

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOIMIRCE SHÓISÍALACH, FORBAIRT POBAIL AGUS TUAITHE AGUS NA HOILEÁIN

JOINT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ISLANDS

Dé Céadaoin, 12 Bealtaine 2021

Wednesday, 12 May 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Joe Carey,	Eugene Murphy,
Paul Donnelly,	Mark Wall.
Claire Kerrane.	

Teachta/Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: I welcome all members of the joint committee to the meeting and remind them that for a duly constituted meeting to proceed, members are required to join the meeting remotely from within the defined precincts of Leinster House only. We have received apologies from Deputies Naughten and Ó Cuív and from Senators Gavan and Garvey. I ask members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones, please, as they interfere with the recording equipment. As members are participating remotely from their offices, I ask that they click the raised hand icon at any point if they wish to contribute during the proceedings of the meeting and to remain on mute until such time as they wish to speak.

We will suspend the meeting for two minutes as we are having a technical issue.

Sitting suspended at 9.39 a.m. and resumed at 9.45 a.m.

Pre-Budget Submissions and Considerations: Discussion

Vice Chairman: We resume our meeting now and I apologise for the technical issues that delayed us. We now turn to the main item on our agenda which is our second discussion on the parliamentary budget cycle and the committee's considerations for submitting our own prebudget submissions to the Ministers for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform in advance of next autumn's budget. In this regard the committee advertised for public submissions and I again thank those stakeholder groups and individuals who submitted same. These will be of great benefit to us in our deliberations.

At our meeting this morning we will hear from two such stakeholder groups with insights in submissions from The Wheel, which is Ireland's umbrella association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises. We will also hear from Community Gardens Ireland, the representative body for more than 100 community garden and allotment groups and associations throughout the country.

The Wheel is well-placed to assess collaborative learnings and there were no doubt plenty throughout the pandemic as State agencies interlinked with members of The Wheel to deliver services of immense benefit to our citizens. The insights of The Wheel as to how budget 2022 will take shape will be invaluable in our considerations.

On Community Gardens Ireland, it was greatly uplifting to see the inventiveness of community gardeners in sharing resources and exchanging ideas across social media platforms throughout the pandemic. The benefits to people, physically and mentally, are immense as are the environmental advantages associated with allotments. As the climate change report published by the Local Government Management Agency in January 2020 outlined, there are more than 2,400 local authority allotments and 97 community gardens throughout Ireland. The insight of Community Gardens Ireland on how this community is growing and how best to support it will be useful. In this regard I welcome Ms Maeve Foreman, chairperson of Commuter Gardens Ireland; Mr. Ivan Cooper, director of policy at The Wheel; Ms Deirdre Garvey chief executive officer of The Wheel; and, attending remotely from outside of the Leinster House complex, Mr. Donal McCormack, co-chairperson of Community Gardens Ireland. They are all very welcome this morning.

Turning briefly to matters of privilege, members of this committee and of the Houses have absolute privilege in respect of statements made in either House of the Oireachtas or before the committee. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses present on the precincts of Leinster House are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are required to give to a committee. Witnesses participating remotely from outside the precincts of Leinster House may not be protected by absolute privilege and should therefore exercise caution in terms of utterances at this committee. If, in the course of committee proceedings, they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a Member of either House of the Oireachtas, a person outside of the House or an official by name in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I now call on Ms Deirdre Garvey, chief executive of The Wheel, to make her opening remarks.

Ms Deirdre Garvey: I thank the committee for the invitation to present to it about the work and importance of Ireland's community and voluntary sector, charities and social enterprises. We forwarded our submission last week. I will make a few remarks before handing over to my colleague.

The Wheel is the national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises. We are their representative body and, together with our almost 2,000 members, we shape and promote the conditions in which their work can thrive. We provide a range of practical training and quasi-business supports to help organisations do their work.

It was said well during the introduction that charities, community groups, voluntary organisations and social enterprises were an essential part of Ireland's society, but also its economy. This is an important point that we want to make at this meeting. The sector is composed of 33,000 organisations, of which more than 11,000 are registered charities. Believe it or not, it directly employs more than 160,000 people and manages an annual income and turnover of in or around €14 billion. These statistics come from the Charities Regulator and an organisation called Benefacts. A further 600,000 people are volunteering, upwards of 80,000 of whom specifically volunteer as charity trustees, namely, the volunteer boards of management of charities and community organisations.

These organisations deliver a public benefit through everything they do. They are active in the arts, culture, democracy, education, the environment, health, housing, international development, local development, religion, social services and sport as well as the representation of diverse interests in politics and the economy. Research that we are in the closing stages of finalising shows that one in every three people delivering public services in Ireland, that is, public benefit work, works for a charitable, community or voluntary organisation. Additionally, because we know that the sector generates *circa* €8 billion annually through fundraising or generation of income on top of the same amount again that is provided by the Government, the sector can increase the funds available for public benefit and public services work by 10%. As such, it is a significant sector.

The pandemic has demonstrated the extent to which we in society rely on the sector's services as well as the integral role it plays in supporting people and communities. As we will hear from Community Gardens Ireland as a perfect example, the sector provided significant

resources in terms of energy, personnel, finance and commitment during Covid that could not be replicated by the State. It delivered flexible approaches and collaborative practices that supported from micro to macro level the ongoing battle against Covid-19. Organisations re-organised services to deliver remotely, they responded to the need for socially distanced and safe services, they cut costs, they redirected resources to priority areas and they designed new service responses targeted at meeting emergent needs. They responded in this way in the face of the single greatest ever reduction in earned and fundraised income and in a context where the demand for many supports and services, including advocacy, increased significantly.

Our members in the Wheel have provided considerable value. There has been a partnership and positive relationship between the sector and the Legislature and all Departments, in particular the Department of Rural and Community Development. The stability fund that was put in place for emergency cash relief for charities and to support the continuity of the sector's work during the crisis is welcome and appreciated. Our members reported a distinct and positive improvement in the collegial and partnership nature of the relationship. It is their fervent wish that this not revert to a business-as-usual approach in the vaccine-enabled reopening of society and the economy. As such, we welcome the early focus of the committee on key issues affecting our sector.

This is not just about Covid. The recovery of the economy is only one of the challenges facing society. Ireland faces a wide range of other challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, the transformation of the economy through digital technologies and robotisation, the continued rise of economic inequality, the potential for political upheaval even within the EU, and the consequences of Brexit, not least in Northern Ireland. For many challenges, not least complex problems like mental health, climate action and care for an ageing population, the community and voluntary sector is an essential partner for the State.

Mr. Cooper will go through seven particular priorities that we wish to highlight for budgetary consideration on behalf of a wide range of our membership so that our sector can be facilitated in making the contribution that it can and wants to make to the recovery and advancement of the economy as well as community and society.

Mr. Ivan Cooper: I will discuss Ms Garvey's points. As the committee will have observed, much remarkable work was done during the crisis by community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises to redesign services. When people stayed at home, the community and voluntary sector rose to the challenge. At the same time, it was experiencing an unprecedented income collapse. I will focus on this point for a moment.

Covid has had a profound effect on many community and voluntary organisations, but the impact has been mixed. Our latest member survey reveals that half of our members - there are 1,900 or so members in the Wheel - have seen their overall incomes fall during the crisis, but a quarter have seen their incomes rise and another quarter have experienced no change. Two thirds of organisations have seen their fundraised income drop; the decrease was more than a half for one third. Fundraising charities have been significantly impacted. Of those that receive statutory funding, which number more than half of all organisations and two thirds of our membership, one third have seen their statutory incomes increase and only 7% have reported a drop in such income. It is a mixed experience.

I draw the committee's attention to four categories of organisation that we have identified. First, traditional face-to-face fundraising charities, for example, on-street collections, have generally seen their incomes fall significantly. Second, the fundraising incomes of innovative

fundraising charities, for example, those that use online, direct debit, social media and other such methods, have been stable or, as in some cases, have increased. Third, the incomes of Government-funded organisations, which are understood to be public service providers, have generally been stable. Fourth, social enterprise organisations that earn an income have had widely varying experiences. Some have had to stop delivering the services and supports they are concerned with and have seen their incomes collapse. Others have seen their incomes increase because their services have been more in demand. As such, it is difficult to come to general conclusions on the sector's needs re funding.

There is a need for significant extra research and resources to track the impact of the income loss across a differentiated sector. This is important. Recently, the Charities Regulator published research on the impact of the Covid crisis on charities. The most significant finding in its report, which was only released last week, is that more than 70% of organisations that partook in its study reported that the main challenge was maintaining income. This is a major issue in the context of the forthcoming budget.

As Ms Garvey indicated, the €35 million stability fund that was secured last year and delivered by the Department of Rural and Community Development was most welcome. It was enhanced by an additional €10 million last year plus €10 million this year, bringing it to a total of €55 million. That is a significant contribution. According to our most recent information, more than 98% of the 600 organisations that applied for and secured funding through this measure have succeeded in continuing to qualify for and hold onto those funds. This indicates the extent of the income drop that was experienced by organisations, given that, in order to qualify, they had to show that they were going to have a 25% income drop over the course of last year. We now need to conduct further research to identify precisely which of the categories of organisation that I referenced will be hit this year as the income collapse continues. Among many of our members, the feeling is that the income collapse in 2021 may be worse and more significant than the income collapse in 2020. We need to be conscious of this.

Benefacts will shortly publish an important report that we are optimistic will provide further information in terms of ascertaining the facts. Even with the work of Benefacts and the Charities Regulator, I appeal to the committee to support the identification of further resources to conduct the research that we believe is needed to get a granular picture of the extent of the damage that might result in critical essential services during the rest of the crisis and the period of adjustment.

I hope all members will have had a chance to review our submission. Our top item for the budget consideration therefore is to focus on adequate and sustainable funding. We provide additional information, which I will not go through now but which we could perhaps discuss during the morning's consideration, on how a more sustainable funding model could be introduced. Key elements of it include multi-annual funding. I am sure the committee will be interested in understanding that better.

Pre-Covid, the second biggest challenge facing Ireland's charities, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises is the regulatory and compliance requirements. None of our members have issues with the fact we now have a much more robust regulatory regime and higher quality reporting - that is all good - but there are costs that go with that, in general it is difficult to fundraise for the cost of compliance, and Departments often do not allocate funds to enable organisations they fund to meet the costs of complying. The costs are considerable. I urge members to have a look at the Charities Regulator's report if they get a chance. It is very accessible on the Charities Regulator's website. Compliance and the time costs and money

costs associated with compliance are the second biggest challenge facing Ireland's charities currently. We are asking in our submission for a process to streamline the regulatory and funding-related compliance requirements and that the cost of compliance would be supported as an earmarked component of any statutory funds that are made available.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has produced a fabulous report. It is the report on sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities, containing many very good commitments. We congratulate the Department on its production. There are significant costs associated with delivering those, so we would be looking for a carefully costed programme from the Department on the costs associated with delivering the commitments in the plan and that they would be provided for in the budget.

Similarly, there is a national social enterprise strategy with which I would recommend members of the committee to familiarise themselves. It is published by the same Department and again contains a set of comprehensive and welcome actions to support social enterprises. None of these strategies were in place a couple of years ago so it is great the Irish community and voluntary sector, the charities sector and the social enterprise sector are now receiving the statutory attention they have so long sought. The Department has also produced a strategy on volunteering. One of our asks is that these strategies, now that we have them, would be very well resourced and protected. We are very encouraged by the fact the Government did not take in any way an austerity approach to dealing with the crisis. We have shown as a society and as an economy that we can do things in a way that is not based on austerity, and given that the cost of borrowing is low, we are very much looking forward to encouraging the Government to continue to invest in social services, environmental action and cultural and social services generally in budget 2022.

Ms Garvey pointed out the extent of the labour force in the community and voluntary sector. There is currently no dedicated, coherent training and development programme for the community and voluntary sector, and we are calling for an increased level of National Training Fund resource to go to supporting a comprehensive training and development programme for the community and voluntary sector. The private sector has one. The public sector has a very solid training and development programme, but this is something that has been lacking for a number of years in the third sector, the community and voluntary sector, and we need to see some attention focused on that now.

Ms Garvey mentioned the extremely positive increase in collaborative working our members have been reporting that generally held last year. Public servants and community and voluntary employees and trustees and volunteers all put their shoulder to the same wheel. The prevailing focus on compliance and financial reporting was put to one side. Everybody agreed on the single priority that we should support people through the crisis and collaborate together in the doing of that. That became priority number one. The fabulous thing is that is indeed what happened. Our members report really improved relationships between public servants and community and voluntary organisations during the crisis. There is some concern now that it is showing signs already of a reversion to previous form, where the focus is returning to financial compliance and other such matters. That would be something we would very strongly urge does not happen.

The health dialogue forum chaired by Peter Cassells is a source for optimism in this regard. It is a place where the community and voluntary sector will be talking to the Department of Health and the HSE about how we can continue a more collaborative approach to work. The forum will be publishing an interesting report soon, and I urge all members of this committee

to familiarise themselves with the work of that group in the Department of Health because we hope the forum will provide a model for deeper social dialogue and collaborative and partnership working as we go on from here.

I will leave it at that. The report we have submitted is rich. I have highlighted a few points I felt were worthy of being specifically drawn to the attention of committee members.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Cooper and Ms Garvey for their excellent presentations. I will turn now to Community Gardens Ireland. Mr. Donal McCormack will present to us.

Mr. Donal McCormack: I am here to represent Community Gardens Ireland. First, to give some background, Community Gardens Ireland has been in existence since 2011 as a community of communities, that is, we are made up of more than 100 community gardens and allotment groups and associations throughout the island of Ireland. Our aim is voluntarily to support and promote community gardens and allotments in Ireland and Northern Ireland. During Covid, our social media outlets provided a virtual connection for community gardeners and a forum for sharing resources and exchanging ideas. In my case, I live in Blessington, County Wicklow and I am part of a local campaign that has been campaigning, so far unsuccessfully, for the provision of community allotments from Wicklow County Council since May 2018. My role is as co-chairperson of Community Gardens Ireland, and I am joined by Ms Maeve Foreman, who will discuss her role and background now.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I extend my greetings to the Vice Chair and the committee members. I am from Mud Island Community Garden, which is in the north-east inner city area of Dublin. We service the Ballybough and North Strand area. I am going to say a few words about the benefits of community gardening to explain why we are so keen to gain the committee's support for an expansion of gardens and allotments in Ireland.

First, there is ample evidence of the physical, mental health and well-being benefits for the individual gardener, from increased exercise and stress reduction, to an increased sense of social cohesion that creates a sense of belonging, and all the benefits that brings. Respected sources are often referred to by my medical colleagues such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK. They have both published research on the physical benefits from as little as two and a half hours of gardening a week, as well as its positive effects as a mental health intervention. As a result, we have seen an increase in GPs social prescribing attendance at community gardens and allotments, particularly in Northern Ireland where social prescribing is more common. We are pleased to see the establishment this year of the All-Ireland Social Prescribing Network for the island of Ireland.

Second, we believe the provision of space for communities to grow their own fruit and vegetables can improve the environment naturally and help address climate change by increasing biodiversity and pollinators, as well as addressing food poverty and food sustainability.

Third, there are educational and cultural benefits for society. Community gardens and allotments hugely increase social capital by encouraging active citizenship and social connection, help reduce health inequalities, and contribute to reducing antisocial behaviour, thus making communities safer places for us all. They also help contribute towards some of the UN's sustainable development goals, which I am sure members are familiar with, in particular goals 3, 11 and 12.

In the case of my own garden, Mud Island Community Garden, its use during Covid was indispensable for the local area. As well as gardening, it provided a safe outdoor space for meetings, for local band and theatre groups to gather for rehearsals and, as restrictions allowed, for use by local schools and youth groups. One example is our seed-to-pizza project with two local primary schools where they grow wheat from seed, harvest it, and learn how to mill it and make flour. Ultimately, our local Italian pizzeria chefs came over and showed us how to make pizza in our pizza oven. Yet, despite the proven benefits, existing legislation and the commitment in the current programme for Government, there is no countrywide policy in place to increase the number of allotments and community gardens. I am going to hand back to Mr. McCormack at this point who will elaborate on these aspects of our submission.

Mr. Donal McCormack: According to the climate change report that was published by the Local Government Management Agency in January 2020, there are over 2,400 local authority allotments and 97 community gardens throughout Ireland. Within this there are eight local authorities that have stated they do not provide any allotments or community gardens. The current legislation covering allotments and community gardens is weak and confusing for citizens. Some legislation relating to allotments is out of date and refers as far back as 1882. This needs to be replaced and updated to make it easier for residents and people to request a plot to be able to grow their own produce.

There are no Irish-wide requirements for waiting lists in each local authority. This makes it difficult for local authorities to forecast or plan ahead for future use of land. Although highlighted as an aid for food poverty, the current laws on allotments and community gardens do not make provision for those who cannot afford a plot. Compared to other countries, Ireland lags behind in the management, support and protection of allotments and community gardens. In Germany for example, there are approximately 1 million plots - a ratio of approximately one plot for every 89 people. In the UK, there are approximately 300,000 plots with a ratio of one plot for every 200 people. Denmark has 60,000 plots with a ratio of one plot for every 97 people. In Ireland, the ratio is closer to one for every 2,000 people. Other countries have also recently improved their legislation surrounding the provision of allotments and community gardens. Scotland, for example, now requires the formal approval of a Scottish Minister if an allotment group or community gardens are to be removed by a local authority. Those responsible have also put duties in place for local authorities to keep a waiting list and take action to ensure local residents do not stay on the waiting list for long periods.

In recent years there has been a well-documented resurgence of interest in gardening and growing our own produce. It is brilliant to know that some Deputies are availing of local authority allotments. Community Gardens Ireland has been helping with the set-up of gardens and plots throughout Ireland. However, this is largely down to individuals and community groups and is not driven by any policy, goal or overall strategy by Departments.

It is worth highlighting that the Greater London Authority set a goal in 2008 that by 2012 it would create an additional 2012 new community growing spaces. Those responsible succeeded. Ireland could learn from this experience and goal.

Our proposal to the joint committee today is in two parts. First, we propose that a capital fund be made available to local authorities for the purchase of land specifically for community growing spaces. Research completed by Community Gardens Ireland in 2021 has shown that only 20% of allotments and community gardens are actually permanent. In recent years community groups have been removed from their community gardens or allotments. Given the sometimes-transient nature of community growing spaces we can see this being more of an

issue over the coming years. We see this as an opportunity for the joint committee to be proactive on this front. If a capital fund was made available, it would allow local authorities to provide additional land for communities to grow their own produce, along with allowing those sites to become permanent. We are not aware of any funding that allows capital funding for the purchase of land. Oftentimes for funding it is assumed that communities would somehow have access to it.

Our second proposal is for a CLÁR-based funding scheme to be put in place for urban areas. We welcomed the most recent announcement of CLÁR funding based on specific rural areas throughout Ireland with an emphasis on a funding scheme for allotments and community gardens. Allotments and community gardens are part of what is called “urban agriculture” given they often occur in built-up areas. We are calling on the joint committee to allocate a specific urban funding scheme similar to the rural scheme to allow community groups to apply for this funding directly. Most of these initiatives would provide long-term outdoor support to communities in areas hit hard by the current pandemic. It is consistent with the 2020 programme for Government and with COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead.

We hope we have demonstrated the immense benefits that come from the provision of allotments and community gardens and how we as a society have to do more. Providing more of these spaces will offer excellent outdoor facilities for local residents to socialise safely and come together once again as a community provided social distancing is built in. We cannot think of another low-cost community initiative like this that has so many benefits. We strongly urge the joint committee to do more to encourage more allotments and community gardens throughout Ireland and we encourage colleagues of committee members to do so as well. I would welcome any questions committee members have on this proposal.

Vice Chairman: Thank you, Mr. McCormack, for your presentation. I am deeply envious of Ms Foreman’s community garden in Mulhuddart. The people in the Tramore Allotments Association have been banging their heads against that particular wall for almost a decade. I am dying to see it rolled out in my community.

We will turn to the question-and-answer section now. I call on members to confine their question-and-answer time to six minutes if possible. I will bring in Deputy Paul Donnelly in the first instance as rapporteur for this section.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: My thanks to the representatives of The Wheel and Community Gardens Ireland for their presentations and submissions to the committee. It is brilliant to see such a strong voice coming forward from The Wheel and from people who are working in the community. I am originally from East Wall, which is beside Mud Island. A fantastic book was written around Mud Island and I imagine the witnesses have read it. It gives a great history of the area. It is so important. I have some comments and questions.

I am a strong advocate for community gardens and allotments in particular. It is one of those issues that comes to the fore every now and again. We have long waiting lists. I find it puzzling that we have such long waiting lists because we have no shortage of land in Dublin West that is owned by the council. It is puzzling that we struggle to get more land in place for people who have a genuine interest. One of my party members is an avid user of the allotments in Powerstown Road in Mulhuddart. I go up to him regularly to get produce. It is fantastic to see the community helping and supporting each other. They get immense enjoyment as well as producing lovely food for people. I fully support it.

Reference was made to supports from local authorities for the provision of land. I was a councillor for many years. We struggled time and again to get the council to provide new land and security. There is an issue around security for people in an urban garden. We battled away for CCTV cameras for the participants, especially the site in Powerstown. It is somewhat isolated. They had major problems there. I always got a sense that community gardens and allotments were seen as a nice thing but not really integral to the work that local authorities should be doing. I would like to hear a comment on that and on how difficult it is. I know that as a councillor it was tough.

I wish to comment on capital funding for land. When we talk about buying land in Dublin 15, we are talking about a serious amount of money. It is at a premium. Anyone who looks at the county development plan can see that almost every area of land that still has a blade of grass on it is ear-marked for something, whether commercial, industrial or residential development. I see little in terms of the community developments.

I will move on to the presentation from The Wheel. A couple of issues arise and I will go through them quickly. I met some section 56 workers who are not involved in any of the pay agreements. They have been left behind by comparison with section 38 and section 39 organisations. Do the representatives from The Wheel have any comment on how we can help and support them to be brought up to the same level as the section 39 workers in respect of pay agreements?

Another point arises around adequate and sustainable funding. There is a double whammy for many community projects that I have been involved in over the years. Those involved have seen the double whammy of the Celtic tiger, from which they have never recovered adequately, and the lack of sustainable funding prior to that. Now they have been hit again with Covid-19 and we can see the impact on their incomes. There is another impact, not on the sustainability of the projects because they manage the service and the funding excellently, but on how we can move forward and build on what has been not only an incredibly difficult time but also a time where people have adapted, taken the bull by the horns and decided to go for it to support their communities in difficult times. To give an example, I have been involved in community projects for a long time-----

Vice Chairman: Not to cut across Deputy Donnelly but, with one eye to the clock, could he keep it as brief as possible?

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I will mention one service I am involved in. We talk about value for money. We are always looking for value for money when we are looking for funding. In 2012, Genesis Psychotherapy & Family Therapy Service provided 1,530 hours of counselling for €323,000. In 2021, for funding of €306,000, it is providing 3,800 hours. That is an incredible service and it has managed to turn things around in difficult times to provide a quality service. I see all of those services and community projects providing those services across the board. I salute them and wish them well. I read the document about the witnesses' budget submission. It is worthy and something we would look to support.

Vice Chairman: A representative of Community Gardens Ireland might like to address the Deputy's first couple of points.

Mr. Donal McCormack: I thank the Deputy for his comments. The main point I want to make relates to what he said about convincing local authorities. We have previously called out that there have been attempts in some local areas for a vacant land use policy or something

along those lines. Ultimately, there has to be legislation to put an additional duty on local authorities to provide this for local communities, whether temporarily or otherwise. If land is to remain idle in the medium term, we see no reason that cannot immediately be given for community use. We are aware of some local authorities which would not give land to local community groups because they would be afraid they would not get it back. A culture change is required in that area. Ultimately, it is down to putting additional duties on the local authority to provide additional community facilities for the benefit of all the local residents.

Vice Chairman: I ask a representative from The Wheel to speak briefly. I have an eye on the clock.

Ms Deirdre Garvey: The issues of funding and funding levels are connected because community organisations and charities are independently governed. They have boards of directors or charity trustees and they have to make decisions based on the mission and purpose of the organisation and indeed the money and the resources they may have to hand, either through cash, volunteer hours or benefit-in-kind. The Deputy is right that we are tracking the cuts in funding to our sector from 2008 onwards. Cumulatively, it was an average of 43% in significant cuts at a time when public expenditure was being cut between 5% and 7% cumulatively. They were disproportionate cuts to the services delivered through community and voluntary organisations at that time, which in some places were being rebuilt or re-established, and then there was the whammy of Covid.

We want to rise above the cycle of crisis to engage with the Government on full cost recovery. If you want community and voluntary organisations to be partners in delivering outcomes for people and communities, what does that look like with regard to real costs? To call a financial bookkeeper or a co-ordinator for health and safety “overheads” and not direct service delivery is a misunderstanding of what it takes to run a service in a high-quality and high-transparency way, as well as highly publicly accountable to groups and committees such as this, and rightly so. There is engagement. Mr Cooper mentioned the hope we have with regard to the Department of Health, the HSE, the independent review group and HSE-funded public services, but it is an ongoing challenge. If we are going to rebuild back better, or rebuild forwards better, we will have to tackle this chestnut. For every 100 people working in the public sector to deliver public services in the country, there are another 50 people delivering public benefit and public services employed in the voluntary sector. Does Mr. Cooper have any last comments about the pay issue?

Mr. Ivan Cooper: On the section 56 circumstance, the same situation could be argued to apply to section 38 and 39 organisations in many respects, especially section 39 organisations. It hinges on the idea of essential services. So that all members of the committee are clear about it, thousands of community and voluntary organisations or charities are funded either by the HSE or Tusla to deliver what are essential services from the perspective of people in the communities who benefit from those services. The people in communities do not make any distinction about whether this service is being funded or delivered directly by HSE employees or by employees of independent organisations funded by the HSE or Tusla to deliver that service. That is not a distinction that is significant to them. To them, it is an essential service in their community. We need to understand that the way we provide services in Ireland is predicated on that reality. That is the nature of it and it has evolved that way over 60 years.

As Ms Garvey indicated, we have a substantial chunk of quasi-public servants who are not public servants but, with the work they are doing, effectively are public servants without the terms and conditions public servants have. There is an issue which can be best understood

under the rubric “essential services”. I draw the committee’s attention to a report from the independent review group, which cannot be seen again here because of the nature of the forum. The independent review group established to examine the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded health and personal social services published a report in January 2019. Check it out. This is a seminal report which is the foundation for the work of the health dialogue forum which I have described and Ms Garvey indicated we are optimistic about, which is chaired by Peter Cassells. Recommendation 8.1 of the report states:

List of essential services

- i. A list of essential services to be funded by the State should be agreed in consultation with the voluntary sector.
- ii. Full cost prices for delivery of these services should be agreed centrally.
- iii. The list should be updated regularly, with provision for adjustment to meet local circumstances.

It recognised that we have all of these services delivered by thousands of organisations under section 39, running to billions of euro per annum dispersed by the HSE to these organisations to employ individuals on inferior terms and conditions and salary levels, and without the benefits of pension provision that public servants typically have. We essentially have a two-tier labour force delivering the same services and that is the issue. The only way to resolve it is for the State to follow the recommendation in that report I just mentioned and agree a list of essential services, then ensure, as Ms Garvey indicated, full cost provision for the services that are essential and should be recognised as being essential.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Cooper. I am conscious that other committee members may have questions.

Mr. Ivan Cooper: Tusla needs to focus on this issue with regard to section 56 organisations because it affects those services which were once funded by the HSE and have been transferred to Tusla for administration. There is the same issue with Tusla’s commissioning process. It is a complicated issue but we are happy to see the committee’s interest in this thorny question.

Deputy Joe Carey: I thank both organisations for their presentations and submissions. I commend the community and voluntary sector on the role it has played in the pandemic. It was encouraging to see community activists rolling up their sleeves, engaging with communities to make them safe, and working with statutory bodies. I note in The Wheel’s presentation that witnesses felt that was slipping back. We do not want to see that. Those links are vital. The community call initiative really worked. It got people around the table in a co-ordinated way. All stakeholders were at the table and everyone was listened to and their views taken on board. Actions were taken and work was done. Those people in our community who were vulnerable were identified. Community was really to the fore in that and vulnerable people were looked after. On the Wheel’s presentation-----

Vice Chairman: The Deputy has gone on mute.

Deputy Joe Carey: I am sorry about that. I do not know why I went on mute. I have interaction with the Wheel on the question of insurance. It is a tricky question. It is very challenging for many community and voluntary organisations. There have been some refunds from insurance companies. They have been relatively minor but they provided some sort of recognition.

Is the Wheel aware of any insurance companies giving refunds to community and voluntary organisations in respect of their premiums? Has the Wheel made any representations with a view to addressing that issue? Will the representatives of the Wheel expand on their proposals with regard to multiannual funding for the community and voluntary sector?

I will turn to Community Gardens Ireland. I note that there is a particular issue with regard to the time licences last. This is having a particular impact on community gardens. How long should a licence last? With regard to operational funding for community gardens, how much does the organisation recommend that the Department of Rural and Community Development should provide in the forthcoming budget?

Mr. Ivan Cooper: With regard to the cost of insurance, we are not aware of any specific organisations receiving a rebate. We are aware that this was an issue for many. In the private sector there were questions as to whether payments will be made in respect of business interruption policies. It may be the case that certain organisations in the community and voluntary sector have made applications for rebates. We do not know. We do not have information in that regard at our fingertips. More generally, we do know that the cost of insurance is a major issue for many organisations, although not for all. The Wheel is a member of the Alliance for Insurance Reform. It is a devilishly complicated policy area that involves a very high degree of policy expertise in the esoteric areas of insurance, the law and so on. In our prebudget submission, we have identified the main areas in which adjustment is needed. Essentially, there needs to be a focus on rebalancing the common duty of care so that occupiers are required to take on a duty of care that is reasonable, practical and proportionate but without personal responsibility being ignored. The alliance is also arguing for a cut in unfair general damages to reflect international norms and to ensure that legitimate minor injuries attract modest damages. We expect that general damages for minor injuries would reduce dramatically if that were to happen. It should also be ensured that An Garda Síochána has the necessary resources to pursue insurance fraud to the fullest extent of the law as a matter of urgency.

With regard to multiannual funding, the question is simple. There is precedent for multiannual funding. The scheme to support national organisations, for example, supports hundreds of national charities and community and voluntary organisations. It is administered by the Department for Rural and Community Development and makes provision for three-year funding agreements with those organisations. There is no public policy obstacle to making multiannual funding the de facto default for all funding relationships between agencies such as the HSE, Tusla, the Department of Education, the education and training boards and the organisations they fund.

We understand that there is some reluctance in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and, perhaps, in the Department of Finance. There seems to be a perception that agreeing to multiannual funding somehow reduces the flexibility line Departments and agencies can apply from year to year and that it reduces their discretion to quickly and rapidly reprioritise funding as it pertains to budgets under their control. We argue that this represents a failure to understand that we should not sacrifice the funding of those services which we have argued are essential but which happen to be provided by voluntary organisations and their employees in one third of cases. The essential budgets of those services should not be seen as discretionary. This is the entire point. We need to see those organisations put on a footing that recognises that they are essential and that therefore considers their funding essential. This would allow the organisations delivering those services to plan adequately and to fully fund those services. A core component of this is rolling agreements of at least three years' duration. This would not

preclude annual reviews, which are important to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. It would, however, allow those organisations to plan beyond the end of the current year.

I could go on and talk about how many funded organisations are in fact lurching from one deficit condition in one year to another the following year. Many organisations that provide essential services would not even be deemed going concerns if the funding agency were to withdraw the funding commitment it tacitly, although not explicitly, makes in the terms of a funding agreement. There are many thorny questions involved in this. It again relates back to a new understanding of essential services and the provision of a multiannual funding framework to properly fund those services. I thank the Deputy very much.

Ms Maeve Foreman: How long should a licence last? In the case of Mud Island Community Garden, an 11-month licence is granted, which can be renewed every year. I believe this is quite common with gardens in Dublin City Council's area. Under the licence, the site must be vacated for the month of January. I believe this provision allows the council to look after its legal entitlement to the land. From a gardens point of view, the longer licences last, the better. A duration of a minimum of two years would allow one to benefit from the vegetables one has grown in any one year. Dublin City Council have it worked out in such a way that most of the land it gives to gardens is given on temporary licences because the land is zoned for social housing. The site Mud Island occupies is also so zoned but we have been in existence for more than ten years now. Bridgefoot Street Community Garden, of which some members may be aware, is the first purpose-built community garden in the Dublin area. The garden has been tied in with a park. Some rural councils have allocated parts of public parks for community garden allotments. This allows for a sense of permanency and ownership as the park belongs to the local community. That is quite a good model.

On the question of how much it costs, how long is a piece of string? In the case of Mud Island Community Garden, we spent an average of €5,000 to €10,000 a year in the first few years. We raised some of these funds ourselves while some were provided under Local Agenda 21, some came from the local council and some from Croke Park's community fund. Because we built the garden on a derelict site where there was a lot of rubble, we had to build raised beds and buy soil and plants. As little as €500 would be enough to get some community gardens going. We are talking about small grants of between €500 and €5,000 to establish gardens and to get things growing.

Vice Chairman: Senator Wall is indicating. If other members of the committee wish to follow him, I ask them to indicate via the raise hand function.

Senator Mark Wall: I wish to be associated with the remarks of the previous two speakers in welcoming representatives of both The Wheel and Community Gardens Ireland. I thank them very much for their presentations.

I wish to be associated with the words of Deputy Carey on what community and voluntary organisations have done for us all during the pandemic. I am always struck by the volunteerism of so many people who have gone out of their way, particularly in rural Ireland but also in urban Ireland, to look after their communities. That is an important point to make.

I was particularly struck by the fact that 160,000 people are employed in the sector. Given what we have come through because of the pandemic, which I hope will be over soon, are there concerns in The Wheel that some jobs will be lost, or are there concerns over where they will go? How can we go about protecting as many of the 160,000 people employed in the sector

as possible? Perhaps Dr. Garvey might comment on that and on what we need to do to sustain and perhaps increase the number. The number of people involved and employed in the sector is amazing.

I have done a great deal of work with voluntary groups and community groups on compliance. Will Dr. Garvey comment on the cost? She mentioned that the cost of compliance is quite considerable. Perhaps she could get a figure for us that we could discuss in our budget discussions in the context of what would be involved for all in the community and voluntary organisations.

I want to touch on insurance, which Deputy Carey also touched on. I appreciate the reply but insurance is a major area of concern for many voluntary and community groups. Unfortunately, there have been many increases in the cost of insurance. I have noted them over recent months. Could the witnesses comment on the increases? A local community hall I am involved with has seen its insurance cost increase by nearly 50% in the past couple of years, which is not sustainable in any way, shape or form. We need to address that.

With regard to Community Gardens Ireland, I discovered gardening four to five years ago and can attest to everything the witnesses said about its benefits and the link between it and mental health. Anybody involved in gardening switches off. That is the main point I discovered. It is about getting your hands dirty. There is a considerable mental health benefit that we need to exploit. Particularly as we come out of the pandemic, there will be many mental health issues. We can address so many of them by increasing the number of community garden space available to citizens.

I was particularly struck by a remark made by Mr. Ray D'Arcy on one of his shows recently. He mentioned that, as with many people, he had been out walking in a forest and suggested that every large town and urban area should have a forest or garden area to which people could go. I thought it was a wonderful idea. So many people have been going to such places during the pandemic. Maybe this is an idea we can tap into. The Kildare county development plan, which is my local development plan, is open for submissions. I fed into the process with this idea and the idea on community gardens. It is disgraceful that there is no countrywide policy, as has been mentioned. The mental health benefits of community gardens far outweigh concerns regarding licence agreements, etc. There are lands available other than local authority lands. I am involved with a community garden that is looking to HSE land because there are opportunities in that regard. Other agencies in the State can provide land. What would the €500,000 in funding mentioned in the presentation mean? How many gardens and other such initiatives could be accommodated with this funding? It is important that we support Community Gardens Ireland in all its great work.

Dr. Deirdre Garvey: I thank the Senator and Deputy Carey for the very positive feedback on what we have all seen in society, namely the great work of community organisations such as Community Gardens Ireland, and on the Community Call initiative. The initiative is ongoing. It is a very welcome development. Keeping that going is something I would ask for.

The employment figure, 160,000, is huge. People are usually taken aback when they hear it. It is important to address this matter because it can be a sensitive one among those who wish to understand it. There are actually four times as many human beings involved in the delivery of the work and the benefit for people in communities in Ireland and internationally so I would not want this to become a conversation that is only about employees and jobs in the labour market, although our sector is an important part of the labour market and economy. The people

resource that the community and voluntary sector brings to activating people in their communities is also really important. It takes money, resources and time to recruit, hire, support and monitor volunteers. The representatives present will attest to the number of hours voluntary organisations give of their week or month. It is important to note that nothing is cost free. Just because there is not necessarily a salary involved does not mean there is no cost. This is evident if we look at the matter in the round. What we need to do is understand that the jobs are in fewer than 50% of the charities because the vast majority of charities, or upwards of 60%, have no staff whatsoever. They are run by volunteers on the board and deliver the services through volunteers. That should be put in perspective.

We have gone through the terms and conditions of some of the employees. I refer to those involved in public service delivery but also those involved in community organisations whose services would not necessarily fall into the category of essential public services. On the question of where those jobs are going, my colleague, Mr. Cooper, spoke about the impact of the Covid pandemic. There is very much a cause and effect relationship between funding going into an organisation and the number of staff it might need to deliver on its mission. There are many reasons organisations hire staff. Highly trained people may be needed to deliver a professional service. There are really three issues, the first of which concerns the proportion of people who are paid versus the people who are unpaid. Whenever we talk about people and the voluntary sector, we talk about all the people. I guess different interventions can be made. With regard to those who are staff or have jobs, the impacts of the cuts in funding, the drop in fundraising and the increases in some statutory places in respect of funding will correlate directly with the ability to retain staff and jobs. People leading community and voluntary organisations right now state attracting and retaining staff is the number one issue in terms of the impact on funding. They are losing staff to the private and public sectors because they cannot keep the same terms and conditions. That relates directly to money, as my colleague Mr. Cooper has said. Keeping staff within the voluntary sector is a really big issue. That presents a mixed picture in terms of the impact of Covid.

The third point I want to make on the bigger cohort of people, paid and unpaid, is the need to invest in skills-building so the individuals are not disadvantaged not only in their terms and conditions, because they work in community organisations, but also in terms of their ability to continuously professionally develop their skills so they will be attractive to all employers, regardless of the sector. Recent research that we published late last year, which we commissioned Indecon to carry out, indicates that the employees of community organisations and charities are significantly disadvantaged in terms of their access to skills-building initiatives. As a cohort, the 160,000 people, who are part of the labour market and labour force, are falling behind regarding the variety of and investment in skills that we all know workforces across all developed societies will have to have if they are to be fit for purpose to meet the challenges facing us. That is a rounded review of the jobs and the bigger context.

The Senator asked for a figure on compliance. We can revert to him with that. The Wheel, of which I am CEO, has 22 staff. I have one senior and one middle-level employee on the payroll to mind our compliance. That represents 5% or 6% of our costs. Some people will call that overhead; I call it an investment in a quality service that is monitored and publicly accountable. We need to knock the myth of overhead and administrative costs on the head and help people to understand what running organisations in a right way looks like. I think we have already dealt with the insurance costs but I look to my colleague, Mr. Cooper, in case he has anything to add on rising insurance costs.

Mr. Ivan Cooper: We will come back with a number of the cost of compliance but I will give a ballpark number because it is possible to come to some conclusions. Ms Garvey mentioned the 5% figure that applies to us. Sector income is at €14 billion per year. It is a huge sector. If one was to apply 5% to that €14 billion, it would come out at around €700 million a year. Those are the unfunded costs of compliance that are most likely being contributed to by the fundraising income. As Ms Garvey noted, voluntary organisations have complex income structures. Many have fundraised income, earned income from ticket sales from activities and events and, perhaps, some grant funding income. The mixture of those three types of income source gives stability to an organisation's finances for those lucky enough to secure some statutory funding. It is often the fundraised income and earned income components that together are used to fund the core costs, such as administration or overhead costs or whatever we want to call them. They are essential costs and are often related to the costs of compliance. We will come back with a harder number.

What was the question on insurance?

Vice Chairman: Mr. Cooper might come back to it. I will turn to Community Gardens Ireland and give them an opportunity to respond to the questions.

Mr. Donal McCormack: I thank Senator Wall for his comments. It is great to hear he is getting his hands dirty and getting involved in gardening. I echo his points on that. Particularly over the last 14 months, I have been encouraging my kids to get out in the garden and get planting. I have found it to be beneficial and I know other community groups have found it beneficial to get growing. I know Grow It Yourself Ireland is definitely on board with that.

On Ray D'Arcy and the suggestion for every town in Ireland to have a space, such as a forest or park, to grow your own, Community Gardens Ireland strongly believes that every urban area should have a place for local communities to grow their own. That can take the form of local authority land, HSE land or other public bodies' land.

The LDA has a State-owned database on its website with a map and a web viewer. It is useful to pinpoint all State-owned land in local areas. Community groups have found it useful to find local authority-owned land, as well as land owned by the HSE, the ESB and others. It can be used to find out if land is publicly owned but there is no information to contact those bodies or to find out how to go from being a community group to asking them formally for the land. A bit of ownership is needed for when a public body has a large amount of land in an urban area to make it more amenable for community groups to request such land.

Senator Wall asked about the €500,000 and how many projects would benefit from that. It is like asking "How long is a piece of string?". I would hope for a minimum of five new community gardens or allotments. It depends on the amount of land made available and on where it is, as the price of land varies. One of the requirements we always had is to have it close enough to urban areas for access by people who cannot drive or if there are no public bus services available.

There is a need for a target associated with how much of an increase we need. We mentioned that during the presentation. It would be ideal for Ireland to set a target for how many more projects we need to achieve by a certain year, which would mean buy-in from all community and public bodies to work together. At the moment it seems a bit aimless and having a set target would allow more strategy to be put in place.

Vice Chairman: I welcome the presentations, particularly that from The Wheel. One of the values of having an umbrella organisation like The Wheel is that everyone in the community and voluntary sector must be involved in that day-to-day nitty-gritty and grind but The Wheel is taking a big picture view. That is essential. One of the things the pandemic has done is made us take stock and take a step back, particularly in terms of transport. As Senator Wall said, during the pandemic many people including me turned to their gardens, if they were lucky enough to have one, and began to reprioritise within their own lives and think again about how they wanted to live those lives.

As we begin to move past the Covid pandemic and to issues like climate change and biodiversity breakdown, the community and voluntary sector and structures like the public participation networks, PPNs, will be increasingly important in the discussion about how we remake and rebuild our society, reset our priorities and make progress on these huge challenges in a way that brings everybody with us. There is a huge role for the community and voluntary sector in that, in line with other community structures. In that idea of social dialogue and how we reinitiate the conversation about the Republic we live in, the community and voluntary sector has a central role. I find it exciting to hear The Wheel take that big picture overview, as well as dealing with the small issues that make the everyday process more difficult, the stone in the shoe.

I have stone-in-the-shoe questions for representatives of The Wheel. Compliance has been raised before and I will not ask a question about it, but I note it. It is a recurring issue when one talks to anybody in the community and voluntary sector. It is so difficult to fundraise for it and to stand on the street seeking funding for it. We are rejecting the word “overheads” but it is a difficult sell to people when one is standing on the side of the street.

The charity VAT compensation scheme is a three-year pilot which is coming to the end. I ask The Wheel about that with a view to the report this committee will produce at the end of this process.

I ask The Wheel, and I will come back with questions for Community Gardens Ireland if I can, about the recommendation about mergers and collaborative working in the sector. I want to allow The Wheel space to dig into that. What will it mean to have mergers and collaborative working in place? Will it reduce compliance costs, increase efficiencies and move people on to the type of work they want to do, as opposed to the type of work they find themselves having to do?

Mr. Ivan Cooper: We are delighted that the Vice Chairman has recognised our ambition for the role the community and voluntary sector can play in resetting our national priorities going on from here, as well as our European and global priorities, which are all interconnected in relation to the social dialogue. We are very pleased that the Government has initiated a discussion with the community and voluntary sector and environmental pillar. The Wheel is a member of the community and voluntary sector pillar with 17 national organisations that have taken part over the years in an ongoing social dialogue. Now the Government is interested in understanding how that can be expanded and reinvigorated in the new context. We are excited about that and will be, along with other members of the community and voluntary sector pillar, carrying the torch and encouraging the Government to maximise the extent to which voluntary organisations and civil society groups can participate in shaping national policy and setting national priorities.

The Vice Chairman asked about the charity VAT compensation scheme. The scheme has been a great success and has been hugely oversubscribed.

A €5 million level currently applies to the scheme. The way the scheme works is that charities apply to have a refund of VAT they have paid using funds that they have fundraised. VAT applies to anything a charity buys. Charities are not VAT exempt. What happens, effectively, is that fundraised income is used to pay Government tax. That was recognised as being fundamentally unfair so the VAT refund scheme was put in place. The scheme has been very successful. Under the scheme, charities apply to have the VAT they have paid in a particular year refunded to them. Clearly, however, there is not enough to go around, so organisations get the proportion of VAT back which is related to their proportion of the overall amount that all charities together have sought. My understanding is that, currently, it comes in at less than 10% of the overall amount that organisations have generally sought. There is precedent for this in Europe. The Danes have a similar scheme. Their scheme operates at the level of a €20 million rebate per year. We are calling on the Government to increase the amount from €5 million to €20 million in the next budget. It boils down to that. Even at the €20 million level, there will still be more VAT paid in than will be reclaimed by charities under the scheme. It has been enormously successful and is very welcome. We are simply seeking that the scheme be enhanced.

Regarding mergers and collaborative working, it is important to note that, in general, it is the experience of The Wheel that when mergers happen, collaborative working is a good thing. There is an imperative on public benefit organisations to seek always to collaborate and to avoid competing when they can. That is a very important principle. Merger is simply a very advanced form of collaboration. It is at one end of the collaboration scale. Many collaborating organisations might consider a merger. However, if they do, it is usually, and should be, on the basis of the effectiveness of the work they do and how the effectiveness of the work can be improved through collaborative working. It is our experience that where mergers succeed, they do not generally result in the fiction that there are many cost savings to be squeezed out of merging organisations. It is not really about that. It is more about maximising the effectiveness of the work and ensuring that if there are any, often relatively small, administrative cost savings attached to that, they are simply released into the increased effectiveness and impact of the work that is being done.

In our pre-budget submission we are calling for the Government to recognise that there are significant costs associated with organisations that are seeking to merge. It has to be done responsibly. There are fiduciary responsibilities that attach to trustees and board members. Due diligence work needs to be done. All this comes with costs. Merging organisations, if they are to do it responsibly, must have resources available to them to fund the additional costs of merging. We are calling for a €2 million fund to be put in place in budget 2022 to enable organisations that want to investigate whether they can merge and want to go on a merger journey to afford the cost of that. That is our request in simple terms.

Vice Chairman: I have a brief question for Community Gardens Ireland. Before that, I wish to give an honourable mention to Grow It Yourself, GIY, Ireland Limited, which is based in Waterford. Tramore has the second oldest GIY branch in the country. I wish to mention the Grow It Forward scheme it is running this year, recognising that so many people have turned to their gardens. GIY has always been brilliant in terms of structuring people into the first harvest and ensuring that their first experience with gardening is a positive one.

On my specific question, we were speaking about no countrywide policy for community gardens and allotments. I agree that is a lacuna. What would Community Gardens Ireland like to see in a countrywide policy for allotments and community gardens?

Mr. Donal McCormack: The best way to start discussing that is, first, to look at a waiting

list. We have heard that in some of the more urban, built-up areas there is a need for a waiting list, but that is not the case in most local authorities and local electoral areas. As a first instance, I recommend a waiting list to be put in place. There is a need to examine all land in a local area to see if, currently, there are private allotments or community gardens there and if there are publicly available ones as well. We have called previously for an audit to be put in place in a local area to be able to see what is currently there and what needs to be put in place.

We have asked for departmental guidance to be given on the establishment of allotments and community gardens. This would be encouraging and give specific advice on what they should look like. We mentioned this in the past. For example, how do we make sure that allotments and community gardens are wheelchair friendly? Do we have to build raised beds to a certain level to ensure they are accessible and open for all? There is simple information such as that. There is general advice, such as the planting of wildflowers to encourage additional pollinators, which is good for the people seeking to harvest the produce in the area and also, as we mentioned, very good for the biodiversity background and pollinators. Simple information like that would be very beneficial.

Putting an additional duty on local authorities to provide allotments or community gardens is a must. At present, there are local authorities that are taking years to deliver on these, or perhaps never doing so. I strongly recommend that a duty be imposed on local authorities, similar to what is in place in other countries. We mentioned Scotland. In 2015, it revised its legislation to be able to have an additional emphasis put on local authorities whereby they must provide to the waiting list a community growing space within five years. If they do not, they have to make a very strong case as to why they have not achieved that. If we do not have an all-island approach to this, we believe it will just be mainly focused in the urban areas and not spread out throughout the other towns and places in rural Ireland as well, where there is a need for this. We mentioned that, currently, more planning permissions are being sought for apartments than for houses. There was a report on that by RTÉ in 2020. This is important because, first, no apartments have a requirement for a community garden to be built in as part of their planning. If one goes to request it afterwards, it is always harder to get it brought in, rather than having it designed into it in the first place. That is something we would recommend, that it be required as part of the planning process that a community garden be provided when an apartment block goes above a certain size.

In addition, there is a discussion at present about a food ombudsperson. We note that in Scotland there is a requirement for a Scottish Minister to have to sign off if a local authority removes or redesignates allotments or community gardens. There is potential either for a food ombudsperson to take that role or for a designated Minister to undertake it. The point is that there is a great deal of change required, and a lot more protection. Security was mentioned as well. There should be a great deal more emphasis, ultimately, on making it easier for community groups to go from wanting to take all the good work that has been put in place and the advice given from GIY to get them growing, to having them permanently growing in a sustainable way and to enable communities to come together.

That is just a snapshot. We are not going to answer this in a minute or two. We would be more than happy to make a second presentation if we are discussing what methods are needed to improve this throughout Ireland.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. McCormack. I will mention one of my personal hobby horses, which is school gardens. I ran a school garden in my previous career for many years. I firmly believe, and if one gardens with one's children one knows this, that if they grow it they will eat

it. I want to give them the opportunity to grow it. It opens their minds, and their palates as well.

I call Senator Murphy.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Many of the questions I wished to ask have been answered already by our guests. I thank them for engaging with us. It is very important. The pandemic has taught me one thing, and that is to prepare for the future. We have to look at all the issues around gardening, outdoor events and more community. They are very important and are on many people's minds.

The Wheel is a fantastic organisation; I know some groups that are in it. How many people does it take to run it and who funds that? Groups with a turnover of €20,000 to €25,000 do not have to pay a fee. Obviously, the fees The Wheel gets would not run the organisation. Does it get any funding from the State or the health service? Looking at much of the work it does, one would presume some funding should be coming from the HSE or the Department of Health. On membership, can individuals sign up and become a member or is it all groups?

On community gardens, I spent my college years in horticulture and gardening is one of the most fantastic things for people. It is very clear to see what is being done now throughout the country. My own local authority is very good when a committee, parish or village wants to put a community garden in place. There is one being developed in west Roscommon which will open very shortly and there is more of that to come. Does Mr. McCormack have an ongoing discussion with all the local authorities about this? It is definitely something they should all be adopting and becoming involved in. Does Mr. McCormack have an ongoing situation where he discusses this with them? He talked about all the charity work The Wheel is involved in. Michael D. Higgins was quoted at one stage as saying that: "The Wheel is a force for good in Irish society." It definitely is and that is why it is important to have its representatives before us.

Community gardens are really good for communities and people with anxiety and mental health issues. Not alone are plants growing and different features present in the space around some towns and villages, one or two animals are often present. Communities look after all of that and do so very well. It is amazing when somebody takes a child with autism to look at an old horse or cow in a field that it means so much to that child and has a very calming effect. There are huge benefits from all of this. I would be very grateful for answers to those few questions.

Dr. Deirdre Garvey: I thank Senator Murphy for the positive, affirming and reaffirming statements he made. As the founding CEO of The Wheel, 21 years ago, the quote from President Michael D. Higgins is very dear to my heart and I passionately believe it to be true. As Mr. Cooper said, we are very excited at the concept of ongoing, structured social dialogue because the world will never be the same, vaccine or no vaccine. We have all seen things in the past year and a bit that will change us and have changed us forever. We are very excited to put our shoulders to the wheel, excuse the pun, to make life and communities better into the future. I thank the Senator for that.

I am very happy to tell the Senator about the funding of The Wheel. It is an open book. Our annual report is more than 40 pages long and everything is put into the open as good practice would dictate. Membership of The Wheel is open to organisations which become members of the company and can vote for the board of directors. That is how that works. They can vote to change the rules as they would in any normal company.

For organisations that are on the smaller side of things, we were delighted on our 20th anniversary last year to be able to fund all those organisations, like Community Gardens Ireland, that are volunteer only or have money flowing through them for specific, small costs up to the level of €25,000. While that figure is not small and is actually quite significant, all of those organisations have free membership, which we are really pleased about. We hope to increase the €25,000 to a higher level of turnover and so capture an enormous number of organisations that way.

We also have a membership category for individuals and organisations that are not non-profit. Full member organisations of The Wheel are the only ones allowed to vote in the AGM or in board of directors' elections. The other two categories of members get all the same benefits in terms of services, belonging, information and training, but they cannot be part of the organisational governance. It is not necessary to be a registered charity to be part of our organisational governance, although more than 80% of our members are. The organisation, however, has to be independent of the State and of any private controlling interests, and it has to be constituted as a not-for-profit so nobody can extract a dividend, sell a share or anything like that. Those are the only two requirements, that the organisation is set up for the public benefit as a not-for-profit and is independent. We welcome everybody with no holds barred, and any organisation whether it is a charity or not. Our membership is growing and thriving.

We do not get any funding from the Department of Health. We have not traditionally been in that funding relationship. As Mr. Cooper said, we now have a very vibrant engagement as regards the relationship between voluntary service providers and the State. That is the current situation and we are doing a lot of work on that.

Where does our funding come from? I like to call our funding model a three-legged stool. One leg is the membership fees. We run 300 training programmes for 6,000 people every year. The vast majority of them are delivered free for members and there is no charge, but we apply a charge for about 35% to 40% of our training courses. That is what we call earned income. We are like an enterprise in the sense that we sell training and a number of other services like that. That is leg number one, which is money we generate from within charities and community and voluntary organisations. The services we provide are very low cost or free but are high volume, which is what makes that work.

The second leg, let us call it core funding, comes from our lead Department, which is the Department of Rural and Community Development. We are beneficiaries of the multiannual funding scheme to support national organisations Mr. Cooper mentioned, administered by Pobal from the Department of Rural and Community Development. We are one of about 70 organisations that benefit from core funding under that scheme. The social dialogue we have been party to and we have mentioned has enabled us to participate in those core functions of representation and support. That is very valuable. That is leg number two.

Leg number three is our largest source of funding but is split into two half legs, if I can put it like that. One is the contracts we have with different Departments. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs has recently asked us to run a contact and information service, secured through eTenders and public procurement processes, to help Irish organisations access EU money post Brexit. Building those connections of culture and meaning that will also result in funding is very important to the Government. This is a typical contract for service where our staff service that function, are employed as a result of that money, and when that contract ends, which we hope it will not because we are already hitting our targets, the funding will continue.

The second half of the third leg is a relatively small number of corporate partnerships in terms of grants for specific training programmes. We have a great one with Medtronic, a foundation and corporation in Ireland which funds our awareness raising and our charity impact awards programme every year. That is a really valuable corporate partnership.

I hope I have not gone into too much detail but have given a flavour of our three-legged stool funding model. Each one of those legs supports the other. Saying that one leg of funding could be taken away and we would still have 80% of our funding is not how it works. It is a virtuous circle, as it is for all charities. They have a diverse mix of income streams and each one enables the other to happen. If one stream is taken out, the income is not simply reduced by 10%, which is what we are seeing in reduced fundraising income because of the impact of the Covid pandemic. I wanted to make that analogy. I thank the committee and I hope that gives it all the information it needs.

Vice Chairman: It is certainly the first three-legged stool I have heard of with two half-legs, but I enjoyed the analogy. I will ask Community Gardens Ireland to give a brief comment with an eye to the clock.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Community Gardens Ireland is really a network of gardens around the country. We have a small committee, we do not have a base and we do not have any full-time workers so negotiating with individual councils is done by the garden in the area in question. A garden will often come to us for help, particularly if it is a new one trying to get off the ground. We use our website as a source of information for people. We have a resource for gardens that are trying to get off the ground and we will advise as best we can but negotiation with individual councils around the country is carried out by the people in the area who are trying to get a garden off the ground. Does that answer the question?

Senator Eugene Murphy: I thank Ms Foreman. That point was really important. I believed last night I would get an opportunity to read all about The Wheels but fatigue set in. I am sorry to have demanded so much detail as a consequence. It is very interesting and it seems like a really good model. I encourage all groups that can join The Wheel to do so. Well done to the Community Gardens Ireland delegates.

Vice Chairman: I echo Senator Murphy's comments. On a personal note, I found this morning's session extremely interesting and informative. It will be really helpful in our work. I thank the witnesses from The Wheel and Community Gardens Ireland for their comprehensive contribution to this meeting. Their input will be of enormous benefit to this committee as we prepare our pre-budget submission to the Minister for Social Protection, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.22 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 19 May 2021.