

<p>EUROPEAN UNION</p>  <p>Committee of the Regions</p>		<p>IRISH DELEGATION</p>  <p>Committee of the Regions</p>
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**A Response to the European Commission's White Paper
on 'A European Communication Policy'
COM(2006)35final**

SUMMARY

The Irish Delegation welcomes the European Commission's initiative to revise and develop its information and communications policies. It considers that any strategy arising from the White Paper must develop long-term and sustainable measures for informing, consulting and listening to the general public and provide suitable provisions for the active involvement of local and regional authorities.

Some of the key points which the Delegation underlines are:

1. Communication is a two-way process – the provision of factual information but also relaying public concerns and aspirations to policy makers and decision takers.
2. There is clearly a role for local and regional authorities in communicating Europe effectively but there are considerable challenges for these authorities in doing so (see Point 2.4) but also some measures which may help to overcome these challenges (see Point 2.5).
3. The public library service, operated by local authorities, is an important information relay source which provides some opportunities.
4. The European Commission Representations in the Member States could develop better contacts and partnerships with local and regional authorities.
5. On the Committee of the Regions, more use could be made of its members as two-way relays of information to, and attitudes and concerns of, local and regional authorities (see Point 3.3).
6. Ireland should review the effectiveness of its communication policy on European Union affairs (see Points 4.2 and 4.4).
7. A permanent and more systematic dialogue between local and regional authorities in Ireland, national representatives in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the European Commission on policy issues of relevance at the sub-national level should be established.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Irish Delegation to the Committee of the Regions welcomes the European Commission's White Paper on 'A European Communication Policy' as an initiative to bridge the gap between the Union's Institutions and Europe's citizens.

1.2 The Irish Delegation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process, especially as it considers that local and regional authorities have an important role to play in any future EU information and communications strategy.

1.3 The Irish Delegation considers that a communication policy must engage with citizens directly. For this to be a success the European Commission and the other partners must commit to a permanent engagement with citizens and resist the attraction of quick-fix, but potentially short-lived, gains. The Irish Delegation considers that this policy must look beyond the adoption of the draft Constitution.

1.4 The Irish Delegation supports communication strands which provide specific information aimed at specific sectors of the population and in a language which is in everyday usage, including the Irish language. The Delegation also cautions against an over reliance on new technology and media, given the findings of the EUROSTAT report (June 2006) on computer literacy across a number of Member States.

1.5 The Irish Delegation considers that communication is a two-way process – providing clear, simple and factual information but also relaying public concerns and aspirations to policy makers and decision takers at national and European levels.

1.6 The Irish Delegation and the regions in Ireland, with the support of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, have worked to keep Irish local and regional authorities and other bodies informed about relevant EU developments – policy proposals, legislation and funding opportunities, primarily through the establishment of the Irish Regions Office in Brussels and the development of its website: www.iro.ie and other information products¹.

A ROLE FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

2.1 The Irish Delegation generally supports the partnership approach in the White Paper and in particular welcomes the explicit reference to local and regional authorities. Members of these authorities are in constant contact with the general public, are well placed to listen to concerns and to dispel any misconceptions on EU issues.

2.2 The Irish Delegation also highlights that local and regional authorities are active in implementing EU policy and participating in EU funded programmes and projects. These authorities are in an ideal position to give European initiatives a local dimension and make them 'real' for citizens. Many of these authorities also publish information publications and have websites and radio stations which are ideal sources of information and communication with the general public.

2.3 The Irish Delegation would however underline that these authorities must maintain their objectivity and be guided by the interests of their communities as expressed in democratic elections and represented by elected members. While they can be partners in communication policy, they should not be considered as agents for the European Union.

2.4 That said, there is clearly a role for local and regional authorities in communicating Europe effectively, but the Irish Delegation underlines that there are considerable challenges for these authorities in doing so. In particular:

- The need to have information that is easily understandable, avoids the excessive use of EU jargon and has a clear local reference and relevance;
- The need to overcome a certain lack of awareness of, interest in and/or focus on the EU decision-making process within certain sections of sub-national government;
- A need to change the perception of what the EU is and the role that it plays. In Ireland, this must change from seeing the EU as a source of funds only to a focus on the policy-making process and the impact this has on policy and service delivery at local level;
- Local authorities have many competing interests, thus there are little resources available or made available to discussing EU issues and communicating EU developments. There is little or no incentive to address this.

2.5 The Irish Delegation requests the European Commission to support local and regional authorities in addressing some of the challenges they face in communicating Europe. In this regard it would like to make a number of suggestions, such as:

- The provision of EU training and awareness for local and regional representatives and officials could be better assisted by the Commission, either through the Representation offices in the Member States or directly from Brussels, through specific briefings on key issues, facilitating study visits, developing some EU educational tools and presentation packs for local representatives;

¹ The Irish Regions Office produces a monthly [EU News Bulletin](#) with information on EU policy developments, funding opportunities and other news items, which is circulated by e-mail to all local and regional authorities, sub-national and national agencies and other bodies in Ireland. It produces this and a bi-monthly [EU Policy Review](#) in association with the Institute of Public Administration. It has also developed an [EU Funding Tracker](#) website, in association with the NASC West Ireland Liaison Office.

The Irish Delegation to the CoR produces a bi-annual newsletter [Delegation Diary](#), which is circulated to all local and regional authorities and other bodies in Ireland.

- To help provide some incentive, the Commission could establish national awards in each Member State for sub-national authorities' with the best, most effective EU communications actions, with European awards for the best from each country. This could also help identify good practices, which may be transferable;
- The proposed 'European Programme for Training and Public Communication' for officials from European and national institutions, as set out in the White Paper, could be opened up to include relevant officials from local and regional authorities;
- The European Commission's use of national experts should also be broadened to include experts from local and regional administrations. This would have a two-fold effect of giving valuable experience to these local/regional officials which can be used by their authorities and also give a new perspective to the Commission's policy making.
- Establish more direct consultation with local and regional government and their associations. In this regard it is suggested that Commissioners and officials visiting Member States could meet with local and regional representatives to discuss developments of interest.

2.6 The Irish Delegation points out that the public library service, operated by local authorities, is an important information relay source and that there are opportunities for the European Commission to work more closely with the public libraries in making information, especially the information it provides to the Europe Direct centres, available free of charge.

2.7 The Irish Delegation encourages the European Commission Representations in the Member States to take a more proactive approach in developing contacts and partnerships with local and regional authorities. The preparations for the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome celebrations in 2007 provide an ideal opportunity for this.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

3.1 The Irish Delegation feels that the members of the Committee of the Regions play a unique role in providing a bridge between their local and regional authority activities and the discussions at EU level.

3.2 The Irish Delegation would like to highlight the efforts that the Committee of the Regions has made to date in terms of developing its contacts with local and regional media and journalists and the unseen representative work that its members undertake in communicating Europe.

3.3 The Irish Delegation considers that more use could be made of the Committee's members, as (a) sources for informing fellow public representatives and their authorities and (b) potential avenues for communicating attitudes and concerns of these authorities to the EU Institutions. However, to undertake this relay role effectively members would have to be suitably resourced.

3.4 The Irish Delegation and the regions in Ireland generally supported many of the initiatives for better interaction between the European Commission and sub-national government proposed under the White Paper on European Governance in 2001. In particular, the Structured Dialogue initiative between the Commission and associations of local and regional government under the auspices of the Committee of the Regions is a positive development but a review of its effectiveness as a means of communication should now be undertaken.

IRELAND – A MORE ENGAGED APPROACH

4.1 The Irish Delegation reiterates its view that communication is not a one-way process and must not just focus on how Brussels can reach out to citizens. It must also be about how citizens and the authorities that directly represent them can communicate, interact and influence what happens in the EU.

4.2 In this regard, the Irish Delegation repeats a number of proposals it initially made in a submission to the National Forum on Europe and the European Convention of the Future of the European Union back in 2002², for more direct and active consultation and communication with sub-national authorities in Ireland on relevant EU matters.

- Adequate mechanisms for consultation when discussing EU decisions and implementing EU policies should be established, which should better involve local and regional authorities in influencing the preparation of EU issues at the national level. This is particularly relevant in the context of the provisions on Subsidiarity and consultation in the Constitutional Treaty.
- Improved channels established for direct, systematic and transparent dialogue between the European Commission and the regions and local authorities in Ireland.
- Ireland needs to use all avenues open to maximise its participation in the EU and to enable this we would propose that a 'Team Ireland' approach be adopted which would bring together Irish representatives on EU bodies and other relevant public representatives to discuss key issues, develop positions and share insights. This structure could also be used to help add value to EU communication policy.
- The analyses of EU legislative proposals prepared for the Joint Committee on European Affairs of the Oireachtas should be made more widely available to facilitate wider debate and discussion on EU issues.

4.3 The Irish Delegation is concerned that much of the European Union related work that local and regional authorities in Ireland undertake seems to go unnoticed or is taken for granted.

4.4 The Irish Delegation also considers that Ireland should review how it communicates within the European Union. As an example, the Irish Delegation highlights the Scotland House model in Brussels (which is a partnership of public, private and voluntary bodies that have combined to provide a central point of contact, information and analysis for Scottish interests, at the same time providing a high profile for Scotland within the EU Institutions). This is a model from which Ireland may learn. The Irish Delegation also considers that Ireland should be more proactive in demonstrating its successes as a member of the EU and implementing EU policy, in particular EU Regional Policy.

4.5 The Irish Delegation considers that the creation of the National Forum on Europe has provided a platform for political discussion on the European Union, its impact on Ireland and the role that Ireland can play in its development. The Delegation is represented on the Observer Pillar of the National Forum and has used this as an opportunity to introduce some issues of interest to the sub-national dimension.

4.6 Outside of the National Forum, the Irish Delegation believes that there is some scope in looking at innovative ways of communicating Europe to sectors of the general public. In the sub-national government sector, there is merit in establishing a permanent and more systematic dialogue between local and regional authority representatives, national representatives in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the European Commission on policy issues of relevance at the sub-national level.

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² This submission is available at: <http://www.iro.ie/pdf/Convention-Paper.pdf>