Outline of Presentation to the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

17 October 2018

- Elections to the European Parliament take place across the EU on 23-26 May next year; in Ireland probably on 24 May.

- Before European elections, the European Parliament runs an EU-wide information campaign to promote awareness of, and encourage participation in, these elections. The campaign has both central and decentralised elements.

- We use the term “information campaign” deliberately, to distinguish it from the political campaign that precede the election. Our campaign is strictly non-political and consists only of providing information, but information that is well-targeted for its intended audience.

- We seek to inform people about the work and role of the European Parliament and the remit of an MEP, as well as some of its legislative and policy achievements, particularly during the past term.

- We also highlight the date and fact of the election and explain the electoral process. For 2019, that means of course highlighting the two additional MEPs that will be returned from Ireland and the changed constituencies.

- For the time being we are proceeding on the basis of polling day on 24 May and the constituencies being as proposed by the Constituency Commission at the end of last month, but of course our job will be much easier once these elements are legally confirmed.

- Similarly, while we are anticipating local elections on the same day as European elections, we are waiting to see if there will also be one or more referendums, which will also have a bearing on the political landscape in which we are operating.

- Turnout in European elections in Ireland has tended, especially recently, to be above the EU average: in 2014 turnout here was 52% against an EU average of 43%. However, we are not exempt from the declining trend in participation in elections that we see across the Western world.

- Today, the EP has published the latest instalment of our regular Eurobarometer survey. It confirms what we know to be the overwhelmingly positive sentiment in Ireland towards the EU: 85% of respondents say that membership is a ‘good thing’, while 92% feel that Ireland has benefitted from EU membership.
However, 40% of Irish respondents said they were ‘not interested’ in the upcoming European elections. So we have two tasks: to reach out to those who are not interested and seek to interest them by explaining what is at stake in European elections; and also to galvanise those who are interested, but for one reason or another, may not actually make it to the polling station on 24 May 2019.

Of course the campaign is aimed at the entire voting-age population. However, there is one demographic segment in Ireland where voting in European elections is well below the EU average: under 25s (Turnout was 21% for this groups in 2014). Therefore, we perceive a need to place particular emphasis on younger and first-time voters.

A central plank of our campaign is www.thistimeimvoting.eu where people can go and sign up by way of a pledge to vote and to encourage their friends and family to do so to. This has been launched across the EU in the past fortnight, but we are waiting until after the Presidential election to do so here.

We envisage three distinct phases for our campaign: November to February encouraging people to make sure they are registered to vote; February to April focussing on why people should vote in European elections; and May 2019, the political campaign, where we pull back to promoting simply the date and fact of the election.

We have had initial contact with government officials in the Department for Housing Planning and Local Government about how we might work with them, particularly during the ‘voter registration’ phase of the campaign; we intend to be in touch with local authorities at the appropriate juncture, and indeed with any referendum commission that is live at the time.

More widely, we are reaching out to a wide range of civil society actors, stakeholder organisations and so on in an effort to engage them in this campaign. We hope they will help us promote www.thistimeimvoting.eu and we can offer a range of (mainly online) election materials to them for free.

One product we hope will be useful will be county-by-county leaflets containing information about the EU and the European election that is specifically relevant to that county. These will be available at the start of 2019.

This is on top of all the ‘standard’ actions EPLOs take prior to elections: an intensification of engagement with journalists and a provision of information seminars for them in Ireland and Brussels; preparation of a ‘Go To Vote’ radio advert for the last phase of the campaign, a campaign video etc.

We also intend to promote as much as possible the so-called Spitzenkandidaten (lead-candidate) process. The Parliament strongly endorsed this process in a resolution in February 2019 as in important element of transparency in the process of choosing the next President of the European Commission and a means of increasing political awareness ahead of the European elections.

We produce a monthly newsletter to provide information about our activities and wider development relevant to the 2019 European elections in Ireland.