

TASKFORCE ON ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP REPORT PUBLISHED - GOVERNMENT ACCEPTS RECOMMENDATIONS

The report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship was launched on the 28th March 2007 by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D., in Government Buildings. The Taoiseach established the Taskforce in April 2006 to advise the Government on policy measures which could be undertaken to support, encourage and promote citizenship in a changing Ireland.

Addressing the launch, the Taskforce Chairperson, Ms Mary Davis, CEO of Special Olympics Ireland, welcomed the Taoiseach's announcement that the government has accepted the Taskforce recommendations, including the establishment of an Active Citizenship Office which will oversee the implementation phase. Ms Davis has accepted an invitation from the Taoiseach to chair the new Office's steering group.

The Taskforce Chairperson also expressed her thanks to the thousands of people who contributed to the Taskforce's extensive public consultation on the issue of active citizenship. Ms Davis said that the Taskforce had concluded that there was little evidence of a decline in the quantity of voluntary activity, despite concerns expressed about the many different types of pressure on people today. However, there had been a worrying decline in voting in elections, a key indicator of civic engagement.

"As we all know, Ireland is a fast-changing, more diverse society and this is changing how we interact with each other" Ms Davis said.

"This requires a more conscious effort to maintain a strong culture of civic engagement and sense of community and the Taskforce has identified a range of measures which we believe will support this through a national effort to promote Active Citizenship across Irish society."

The main Taskforce recommendations to Government include:

- an independent electoral commission to encourage everyone who is eligible to register and vote in elections, to support voter education programmes and to provide data, research and analysis on political engagement and awareness.
- National Presidential Citizen Awards to recognize outstanding contributions to civic and community life.
- a formal Citizenship Ceremony to mark admission to Irish citizenship and to engage and welcome newcomers. This could apply to all Irish citizens when they reach the age of eighteen.
- a National Active Citizenship theme each year to stimulate local initiatives and events. This initiative would culminate in an Active Citizenship Week.
- the group insurance scheme currently open to members of Local Community and Voluntary Fora to be promoted widely amongst relevant organisations and groups. This measure would counter prohibitive insurance costs for many community initiatives.

- an initiative to help community and voluntary organisations to meet compliance costs and ensuring these costs are proportionate.
- a programme in the public service to promote community engagement and participation, for example, by providing some time off for voluntary effort and through pre-retirement courses.
- the priority provision by Local Authorities of community and recreational facilities as a part of the planning process.
- an audit of existing community facilities to be undertaken by Local Authorities through the County/City Development Boards.
- better use to be made of schools at evening and weekend time, to act as community hubs.
- the expansion of education for citizenship in the school system and in the youth and adult education sectors.
- a certificate/award which would be earned through completing at least three months volunteering or community involvement activity (in Ireland or overseas)
- an initiative to promote, support and link together initiatives across the Higher Education sector.
- a National Observatory to act as a focal point for research on civic engagement.

The Taskforce has also set “a number of ambitious but realisable targets”:

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

Copies of the report are available online at www.activecitizen.ie or from:

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