provide print-outs of each DED by population (These are sometimes called small area population statistics). Other agencies can provide information on standard-of-living indicators, the environment, training services, crime rates and so on (e.g. Environmental Protection Agency, FÁS, Gardaí etc) as is appropriate to them. Groups should therefore give careful consideration to the range of reports which they are likely to need and the time and money they will need in order to accumulate and analyse them.

What research can do

- Collect information about an area, a problem
- Quantify its size, explain its nature
- Examine, measure the consequences of poverty
- See how other people resolve these problems
- Analyse the existing set of policies and their shortcomings
- Point the way to solutions
- Present options
- Make recommendations

Where to get information

- Local library
- University and college libraries
- Government Publications, Dublin
- Government departments
- Semi-state boards, bodies and agencies
- Local authorities, health boards
- Combat Poverty Agency
- Area Development Management (ADM)
- Central Statistics Office
- European Union, Dublin & Belfast
- The internet
- Specialised libraries

Case studies:

Knowing your facts

The South Inner City Treatment Services Group was trying to get community-based services into Dublin south inner city as part of its response to the drugs problem. The group put an emphasis on good documentation. The fact that the group knew how many drug users there were in the area and that it had detailed knowledge of the drug culture and its effects on the local community meant that it was in a strong position to go to statutory bodies and make a case for the size, scale and type of services that should be provided.

Research the area

Tuam Community Development Project was anxious to respond to the problems of domestic violence in the area. But rather than launch headlong into something, it commissioned research to investigate the prevalence of domestic violence in the rural areas, public attitudes and the current range of services – in order to determine the elements of a local community response and what the role of the resource centre should be.

With research comes knowledge, with knowledge comes authority, with authority comes conviction and with conviction comes a greater chance of success. Don't economise on research.

– Des Wilson

Research makes policy

Trying to get an improved local authority response to its housing problems, the Ballymun Community Coalition commissioned a report which examined the priority estates projects in Britain. The report, *An Integrated Housing Plan*, was presented to the Corporation as a model of how things had been done in Britain and how they could be done here, emphasising community involvement, consultation and decentralisation. The research was persuasive, the Corporation being involved in the subsequent Ballymun Task Force. The Department of the Environment adapted the experience for national models of tenant participation.

Research: the beginning of something, not the end

Many voluntary organisations and community groups regard the publication of a research report or a report which makes their case as the end of a process. In fact, it is the beginning of the next, most important stage in the process of influencing policy.

But often, groups are exhausted by the time of publication and the next stage can fall short of what it can achieve. Research reports can be particularly effective if the groups which commission them think in advance of:

- Who they plan to send them to;
- What they want to come out from the report;
- What they would like the report to have achieved in, say, a year's time.

For a report to be effective, a budget should be set aside for promoting it. Some groups will spend thousands on commissioning research and publishing a nice book at the end, but begrudge a few hundred euros on getting it out into the hands of those who might be able to act on it. It is also possible for organisations to recoup some of their costs by charging for sales.

Research reports should obviously be sent, in the first instance, to those in the decision-making loop, be they officials, public representatives or semi-state bodies. They should also be well distributed within the research community itself – to university libraries, public libraries, specialised libraries, research bodies, known researchers and experts. Many government departments and many semi-state bodies have their own libraries. Staff will rely on the reports there to inform them. These libraries may circulate accessions lists to their staff.

Once the report starts to be widely quoted by others, it is considered to be even more influential. It means the report continues to generate a momentum long after it is launched. The more professional voluntary organisations and community groups hold back some of their best information and supporting personalities until later stages of a campaign. They realise that launching all their research at the first phase may mean that they run out of steam later. When organisations are able to announce fresh research findings, it creates a sense of momentum.

Some groups send their reports to officials, specifically asking them to read them and give them back comments. Statutory bodies are generally prepared to meet organisations or groups on specific or substantial research or policy documents. Reports can make a considerable impact if they are used as the basis for meetings with officials and public representatives or are the subject of parliamentary questions or debates (What action has the minister

taken following the report XYZ...?). Very few public representatives or officials will refuse point-blank to read a report (though they may be more cagey about how well they have read it or what they will do about it). For sympathetic individual officials or public representatives, a report can add weight to a proposal or policy for which they have already been pressing for some time.

Conferences

Many voluntary organisations use conferences as an important means of influencing policy and decision-making. Although conferences may involve a considerable amount of work, they have a number of distinct advantages:

- They are useful opportunities for launching research reports, policy recommendations and other proposals;
- They provide an opportunity for the statutory agencies to respond;
- Conferences will attract other agencies interested in the issue, supporters and sympathisers, providing networking opportunities; and
- They may attract media publicity.

3.3 Presenting one's case effectively

Voluntary organisations and community groups attempting to influence policy or decision-makers will, sooner or later, find themselves making oral or written presentations to them.

Examples of bodies which take oral presentations are committees of the local authorities and Oireachtas committees. Many groups find the experience intimidating, but the invitation is of itself a sign that the group is making progress. Groups should select someone or a number of persons familiar with talking to meetings and entirely familiar with the group's research. They should anticipate difficult questions and prepare responses carefully. It is important the group bring a written statement to leave behind, along with appropriate documentation.

To present one's case in writing requires a different set of skills. The principal components of a written policy presentation or submission are:

- A group must explain its origins, why it exists, the services and activities it already provides. These things may be obvious to every member of the group, but they are important if the group is to assert its right to speak for the people that are its concern. More practically, some of the readers of the document may not even know of the group's existence or what it does;

CSO Information available in small area reports/district electoral divisions

Numbers of people living in the area (divided into houses, flats)

Age groups (0-4, 5-14 etc)

Household types (e.g. single, couple, couple with children)

Persons per household, per room
Work status of people in the area (e.g. student, unemployed, sick, at work)

Employment for those at work (e.g. transport, professional, agricultural)

Age of leaving school

Case study:

Back to basics

The Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI), as part of its efforts to persuade government of the virtues of basic income as a means of combating income poverty, submitted its proposal to a government committee (the expert working group on the integration of the taxation and social welfare systems). The committee disapproved of the proposal and said it would cost too much. In CORI's view, the committee acted wrongly, distorted CORI's proposal and criticised something they had never proposed. Rather than be defeated on the issue, CORI commissioned fresh research to refute the viewpoint of the expert group. Having to recreate their own research and arguments was an unwelcome setback, but the proposal may have emerged stronger as a result.

Keeping a report on the agenda. Is it:

- The subject of parliamentary questions?
- Raised on the adjournment debate in the Dáil or Seanad?
- The subject of a motion in the Dáil or Seanad?
- Referred to routinely or occasionally by deputies or senators during their speeches?
- A topic in the media?
- Discussed in the Dáil or Seanad?
- Under discussion or being researched by NESC, NESF or other leading advisory bodies?
- Mentioned in national agreement monitoring meetings?
- The subject of departmental reports, Green Papers or White Papers?
- The subject of on-going meetings between yourselves on the one hand and governmental officials on the other?
- The subject of active correspondence and meetings between yourselves and members of the Oireachtas?
- Sold out?

Checklist for launching a research or documentary report

- Who will get it?
- What are you asking them to do with it?
- What would you like it to have achieved in a year?
- Do you have the budget to promote it effectively?

- The group must present its analysis of the problem, using the best research, information and documentation available;
- The group must outline the solution it favours, why it would work, the benefits of following this course of action and the costs of not doing so. Voluntary organisations and community groups should be as clear as possible about what they want (resources, a change in the law, a government circular or whatever). A generalised statement that 'more should be done' about a problem will make little difference;
- A summary of the main points.

In preparing a policy submission, it is often useful for voluntary organisations and community groups to consider, in addition to their own policies, an analysis of government policy and the various other options which are on the national policy menu. This puts the group's proposals in a wider context and shows that it has an understanding and appreciation of other points of view. It is often also useful for the group to state what are the key assumptions and values which shape its own views and approach. For pre-budget submissions, groups should pay attention to what may be feasible and realistic within the national finances (This does not mean that one has to, or should, abandon more ambitious long-term aims).

Voluntary organisations and community groups often find it difficult to find a suitable presentation style. Although it is possible to send much longer documents to civil servants than members of the Oireachtas, many are nevertheless too long. It is always better to provide a page that people read than ten more brilliant pages that go unread. Additional material can always be supplied separately, in supplementary documents or annexes.

A good test is to give the report to people who know nothing about your organisation, ask them to read it and then ask them if they understand the report. Reports, policy documents and submissions do not need to be glossy or fancy. Clarity is more important. However, some groups can make false economies by not binding their reports nicely or by using photocopiers with poor quality. It is worth paying for a clear presentation; likewise, a 50 cent folder can make quite a difference in the appearance of a policy submission.

3.4 Resources to fund policy work

Attempts to influence the political and administrative machine cannot be run on fresh air, although many have been run on surprisingly few resources. Taking on policy work has important resource implications. These must be balanced against the organisation's continued provision of services. Budgeting for policy work will also help to anticipate costs and keep them within reasonable limits.

In the first instance, resources must be allocated so that voluntary organisations and community groups may organise their case and present their basic policy documents. This may involve research (which can be expensive), drafting reports, circulating them for discussion and then launching and disseminating them. This will inevitably involve computers, photocopiers and the range of office supports that they require.

To influence the political and administrative system on an on-going basis will use up considerable resources in telephoning, postage, letters and forms of communications generally. Many groups send out regular mailings – be they newsletters or occasional material – to the full range of decision-makers that they try to reach. These costs may run into thousands each year. What groups may often forget to budget for is the price of buying in information. This could include the cost of parliamentary debates, relevant government reports affecting their area of interest and other information so that they may stay up to date. Much of this information is available in specialised libraries, but it is always useful to have such material ready to hand. Downloading reports from the web will save money as will circulating information by e-mail, but there will still be some costs.

Some lobbying costs can be offset, for example by membership fees, appeals for funds, sales of publications and applications for grants to cover a number of these activities. Some organisations run conferences and similar events at a profit to subsidise these activities (although there are other good reasons for doing so). Some trust funds will explicitly support organisations active in trying to influence policy, while others are prepared to fund research and publicity material so that may be used as part of on-going efforts to influence policy.

Case study:

Making research, conferences go far

The PAUL partnership in Limerick carried out a study of education costs in four schools in disadvantaged areas of the city. Although the sample was small, it was soundly carried out, had very clear findings and recommended a number of changes in the procedures for making claims for educational costs (one queue instead of three), fewer means tests (one instead of two), better take-up of existing benefits and increased government support for school costs. The recommendations were divided into local and national. Considerable efforts went into disseminating the study locally, especially among low income families in the city. Actions taken included a public launch of the report in a local housing estate, door-to-door distribution of a popular version of the report and extensive local and national media coverage. To promote the research findings at national level, PAUL called a conference of local providers of services (e.g. health boards), national government departments (Education, Social Welfare), and educational interests (e.g. parents' councils). They were challenged to work with the project in trying to find solutions to the problems identified. In addition, the research report was widely distributed using an extensive mailing list and a popular version of the report was made available. Not long afterwards, the local procedures were changed. The health board organised a benefit take-up campaign. At national level, school-related payments were increased in the next budget.

Making a pre-budget submission

Send it in early, in good time
(though you may publicise it later)

Make sure it is different from the
previous year

Send it to the right ministers,
departments, Oireachtas committees

Pay attention to costs and where they
will be met

Case study:

Research makes the argument

When the Local Employment Service was set up, Clondalkin was not included in the service. The Clondalkin Women's Network, the Clondalkin Partnership, local unemployed groups, FÁS and other agencies came together and, following a series of representations to TDs, it was included. Clondalkin Women's Network carried out research (*Bridging the gap*) into the obstacles which women experience in entering the labour market. The fact that the research had been done strengthened the case to include women in the service and has also been effective in monitoring services to check how they are helping get women back to work.

Tips for making an oral presentation

Make sure it is appropriate for the
people and the occasion

Make links with the audience

Make it short. Most speeches are far
too long

Find out the names of the people you
are talking to

Prepare yourself with headings

Try to get across four or five main
points

Show conviction, but do not be
over-emotional

Be friendly and good-humoured

3.5 Protests, direct action and other strategies

Some groups use direct action as a means of influencing decision-makers, either on their own or to supplement more conventional means of influence. Direct action has very much fallen out of favour in recent years but despite that, well-publicised, imaginative and creative direct action can, if applied in conjunction with other forms of lobbying, be effective in creating pressure for change.

Sometimes voluntary organisations will take direct action when the danger of action they oppose is imminent and complaints through the normal channels will simply be too late (e.g. overnight demolition of a listed building). Others may use them because they have little access to power or policy-makers or because no one seems to be listening. Imaginative and creative direct action with a strong visual appeal may be particularly successful. Protests can take the form of marches, rallies, vigils, sleep-outs and street theatre, climbing trees, blocking roads, overnight sleep-outs, chaining oneself to railings, blocking polluting outfall pipes or occupying oil rigs – some of which are more legal than others! Some other approaches are now considered.



Influencing policy-makers through electronic means

One of the main future forms of lobbying may be electronic. Directorates of the European Commission now routinely invite comments on their policy documents by electronic mail and host on-line discussions with commissioners. This has begun to happen here (For example, the Department of Education & Science Commission on the Points System had its own web site for information and comment). It is possible to foresee, in the near future, chat groups set up by voluntary organisations and community groups seeking to draw in government officials and others in the policy-making community.

Voluntary organisations already rival each another in the quality of their websites and many post their policy proposals there. One voluntary organisation has gone as far as to organise an on-line petition; another a cyberpicket. Critics may say that such a global village, or electronic town hall approach to democracy is entirely superficial. Nevertheless, it may open the way to new forms of influencing politics and administration.

What should go into a submission or a policy submission

Who you are

What your group does

How long you have been there

The services you provide

The activities you carry out

What the problem is, in your view

Your view of its extent and nature

The reputable and independent sources of information you rely on

The negative consequences of this problem (pain, suffering, hardship)

What can be done about it

The various proposals under consideration, if any

What you think should be done

What the solution would look like

The benefits of solving the problem

The costs of not solving the problem

Your vision of the solution

Making presentations count

Be short, rather than long. Make every word count. Don't repeat anything.

Provide a single page summary at the start

Have a table of contents, list of tables at the start

Don't crowd the page. Leave plenty of white space

Use a new page for a new section

Use headings

Use tables, charts and graphs to break up the presentation

Use short sentences rather than long sentences

Use short paragraphs rather than long paragraphs

Avoid jargon

Make sure it is proof read. Take out silly mistakes

Some costs of influencing the decision-makers

Research

Headed paper, graphics

Campaign documents, supporting and promotional material

Computers, printers

Photocopiers

Supplies for computers – toner, ink cartridges, paper

Telephones, internet, e-mail

Postage

Stationery

Newsletter

Annual report

Subscriptions to books, reports and publications

Hiring rooms for public events

Making policy documents work for you

Who should it be sent to?

Is there a mailing list?

What impact would you like it to have made in a year or so?

Should it be sent to other groups, organisations, the media, the libraries?

Post it on your website?

Polling

One of the least used means of influencing policy is the opinion poll. Voluntary organisations and community groups have been unsure about using opinion polls or how to set about doing them. A poll which shows strong support for the stance taken by a voluntary organisation or a community group will tell decision-makers that ordinary people are on the group's side and will make them much more likely to consider their views more carefully. Public representatives and governments generally do not like to swim against the tide of public opinion.

There are two ways of doing opinion polls. One is to pay a polling agency to add additional questions to the routine polling conducted for national newspapers on voting intentions and national political questions. Another is for the group to organise its own poll. However, it must have credibility, ask objective questions and cover a large sample. At the end of the day, groups are not obliged to publish the results. For those who do, publication of an opinion poll can make a good news story.

3.6 Personal skills to influence decision-makers

It has been said that the three main human qualities required to influence policy are persistence, persistence and persistence.

This is certainly true. Influencing policy takes time and patience, both because of the slow nature of the decision-making process and its ability to absorb change only gradually. Becoming known, making a case, convincing people and building a reputation take a long time.

Voluntary organisations and community groups routinely underestimate the time and energy it will take to get policy changed. Many comment ruefully that if they had known that it would have taken ten years to get the policy change they sought, they might never have started. For example, proposals to improve the legal framework for children in Ireland were first made in 1968, but the Child Care Act was not passed until 1991 and even then it was phased in slowly. Most efforts to change social policy have been more rapid. Sometimes, after years of trying, a breakthrough can take place quite rapidly. For voluntary organisations and community groups, perhaps the key lesson is the importance of setting some early, tangible, modest and short-term objectives, for achieving them can give members the heart and confidence to keep going.

Representatives of voluntary organisations and community groups should have a personable manner – be that in person, on the phone, or on paper. This does not mean that the representative should lack conviction – quite the contrary – but that the person has a sense of proportion. This means appreciating what can be done and what cannot; making a distinction between what can be achieved now and in a few months and in a few years; and an understanding that there is another point of view about the problem. Politicians and administrators value people who understand the range of pressures that are on them. Expressed another way, they do not like and find it difficult to deal with people who appear to be fanatics, who expect to win all their demands immediately or who make it plain that they just do not like politicians or officials.

Case studies:

National day of action

The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed and the National Women's Council had spent some time trying to influence the government to ensure that unemployed women experiencing disadvantage and poverty were able to sign on so as to get the necessary credits that would enable them to later access training schemes. During a European summit in Dublin, they organised a national day of action, which included women marching near Dublin Castle chained to kitchen sinks. It was a colourful counterpoint to a colourless summit and attracted considerable news attention.

The government appointed a working group to investigate the problem, where both organisations were represented. The Department of Social Welfare made information officers available to brief women on signing on.

Artistic direct action

The Clondalkin Partnership had been trying to reduce the number of eyesores in the area, especially the use of spiky, metal palisade fencing. It commissioned a local sculptor to weld some art onto the palisades in order to show how fencing could be more attractive and to draw attention to the problem. Discussions were held with South Dublin County Council to ensure that new buildings would be required to have a more attractive boundary treatment.

Two agencies were approached (Eircom and the health board) about the fencing and appearance of their buildings and one (the health board) agreed to discuss ways of improving fencing around their buildings in Clondalkin.

Case studies:

The cyberpicket

During its efforts to persuade the government to restore 8,000 places on the Community Employment Scheme, member groups of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed ran a cyberpicket – a national fax-in to the Minister for Finance. Member organisations used a model letter about four pages long. The purpose of the cyberpicket was to convince him and officials in the Department of the importance of the scheme for people out of work. Because the cyberpicket was disruptive, it was used only once and only for a day, but the organisation felt that the point was well made. The government restored the places some weeks later.

The on-line petition

Astronomy Ireland was approved places on a FÁS scheme. After a year, no funding had materialised. The places seemed to have been reallocated. The association put up an on-line petition on its web page for on-forwarding to the Minister. In contrast to written petitions, where about 1 in 20 members wrote letters to the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise and Employment, over 100 e-mailed support for the petition, probably a substantial part of the members then on e-mail. Funding came through shortly afterwards.

The key choice of spokesperson emphasises the importance of the group making a good match of positions and skills within the group – chairpersons who can chair meetings, treasurers who are happy with handling money and representatives who are comfortable about speaking to officials and public representatives. It is important that voluntary organisations and community groups make a wise choice about who is their public face and who has the most appropriate communication skills. That person is not necessarily the leader of the campaign. Indeed, good leaders and groups will be able to recognise who has the best such skills and that may well be someone else.

There are many additional benefits to an organisation that result from active participation in trying to influence policy and decision-making. It becomes much better known and will, in the course of time, attract more money and more volunteers. This may give it the confidence and the resources to expand its services. At a personal level, the people active in the process become more confident, more assertive and develop skills which stay with them for the rest of their lives, even if they move on to other organisations or into other fields of work. These skills could vary from public speaking to organising events, using computers, design or writing.



Leadership

An essential part of trying to influence the decision-making process is a belief that it is possible to do so. This may seem like a truism, but many voluntary and community organisations include jaded people who do not really think that they can make an impact. This is understandable, for many voluntary organisations and community groups may have had disheartening experiences of dealing with officialdom and the authorities. Part of good leadership is convincing people that, with perseverance and skill, they can successfully make an impact on decisions. If the view is widely held and articulated that the group is wasting its time in trying to influence the decision-making process, this can be corrosive and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For many voluntary organisations and community groups, the question of the image they convey and the tone they strike may seem to be a distraction to them. In fact, these are important matters. Voluntary organisations and community groups, if they are to successfully influence the decision-making process, must convey an image that they are serious, they know what they are doing, they can debate and discuss issues coherently and people can do business with them. This does not mean that they should signal a preparedness to compromise, but they should set people in government at ease about dealing with them. Even the group's name can be very important in conveying an image or impression. Campaign groups should always give themselves a positive, upbeat title (Concerned citizens for...), rather than a negative one (Campaign to stop..., or Protest against...).

Case studies:

The walk-out

The Irish Haemophilia Society walked out of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the safety of blood in Ireland. It did so when the judge ruled that under the terms of reference particular issues of essential interest to the society could not be addressed. This was a high-risk strategy and the first press conference after the walk-out was a difficult one. The society appealed through the media for the need for the public as a whole to be absolutely satisfied about the safety of blood. The Minister announced a new tribunal.

Keeping up the pressure

The Disability Awareness Group of Mahon Community Development Project in Cork campaigned to have houses in their area made accessible to people with a disability and in wheelchairs. The Corporation offered portable ramps for wheelchair users when they needed them, but the group held out for full adaptation. The Corporation agreed to a pilot scheme of 20 new houses, to be made fully adaptable. However, work was slow to start, and the group moved on to the next task of ensuring the commitment was met.

Case study:

Asking the people their views

Galway Westside Community

Development Project became aware that the Corporation planned a €16.5m programme to refurbish the flats in the area where the project worked. There had been little consultation with the tenants. The resource centre became involved in working with the tenants and through this work decided to carry out research into the housing needs of the tenants. The results of the research strongly indicated that the problems were so serious that no refurbishment programme could solve them. Many of the core problems would still remain. The tenants strongly favoured the provision of houses as opposed to refurbished flats and proposed that the flats be demolished and/or sold to private investors. The report was presented to corporation officials and the Galway city council. TDs and councillors were invited to visit the flats, which proved important in confirming the views expressed in the research. The Galway city council and the corporation scrapped the original refurbishment plan and made a recommendation to the Department of the Environment to allocate funding for the provision of houses. A new building programme was sanctioned and this began a process of consultation between tenants and the corporation on future development.

Likewise, people in local and national government, semi-state bodies and public representatives will listen most to people who can demonstrate a firm command of the issues and can shape them in such a way as to invite a positive response by government. Groups should be able to point to solutions. It is important that attacks on government are de-personalised and that they are couched in terms of 'bad policies' rather than 'bad people', for people under personal attack find it twice as hard to change a policy. When groups feel it necessary to make strong criticism, it is always wiser to focus on the policy, not the person.

Voluntary organisations and community groups which run their affairs efficiently and are seen to do so can be persuasive. Policy-makers and decision-makers and the media often warm to organisations which know what they are trying to achieve, can answer enquiries quickly and are up to date. They are more likely to presume that what they are looking for is well thought out and correct. Efficiency and accuracy will impress. Bad administration can be very wasteful of people and money, and create doubt among sympathisers whether the cause an organisation is promoting is worthwhile.

Regrouping and pacing

Trying to influence decision-makers can be a difficult, slow process. Sometimes, especially at the beginning, it may be difficult to see if any progress is being made. There will inevitably be set-backs and frustrations which will be a test for the leadership, the members and the supporters of any campaign. Worse, organisations may be divided, become destabilised and face splits. Not least, groups can underestimate the importance of bringing their own members, supporters and friends along with them – consulting them, explaining the various stage of their campaign and keeping them up to date with progress. This emphasises the importance of continuous, on-going, democratic consultation. There are several ways of managing these problems.

In the first instance, all voluntary organisations and community groups seriously engaged in trying to influence the decision-making process will make errors and mistakes. Hopefully, these will not be too disastrous and the group will recover. The aphorism 'one learns from one's mistakes' is absolutely true, for the group will learn from the difficulty and go on to the next stage of the work. This emphasises the importance of always being self-critical. Some groups enlist the help of external evaluators to assist them in this process.

In the second instance, groups must learn to pace their work. One cannot try to influence the process of decision-making at 100 per cent effort all the time, for the group and its members will soon get burned out. For national voluntary organisations, decision-making within the political system is at its most active when the Oireachtas is in session. Many groups pace their activities around these times of year, being less pressurised at other times (e.g. the Summer) but preparing the way for the next stage. Even though they deal with difficult and serious issues, some groups have learned how to take time out to relax and to celebrate their successes.

In the third case, organisations may wish to reconsider their attempts to influence the decision-makers. Have the objectives changed? Are they too ambitious? Are the outcomes worth the energy being expended? Are other priorities within the organisation suffering? In order to make a bigger impact, is more information needed at this stage? Is more money needed to get the message across? Are there ways of repackaging and representing proposals in new and more exciting ways? Are there ways of consulting members, friends and supporters more effectively on these problems? Some voluntary organisations and community groups have re-launched their campaigns with fresh information and research, with new logos and fresh information material, such as a video.

Checklist for assessing progress

How does the group:

- Review its work?
- Consult its members, friends, supporters?
- Reconsider its objectives?
- Slow down? Take time out?
- Celebrate success?



Case study:

The Irish Foreign Adoption Group – never giving up

The Irish Foreign Adoption Group succeeded in getting changes in procedures to enable Irish parents to adopt children from abroad. Foreign adoptions had been held up by a mixture of lengthy assessment procedures and a shortage of social workers to carry out assessments, as well as the complications resulting from different laws in other countries. In getting the system changed in Ireland, the group relied on a combination of strategies:

- Much contact with TDs; officials, the Adoption Board, the Eastern Health Board and the Department of Health;
- Media coverage, including an RTE radio documentary;
- Public meetings;
- Their own intimacy with legal procedures in Ireland and abroad;
- Accurate information on procedures and waiting lists;
- Never giving up.

Case study:

Diplomatic skills

The North Clondalkin Community Development Project, in an effort to improve services in the area, took the initiative in bringing together a wide range of statutory bodies to try to resolve some common problems. This required some considerable organising and diplomatic skills. The managers of these agencies had not worked together before and the area did not have a partnership company.

The project limited the initiative to a year, used a facilitator to write a report and focused on a number of specific issues.

The agencies which participated were FÁS, the Gardaí, schools, the probation service, the Industrial Development Authority, the county council and the health board. One early practical result was the location of probation officers in the area (Until then, the nearest office was in Smithfield) and a project to prevent re-offending.

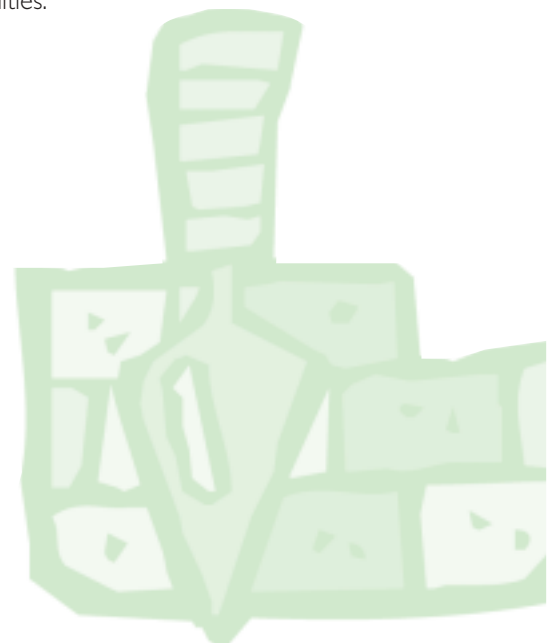
3.7 Networking and coalition-building to influence policy

One of the great strengths of voluntary organisations and community groups is their ability to network, work horizontally and share with one another in their attempts to influence decision makers and policy makers. In a competitive policy-making environment, alliances make more and more sense in sharing personnel, resources and opportunities to lobby. The community pillar of the national agreement is an example of what voluntary and community organisations can achieve by working together.

There are several reasons why voluntary organisations and community groups network, build coalitions and share their experiences. Some coalitions can be deliberately temporary, others long-enduring. There are several reasons for doing so:

- To establish their right to speak on a particular issue;
- To establish their area of interest;
- To neutralise potential opposition;
- To ask other organisations to support their cause;
- To create the impression – indeed, the reality – of a campaign that has a very broad base of support;
- To work together on issues of common concern.

Other organisations are generally prepared to be supportive of campaigns run by others. Officials and public representatives will often ask themselves How big is this campaign? An indication that it has widespread support can encourage them toward a new policy. Finally, by building a broad coalition behind an issue, voluntary organisations and community groups are better able to share their experiences, their knowledge of who to contact and where and how to survive difficulties.



3.8 Devising a media strategy

Voluntary organisations and community groups that wish to influence policy and decision-makers will, sooner or later, find themselves working directly with the media and devising their own set of publications to influence others. Many handbooks have been written about public relations and working with the media. This guide concentrates on media work where it relates most closely to influencing policy, namely:

- Influencing decisions and policies through the media; and
- Assembling a media list.

Most voluntary organisations and community groups in the business of influencing policy find that they work with the media from time to time (Only very well entrenched and powerful insider groups can avoid working with the media altogether). Expressed another way, it is very difficult to influence decision-makers unless they are persuaded that there is some underlying public concern 'out there' and the level of media interest in a topic is often the yardstick by which this is judged. More positively, the media can focus and intensify interest in and concern about an issue, to the extent that decision and policy-makers feel obliged to respond. Work with the media can add considerable weight to the work being done to influence decision-makers, for it reminds them that the organisation is still there and looking for change. Sustained criticism by a voluntary organisation or community group in the media can be very effective in securing change, although the group concerned may be quite unaware of the effect it is having within the system.



Case study:

Being up to date

The Limerick Travellers Development Group, in its efforts to develop a community-based response to Traveller health needs, kept up to date with national developments in the areas of Traveller health services. Their members found it difficult to convince the health board of the value of community-based health services, what they meant and what such a service would look like, as it was a very new concept. However, the group spoke convincingly about how its approach was in line with the National Health Strategy, the report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community and the Strategy on Women's Health, demonstrating their national perspective and that they were up to date with the latest national practice (e.g. Pavee Point primary health care programme). The framework for developing a community-based approach was clearly outlined by the group. This may have been critical in persuading the health board to set up a community-based health service.

Case study:

Use of research to build support

Duhallow Integrated Rural Development LEADER project, Co. Cork carried out a study of agriculture in the area and found that 918 farmers had left the land in the past 20 years and another 500 would probably leave in the next number of years, unless something was done. The group made two proposals. The first was to have a number of milk quotas reserved for low-income farmers (Under the European Union, the production of milk is controlled by a system of quotas). The second was to have small-holders designated as a target group under the EU operational programme for local, urban and rural development. To do so was a formidable challenge, for it meant changing Irish government policy and Brussels policy. The research was compelling in pointing to the way in which such a wide variety of groups was affected by rural depopulation and the seriousness of the threat. The project won support from TDs, agencies such as Area Development Management and the departments of Agriculture and the Taoiseach who in turn lobbied Brussels for a change. The outcome was that a set of quotas of less than 100,000 litres was reserved for low-income farmers. Small-holders were designated a target group. Efforts were made to ensure their participation in programmes such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme and the measures for the prevention of farmyard pollution and alternative enterprises in the operational programme for local, urban and rural development.

Influencing decisions and policies through the media

The media have a key role in shaping the political agenda and how it is perceived. Politicians in particular are enormously conscious of how they present themselves and in turn how they are portrayed by and in the media. They are aware that a negative perception of them, or their party, can have a damaging effect on their future electoral prospects. They wish to be seen as capable, confident, sensitive, caring people. They pay considerable attention to what is being said and written about them in newspapers and on television and radio. Likewise, government departments, local authorities and state agencies like to see a positive image projected of themselves and their work. Although officials are generally not in a position to argue back in the same way, they are equally anxious to avoid an impression that they are out of touch, harsh or unresponsive to the needs of the community.

This atmosphere should create a favourable climate where voluntary organisations can make their case. But, despite these promising factors, voluntary and community organisations often find it difficult to interest the media in their stories, causes and problems, sustain that interest over time and help keep their concerns on the political agenda.

There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, voluntary organisations are often seen to be 'worthy but dull' and of little news value. They are forever running fund-raising events, one more like the other, or 'whingeing' about their lack of money. In the midst of all this, the media sometimes find it difficult to see a policy issue, though there may well be one. Compared to the much greater numbers who cover business or party politics, the media have few correspondents dedicated to cover social action. Some have a poor appreciation of social policy and issues get lost in the bigger battles over economic policy or the confrontations of the various political parties. Voluntary and community organisations are seen as minor players in a field dominated by the large social partners. Positively, though, a small number of correspondents and columnists do have a serious, professional interest in social issues.



Some community and voluntary organisations have made good use of the national media, the press, radio and television. Others have managed to get their case across to a range of specialised magazines, journals and periodicals. Community groups have opened up opportunities not only in the provincial press but in local radio where they have been successful in getting the community perspective across. Others have been adept at forcing the political system to respond to their pressure and have got influential political commentators and news staff really interested in their issues.

Choosing a good spokesperson or public relations officer (PRO) for the media is an important task for a voluntary or community organisation. The person should be selected for communication skills and is not necessarily the group's chairperson. These skills may be divided into technical skills (ability to write to-the-point press releases, doing radio interviews for example) and personal skills (being personable to the media, having a sense of judgement about what to say and what not to say). Some voluntary organisations and community groups have extremely successful spokespersons, to the extent that they are invited to contribute to a wide range of radio or television programmes on issues much broader than the original cause where they started (e.g. chat shows, panel programmes). This can add to the group's reputation.

Case studies:

Strategic alliance for adult literacy

In its campaign for improved adult literacy services, the National Adult Literacy Agency made a joint campaign with Aontas. They held a joint press conference and drew up a charter together, sending it out to members of the Oireachtas. They got meetings with the main political parties and specific reference to adult literacy in two of the subsequent party manifestos.

Knowing the issues, building alliances

Members of the South-East Community Development Network were elected to the regional committee monitoring the operation of the structural funds. Although membership of the committee was in many ways a frustrating and difficult experience, the fact that the network had studied the operation of the structural funds in some detail beforehand and was knowledgeable about them meant that other organisations on the committee looked to them for information. The former organisations were also frustrated with the way the monitoring process worked and in the course of time the community representatives were able to work with other groups raising issues of common concern, such as rural depopulation. When community representatives wished to raise issues of particular concern to them, they were able to get support from former organisations and councillors on the inadequacy of procedures and methods of monitoring the funds.

Case study:

Interpreting the unemployment figures for the media

For years, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) used to send in commentaries on the monthly unemployment figures and what the government should do about unemployment. This was a tedious chore, since the figures were always released at 6pm on a Friday evening, a difficult time of the week to get attention. For years, the press, radio and television paid little or no attention. Eventually, however, a local radio producer, looking for a different angle on the figures, took up the story. One of the main values in the INOU commentaries was that they spotted trends and patterns in the figures which the other economic commentators missed. The organisation became highly valued for its interpretative work. Now the INOU is often the first organisation to be asked for a comment, giving it a unique opportunity to present its case for new and more effective government policies on unemployment.

Basic skills required for media work

- Writing a press release
- Knowing what is newsworthy
- Organising a press conference
- Handling relationships with journalists
- Doing an interview for radio (or television)

It is important to have a spokesperson who has the trust of the group, the authority to act and is comfortable doing media work. PROs cannot wait for the next committee meeting before deciding what to say to a journalist or not; and may have to seize media opportunities at short notice. On the other hand, it is reasonable that PROs be well briefed about what they may say and what is not the group's policy. Either way, there must be a clear understanding about the nature of the role and the work to be done. Having a good PRO or public face is an important investment for a voluntary organisation and it may be worth thinking of additional training or help for the person concerned.

There are many ways of working with the media. Some groups work in a very structured way, with a set piece series of events to encourage media interest in their concerns over the year (e.g. annual report, annual conference). They plan the launches of the research reports carefully, hold press conferences at particular points in the year and organise a calendar of events months ahead specifically designed to attract media attention.

Other voluntary organisations and community groups are much more opportunist, issuing frequent comment through press releases, sending in reports and stories as they arise, stirring debate in the *Letters to the Editor* section, joining phone-ins, even telephoning a radio station on a quiet news evening and offering to do an interview there and then. Although this can be hard work, an issue which appears regularly or continuously in news, features, on radio and television, in the specialised press, can create the impression of a strong groundswell of public opinion favouring change.

There is a range of important skills involved in media work.

The main ones are:

- Targeting media work carefully (The *Irish Times* is read by decision-makers, but the *Irish Independent* has a big readership, especially in rural areas);
- Timing (calling a weekly local newspaper when it is first being written, not when the presses are already running);
- Contacting the right person (for radio, the producer, not the presenter);
- Having ready-to-go publicity material and photographs;
- Writing short, sharp copy that can be adapted quickly for the news pages;
- Recognising a good story and having a feel for what is newsworthy.

Assembling a media list

For voluntary organisations wishing to influence policy, media work will have a number of angles. They must aim particularly at those forms of media most seen by policy-makers. They must target carefully. This may mean an emphasis on the specialised press, the broadsheet newspapers and niche radio and television programmes. They must work hard on the policy dimension of their work, always emphasising the policy implications arising from human interest stories. They must be able to get their story, their issue, their problems into a number of media and their many different corners on a very regular basis. Each will be another reminder of the need for action on the problem in question.

Case study:

From media influence to political influence

The Pavee Point Travellers Centre spent ten years working through the media trying to change the way in which Travellers were portrayed, perceived and presented. Policies which adversely affected Travellers were attacked and the group worked closely with radio, television and the print media to try provide openings for Travellers to present their own point of view. In 1993, the government appointed the Task Force on Travellers in an attempt to confront the wide range of issues affecting the Traveller community. Voluntary organisations and community groups were appointed to the task force. Taking part in its work required a different set of skills – those of negotiation, research, writing, amending reports.

Important attributes of a spokesperson

- Understands the members of the group
- Appreciates differences of opinion in the group
- Is entirely familiar with the group's case and objectives
- Is easy to reach, at home, work or on mobile. It can be wasteful to build up interest in the media but not be there when they call back.

Ways of working with the media

- Press conferences
- Press releases
- Photo events and opportunities
- Offering comments
- Proposing articles, features
- Seminars
- Launches of reports
- Ready-to-go stories and photos on the website

Case study:

Media highlighting disadvantage

The media were a key part of the efforts by *We the People* Community Development project (Knocknaheenyl/Hollyhill, Cork) to get their local school included in the *Breaking the cycle* programme of assistance to schools in areas of disadvantage. When the *Breaking the Cycle* programme was announced, there was consternation in Knocknaheenyl/Hollyhill because the area was not included, for it has one of the highest rates of disadvantage in Cork. The project at once contacted TDs in the Cork area to ask for support. It invited them to visit the school. Because a general election was on, it was possible to make the exclusion of the school a big issue. The group marched to the lord mayor's office. There were protests wherever the candidates for election went. It was a very visible issue. Members of the project took part in the audience of the RTÉ programme *Questions and Answers*, asking questions about the school from the audience. The issue was raised many times on local radio to the extent that it became one of the main local issues in the general election. Soon after, the new government was formed. Although it was not included in the *Breaking the Cycle* programme, a review of the school's needs was carried out and this resulted in an allocation of five extra teaching positions to the school and extra funding.

To do this, the first task is to bring together a media list. Once a group decides that it wishes to influence a policy or decision and has set down its proposals and has a spokesperson, its next task may be to assemble a list of the media with which it wishes to work. In any media organisation, there are many branches (e.g. news, features, business, arts). Within each organisation, there will be particular individuals the organisation may wish to contact – like the social affairs correspondent, or the political correspondent, or people who have regular columns. Producers of each programme may be found in the *RTÉ Guide*.

The Institute of Public Administration publishes a comprehensive annual *Yearbook and Diary*, which provides a media listing: Institute of Public Administration, 57-61 Lansdowne Rd, Dublin 4, tel 668 6233, fax 668 9135, e-mail: information@ipa.ie, site: www.ipa.ie

Some voluntary organisations and community groups may have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved through the media. Some media are more important than others. For most community groups, getting into the local papers and local radio is something they should expect to achieve. That may be all they need to do. They are unlikely to attract the interest of CNN and it may not be worth their while to try. Most national voluntary organisations will find themselves concentrating on the national press and radio. There has been a substantial growth in the specialised media in recent years and some voluntary organisations have devoted efforts to getting coverage in them (For example, education magazines, women's papers). Others have sent articles for publication in journals which they know are read extensively by decision-makers (for example, **Administration, Studies**).

An important aspect of working with the media is getting maximum value from the experience. Some voluntary organisations and community groups keep scrap-books of clippings of their coverage in the press (or videos or tapes of their television and radio appearances) and either use them in their annual report and in displays, or send them on to some of the people they are trying to influence. In effect, it is an indirect but powerful way of saying *The media think we are important. You should too*. Scrap-books and tapes are always valuable for later reference purposes.

Finally, even groups which develop good media strategies can experience frustrations. Some good campaigns on policy issues may not get the attention they deserve and sometimes they get none at all. Sometimes, journalists in a hurry misunderstand important issues. Others can reinforce negative images of an area or its people, despite one's best efforts to the contrary. As with all other aspects of attempting to change policy, persistence is essential and is likely to be rewarded.

Media for voluntary organisations and community groups

- Local papers
- Local radio
- National radio, television
- National daily, Sunday newspapers
- Specialised magazines, journals
- International media

Tips for writing a good press release

- One page only
- Your logo or headed paper at the top – quickly recognisable
- Date and time issued
- Your contact names and phone numbers at the bottom
- Tell the story in your opening line – who, what, why, when and where (the five 'w's')
- The most important news in the first paragraph
- Information of decreasing importance in the second and third paragraph
- Write it so it is ready to go straight to the news page
- Include some quotable quotes 'Speaking at the meeting, the chairperson, A.B. said...' (Embargo date and time, if one is being used)

Who gets your newsletter?

- Your members?
- Other voluntary and community organisations?
- Friends and sympathisers?
- Public representatives? Their advisors?
- Officials in local and national government, semi-state bodies?
- The media?
- Have you considered an electronic newsletter?
It can be a good means of getting news, views, information and comment out fast.

3.9 Using publications, newsletters to influence policy and decisions

Newsletters, magazines and publications can play a crucial role in the way voluntary and community organisations influence policy. Although most newsletters start as a means of helping members of the group keep in touch with each other, many evolve, in the course of time, into important ways of enabling organisations to define issues, keep up pressure and persuade other people to see their point of view. Many have very modest beginnings and develop into influential organs of opinion. Most are published quarterly, some more frequently. Good newsletters do not have to be glossy, but they must have a clear message, a sense of purpose and be well written.

Newsletters enable voluntary organisations and community groups to explain the issues and problems as they see them; to create a sense of who they are, what they are doing and why people should listen to them; and to report on the progress of their campaigns. Newsletters can be very effective in commending politicians and officials who support and help their campaign. Conversely, adverse publicity in such a newsletter can have quite an effect in unsettling people. Internally, they can be an excellent way of involving people in a campaign.

Good newsletters can – and should – take some time to prepare, write, design and lay out. Printing and postage costs can make them moderately costly (though several defray costs by getting in subscriptions). Nevertheless, they can be a cost-effective means of keeping an issue on the political agenda; reminding officials and public representatives that the issue which concerns them has not gone away; iterating and re-iterating the policies that must be changed; and demonstrating that the organisation is on top of the issue. Good newsletters will carry news of the progress a campaign is making, provide interesting information and stimulate new support. Newsletters can have a positive effect in mobilising members and other voluntary organisations. Some groups get the most out of their newsletters by using them to publish details of reports and research that they would otherwise have to publish

separately. Others send their newsletters into key media contacts such as national newspapers, provincial press and local radio, encouraging them to take up the news and views published, which they often do.

Good newsletters carry news – preferably fresh, original information about the issues which concern the group. Good newsletters carry editorial opinion, which should be labelled 'Editorial', a space where the organisation may formally express its point of view (This is the single part most likely to be noticed by the other media). Photographs can be helpful, be they commissioned by the organisation concerned or bought from agencies (Political parties will oblige with photographs of their public representatives). After a while, the newsletter will find itself quoted elsewhere and be relied on as an important source of information and an organ of opinion. Some organisations do not get the most out of their newsletters and sometimes use their scarce resources to explain, without comment, government decisions and schemes when there is plenty of official information available in any case. Related to newsletters, annual reports have an important role in the media strategy of voluntary organisations and community groups.

Using annual reports effectively

Although most voluntary organisations publish annual reports, not all use them effectively as a means of influencing decision makers. Many organisations present dull annual reports and spend considerable resources in doing so, missing a great opportunity to present their case for change. Although annual reports are primarily published in order to provide a means of accountability for the organisation to the public and the tax-payer, they can have an important role to play in the work of winning friends and influencing people. New documentation or information presented in a lively and hard-hitting manner in an annual report can make it a strong force for change.

Checklist for getting the most from the annual report

- Does it convey the image of an organisation that wants to influence policy?
- Does it analyse the situation facing its clients and what can be done to make it better?
- Does it present the organisation's main policy objectives?
- Does it remind the authorities of what is expected of them?
- Does it present fresh research and information?

How often do you check your mailing list?

- Every week?
- Every month?
- Every year?
- Never?
- Will you revise it after the next general/local/European election?
- Will you revise it the next time a minister is moved or changed?
- Will you revise it when the new schedule of radio programmes comes in?
- Will you include the new Sunday paper on the list?
- Are you compiling a list of e-mail addresses for an electronic newsletter?

3.10 The mailing list

Most voluntary organisations and community groups regard their mailing list as one of their least important tools. Looking after the mailing list is considered one of the least desirable chores, one attended to only occasionally and normally by a junior person in the organisation.

In fact, the mailing list may be one of its most important tools. One may even say that an organisation is only as good as its mailing list and the last time it was revised. In effect, the mailing list is the organisation's statement of who it wishes to influence in the political system. On it should be all the people in the decision-making apparatus at local and national level; supporters, friends and fellow-travellers; the media; as well as one's own members. Some organisations break down their membership list according to the type of publication they receive, e.g. the newsletter, annual reports, research reports, appeals and so on.

Looking after the mailing list is a responsible task which must be attended to regularly at a high level. Alert voluntary organisations and community groups add people who have spoken in the media on their issue, public representatives who express an interest and other people who they feel ought to be on it. They are always on the look-out for other people whom they think they should be reaching. They routinely add people who come to their organisation looking for information. Sometimes the person responsible for the list passes it around to committee members from time to time, asking them to check it for accuracy and changes.

Voluntary and community organisations must be vigilant as to civil servants or local government officials who move from one section to another or from one department to another. They must follow politics and watch when the opposition parties reshuffle their various spokespersons or change their spokespersons in the Seanad. In dealing with the media, they must watch which specialised correspondents have changed their assignments, or programmes which have changed their name or even gone off the air. All this is part of keeping up-to-date on the job. Looking at it another way round, sending out mailings to people who have changed career, to politicians who have passed away or to defunct newspapers or long-gone radio programmes creates a bad impression and is wasteful.

3.11 Devising an information strategy

A key issue for voluntary and community groups wishing to influence the decision-making process is to get useful information on the groups they are dealing with. Investing in acquiring information is an important preliminary step in influencing the political and administrative process.

Voluntary organisations may wish to give consideration to what they expect their on-going information needs to be. Several groups make a big sweep for information at the start of their work to influence policy – but neglect to take out subscriptions to ensure that they continue to stay up to date. Others adopt the approach of ‘Get it if it’s free’. This has the double disadvantage of acquiring free information which may be of limited value and passing over quality information which costs some money but which may be essential for any proposals for change to succeed. Although some types of documents may be free (the best example being the annual reports of organisations or state agencies), there are many sources of information which are worth going to some trouble to obtain or which are worth paying for. It may be useful for voluntary organisations and community groups to be more strategic and:

- Consider their information needs both now and over the next number of months or years;
- Draw up a list of worthwhile publications which should be requested or subscribed to over this period of time;
- Set aside space and storage and devise a cataloguing system so that this information can be accessible to the organisation and its members;
- Allocate a budget accordingly;
- Have someone responsible for making sure that incoming information is then circulated within the organisation.

Next the guide examines where one can obtain basic information on the political and administrative system in Ireland; where one can obtain on-going information; important information points; and information on the European Union.

Sources of information

Three sources of information on government and the public service are recommended:

- The government publishes the *State Directory*, which lists all the members of the Oireachtas and government. The largest section is devoted to the departments of government, where it lists all the senior civil servants in each department and their respective units. Its publication can be irregular.
- The Institute of Public Administration publishes a comprehensive annual *Yearbook and Diary*, which provides a similar listing, but which also includes local administration, all semi-state bodies, financial institutions, communications, educational bodies, voluntary organisations, professional bodies and a wealth of other information.
- Information on the political system may also be found at the Oireachtas website:
www.irlgov.ie/oireachtas

Further reading

Basil Chubb: *Government and Politics of Ireland* (3rd edition). London, Longman, 1992.

G Menzies (Ed): *Nealon's Guide to the 28th Dáil and Seanad*. Dublin, Gill & McMillan, 1997.

Sources of information on Irish government

Institute of Public Administration,
57-61 Lansdowne Rd, Dublin 4,
tel 668 6233, fax 668 9135,
e-mail: information@ipa.ie,
site: www.ipa.ie

Government website: www.irlgov.ie

Oireachtas website:
www.irlgov.ie/oireachtas

Information on the political and administrative system

This guide provides only an outline of the political and administrative system in Ireland and how it operates.

Many voluntary and community organisations may wish to learn much more about how the system functions and how policy questions are decided.

There are several ways of doing so. In the first instance, a number of texts are available, both for students and for the general reader. Second, several organisations and bodies specialise in public administration and how it works. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) is the national organisation committed to the study and improvement of public administration in Ireland. It publishes books about public administration, issues a journal (*Administration*), has a library, runs training courses and is well known for its annual *Yearbook* of public administration in Ireland. The *Yearbook* provides full details on national and local administration, the media, business and commerce, as well as details of professional and voluntary organisations. It is expensive – and well worth it. Membership of the institute is open to individuals interested in public administration. The Oireachtas website also provides useful information on the political system.

Information on the on-going work of the political and administrative system

The output of government bodies varies, with some being very prolific and others presenting little information. Likewise, the quality varies enormously, between the professional and informative on one hand and the uninformative, the glossy or insubstantial on the other.

Most semi-state, advisory and similar bodies publish annual reports. These are normally available, free of charge, on request from the organisation concerned (Their addresses may be found in the *IPA Yearbook*). Most annual reports provide details of the members of the boards of the semi-state body, the functions of the organisation and how it fulfils its responsibilities and list publications. Those which award grants normally provide a full range of details. Some government departments publish annual reports. Some state bodies also publish strategic plans, periodicals, magazines, occasional reports, policy documents and their own research.

All the discussions of the Dáil and Seanad are recorded and published, including written answers to questions. The record is published about a week or two after the day of the sitting concerned in reports. They provide a verbatim account of all the debates. The record is valuable in recording the commitments given by ministers. One can tell what interests concern individual deputies and senators and judge who makes the most useful contributions. They can also be the source of up-to-date research and information. Small voluntary organisations and community groups may not have time to read the reports, note the relevant sections, or have the space to store them, but they are essential for serious attempts to influence decision-making over time. Several libraries keep bound volumes of the debates (with indexes). An archive of all debates since 1919 has now been posted on the Oireachtas website.

Keeping up with the Dáil and Seanad

Dáil and Seanad debates are available on the web at www.irlgov.ie/oireachtas

In paper format, they may be bought individually from Government Publications, Molesworth St, Dublin 2 (Walk-in service; price €6.35 each for Dáil reports) or by annual subscription from Government Publications, 4-5 Harcourt Rd, Dublin 2, tel 647 6000. The price has become very expensive and is now €990 a year (including postage to one's office or home).

The archive of debates may now be found at: www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie

National newspapers cover debates in the Dáil and Seanad. However, such coverage is often limited to important national issues and debates which take place in the morning and afternoon and may be of limited value to voluntary and community organisations interested in detailed discussions on particular issues which affect them. Likewise, RTÉ television and radio summarise key points in debates. Check in the weekly *RTÉ Guide*.

The Combat Poverty Agency provides regular bulletins on coverage of issues of poverty and social exclusion in the Oireachtas, called Dáilbrief. This is available monthly when the Dáil and Seanad are in session and is available only on e-mail. There is no charge. Contact the agency and ask to be put on the mailing list, info@cpa.ie

Government websites

Each government department now has its own website (typically www.gov.ie/..., with an abbreviation for the department concerned, but note that some departments follow a different style). Typical contents are a welcoming message from the minister, departmental services available, current projects, what's new, press releases, documents and statistical information. Some are better than others and some are also more up to date than others. Irish government websites have been rated highly by international standards.

See Directory

Important information points

All government departments have press and information officers (The Oireachtas also has a PRO). So too do some state bodies and agencies. Their primary role is to work with the media but they will also help voluntary organisations and community groups with enquiries. Many government departments and state agencies have their own libraries. Whilst in most cases these are designed to meet the internal needs of staff, some agencies encourage outside groups to use their services.

The principal omnibus information service is Government Publications. This has a walk-in office in Molesworth St, Dublin but takes written orders through its address in Harcourt Rd, Dublin. Most government publications are available there and staff will search the catalogues to try to help callers with requests for particular information.

The level of documentation provided by local administration in Ireland is generally very low and there is no national point at which their publications are distributed. Enquiries must be made with each appropriate body. Some local libraries will provide information about the work of their local authority.

Two state agencies, Comhairle and the Combat Poverty Agency, have important roles as providers of information. Comhairle has a team of information officers, provides bulletins on social policy issues (magazine *Relate*) and offers an information portal to government (www.oasis.ie). The Combat Poverty Agency has a number of publications, a magazine *Poverty Today*, a library on poverty issues, and a website www.cpa.ie.

www.go

For those with access to them, university libraries are, by definition, important sources of information. The universities are copyright libraries and are required to obtain and keep all books published in Ireland (for Dublin University, Trinity College, this applies to Britain as well). Universities also hold theses submitted by students, which may be helpful if one's area of interest is not otherwise well researched. Finally, many public libraries will have reference sections on Irish government, politics and administration.

The Central Statistics Office is the principal information point for statistical information in the state. The CSO publishes the census, labour force survey, household budget survey, unemployment figures and a vast range of national economic and social statistics. Enquiries may be made to the CSO office in either Dublin or Cork. Details of CSO regular weekly and monthly information releases may be requested or may be viewed on the website (www.cso.ie). Certain information is also available on diskette. State agencies and advisory bodies, like, for example the National Economic and Social Council, rely substantially on the information and data collected by the Central Statistics Office. The CSO also assembles localised information in what are called its small area statistics (See 3.2 above).

Useful addresses

Combat Poverty Agency
Bridgewater Centre
Conyngham Rd
Islandbridge
Dublin 8
Tel 670 6746, fax 670 6760,
e-mail: info@cpa.ie,
site: www.cpa.ie

Comhairle
Hume House
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4
Tel 605 9000, fax 605 9099,
e-mail: comhairle@comhairle.ie,
site: www.comhairle.ie

Government Publications
Molesworth St
Dublin 2 (walk-in), tel 647 6000
4-5 Harcourt Rd, Dublin 2
(post and enquiries), tel 647 6000,
fax 478 0645, site: www.opw.ie

Central Statistics Office
Skehard Rd
Cork
Tel 021.453 5000,
fax 021.453 5555,
e-mail: information@cso.ie,
site: www.cso.ie
Also at: Ardee Rd, Rathmines,
Dublin 6, Tel 497 7144,
fax 497 2360

See information sources, *Directory*.

ov.ie / ...

Information on the European Union

The output of information by the European Union nowadays is huge and it is sometimes difficult to know where to start. From the point of view of voluntary organisations and community groups, perhaps the most useful guidelines are as follows:

- For people wishing to obtain walk-in information, the European Commission has an information centre in Dublin, which provides information sheets and a library service;
- The main university libraries are termed European Documentation Centres, which mean that they hold all EU publications. Because they are termed European Documentation Centres, they must be open to European citizens on request. EDCs may be found at University Colleges Dublin, Cork and Galway; in St Patrick's College, Maynooth; Dublin University (Trinity College); the University of Limerick; Queen's University Belfast; and the University of Ulster in Coleraine;
- In addition to the European Documentation Centres, there are regional Euro-Info-Centres. Although designed for the business community (several are operated by the Chambers of Commerce), much of the information they have will be of interest to a wider range of groups. Euro-info-Centres may be found in Dublin, Belfast, Galway, Sligo, Cork, Limerick and Waterford;
- Obtaining information through the internet is probably the fastest, most comprehensive and satisfactory method. The European institutions have invested considerable time and effort in providing comprehensive websites with news, documents, reports and other information. The best way to do this is to go to the universal website, called the 'Europa' site, which has over a million pages:
<http://europa.eu.int>
This then offers people choices for the different European institutions. For those interested in social policy issues, the most useful approach is to go the Commission:
<http://europa.eu.int/comm>
and then the directorate general responsible for social affairs:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/index

- Voluntary organisations and community groups seriously interested in taking part in influencing developments in Europe are advised to join or take part in some way in the work of European networks which are most appropriate for their field of activity. Two hundred such networks now exist and they can be the most economical way of following issues and gaining access to European information. The most helpful here may be the European Anti-Poverty Network (www.eapn.org) and the European Platform of Social NGOs (www.socialplatform.org).
- Voluntary organisations and community groups which expect to have regular contact with the European institutions are advised to obtain some directories of the principal officials and their responsibilities. The Commission publishes its own inter-institutional directory (the equivalent of the state directory in Ireland) and a number of commercial directories are also available.

European Union in Ireland

European Commission,
18 Dawson St,
Dublin 2;
tel 634 1111,
fax 623 1112;
site: www.euireland.ie

European Commission,
Windsor House,
9-15 Bedford St,
Belfast BT2 7EG,
tel 028.90.240708,
fax 028.90.248241,
www.europa.eu.int/comm

European Parliament,
43 Molesworth St,
Dublin 2,
tel 605 7900,
fax 605 7999,
site: www.europarl.ie

For more details on the
European Union, see *Directory*.

Applying the strategy

This chapter looks at how voluntary organisations and community groups may best plan their approach to influencing policy and decision-makers, such as:

- Identifying where and how policy is made;
- Persuading people that a problem exists;
- Shaping the response of government;
- Ensuring the decision is implemented;
- Maintaining influence on the political and administrative system;
- Working with public representatives;
- Working with public bodies; and
- Working with the consultative process.

4.1 Where and how policy is made

There is no straightforward answer to the question: How is policy made in Ireland? From the point of view of community and voluntary organisations, getting a concern successfully addressed by the political and administrative system may seem a daunting task, with so many centres of power and decision-making.

Administration and politics in Ireland are a complex interplay of government departments, ministers, civil servants, politicians, the media, public opinion, political parties, the social partners, local government, advisory bodies, lobby groups and semi-state agencies. Influencing decision-making successfully involves working with many of these different groups. Few succeed by working with one or two of them alone, but by building up sympathy and support in a number of places simultaneously. Attempts to influence decision-making which concentrate on Dáil deputies but which do not attempt to reach the relevant government departments may be unlikely to succeed, and *vice versa*. Effective lobbyists will make sure that semi-state bodies which have an interest in the matter that concerns them are, if not on their side, at least not against them. They will also work hard to ensure that their issue has been well aired in the media, that it has been portrayed sympathetically there and that a climate of opinion which favours change has been created.

Questions for groups approaching government departments, semi-state bodies, local administration

- Why are we approaching them?
- What do we want them to do or to change?
- Is this a local matter or a national matter, or both?
- Who (if anyone) has the legal responsibility here?
- Who is also involved in the problem?
- Should we approach officials, or elected representatives, or both?
- If we approach officials, *who* is the appropriate person? At what level?

Case study:

Building a broad alliance to restore VTOS

When an announced increase in a thousand places on the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was deferred, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) set about a broad effort to convince the government to change its mind, especially since the VTOS was known to be particularly effective in combating educational disadvantage. An INOU representative cornered the Minister for Education at an international conference and urged her to change her mind. The organisation asked Vocational Education Committees to pass resolutions on the need to increase the places on the VTOS. Senior VEC officials were asked to express their concern privately. There was a lobby day in Buswell's Hotel where about fifty or so TDs and senators turned up to oppose the cuts. Affiliates and members took part in a fax and letter protest campaign. The Department of Education soon realised that the campaign had widespread national support. There was a series of press releases and interviews on radio, all of which stressed the value of the scheme to people who were educationally disadvantaged. There was a debate in the Dáil. Newspaper columnists were persuaded to take up the issue. The places were restored in the following budget.

Most political analysts take the view that for change to take place, a number of bodies must be influenced and a climate must be created where the benefits of the change proposed are considered to outweigh the disadvantages. Political change often happens when the cost of not changing becomes greater than the cost of changing. Several parts of the decision-making apparatus must be convinced of the need for change, before it can happen.

Deciding on where exactly to concentrate one's work is one of the most difficult challenges. To complicate things further, parts of the political and administrative system may very well be sympathetic to a cause proposed by a voluntary or community organisation, but other parts may not be. There are many cases where a government has privately favoured a change, but where it has been afraid of the strength of opposition from well-entrenched lobby groups which could make that change electorally expensive. There are times when members of the Oireachtas favour a change, but government departments do not and vice versa. Sometimes central government may favour a change, but local government may not, and vice versa. Even within government departments and local administration, there may be contradictions as well. Some officials may support and welcome changes proposed by voluntary and community organisations, but some of their colleagues may not, or other departments may not. Thus pressure groups must work in an environment that may fluctuate and exhibit many contradictory features.

Some groups spread themselves very widely in their approach to the decision-making system. They do not just go to the obvious places – like government departments and the minister responsible – important though that is. They also ask a wide range of deputies and senators (sometimes receiving support from individuals they least expect). They build up support among councillors, health boards and the local authorities. They ask the youth wings of political parties to endorse their view. They ask trade unions to support their campaign by passing a motion and sending it on to the appropriate authorities. Within months, their issue has started to pop up everywhere and a climate has been created where change becomes a possibility. Yet where they will achieve the crucial breakthrough is not always obvious – and it may be where it is least expected.



4.2 Persuading appropriate people that a problem exists

Policy-making is a dynamic process in which a range of actors come together to make, unmake or change a decision. Perhaps the most difficult stage of getting access to decision-makers is persuading them that a problem exists in the first place and to accept responsibility for it. The work of government, the Oireachtas and politicians is already an overburdened one in which the system is trying to handle many more issues than its resources can manage. Trying to get yet another issue on to the crowded policy-making map is often the biggest hurdle a group faces. Once the centres of power come to accept the fact that the problem is one which should be addressed, the next most difficult stage is to define the issue in such a way that the system can cope and options can be considered for its solution.

The most crucial people in any given issue are not always obvious. Sometimes it is a minister, sometimes an official, sometimes elected representatives, sometimes a shifting balance between them. Voluntary organisations and community groups will spend some time trying to assess exactly who are the most critical people to address. This can be very difficult at times, for public agencies can be quite plausible in attributing problems to other parts of 'the system'. Voluntary organisations and community groups often face the serious issue of identifying who they think should be responsible and pursuing the appropriate authority accordingly.

Decision-Making

The decision-making journey

Problem stated

Departmental response

Political response

- Committee?
- Task force?
- Green Paper?
- Working group?

Decision

- Shelved?
- Minimal response?
- Legislation?
- The desired action?
- Implementation system?

What groups can ask government to do

- New legislation
- Statutory instruments, ministerial orders, government circulars
- New resources; or moving resources from one area to another
- Exhortation, education, training
- New or changed consultative procedures which bring in a new range of actors
- Financial incentives
- Administrative changes, improved co-ordination
- Introduce, change the means of implementation
- New or changed services

Stages of a policy change for policy-makers

- 1 Acceptance that a problem exists
- 2 Defining what the issue is
- 3 Considering a series of actions that responds to the problem or the issue
 - The legislative and resource implications
 - Considering other views
 - Appointment of committees, task forces etc
- 4 Taking the decision
- 5 Carrying it out
- 6 Implementing, monitoring the change

Case study:

Reaching deep into government to promote adult literacy

In its efforts to persuade policy-makers to respond to the problems of literacy difficulties among adults, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) reached out to a wide variety of people in the decision-making system. NALA held information days to which it invited:

- Officials of the Department of Education;
- Officials of other government departments, from Principal Officer to Secretary General;
- Politicians;
- Ministerial advisors;
- Officials of state agencies like FÁS and Teagasc;
- Agencies concerned with local development, like ADM and partnerships companies.

These information sessions involved presentations by people who had experienced literacy difficulties and their descriptions of how the school system had failed them and the barriers which they faced on their return for help. The agency's approach reached out to a wide range of people in government and sent compelling signals to them on the need for action.

A critical stage in any attempt to influence policy is the first time it is discussed by decision-makers. Many voluntary and community organisations become frustrated when their issue is first aired, debated or discussed – whether that be in the health board, the county council chamber, a state advisory body or the Oireachtas. After all, ***Nothing happened***, they say. ***They talked about the problem, but they never did anything***, they complain. ***They waffled on and we got nowhere***.

In fact, to get an issue debated is the first and best sign of progress in influencing decision-making. It means that the group's issue has at last been recognised as important and more important than many other competing and pressing concerns. Once a minister, deputy, senator, official makes a statement about the issue, it goes on the record and this gives the group an opening to go back to the person concerned and make a challenge (or congratulate and encourage future action). Officials and public representatives are often quite taken aback to be contacted about something they have said and may be prepared to agree to a meeting to clear the air. Groups can use this as an opportunity to build a more constructive relationship, especially with people with whom they might have disagreed.

Parliamentary debates can be a useful means of consolidating some policies, or sowing doubt about others, especially when contributors have been given useful information by voluntary and community organisations. A minister who is given a hard time in a debate, or an official who is given a difficult reception in local administration, will remember the experience for some time. Well-briefed public representatives can cross-examine ministers quite effectively, asking a minister about particular information, or a relevant report, or knowledge of other particular facts and so on. When this happens, ministers and their departments know they will have to deal more thoughtfully with the organisation behind the briefings. Some voluntary organisations and community groups even keep records of quotes of what ministers, officials or public representatives said about particular issues or their commitments to them, to remind them months or years later at a suitable opportunity.

Many groups often lose heart, when, after fighting hard to get an issue on the agenda, there is then an unsatisfactory debate, contributors show they don't understand the issue and the reaction of the political system is negative or complacent. Quite the contrary: the statements made and the response given serve as the basis for the next stage of the work of persuading people further to one's point of view. Especially in the Oireachtas, ministers are very conscious that they must not mislead the house over matters of fact, however unintentionally.

4.3 Shaping the response of government

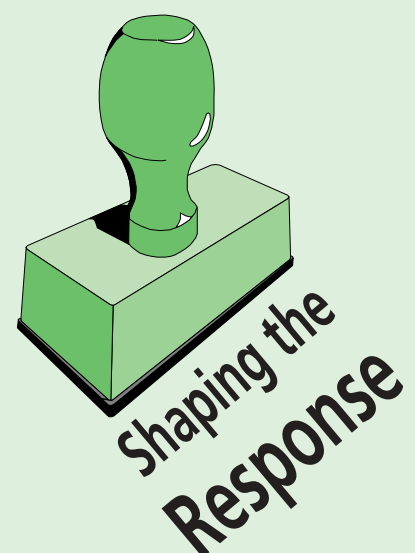
The authorities in general and governments in particular often take some time to respond to problems and issues in a variety of ways. The least likely thing they do is provide an immediate response that fully meets the demands of the lobbying group. Quick and immediate change is difficult to achieve. In an over-burdened decision-making system and with finite resources, government lacks the flexibility and capability to do so. For this reason, governments tend to put problems 'under review', delegate civil servants to write reports, or appoint committees. Some reviews are purely internal but may lead to a report, a policy document, a Green Paper or a White Paper. Other review bodies are external, bringing in people from outside the public service.

The process of review is not necessarily a cynical exercise. Governments know that they cannot produce an immediate response. They want to look at all the options, predict the costs and benefits involved, try to get a consensus between all the actors involved, and bring in as wide a range of expert opinion as possible. Often, they are genuinely unsure of the best course of action. Whilst committees, task forces and working groups have certainly been appointed as delaying actions, it would be a mistake to always view them as an exercise in manipulation. Although they can be delaying actions, they can also be used by voluntary organisations to push through much-needed changes (see case studies).

Case study:

Getting the social economy on to the agenda

The Community Workers Co-operative (CWC) has long pressed for the role of the social economy to be properly recognised in economic and social development; and for government investment in the social economy as a motor for economic development in local areas and communities experiencing disadvantage. The CWC was able to point to the endorsement of the social economy by the European Commission. Along with other organisations, the CWC successfully pressed for the issue to be examined by the National Economic & Social Forum as part of its report *Jobs Potential of the Services Sector*. Under *Partnership 2000*, agreement was reached for a working group on the development of the social economy to be set up in the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment. The CWC was able to furnish the department with a useful definition of 'the social economy' which has informed the focus of the working group and in turn allowed the issue to proceed to its next stage.



Case study:

Reviews as an instrument of change – Travellers signing on

For many years, Travellers were required to sign on at the same time in order to collect social welfare payments. This was supposedly a measure against fraud. Traveller organisations regarded this segregation as racist, since it was not required of any other ethnic group in the state. When the report on the Task Force on Travellers was being discussed, this issue was raised forcefully as an area of discrimination to be named and addressed. The Department of Social Welfare dropped the requirement before the report – and any possible controversy – came out, thereby avoiding being seen in bad light.

At this stage, the perspective of other groups becomes important. Although pressure groups are not necessarily obliged to consider other people's points of view, this is not true of government. No government department wishes to initiate a change that will cause problems or precipitate knock-on effects with other departments or lobby groups.

When making a policy decision, governments are always conscious of the likely reaction of their supporters on the one hand and the opposition on the other. They have an eye to the broader public reaction. Is this something they can take credit for, or will it get them involved in a mess from which they cannot extricate themselves? Although government decisions should be based on the objective realities of a problem, the political consequences and public perceptions are also important in the taking of decisions, even though they perhaps should not be. When voluntary organisations and community groups try to influence policy they must ask themselves: Who else is involved in this? What will they say? How can we make sure they see our point of view? What will public perceptions be?

Once the critical consultation has taken place, or a report, Green Paper or White Paper is published, the decision-making process enters a decisive stage. The government may indicate its intention of acting immediately on the report's findings and recommendations; it may be non-committal; or it may even repudiate the document concerned. The fate of the issue in question at this stage will depend on a variety of factors: the attitudes of the departmental officials most closely involved; the interest of the minister and the minister of state; the view of other departments; the attitude of the opposition; reactions within the political parties; the way the problem is perceived by the media; the views and contributions of other interest groups; and the continued level of interest and pressure of the lobbying groups. The authorities will respond differently to the different styles and approaches of the lobbying groups, how representative they appear to be and their relative power compared to other groups.

If legislation is required, the process of change can become fraught and slow. Government permission is required for the drafting of a Bill. Once the decision in principle is approved, a Bill goes to the office of the Attorney General for drafting (the parliamentary draftsman). All Bills must be checked carefully for compatibility with other laws and the constitution. Bills must then take their place in the queue. Once the draft Bill emerges, it must be approved by cabinet and the other ministers. Time to pass it must be found in the parliamentary timetable where it vies for priority with other Bills. Most Bills take months to get through, some take years and others never make it. Should a general election be called, all Bills automatically lapse (though there is a procedure to fast-track them back into the order of business in a new government).

Efforts by voluntary organisations and community groups to influence policy do not always have clear-cut, clinical outcomes. They rarely achieve everything they want. Sometimes, groups do not know if they have 'won' or not, for the outcomes and decisions that result from their activities may emerge in a very fragmented, sometimes confusing way.

Even when the right part of the political system has been identified for lobbying, the appropriate remedy is often difficult to determine. A wide range of policy instruments lies between compulsion and exhortation. In some cases, the problem is a legal one and can best be addressed by a new law, regulation, ministerial order or penalties for offences. At the other extreme, some problems require a long-term educational campaign to change attitudes and this is not something one can legislate for. Some problems can be addressed by a combination of exhortation, education, circulars, training and the more efficient allocation of resources and responsibilities. It is rare for one means alone to be sufficient. Most require a mixture of administrative action and the reallocation of resources.

Case study:

Getting basic income on to the agenda

The Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) campaigned for many years on issues concerned with social exclusion. Recently, CORI argued for a new means of confronting poverty through a system of basic income (BI) for all citizens. Knowing that it would take a long time for the government to adopt such a proposal, CORI argued that the idea should at least be studied to test its merits. That way, it would get on to and stay on the political agenda for some time, when it could be further promoted. During the discussions on *Partnership 2000*, CORI successfully argued that there be an independent study of basic income and this has since been done. During the negotiations on the formation of the next government, CORI asked the two government parties to agree to the preparation of a Green Paper on basic income. They agreed. As a result, a controversial issue has remained on the agenda and within the system. It has not disappeared from sight, as some people expected it might.

Case study:

Influencing government through state bodies

When the Department of Education was drawing up proposals for special support for schools in disadvantaged areas, Irish Rural Link made a submission to the Combat Poverty Agency. At the time, the agency was undertaking work on the issue for the Department of Education, subsequently published as *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*. The report identified the high level of educational disadvantage in the rural areas, including the need for new criteria to identify disadvantaged families in the rural areas. The recommendations provided a basis for the *Breaking the Cycle* scheme. The criteria used to select the schools in urban areas relied on the number of children living in local authority housing, but more suitable criteria were used for the rural schools. Irish Rural Link was able to exert its influence on the criteria used for selecting rural families in the state scheme.

4.4 Ensuring a decision is implemented

Even when a policy is changed or amended, legislation passed or resources allocated, work may only be beginning. In the past, lobbying groups may have paid insufficient attention to thinking of assessing whether the change that they managed to obtain actually produced the desired results. How is it monitored and by whom? Were there unintended consequences no one expected? If so, how can the issue be brought back into the political system for further consideration?

The study of implementation emphasises the importance of organisations giving attention to how they can ensure the outcomes they seek. This may involve:

- Making a case for implementation bodies in the original proposal;
- Asking the government (or statutory agencies) to set up implementation bodies;
- Setting down criteria to test and measure the effectiveness of the policy changes sought;
- Setting up watchdog groups;
- Getting resources for research to measure the outcome of changes resulting from the government decision.



4.5 Maintaining one's influence on the system

To influence policy and decision-making is always most difficult the first time. The organisation is then an outsider group. It finds it difficult to know where to start and how to begin. Once a group has engaged with the political system once, things become easier, for its members will have built up contact with individual deputies, senators, civil servants, leaders of semi-state bodies, local authority officials and councillors. The longer these last, the more it is likely to become an insider group.

Some organisations prefer to stay outsider groups by choice, campaigning aggressively at a distance from the political system. They may have an ideological aversion to dealing too closely with government; they may be wary of any compromise; or they may feel they can be more effective by changing public opinion through effective campaigns in the media. Some outsider groups may be very small and, while they have the resources for such high-profile work, do not have the time or people to sit on committees. The disadvantage is that their influence is very difficult to measure. Greenpeace may be an example of a high-profile outsider group.

Many outsider groups, however, are really outsider groups which want to be insider groups. They want to enter the corridors of power and do business with officials and get to the heart of the decision-making system. They are reformist at heart, with modest objectives which they are determined to achieve. As people in government come to know them better, consultation becomes easier and more regular and may be arranged at shorter notice. The more experienced groups become so involved that they come to learn more and more of what is going on. In time, some of their representatives may be appointed to the very advisory bodies that they themselves lobbied several years ago. Even further along, they may be consulted as a norm whenever the government proposes a change, or they may even be tipped off about the proposals of rival organisations. In other words, they become an essential, integral part of the decision-making landscape themselves. They can see the effect of their representations and point to aspects of policy which they have changed.

Case study:

Getting rural social exclusion up the agenda

Irish Rural Link has long argued for the proper recognition of the problems of social exclusion in the rural areas. There is a range of policies its members would like to see pursued. However, the first step was to get the issue on to the public agenda. Its representative eventually persuaded the National Economic and Social Forum to issue a report on rural exclusion (its 12th report). The report identified those groups most at risk of social exclusion (e.g. women) and recommended a national committee for rural development. The outcome, years later, was the publication by the government of a White Paper, which had a chapter on social inclusion and recommended a national rural development forum.


Case study:

Implementing the Status of Children Act, 1987

Treoir, the organisation for unmarried parents and their families, welcomed the passing of the Status of Children Act, 1987 which came into force in 1988 and resulted in the abolition of the status of illegitimacy. Treoir members were surprised that many government services seemed to be unaware that the Act had been passed and its implications for lone parents and their children. A survey of member organisations found a picture of considerable confusion and misinformation. Accordingly, they found themselves in a position of having to provide information and training on how the Act should be implemented. They organised workshops, printed (at their own expense) information leaflets about the Act, briefed social workers and wrote letters to the paper to explain the situation. It took some time for the Act to operate smoothly. The moral of the tale was the importance of allocating time and a budget to making sure the policy change was publicised and understood.

Sometimes, the relationship to government and the decision-making system becomes so intimate that they are afraid to criticise people with whom they now have an interdependent relationship, for fear of losing their place in the heart of government. They will not rock the boat by issuing angry press statements when they do not get their way, for fear of offending people they now know quite well. As they become muted, this is sometimes referred to as the 'capture' of interest groups by government and they are called 'prisoner' groups. At this stage, new, more radical outsider groups may start raising the critical issues once again and the entire process begins afresh. Only a few insider groups either choose or manage to keep a high profile, being an integral part of the decision-making system, yet prepared to be forcefully critical at the same time (The Irish Farmers Association is perhaps the best example of the high-profile insider group).





Most governments and authorities prefer a relatively predictable and controlled environment in which to do their work. They do not like surprises, nor do they like to be in a permanent state of tension or hostility with significant groups that wish to influence them. Accordingly, most are prepared to go a certain distance to establish links, consultation and some form of a stable relationship with pressure groups. Voluntary organisations and community groups may wish to give attention to the kind of long-term relationship with the political system they would like – and the resources, time and personnel they need to make that work. The more organisations become insider groups, the more time and personnel they have to give to sitting on advisory committees and the time-consuming process of consultation. Do they have the human and financial resources to support this work? Is there the danger that the original aims of the organisation will be lost? What if the authority being lobbied is also your funder?

Having identified the general principles of devising a strategy, the guide now looks at how to work with individual parts of the political and administrative system.

Case study:

Outside to insider group

Threshold, the housing advice agency, found out in the course of its research that 80 per cent of tenants in private rented accommodation had no rent books to receipt their rent payments and 70 per cent could be evicted at a week's notice or less. The organisation proposed legislation to remedy the situation. Threshold wrote to a huge range of people – to TDs and ministers, student unions and other voluntary organisations with a large tenant membership and to the relevant statutory bodies. A supporters' newsletter, *Threshold News*, was published to keep them up to date on the campaign. Threshold made a giant-size rent-book, presented it to the lord mayor and had the media photograph it outside Leinster House. Eventually, the government announced a new deal for tenants as a key step in its new social housing policy. Detailed discussions took place with the department and Threshold had the opportunity to comment on new regulations. These obliged all landlords to supply rent books and to give tenants a minimum of one month's notice and the new rules were enshrined in the 1992 Housing Act. A very visible public campaign ended up in quiet, effective negotiations with the department concerned.

Testing policy changes

- Did the policy change have the expected or hoped-for effect?
- Were there other, unintended effects, good or bad?
- Did the situation improve?
- What must be done to make things better still?

Case study:

Finding champions within government

The Inner City Organisations Network (ICON) took the view that it would only make progress in combating drugs when it got a wide range of statutory agencies involved and working together. Although it had ideas as to how to combat drugs (e.g. the Criminal Assets Bureau), it was making less progress with them than it would have liked.

The organisation proposed an inter-agency drugs project. Central to its efforts was trying to get the Department of Justice to back the plan. If that department lent its support, the others would probably come in too. Accordingly ICON went to some efforts to get senior representatives of the Department of Justice to the first meeting. This was successful and the Department of Justice provided funding to involve the other departments in pilot projects. ICON continued to try to find champions for its approach in the other departments – people who will give a commitment to the inter-agency project, attend regularly, share problems and promote the project within their department. In an effort to confront the smaller drugs dealers, the inter-agency project tried to develop a coherent integrated approach by relevant statutory agencies. A grant for an independent evaluation was received.

4.6 Working with public representatives

Working effectively with public representatives is a crucially important activity for organisations and groups wishing to influence policy. Here, the various aspects of working with public representatives are discussed.

What public representatives have the power to do

It is essential that voluntary organisations and community groups know what they want a deputy, senator or councillor to do. Many go in with the vague notion that a member can somehow 'sort out' the problem. This vague purpose can lead to imprecise and unsatisfactory results. Deputies are not all-powerful, though they have certain means of influence. 'Making a deputy aware of a problem' is not a sufficient reason to contact one or to organise a meeting unless the group has a clear set of ideas as to what should actually be done about it. Sometimes groups approach their deputy about a matter which really has to be sorted out at local level, or at the other extreme, at European level.

Other organisations, by contrast, are extremely focused. They want their deputy to arrange a meeting for them with a minister, or ask a parliamentary question, or speak on a Bill, or even introduce legislation for them. Deputies and senators are generally very happy to take up an issue with a department, a minister, or a colleague; or ask parliamentary questions. This involves them in a defined amount of work, with little or no political cost. Most are prepared to raise matters on the adjournment debate if they feel they can make a strong case. Deputies are more reluctant to commit themselves to strong policy positions, especially controversial ones, since that may put them at odds with their party or alienate other voters. They are cautious about speaking on Bills and putting down amendments unless they are sure they have the time available to do this and they can trust the group to present a well-stated case to them that does not have other, negative consequences for them later.

How public representatives can best help

Voluntary groups and community organisations must therefore give considerable attention to what they want their public representative to do. In the Oireachtas, repeated questions, adjournment debates and motions can produce an effect over time. Although such work can be time-consuming, unglamorous and tedious, it is often the most effective way in which members of the Oireachtas can help in the long run. Some groups are more ambitious and look for legislation and ask members to introduce private member's Bills. Trying to get a Bill through is a campaign that will involve a long time and requires a lot of supporting documentation. Bills are problematic, because deputies and senators have no special resources to help them with this (The parliamentary draftsman works only on government Bills). Furthermore, they take years to work their way through the system and fall when there is a general election. Groups must therefore be prepared to do the drafting work themselves (This is often not as difficult as it seems) and help the member steer it through. On the other hand, a successful Bill can produce a political change that is likely to be irreversible and can be a focus for a campaign. Voluntary groups and organisations should also consider if there are other faster ways of achieving their objectives (e.g. statutory instrument, ministerial order, government circular).

Decision-makers say they listen to people who...

- Know exactly what they want
- Make their case early in a policy process
- Recognise the difference between what can be achieved in the short, medium and long term
- Are up-to-date, know their field and are on top of their issue
- Provide regular and always accurate information
- Approach officials at the appropriate level (neither too high up nor too low down)
- Appreciate that there is another side to the argument
- Know the limits of what they can achieve
- Are to the point
- Leave a page behind each time

What a member of the Oireachtas can do

- Ask a question (priority, oral, written) (Dáil only)
- Raise a matter on the adjournment of the house
- Introduce, speak on a motion
- Introduce a Bill
- Put down amendments to a government Bill
- Arrange a meeting with a minister
- Make representations to a minister
- Write to a state agency on your behalf
- Introduce a constitutional amendment (Dáil only)
- Speak on a Bill

Tel: Leinster House 618 3000
(also LoCall Dáil 1890 337 889,
Seanad 1890 732 623). Public
Relations Office 618 3066.

Callers who know the extension of
their member should dial 618 and
then the four-digit number.

Case studies:

Private Member's Bill

The Refugee Council tried for some time to get better legal protection for refugees in Irish law. Eventually a lawyer they knew encouraged an opposition TD to introduce a Bill and worked with him on the draft. The Irish Refugee Council contributed amendments. The Bill was defeated in the Dáil, but the experience was embarrassing for the government: It set up a committee which recommended there be government legislation. Refugee Bills were then introduced by two successive governments. Eventually, the Refugee Act, 1996 was passed (though getting it implemented was another story).

Using experience to make better legislation

Although drafting legislation is a complex exercise, voluntary organisations may be able to contribute more than they imagine. Earthwatch wrote up an account of years of the practical struggle it had with local authorities to get information on the environment. Its report was studied carefully and influenced the shape and terms of the Freedom of Information Bill, designed to avoid problems already encountered in practice.

Members of the Dáil

Sometimes the first task of a group is to find out who is their public representative. For the Dáil, the country is divided into 42 constituencies, each with three, four or five deputies.

Outside Dublin and Cork, constituencies generally follow county boundaries, though some counties may be grouped together.

The names of each deputy are listed in the State directory and the IPA *Yearbook*. More simply, one may contact Leinster House and ask, or visit the website. Then it is important to decide which one to approach, or to approach all of them for the constituency. For the sake of neutrality, most community organisations approach each of their deputies, partly to see who can be the most effective but also to prevent the issue being cornered by one political party or individual rather than another. Most deputies do not take offence at their fellow members being approached – there is little they can do about it anyway – and most expect groups to seek the support of all the political parties on a given issue.

Organisations that have gone to the trouble of personally meeting a large number of members often find that this pays off when the issue which concerns them comes up and a large number of knowledgeable deputies or senators rise to support them.

For national voluntary organisations without a local connection, the problem of who to approach is somewhat different.

Most will approach ministers, deputies, senators or councillors who have a particular interest in the subject concerned or they will approach opposition spokespersons who cover their area of interest. In terms of timing, approaching public representatives and their parties in the period coming up to an election may be especially effective.

Senators

Identifying a senator to support one's cause presents a different set of problems, since senators have a different set of constituencies. The obvious approach is to ask the appropriate party spokesperson in the senate on the particular issue. University graduates have clearly identifiable representatives, though in practice many people who approach the university senators have no connection to the colleges in question. A more practical approach is to find out which individual senators are interested in the issue in question, or to locate one who lives nearest to the group in question (There are proportionately more senators for the rural areas). Many senators are aspiring candidates for the Dáil and are active in local politics, so this should not present a difficulty.

Many groups underestimate the value of the Seanad. Although its powers are less than those of the Dáil, it is possible to introduce and amend Bills in the Seanad, debate private member's motions there and raise matters on the adjournment. Senators have a lighter workload than the deputies of the Dáil, which means that they may be able to devote more time to policy questions and participate more actively in the joint committees of both houses. Several, particularly the university senators, have made an exceptional contribution to policy issues. At certain times, the Seanad may be found in session when the Dáil is not.

The ability of voluntary organisations to nominate Seanad candidates has, likewise, been poorly appreciated. In 1977, for example, the National Youth Council ran a candidate for the Seanad in order to highlight issues affecting Irish youth. The Simon Community has supported a senator campaigning on issues of poverty and homelessness. It is open to national voluntary organisations to register as bodies which can nominate candidates for election to the Seanad under some of the panels and thereby raise issues which concern them. However, once registered, they are not obliged to run candidates. Instead, some wait for independent Seanad hopefuls or party senators to come to them for a nomination. Nominating bodies may then remind senators elected through their nomination and get favourable access to that senator subsequently.

Case studies:

Amending a Bill in the Seanad

The Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) tried to strengthen the role of the Legal Aid Board to include educational functions. FLAC, with the Coolock Community Law Centre, drafted amendments to the Civil Legal Aid Bill, 1995 which it sent to the minister handling the Bill and the respective spokespeople in each of the political parties. FLAC also approached the university senators, on whose support the government then depended for the passing of the Bill. The amendments as drafted were not used, but the government put forward alternatives which were passed. Although much more limited than had been hoped for, the concept of an educational role for the board was accepted in principle.

Amending the Refugee Bill in the Seanad

During the passage of the Refugee Bill in the Seanad, the Irish Refugee Council and others proposed a set of amendments to improve the rights of refugees. The government did not have an overall majority in the Seanad at the time and was vulnerable. The council presented position papers and held briefing sessions for senators in an adjacent hotel room. The amendments gathered strong support and the government faced defeat or long delays. One opposition amendment was defeated by only one vote; on another, the minister introduced a government amendment to take account of opposition views.

Some voluntary organisations that nominate senators

Irish Georgian Society
Library Association
Irish Countrywomen's Association
National Youth Council
Irish Wheelchair Association
National Association for Cerebral Palsy
National Association for the Mentally Handicapped of Ireland
National Association for the Deaf
Multiple Sclerosis Society of Ireland
Irish Kidney Association
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Notices regarding nominating bodies for the Seanad are posted in the national press from time to time; or enquiries may be made to the Clerk of the Seanad, Seanad Éireann, Dublin 2, Tel 1890 732623

Case study: *Councillors helping in the health boards*

Some councillors are members of health boards. When the South City Treatment Services Group in Dublin was trying to get a new local drug treatment service into the south inner city, they found that progress was quite slow at one stage. They asked some of the Dublin Corporation councillors for the area to arrange a meeting with the officials of the health board to get a discussion on these problems, especially a location for the new project. The officials said it wasn't necessary for the project to do this, but the involvement of councillors in setting up the meeting does seem to have unblocked some delays.

Councillors

The names of councillors (though not their home addresses) are listed in the IPA *Yearbook*. Alternatively, one may contact the nearest local authority (e.g. the county council) and ask for the names, addresses and phone numbers of the councillor for one's district or ward. Councillors may ask formal questions of officials (echoing the procedure in the Dáil). They can take up issues with officials in writing or personally and put them under pressure to respond more effectively to local need. Councillors have the authority to introduce a motion supporting a particular cause or the work of a group and have it discussed and adopted. They may arrange for the group and to have the opportunity to address the council, though this is only likely to happen if the council has already expressed a concern about the issue. The councillor may arrange for the group to address one of the many committees of councillors in local government, which may be less prestigious but might be more useful. Presentations to the local authority may generate considerable press coverage, thereby giving the issue a further boost. Finally, councillors may be helpful intermediaries in fixing meetings with local authority officials. The councillor may also help by attending the meeting in question.

The importance of local government is often underestimated by voluntary and community organisations. The issues which affect city and county managers at local level frequently find their way into the thinking and policies of the Department of the Environment & Local Government at national level. For example, the department is careful, in developing housing policy, to consult with local authority housing managers to ascertain their problems and concerns. Vocational Education Committees have close links with the Department of Education & Science and so on. Groups which successfully influence local government may therefore be having an effect on national thinking of which they may be unaware.

Councillors are important points of influence within the political system and within their own parties. Although their powers are limited, which is a source of frustration to them, they are listened to carefully by local government officials and members of their own political party. Many may have good access to the media. Councillors have positions on health boards, vocational education committees and some groups which are responsible for local development. Some go on later to be members of the Oireachtas. Because they comprise the electorate for the Seanad, many members of that house are anxious to co-operate with them. Voluntary organisations and community groups which develop a good working relationship with a councillor often find that it pays dividends years later.

The first meeting

Most groups make their first approach to a public representative by letter, stating who they are and outlining their case. It is important that groups are brief and to the point. Deputies may receive a hundred letters a day and busy people do not have time to read long letters. Accordingly, the group should explain its case on one page only, though there is nothing to stop it supplying additional material either then or later. Many voluntary organisations and groups approach their first meeting with their deputy, senator or councillor with trepidation. Normally they may meet them either in their official offices (Leinster House or the county hall respectively) or sometimes in their clinic or even in their home. Constituency clinics are generally held out of normal working hours, often in a room over a pub, the times being advertised on notices placed on shop fronts and in local newspapers. For groups meeting their deputy in Leinster House, there are often delays as the member tries to get away from previous meetings, or a vote in the house or other business. Such meetings are often short, since the deputy will have a range of meetings before and afterwards. This means that the group must explain its case reasonably quickly and make efficient use of the time available. There may well be interruptions from the phone, with people coming in and out.

Single page man

"I don't make any bones about it – I operated the department on the basis of no long files, no long reports. Put it on a single sheet. If I need more information I know where I can get it."

*Albert Reynolds,
former Taoiseach and minister*

Case study:

Overcoming fear

Many voluntary organisations and community groups find the process of approaching the power houses of the state and the local authorities to be daunting. The Limerick Travellers Development Group, in dealing with the Corporation in the city, decided to go ahead anyway and ask the city manager for a meeting – which he agreed to without difficulty. The principle and process of consultation and participation in decision-making was accepted, providing a valuable first step in the establishment of a Traveller accommodation committee in the corporation. The group got permission to use the council building for an exhibition and to launch a document there. Familiarity with the council, its officials and elected representatives, was crucial in the group's efforts to improve accommodation for Travellers in the city and also built support in other branches of the council's work (e.g. the engineering department).

Case study:

Ministerial meeting

The Minister of State responsible for rural renewal began a programme for the introduction of one-stop shops for information, services and development in the rural areas. Irish Rural Link was not convinced that this was the right way forward and that other options for delivering services in the rural areas should be considered. It ran a series of meetings around the country on rural services. It asked for – and got – a meeting with the minister on the issue. The case it made at that meeting and the evidence presented were crucial to the whole issue. It obviously convinced him, because the final report, whilst it mentioned one-stop-shops, also discussed Irish Rural Link's other proposals.

Checklist for meeting one's public representative

- Select two or three people
- Appoint people who can get their case across articulately
- Agree on what each party will do next
- Arrange to keep in contact. Provide a phone number
- Write afterwards to express thanks, noting the points of agreement and work to be undertaken

Developing the relationship

Ideally, a relationship with a deputy, senator or councillor should mature over time and the two parties should learn to trust, respect and value one other. Public representatives value voluntary organisations and community groups which provide them with regular, accurate and useful information, who understand the limits of what they can do and who give them credit for work done. Voluntary and community organisations in turn value public representatives who keep an issue alive for them and give them support and useful advice.

Working with political parties

There are several ways of influencing political parties, such as by meeting the general secretary, research and policy staff at headquarters, a particular policy committee, or by getting an introduction to particular people in the party with a shared interest. Some organisations have arranged meetings with the youth wings of parties; for youth groups are often keenly interested in policy questions and have good access to the 'adult' party. Others have got to meet the front bench or front bench committees of opposition parties, the very people who cross-examine government in the Oireachtas and may later become ministers themselves. Some voluntary and community organisations offer to speak to branch meetings about their particular concern or interest. The results from doing so are rarely immediate, but they can be significant in the medium and long term. Sometimes, opposition parties set up review groups to overhaul their policies, while in opposition, and invite outside views. These provide additional opportunities.

4.7 Working with public bodies

Approaching government departments and semi-state bodies is different from dealing with public servants. Departments operate within a given set of boundaries and policies. Public servants are not expected to subvert existing sets of policies (whereas some politicians love to do so). On the other hand, they can welcome support for existing sets of policies and current departmental priorities and there can be considerable latitude for what can be done within existing boundaries. In dealing with government departments, voluntary organisations and community groups often find the pace less frenetic than Leinster House, with less pressure for media attention and immediate results. Issues can be considered in a more reflective way, meetings can be longer and documentation and research can be considered in more detail. Civil servants have more time to read and study documentation than members of the Oireachtas.

As is the case with approaching deputies and senators, the first consideration for a group in approaching a government department is: Why? What do we want them to do? Are we talking to the right people? Again, the group must have a clear idea of what they expect the department to do in response. Is it to allocate resources, issue regulations, change procedures, or what? The answer to this question is not always straightforward, since the boundaries between government departments can often be blurred and the distinctions between national and local government equally unclear. Issues of child welfare, for example, have often crossed several departmental boundaries (Health, Justice, Education). The Department of Environment and Local Government may insist that a particular problem is a local authority's responsibility; with equal conviction, the latter may insist that the former is responsible. The same problems arise in the relationship between the Department of Health & Children and the health boards. So the first problem a voluntary organisation or community group faces is which part of which department to approach, why, what it wants it to do and how that department relates to other departments and organisations.

Case study:

Getting the department to fund a new type of service

The Centre for Independent Living, supported by the Irish Wheelchair Association, promoted the idea that people with disabilities should have an individual personal assistant to accompany and help them during the day.

The concept had first been tested by the Centre for Independent Living in a European Union pilot project under the HORIZON programme. While the idea was a simple one, it meant a major re-think in the way disability was considered. The centre asked the Department of Health to fund a system of personal assistants for people with disabilities, but was told the idea was too expensive.

The association:

- Used the HORIZON report to show how the service could operate;
- Contacted a large number of TDs;
- Got some high-profile media publicity;
- Persuaded the Eastern Health Board to fund a service in its region.

Eventually, in response to all the pressure, the Department set up a review group which included people with a disability and voluntary organisations. In effect, the appointment of the review group meant the department had already decided there should be such a service. The initial funding began soon afterwards.

The association had persuaded a wide range of people and groups to put pressure on the department for this change.

Checklist before approaching a government department

- Why?
- What do we want the department to do?
- Can the department deliver?
- Are we talking to the right people in the department?

Case study:

Who is responsible?

The Irish Wheelchair Association's driving school for people with a disability faced closure due to lack of resources. No government department was prepared to fund it: neither Health, Transport nor Environment. They all said no.

The association's members contacted a large number of TDs. Several people prominent in public life, who had learned (or relearned) to drive in the school, participated. A leading government senator supported the campaign.

The association identified officials in the Department of Health thought to be sympathetic to their case, asking them, more modestly, simply to look at their case. They kept up the pressure and not long afterwards were invited to discuss the funding arrangements.



The second problem for a group to decide is which officials to approach. The *State directory* and the *IPA Yearbook* list officials responsible in each department and their rank, providing a similar listing for the officials of the local authorities. Most will approach the head of each unit, but may in the event find themselves dealing with a more junior person either in correspondence or in person. It is a mistake for groups to assume that they should necessarily aim to deal with very senior people all the time. Matters of policy and practice are often decided by people further down the line who are regarded as the department's expert on a particular issue. The people above will normally respect and defer to the more junior official's judgement and are slow to overturn it simply because of strong representations made on the outside.



4.8 Working with the consultative process

Government and the Oireachtas consult groups, organisations and the many different interest groups of society in different ways – both on an on-going basis and through particular mechanisms. The principal ones are:

- Temporary commissions, task forces and review bodies;
- Oireachtas committees; and
- The local consultation and planning process.

Governments use commissions extensively in their work (Sometimes they have other titles, such as working groups, task forces, initiatives and so on). For voluntary and community organisations, they provide a window of opportunity to influence the decision-making process. Even if the commission does not act as fulsomely on their proposals as they would like, the resulting report can often be a valuable reference document for some time to come.

Voluntary and community groups are, of course, free to make proposals to national or local government, state agencies, or any body at any time. Many groups make policy submissions to government departments from time to time, either to inform general departmental thinking or to address a specific issue. Several groups find the preparation of these policy documents to be of considerable internal value to their own organisation, because they help to sort out their own internal policies and priorities and oblige them to assemble their own documentation and information. Officials in these departments generally do read these documents. Most officials like to stay up to date with the thinking, approach and views of voluntary groups, both for its own sake and because to do so may give them ideas for the development of these and other services in the future. Many voluntary groups and community organisations will ask for a meeting on their policy submissions and this can provide a useful occasion for the exchange of ideas on the text in question, as well as give the organisations concerned an idea of departmental thinking.

Case study:

Finding the right person

The Limerick Travellers Development Group worked hard to get a community health service for Travellers in the city. The group identified the senior social worker, the director of public health and their colleagues as the crucial people to win over in trying to get the service (not the chief executive officer). They were in regular contact with them and persuaded the director of public health to visit Traveller sites around the city, showing him the difficult situation in which Travellers found themselves, pointing to their vision of how a community-based service might work and thanking him for his interest. The group also enlisted the support of board members, including a former lord mayor and senator. Eventually, after two years, funding was allocated to the group for two part-time health workers and the board made moves to establish a Traveller health unit.

Some Commissions and similar bodies that have advertised for submissions

- National Anti-Poverty Strategy Review
- Immigration Policy Consultation
- Commission on the Family
- Dublin Transportation Initiative
- Review of the Structure and Organisation of Prison Health Services
- Review Group on the Constitution
- Women in Sport Task Force
- Expert Working Group on Childcare
- Disabled Drivers and Passengers Tax Concessions Scheme
- National Drugs Strategy
- The Commission on the Family received 525 submissions, 44 per cent of which came from voluntary and community organisations. The Commission received 450 calls on its comment line. In addition, it held a day of public consultation.

Why governments appoint commissions

- Not sure what to do
- As a holding action, so as to consider various options and their implications
- In order to try to build a political consensus about what to do next, not just with the other political parties, but with all the interested parties
- To find expert opinion on a knotty problem
- As a delaying action, possibly due to lack of resources
- To get better co-ordination between government departments, local administration and voluntary organisations
- To try to resolve inter-departmental rivalry
- To monitor a programme which has run for some years
- To legitimise a new area of government action
- To anticipate the effects of decisions taken elsewhere or the external environment (e.g. new countries joining the European Union, The Information Society)

A widely-used strategy is for voluntary organisations and community groups to present a policy submission in response to an invitation from a government committee, commission, review group, task force or other group preparing a White Paper or a Green Paper. These occasions provide an opportunity for organisations to make a case with other groups and to build up pressure for change. Some committees not only take written submissions but ask for oral presentations which give groups the opportunity to meet the individual members of the committee in person. Some groups specifically request such meetings.

Many committees consult with those whom they consider to be the key players. The most important feature of such committees is that there is the expectation that the views of these organisations will be taken into account in the analysis and recommendations and that government action will follow. Voluntary organisations and community groups often criticise committees which fail, in their view, to take adequate account of their proposals; and criticise governments which fail to act on foot of their reports.

Government commissions which wish to receive views normally advertise in the national press. They generally give organisations a month or so to respond. A contact person in a government department is normally identified. Organisations and individuals who make proposals are normally sent a complimentary copy of the eventual report and their contribution is acknowledged in the annexe (whether or not any note is taken of what they say). They may be invited to its launch.

Next, the guide reviews how voluntary and community organisations may best approach and work with Oireachtas committees; and participate in the local processes of consultation.

Oireachtas committees

Several Oireachtas committees (See 2.1) ask for submissions and proposals from time to time, generally on specific subjects of interest to them. Some have commissioned research and have interacted with a range of external groups. Sometimes, voluntary organisations and community groups ask on their own initiative to meet Oireachtas committees. This provides a useful opportunity to meet a number of deputies and senators at a time, to get a dialogue going on the questions concerned, to build up support and to have the presentation noted for the record.

Each committee is assigned a clerk from the staff of Leinster House (names are listed in the IPA *Yearbook*). Joint committees comprise senators and deputies. For voluntary organisations and community groups, making a presentation to a committee can provide useful publicity (The media are normally present. See case study). The support of a committee for its viewpoint can be quite a boost and carry considerable moral effect.



Case study:

Presentation to Oireachtas committee

The Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) were invited to make a presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Women's Rights. FLAC duly spoke about the need for legal aid to assist women facing domestic violence. The presentation lasted 10mins, followed by 30mins cross-examination. The press coverage was so extensive that the Minister concerned publicly attacked FLAC, leading to FLAC's return to the committee for further discussions. The upshot was that domestic violence became prioritised in the caseload of the state legal aid centres.

Case study:

Talking to the key people

A number of years ago, the St Michael's Estate Blocks Committee, Inchicore, Dublin 8 reacted strongly when Dublin Corporation withdrew its estate officer for the area. The officer had responsibility for tenancies, allocations, maintenance, repairs and other issues in the area. In trying to get the service restored, the committee decided to concentrate on two groups: local councillors and senior management in the Corporation.

The committee entered into a long period of intense contact with key councillors for the ward, getting councillors to debate the issue in the city council and on the housing subcommittee; and persuading them to raise the issue repeatedly with officials. They contacted the city manager, the principal officer in housing, and the assistant principal officer in housing, keeping up a constant stream of letters and phone calls. They invited the officials out on to the estate to see conditions for themselves, making it easier for them to change the decision. After several months, the service was restored.

Local consultation process

Leaving aside local economic and social development, the most frequent point of contact between community groups and the local authorities may concern planning applications. Applicants for planning permission must file an application with the authority (where it is open to inspection); place a notice in the newspaper; and erect a notice at the site itself. Local authorities are obliged to consider all objections made by individuals and organisations.

There is no set form for objections, which range from the short and hand-written, to extensive, well documented reports.

A community group dissatisfied with the decision of a local authority to grant a permission may appeal, within a month, to An Bord Pleanála (a fee is required), which appoints an inspector to report and then adjudicates the matter. Community groups may (at extra cost) ask the inspector for an oral hearing and this will normally be granted where significant issues of public interest are involved. Oral hearings are conducted by the inspector, who invites (or may compel) interested parties to present their views before filing a report with recommendations. These public hearings can provide a significant opportunity for local planning and environmental issues to be presented by community groups and to be heard before the local and even national press.

Large-scale developments, such as factories, urban development projects and infrastructural schemes are required under European law to have Environmental Impact Statements (EIS).

The developer must commission a study of the likely effect of a proposed development on the environment; the statement must be available on request; and it must then be assessed by the local authority before permission is given. Industrial, chemical and pharmaceutical developments must also apply for an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) Licence from the Environmental Protection Agency. Developers applying for an IPC must advertise their intention in a manner similar to a planning application, giving the opportunity for objections to be made by individuals and community groups to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The local authorities are obliged to draw up a development plan every five years which initiates a process of consultation. The plan is normally put on display for a number of months. Written comments are invited. Although the number received may be quite considerable, it is unclear how much attention each receives and what overall impact they have. The impact which community groups make may well depend on their ability to mobilise public and press interest outside the consultative process itself. Special inquiries may also be held, with written or oral submissions invited (e.g. Dublin light rail). Under the Planning & Development Act, 2000, new procedures were introduced whereby local authorities must consult with local communities. Local area plans are given formal, legal recognition.

Case study:

Making reports work effectively at local level

The Integrated Services Initiative was an attempt to develop a range of responses to poverty in Dublin city. The project drew up the report *Common Goals, Unmet Needs – Meaningful Collaboration in Tackling Exclusion in Dublin's North East Inner City*. Central to its approach was developing a partnership with the full range of statutory agencies working in the city on these issues. To get their co-operation, the initiative made a point of:

- Sending the report to each public agency in the area;
- Summarising the report at a briefing session for all state bodies;
- Asking for specific comments on the report;
- Meeting each body separately to discuss it.

These meetings opened communications, cleared misunderstandings, found out where some agencies had reservations and suggested ways in which the initiative should reconsider its proposals. The text of the report was the focus for each such meeting. Many agencies also commented favourably on the clear presentational style of the report.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all those who assisted with the research, provided case studies or responded to requests for information. The following kindly assisted:

First edition:

Lyla Crosson, Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform; Janice Ransom, One Parent Exchange and Network; Susan O'Donnell, Dublin City University; Chris Fahey, Mahon Disability Awareness Group; Angela Walsh, Community Action Network; Feargall Connolly, Community Response; Eithne FitzGerald; Mike Allen, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed; Jerome Connolly, Irish Commission for Justice & Peace; Anne Duffy, Irish Foreign Adoptions Group; Suzanne Nolan, Áit na nDaoine; Nadette Foley, Irish Refugee Council; Geraldine Memagh and Inez Bailey, National Adult Literacy Agency; Niall Crowley, Pavee Point; Fr Sean Healy, Conference of Religious in Ireland; Trish Brennan, Blocks committee, St Michael's Estate; Anne Winslow, Irish Wheelchair Association; Noel Martin, Ballymun Task Force; Margaret Dromey, Treoir; Maureen Kavanagh, Clondalkin Women's Network; Aileen O'Donoghue, Clondalkin Partnership; Rebecca Loughry, Knocknaheeny *We the people project*; Ger Doherty, Integrated Services Initiative; Sabha Greene, FLAC; Sarah Kelleher, Lourdes Youth & Community Services; Rosemary Daly, Irish Haemophilia Society; Mary Higgins; Liz Riches and Angela Glen, Interagency Drugs Project; David Moore, Astronomy Ireland; Thelma Blehein, Helen Landers, South-East Community Development Network; Maura Walsh, Integrated Rural Development LEADER, Duhallow; John Bennett, North Clondalkin Community Development Project; Columba Faulkner, Society of St Vincent de Paul; Sharon O'Halloran, Eiri Corca Baiscinn; Siobhan O'Donoghue, Community Workers Co-operative; Evelyn Fanning, Westside Galway Community Development Project; Evelyn Glynn, Tuam Community Development Project; Una Ní Chuinn, Irish Rural Link; Anne O'Donovan, Mahon Community Development Project; Brian Trench, Dublin City University; Susan O'Donnell, Dublin City University; Sean Lawless, Focus on Children; Heidi Vormhagen, NODE; Frank Litton, Institute of Public Administration; Mary Murphy, Society of St. Vincent de Paul; Mel Cousins; and Neil Newman, PLANET.

Second edition:

Bernard O'Shea, Legal Aid Board; Declan Taaffe, Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs; Seán Bell, Department of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development; Ray Henry, National Drugs Strategy Team; Helen Clohessy, IBEC; Louise O'Neill, OPEN; John Quirke, Law Reform Commission; Bernadette Loughrey, Reception & Integration Agency; Mary Murphy, Central Statistics Office; Sharyn Long, People with Disabilities in Ireland; Tony Crooks, ADM; GERALYN McGARRY, Comhairle; Cecilia Forrestal, Community Action Network; David Silke, NESF; Tara Keogh, ICTU; and the Institute of Public Health.

Within the Combat Poverty Agency itself I would especially like to thank Clare Farrell, June Meehan, Jim Walsh, Margaret O'Gorman and Helen Johnston for their comments and assistance.

Brian Harvey

Working for Change – A Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland

looks at how voluntary and community organisations in Ireland can influence policy-making and help to bring about change. It describes how the political and administrative systems work; how, where and when groups can intervene; and advises on the skills and strategies needed to get involved in making a difference, whether at a local, regional or national level.

€10

**Combat Poverty Agency**

Bridgewater Centre
Conyngham Road
Islandbridge
Dublin 8

Tel: 01 6706746
Fax: 01 6706760
email: info@cpa.ie