
Online consultation with Member States

Survey response 1

Information details

Name of the State:
Ireland
The institution responding to the survey:
Department of Foreign Affairs

Questions

1. What innovative practices did authorities in your state adopt to facilitate civil society's input to decision-making during the COVID-19 crisis, including through online channels? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

Legal Aid Board:

One benefit that emerged from the pandemic was the use of video conferencing technology to engage more extensively with stakeholders. The Legal Aid Board ("the Board") established a Consultative Panel a number of years ago. The purpose of the Panel is to provide a forum to enable the Board to keep external stakeholders informed and updated on relevant developments in the areas in which the Board has an interest and to facilitate stakeholders to provide feedback and assistance to the Board on the Board's services from the perspective and informed position of the stakeholder. The Panel met on nine occasions over the course of 2020 and 2021 with all meetings taking place online. The virtual nature of the meetings allowed for significantly more engagement.

The stakeholders involved on the Panel are representatives of bodies with an interest in the Board's activities. Membership is relatively fluid and includes NGOs, who bring a useful perspective and includes representatives from, among others, the Law Society, the Bar Council, the Courts Service, the Citizens Information Board, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, FLAC, Women's Aid, One Family, Community Law and Mediation, the Children's Rights Alliance, Mercy Law, St. Vincent de Paul and Sage Advocacy.

The Board recognises that many of the Panel members, particularly NGOs, are key 'gateways' for the Board's services. The opportunity to deepen relationships with the stakeholder organisations and build better awareness was very welcome and in turn helped the Board reach more of those who need its services.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth continues to oversee and implement a suite of Equality Strategies. Key to these strategies implementation is their Strategy Committees. These Committees are in place to oversee implementation of the relevant Strategy, and includes civil society groups, which represent wider society. The Committees meet quarterly and these meetings have continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, having moved online. The Equality Strategies are as follows:

- National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy.
- National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.
- National Strategy for Women and Girls.
- National Disability Strategy.
- Migrant Integration Strategy.

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD):

Community Call Learning for the Future Webinar

Through sharing information across various agencies and communities, DRCD quickly identified some underlying issues that were exacerbating the effects of the pandemic including food poverty, digital poverty, and poor mental health. Working groups were set up to address these issues and this resulted in Public Participation Networks collaborating in initiatives that included food distribution, supporting access to digital connections, funding, training, peer support and insurance provision, as well as providing programmes and activities to support wellbeing.

Emphasis on Public Participation Networks (PPNs)/Local Authority cooperation

Within the Community Call initiative set up in response to Covid-19, Public Participation Networks (PPNs) are working together with local authorities and carrying out initiatives of their own to help vulnerable people in their localities. These include setting up mental health phone supports, coordinating food donations, and serving as a crucial information hub for local groups, passing information from national sources such as the HSE to local level as well as developing their own information resources tailored to their own area.

Specific examples:

- Many PPNs worked with the Irish Red Cross to link food donations to community groups undertaking food provision
- Wexford PPN linked with other groups to offer volunteers to carry out dog walking for older people cocooning and vulnerable people who were self-isolating.
- Longford PPN have worked with the Longford Community Champion to roll out the HEAR FOR YOU listening service as a positive outlet for people experiencing isolation and depression.

2. Are there innovative practices that authorities in your country used to enable safe and inclusive online participation, which encourages a diversity of participation, with a particular emphasis on underrepresented parts of civil society? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, every effort was made to ensure that consultations with civil society continued in a safe and inclusive manner, accessible to all stakeholders. Some recent examples can be found below:

Legal Aid Board:

In 2021, the Board commenced an initiative to better support the legal needs of the Traveller community. The Board engaged with FLAC's Traveller Support Project, Mercy Law, Community Law and Mediation and UCC Traveller Equality and Justice Project in this area. The Board appointed a solicitor to lead the Board's work in improving legal supports to the Traveller community. The service includes, though is not limited to online participation. A number of other staff will be trained on legal needs of travellers and the cultural aspect. The Board was also involved in a number of online training events that had input or were facilitated by NGOs in the past two years.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY):

UPR

In advance of Ireland's UPR examination, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth engaged with civil society through a consultation process. The Department invited written submissions from interested parties and an online consultation event with stakeholder groups took place on 7 May 2021.

National Action Plan against Racism

Ireland's Anti-Racism Committee held a Public Consultation on the development of a new National Action Plan against Racism. The consultation ran for 12 weeks from April to July 2021. During this phase, the Committee accepted written submissions, conducted an online survey, and held a series of facilitated consultation sessions online with stakeholders in May, June and July in order better to understand the nature and different forms of racism that are present in Ireland today. These sessions addressed different themes such as access to justice; media and new technologies; inclusion and participation; and others identified by the Committee as being of particular concern in the fight against racism. Over 100 written submissions were made.

Consultation on Equality, Integration, Family Leave and work-life balance

Consultation with civil society stakeholders on the development of Government policy in the area of equality, integration, family leaves and work-life balance has also continued in this period, through inviting written submissions in response to consultations and meetings held online. Examples include the consultation on the review of equality legislation, which is ongoing.

3. Do you have examples of good practice in including civil society in designing and implementing strategies to respond to the pandemic? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

Department of Justice (Still Here campaign):

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic the Department of Justice identified the need for specific action to protect victims and potential victims of domestic abuse, including sexual violence – and to ensure people knew that help remained available to them. The #StillHere campaign was developed in collaboration with a number of NGOs working on the frontline. It formed part of an action-orientated, inter-agency plan, involving coordinated action across all relevant agencies in the sector to ensure that victims and potential victims of domestic abuse, including sexual violence knew where and how to seek help. This partnership was critical in ensuring that the campaign could meet the key concerns of victims and reach as broad an audience as possible. In addition, NGO services availed of additional funding provided to adapt their services to ensure continued availability.

The DOJ ran a public awareness campaign that involved state and non-state actors cooperating as full partners to achieve a common goal, with a common message and a dedicated website as touchstone for all (www.stillhere.ie). The campaign included traditional as well as social media and featured targeted press releases to all counties in Ireland to provide specially tailored local messaging. To deliver the public awareness campaign, the Department's Transparency function engaged broadly with civil society stakeholders and identified the organisations maintaining national helplines.

Agreement was reached to deliver the campaign jointly, as a partnership with the following organisations: Women's Aid, National Women's Council of Ireland, Safe Ireland, Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, Rape Crisis Network Ireland, and the Men's Development Network. This partnership was critical in ensuring that the campaign could meet the key concerns of victims and reach as broad an audience as possible.

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD):

DRCD published the COVID-19 Action Plan on 20th March, as a first step to support the community response.

Its three key initiatives were: letting people know how and where to volunteer through our partnership with Volunteer Ireland and our network of Volunteer Centres; increasing community supports for older people through a partnership with ALONE for their crisis telephone support line and follow through practical supports; and launching an email helpdesk supporting smaller community groups to access the information and support they required.

DRCD produced a COVID-19 Communication Pack for Communities, offering practical advice and information on topics including: sensible volunteering, information on community supports and the prevention of fraud and theft. In April 2020, a collective of 14 civil society representative groups spanning a broad spectrum of the community and voluntary sector, submitted a paper outlining their proposal for 'A Stability Package for Charities, Social Enterprises & Community and Voluntary Organisations'.

Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment

Engagement has taken place between Government, trade unions and employer representatives, under the auspices of the Labour Employer Economic Forum throughout the pandemic, especially in relation to the development of the guidance required for employers and workers to ensure the safe operation of workplaces. A consultative stakeholder forum, under the aegis of Labour Employer Economic Forum, which is the forum for high-level dialogue between Government, Trade Union and Employer representatives on matters related to the labour force, was established to oversee development and implementation of the Work Safely Protocol (WSP), which takes account of the latest COVID-19 Public Health advice and decisions made by Government based on this advice. Members of the Stakeholder Forum are Ibec, CIF, ICTU, SIPTU, the HSA, the HSE, the Department of Health, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, Department of Health, and the Department of Taoiseach. As the advice issued by Government and NPHET continues to evolve, the WSP and the measures employers and workers need to address has evolved.

The Protocol is a general document applicable to all sectors. On foot of the updating of the WSP, all businesses and sectors who have specific guidance are required to review and update their guidance in line with the advice contained in the Protocol. In addition to the Protocol document there a range of complementary material available for workplaces including a checklist and posters which are promoted by Trade Union and Employer representative bodies, to make it easier to communicate the measures advised.

4. Do you have examples of innovative steps taken to minimise the impact of measures imposed during the pandemic, including emergency measures, on the free and safe functioning of civil society and on public freedoms (of expression, access to information, assembly, and association) as well as on the protection of personal data and privacy? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

Department of Justice:

Despite restrictions being put in place in terms of physical movement and gatherings, in attempts to best protect public health, the Irish Government has ensured that these restrictions are only limited to physical gatherings and there is no equivalent online and that these restrictions are temporary in nature.

In order to protect human life and public safety some associated enforcement powers have been provided for An Garda Síochána. An independent statutory body, the Policing Authority, have published each of their reports and assessments on the additional exercise of powers by An Garda Síochána. Extra provisions have also been made to ensure that existing oversight mechanisms remain in place. This has included the use of remote or virtual meetings that are live-streamed, between An Garda Síochána and the Policing Authority. Active cooperation and partnership between the State and civil society actors was also a feature of the justice sector response to the pandemic. This included involvement of human rights NGOs in the process of oversight by the Policing Authority of enforcement action by An Garda Síochána.

Legal Aid Board:

The Board established a national helpline on 31 March, 2020 to provide information on civil legal aid and family mediation services. Among other things, this service sought to assist people who were experiencing difficult family issues that were being exacerbated by the pandemic restrictions. The delivery of the helpline played a key role in allowing the Board to continue to provide customer services during the pandemic.

The Board participated in the Still Here Campaign, a media campaign developed by the Department of Justice in collaboration with frontline services that sought to reassure victims of domestic violence that services are 'still here' during the pandemic, and that victims are being prioritised.

The Board also took steps to ensure that whatever the restrictions, legal services would be available on demand in cases involving domestic violence or children at risk. Steps included the establishment of a duty solicitor service at the Board's District Court Office at Dolphin House, Dublin which services the Dublin Metropolitan area.

In 2020 the Board also established a number of 'settlement hubs' which were aimed at giving people experiencing difficult family problems, a facility to try to negotiate a resolution of the issues (in the absence of being able to do so in as timely a manner as normal through the court process).

5. Did authorities in your state implement any innovative measures to protect and facilitate civil society access to resources in the COVID-19 context? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

Ireland implemented several funding streams throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that civil society had access to resources. Three examples of this funding are listed below:

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

DCEDIY has provided Tusla (Ireland's Child and Family Agency) with funding of €30 million to fund domestic sexual and gender bases violence services. This includes a €2.7 million increase in core services, bringing core service provision to €28 million, with an additional €2 million of one-off contingency funding being made available to help services cope with the ongoing effects of COVID-19.

DCEDIY also ran a number of funding calls throughout 2021. These programmes were rolled out online and continue to support funded organisations in delivering their projects. As part of the response to COVID-19, the department granted extensions to normal deadlines during the funding calls. The list of funding calls in 2021:

- LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call.
- Communities Integration Fund.
- Disability Participation and Awareness Fund.

Under the 2021 LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call €1.5 million was allocated to 42 LGBTI+ community service based project. Grants of up to €85,000 have were allocated to successful organisations to assist the development of rural community infrastructure to be inclusive and welcoming of LGBTI+ persons, address gaps in LGBTI+ services and support existing LGBTI+ community organisations.

Under the Communities Integration Fund, funding is made available to local communities throughout Ireland to promote the integration of migrants and refugees. Grants of up to €5,000 have been allocated to organisations to support integration initiatives. In 2020 and 2021, 224 community projects were approved funding some of which were designed to respond to the implications of COVID-19, including the provision of on-line education materials, refurbished laptops and remote supervision, psychosocial supports, and the establishment of community support networks assisting migrant families to access services.

In addition to the funding calls, and core funding allocated to a large number of NGOs, additional funding and other supports were provided to our partner Traveller organisations for the continued provision of necessary services during the COVID-19 crisis to the Traveller and Roma population, including in appropriate languages.

Department of Justice

The Covid-19 response funding from the Department of Justice is ongoing, and €4.9m is being allocated to supporting Victims of Crime under Budget 2022 - includes the retention of emergency COVID-19 funding of €400k and an additional €785,000 in direct supports to NGOs and specific domestic violence intervention programmes.

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD)

In 2020, a €50 million support package for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises was launched by DRCD. This funding was made available from the Dormant Accounts Fund and consisted of the €45m COVID-19 Stability Fund and the €5m Innovate Together Fund. Through the COVID-19 Stability Fund the DRCD supported close to 600 civil society organisations to continue to deliver vital services to the most vulnerable in our communities.

Drawing on the success of the 2020 scheme, a further allocation was made available for the 2021 COVID-19 Stability Fund, which was similarly targeted at organisations which deliver critical services to vulnerable people within their community but which faced closure or a loss of service due to the impact of the pandemic on their opportunities for fundraising and traded income.

The Innovate Together Fund is a collaboration between Government, philanthropists and social innovators. It focuses on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis. The Fund is supported by a commitment of €5 million from the Department through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, and is administered by Rethink Ireland, who raised an additional €0.6m from philanthropic donations for this initiative.

Applicants to the Innovate Together Fund came from charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations based in the State who provide services in Irish communities, i.e. addressing social, economic or educational disadvantage or supporting persons with a disability and for which there is a clear ongoing need. The second call for applications to the Fund had a particular focus on projects achieving impact in sustainability, economic recovery and community outreach.

6. Has your state identified any good practices to identify, and protect civil society from, online intimidation and attacks (e.g. online threats, harassment, organized smear campaigns etc.)? (Maximum limit: approximately 5,000 characters with spaces)

N/A