

## **Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs:**

**The Wheel, 10 July 2019**

Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to speak to you today on the topic of alliance building to strengthen the European Union.

As European Programmes Manager for The Wheel, I am delighted to have the opportunity to present our position and thoughts on the subject. I am joined today by our Director of Public Policy, Ivan Cooper.

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises. We represent almost 1,600 member organisations and this year we proudly celebrate our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **Irish Civil Society**

Ireland's 29,000 community, voluntary and charitable organisations work day in and day out in every community in the country. They are supporting people to live independent lives, supporting people with disabilities and medical conditions and supporting older people, children and young people to realize their potential. The Charities Regulator estimates that the community and voluntary sector turns over €14 billion per annum, about half of which comes from Government sources, with the rest raised by organisations themselves. The sector employs 150,000 people as well as benefitting from the voluntary work of over 50,000 volunteer board members and over half a million 'operational' volunteers – these form the backbone of the ethos of volunteerism and social good that we pride ourselves on in Ireland.

While many community and voluntary organisations participate in European programmes such as Horizon 2020, Interreg, PEACE and Erasmus+, our experience is that there is huge unrealized potential for far greater participation in European programmes by Ireland's community and voluntary sector – and that this increased potential would greatly increase Ireland's share of European programme related funding, to the benefit of everyone.

### **The Wheel's European Programme**

By way of background, since 2015, The Wheel is the National Contact Point for the Europe for Citizens programme, which involves us promoting the programme to Irish nonprofits and driving applications upwards. The Wheel has increased applications to this programme and over €600,000 in additional funding has been awarded to Irish orgs for transnational work.

The Wheel's European work also promotes awareness of Europe, its institutions and policies. Since 2013 we have operated a number of projects funded by DG Communications to promote awareness of European values and institutions. As I am sure members will be aware, Government undertook a wide-ranging consultation in 2018 to frame Ireland's position on the 'Future of Europe'. As part of this consultation work, The Wheel hosted a citizens' dialogue on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, specifically targeted at the community and voluntary Sector.

Similarly, earlier this year The Wheel facilitated citizens' dialogues around the country, where we invited European Election candidates to engage with our members to deepen public awareness of Europe and to encourage participation in the European elections. Additionally, for

the last two years The Wheel has worked through funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Communicating Europe* initiative to promote European project development and awareness to Irish civil society organisations.

From such discussions with civil society and citizens on how to increase participation in European policymaking and policy-implementation, we have learnt that members of The Wheel are generally pro-Europe but they wish to engage more in European affairs and alliances. This however is easier said than done.

Participation in EU funded programmes is one of the key ways in which the sector can engage with counterparts in other EU countries. It is seen as the people-to-people dimension to building a stronger and ever-closer Union. Unfortunately, our activity in the field of European affairs in the past four years has concluded that Irish civil society organisations do not participate as actively in certain programmes as our European counterparts.

To enable participation in EU funded programmes, The Wheel implemented the Atlantic Philanthropies funded *Access Europe* project in the Republic of Ireland in 2018. The results of the project provided solid evidence that a support service and point of EU technical expertise for Irish civil society, is needed and works. The budget for the project was €387,150 for three years. Access Europe enabled over €22.53m of funding to Irish organisations north and south over a three year period, with 74 applications filed.

Our member surveys and discussion groups have pointed to the following key issues which act as barriers to full engagement with the EU:

- **Costs:** Members cite the costs associated with preparing applications for, and implementing, European projects, and the geographical distance from mainland Europe as barriers to entry for Irish groups.
- **Match Funding:** A special national fund should be established to serve as a matching source for organisations that are successful in their applications. This would put them on a par with publicly funded bodies (state agencies, universities, local authorities) that can avail of public funds to match EU contributions.
- **Ringfencing:** Given the inherent disadvantages faced by these organisations with small scale and limited resources, ring-fencing a share of some EU programmes' funds for the voluntary sector would help.
- **Simplification:** Navigating the complexity of European funding applications and requirements continues to discourage Irish applicants. We urge programme developers at the European Commission and nationally to continue to 'simplify' the application processes and paperwork.
- **Partnership development facility and support:** Our members lack opportunities to attend European brokerage events and partnership development meetings in Brussels and beyond. This must be addressed and facilitated.

With the departure of UK from the European Union, Ireland will be seen by other member states as a valuable source of partners and expertise in building future European partnerships across the full spectrum of economic, social and cultural life. This is because of its long experience of EU membership, its English language capability and its reputation for efficiency and innovation in the management of EU funds over the past 45 years. But the issues identified above will need to be addressed if we are to maximise participation – arguably a crucial national objective with Brexit rapidly approaching.

At The Wheel, we see it as crucial that Irish civil society organisations are at the centre of European alliance building, given their proximity to the people. Building alliances across the

now-27 member states must be as much citizens-led as it is government-led. Our members are at the heart of this relationship building and dialogue and it is through them that real partnership and mutual understanding can be achieved

As a sector that represents diverse and often unheard voices, Irish civil society should have a forum where it can engage with politicians and senior public servants on a regular basis on key European issues that affect its members. Such a forum could convene twice a year, once at senior official level and once at the political level. This would be a major step in recognising the need for a more active input and feedback mechanism for the sector on EU affairs.

I wish to thank you again, Chairman and Committee, for the opportunity to present today. I look forward to answering your questions and engaging in a positive discussion on the future of Irish civil society and citizens in the European arena.