

Commitment to Communities

Sinn Féin's commitment to the community and voluntary sector



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I Introduction

A sector delivering what the state does not

The community and voluntary sector in Ireland is estimated to be worth $\text{€}6.5$ billion, more than three times the size of the state's investment. This is proof that the community and voluntary sector is a cost effective medium for the provision of many vital services and for development. The delivery costs of many of the services currently provided by this sector would be substantially greater if government departments, the HSE or private companies were to deliver the same level of service directly. And it is unacceptable for the state to abdicate its own responsibility for the delivery of vital services to the community and voluntary sector without providing adequate support and funding.

The sector provides the equivalent of 50,000 full-time jobs, with large numbers of part-time workers greatly increasing the total number employed. And the professional staff facilitate much greater levels of volunteering on top of that.

Across the state the 7,500 charitable, community and voluntary groups in the community and voluntary sector provide essential services to children, older people, people with disabilities or ill health, drug users, women and Travellers.

The sector is also an important voice in Irish society, a tireless advocate for communities dealing with some of Ireland's most serious social and economic problems. It informs debates around planning, social integration, education and training, community development, labour market supports, housing and health.

Sinn Féin believes that the potential of the community and voluntary sector, as both a service provider and an advocate, is far from fulfilled. In the midst of recession, as unemployment rises and struggling public services are overwhelmed, community organisations are trying to step into the gap. Almost 75% of

the sector report an increase in demand for their services over the last six months.

But instead of being supported, community and voluntary groups find themselves under attack. All are facing cutbacks, but many fear that reductions in funding are a punishment for speaking out against government policy. Some are unfairly scapegoated as 'quangos' and marked for abolition by right-wing political parties and commentators, ignorant of the difference they make in working class communities across Ireland.

The cuts are targeting programmes that serve the most vulnerable in our society and deepen existing inequalities. The cuts are hitting community crèches that have enabled women to build their literacy skills and return to education, day centres for the elderly and supports for grandparents charged with minding grandchildren as heavy mortgages and high rents force both parents into the labour market. They are also hitting after-school programmes and homework clubs that directly contribute to keeping children who are at risk of early school leaving and teen pregnancy in school and off the streets.

Sinn Féin's vision is of a securely resourced community and voluntary sector that both responds



to, and advocates for, the needs and wishes of communities. It is about much more than service provision, indeed it is about more than simply informing political decision making. The sector needs to participate in making those decisions; it must be able to monitor and challenge Government to fulfil a watchdog function on the political class.



A target for government cuts

Despite the importance and independently-evaluated track record of the sector, it has been targeted disproportionately by government cuts since the commencement of the economic downturn. In 2009, when public expenditure actually increased by 6%, the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht (which funds essential community infrastructure) had its budget cut by 8%. In 2010 the Department's budget cut of 10% was again disproportionate considering the overall adjustment. The headline cut for voluntary organisations averaged between 18 and 20 per cent over 2009-2010. This is a staggering figure for a sector that was never properly, or securely, funded. Community development and frontline service providers working in the area of drug use and addiction were especially badly hit. As a result, the sector has contracted by about 15% and almost 5,000 full time equivalent jobs have been lost. While the full impact of Budget 2011 on the ground has yet to be quantified, key figures from the Department provide an indication. The following cuts are signalled: supports for community and voluntary sector cut by 29%, local and community development programmes cut by 6%, RAPID cut by 44%, initiatives tackling economic and social disadvantage (dormant accounts fund) cut by 70% and drugs initiatives cut by 7%.

It is a tribute to the commitment of those working in the community and voluntary sector that the first round of cuts were absorbed by many community groups and projects. Employees and voluntary workers made enormous, and for the most part unacknowledged, sacrifices to ensure that they could continue to function. Pay cuts, three day weeks, the non-renewal of contracts and service suspensions and reductions all ensued.

But most groups and projects are now at breaking point and unable to absorb anything further. More than half report suspending or delaying vital projects because of financial problems since July 2010. A quarter believe they may have to suspend their operations within this year. Advocacy is an area of work that has been badly squeezed, both in terms of representing individual service users, and the development and promotion of progressive policy agendas. The policy agenda is set to suffer particularly considering the additional closure of the Combat Poverty Agency, the absence of any social research posts in the Department of Social Protection, and the radical cuts in funding for organisations like the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Equality Authority, which serve to undermine bodies that typically provide a leadership role in the sector.



III Sinn Féin's vision for the community and voluntary sector

Our vision is of a securely resourced community and voluntary sector that both responds to and advocates for the needs and wishes of communities, be they geographically based or communities of interest. We believe that the community and voluntary sector is about much more than service provision. It can also be an important conduit for the views of communities, accommodating meaningful input into decisions and helping to ensure ongoing accountability around their implementation.

Frontline services alone cannot tackle marginalisation. Communities must also be given the resources and supports to address its underlying causes. There is a need for all of those involved in responding to the problems to work together. This includes those most affected: families, communities and young people.

Sinn Féin rejects deflationary austerity plans. Sinn Féin believes that the programme of spending cuts pursued by the outgoing government is doing irreparable damage to our vital community infrastructure which has taken years to build up. The

consensus of cuts is supported by Fine Gael and the Labour Party, both of which endorsed the EU deficit reduction timeframe and which are now seeking to make cuts of €6 billion and €4 billion respectively. The cuts inflicted also affect those communities that have never fully benefited from the so-called 'Celtic Tiger'. These same communities are now suffering from the cumulative effect of cuts to public spending, cuts to public services, cuts to minimum wage and cuts to community-based services.

Sinn Féin believes that people have the right to participate directly in the decision-making processes that affect them. Not only does participation have intrinsic value in itself, but it also results in better decisions. For example, tens of millions were wasted on the hospital co-location scheme which was widely opposed. The scheme is now in tatters and not a single additional bed has been provided. Likewise, had the outgoing government listened to the voices of groups representing people with mental illness and penal reform advocacy bodies, it could have avoided wasting millions of euro on a site for an ill-advised Superprison and Central Mental



Hospital at Thornton Hall in north county Dublin. And furthermore, had the people of Ringsend and environmental NGOs been listened to, the whole Poolbeg incinerator fiasco would have been avoided and the millions spent by Dublin City Council on consultants and public relations could have been redirected into promoting reducing, reusing and recycling our waste.

In pursuit of this vision Sinn Féin is committed to:

Multi-annual minimum funding

Sinn Féin is committed to reversing the cuts in funding to the community and voluntary sector. We are committed to moving towards multi-annual minimum funding because community and voluntary organisations need to be able to plan ahead. Sinn Féin would quickly target several common practices for elimination. For example, we would end the practice of funding bodies requiring the production of detailed business plans before giving any indication of the size of the budget available for the year in question. Likewise we would ensure that funding once approved, or provisionally approved in appropriate circumstances, is released immediately. This would target the current unacceptable situation in which community and voluntary organisations frequently survive on bank overdrafts because funding despite being approved, is held back until the very last moment. The current practice also diverts many valuable hours away from vital community development and service delivery and into chasing funding.

Ring-fencing certain funding

As outlined in our pre-budget submission for 2011, Sinn Féin is committed to ring-fencing €50 million per year from the dormant accounts fund for the community and voluntary sector. At the end of 2010 there was in the region of €58 million in the fund, of which €2 million was by its own reckoning available for disbursement. The fund is also bringing in an additional €40-€45 million per year from dormant accounts. Monies could be allocated in multi-annual grants to give projects some security and the ability to plan ahead.

Sinn Féin would also ring-fence monies seized by CAB for community development and community based drug projects in the areas worst affected by drug-related

crime. This funding would be in addition to and not a substitute for existing funding streams.

VAT refunds

Sinn Féin would introduce a VAT refund scheme for charities, thus increasing the monies available for service delivery.

Reshaping and extending Community Employment

Sinn Féin would re-conceptualise and extend the CE scheme. Sinn Féin is committed to increasing the number of CE places available, including Special CE. Parts of the community and voluntary sector and by extension the communities they serve depend greatly on CE scheme participants. The work undertaken by CE workers is hugely valuable and it should not be limited to being a 'transitional' scheme. Supports for transition to the labour market are needed but for many people, positions on CE and the services they underpin for the community should be recognised as valuable ends in and of themselves.

Social Enterprise

Sinn Féin would support community and voluntary organisations to benefit from the potential posed by social enterprise. Social enterprises trade in pursuit of social objectives, including job creation, which is a valued end in itself. Ownership of the enterprise may be community based and surpluses are re-invested. Social Enterprise has the potential to create 5,000 jobs a year.



Practical supports

Effective volunteerism requires professional support. For many groups this means employees of their own; for others professional support staff, advice and guidance can be pooled. But it is a myth that volunteers can step into the breach left by recent job losses. Funding must be available to recruit, induct, train and support volunteers.

Collective Bargaining

Community and voluntary sector workers currently do not have the ability to negotiate their pay and conditions on a collective basis. A mechanism involving Departments, employers and workers should be introduced to enable the right to collective bargaining to be realised.

Labour Court Recommendations

There are a number of Labour Court recommendations which have not been honoured by Government Departments or the Department of Finance. The relevant recommendations relate principally to redundancy payments totalling some €3 million. Sinn Féin is committed to ensuring that these recommendations are honoured.

Supportive regulation

Sinn Féin is committed to supporting charities to comply with their obligations under the Charities Act 2009. Sinn Féin would also amend the Charities Act to provide for the recognition of human rights promotion as a charitable activity.

All-Ireland Consultative Civic Forum

Sinn Féin is committed to securing the establishment of the All-Ireland Consultative Civic Forum promised by the Good Friday Agreement. Building a state-wide system, where communities learn from best practices being carried out elsewhere in the country and share information and ideas for ways forward, is critical. Grassroots workers and volunteers must be supported to participate in the forum. To date the state has operated a divide-and-conquer system and has dismantled the support agency network for the CDP sector.

Participative democracy

Often 'Partnership' has operated to the benefit of vested interests other than those of the community. Consultation has not been genuine and communities have been bullied into accepting deals. Ministers and government departments have paid lip service to partnership while acting unilaterally and statutory agencies have failed to participate fully in the partnership type mechanisms

that exist. Sinn Féin believes it is time to move on from 'Partnership' as we currently know it and move towards the greatest possible use of decision making mechanisms involving participative democracy. Sinn Féin believe that community and voluntary organisations could involve the community in the design and direction of public services and public budgets. Sinn Féin would introduce local participatory budgeting mechanisms such as those used successfully in more than 200 municipalities worldwide, to ensure full transparency and accountability in setting of rates and charges and in spending. For example, Participatory Budgeting has been practiced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, since 1989.

Advocacy

Many in the community and voluntary sector were concerned by what they saw as veiled threats to the funding of Travellers' rights organisation Pavee Point in July of 2007 when the organisation was campaigning on behalf of a group of Roma living near the M50. Other organisations have privately expressed their reluctance to campaign on certain issues in case their funding comes under threat.

Advocacy is an important part of community development. Sinn Féin has been to the fore in challenging the attack on advocacy that was commenced by the Fianna Fáil/PPD government and continued by Fianna Fáil and the Greens. The attack on the Equality Authority and the Human Rights Commission may have attracted the most column inches in the papers, but that was just the culmination of a lengthy government campaign in which the funding of organisations that spoke out in critical tones was slashed and in some instances discontinued. Sinn Féin will protect the community and voluntary sector's right to engage in advocacy.

