

Citizens' Corner

Information Exchange

National Active Citizenship Network

September 2006



A Necessary and Timely Development!

This edition of Citizens' Corner, the information exchange newsletter of the National Active Citizenship Network (NACN), celebrates the launch of very successful regional meetings of our Active Citizenship Network. The contents also deal with the appointment of our new development officer, the Task Force on Active Citizenship, our new website www.vote.ie and other interesting initiatives. In order to appreciate these developments it might be helpful to recall some important dates and events in the history of the NACN:

- 1995 The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice V.P.S.J. established to work for social and economic change-tackling poverty and exclusion.
- 1996 A decision was taken to focus on active citizenship/voter education as a means of achieving this goal
- 1997 The Voter Education Programme was facilitated for the first time by the 2 coordinators of the V.P.S.J. - Margo Delaney CHF and Bernadette Mac Mahon D.C. and a number of volunteers. This pilot effort showed that the programme was very effective in promoting greater voter turnout.
- 1998 The V.P.S.J. was granted a Community Employment Scheme. For 3 years an average of eight teams facilitated the programme in Dublin.
- 2000 Approximately 400 community groups in Dublin and in different parts of Ireland had participants in the Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme workshops.
- 2001 Requests were received to train community workers /leaders as facilitators. To date approximately 2000 have been trained.
- 2002 The NACN was established to support the new facilitators
- 2003/4 The Dublin members of the NACN organised very successful national conferences and produced resource material for the 2004 elections.
- 2005 A grant was received from the Dormant Accounts to employ a Development Officer for 2 years.
- 2006 Regional meetings of the NACN took place in Tralee, Ennis and Mallow and others are in the planning stage. A new website www.vote.ie will be launched.



Members hard at work at our Mallow Network meeting - June 2006

Today the Active Citizenship/Voter Education team of the V.P.S.J. consists of Director (Bernadette Mac Mahon D.C), Workshops Co-ordinator (Phyllis Lee D.C), Secretary (Mary Murphy) and Development Officer (Carina Fitzgerald). Since her arrival Carina has made a valuable contribution to the work of the V.P.S.J. In collaboration with Bernadette and Phyllis she promotes the Training for Trainers and Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme workshops and participates in the development of the Network. This second edition of Citizens Corner provides an up to date account of developments. The events and activities further the vision and goals of N.A.C.N and the V.P.S.J.- an Ireland in which every citizen believes they have an active role to play – an Ireland in which every voice is heard. The 2007 election provides us with an opportunity to realise our vision.

Voter Education on Radio!!!

Over the past number of months NEAR fm 101.6 (North East Access Radio) has been working closely with the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice on a series of six radio programmes based on the Active Citizenship Voter Education Program



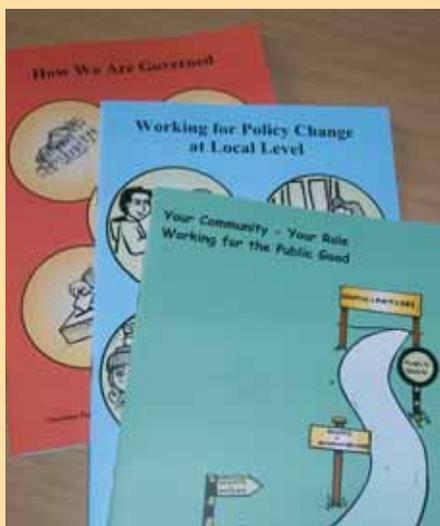
Production of the series, entitled 'Your Voice, Your Vote' was funded by Citizenship.ie, as part of their activities under the European Year of Citizenship through Education. There are six programmes in the series, which will be launched in September of this year on NEAR fm. The series starts by looking at the history of the vote, and then explains how to register, and how to fill out the ballot paper. Subsequent programmes look at party policies, candidates and election issues.

The final programme looks at spin, and keeping politicians accountable.

The programmes are part of a plan developed by a local steering committee of community groups in northeast Dublin which is concerned with low levels of voter turnout in communities in the area. This steering committee includes the Northside Partnership, the Northside Community Law Centre, the Northside Citizens Information Centre, The Discovery Centre Darndale, and NEAR fm. With the support of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, the steering committee has already trained a number of local people to deliver the course. The group hopes that the radio programmes will complement the training, by raising awareness on the issue of low voter turnout, and by providing listeners with an overview of the course.

The programmes will be made available nationally through the national network of twenty community radio stations, Craol. Community groups interested in receiving a copy of the programmes should contact Niamh Faren at NEAR fm – 01 848 5213 or niamh@mediacoop.ie.

New Active Citizenship Material



Network members who attended our National Conference at the Aisling Hotel in October 2005 may remember the piloting of some new material. The material consists of 3 new units in booklets, which are designed in the same format as the Voter Education manual. The 3 new units are entitled 'How we are Governed' 'Working for Change at Policy Level' and 'Your Community, Your Role'. All material is easy to use and exercises are interactive and suitable for all groups. The material is a useful addition to or as a follow-on from the Voter Education workshop.

Thanks to Mary Connaire DC, Margo Delaney CHF and Bernadette Mac Mahon DC who designed the 3 units and also to Mary Murphy for her hard work in compiling the finished products.

Taskforce on Active Citizenship

In April 2006 our Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern T.D. announced a taskforce on Active Citizenship. This is an overdue and welcome measure from our government. Sr. Bernadette Mac Mahon DC, director of the Vincentian Partnership was invited to join the taskforce and is chairperson of the sub-committee on political participation. It is an opportunity for Sr. Bernadette and the V.P.S.J. to highlight issues around voter participation and its role in a healthy thriving democracy of active citizens.



To get the widest spectrum of views, the Taskforce has widely distributed a public consultation questionnaire through **public bodies, business and community networks**. It is also available to download from the website www.activecitizen.ie. The Taskforce is due to make recommendations to the government early in 2007.

The Taskforce on Active Citizenship held a series of regional public meetings as part of its public consultation process. The Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D. launched the first public consultation meeting of the Taskforce in Croke Park, Dublin on Thursday 14th September 2006. The meeting was chaired by broadcaster Miriam O'Callaghan of RTE and was a well attended successful event. Further public meetings were held in **Monaghan, Sligo, Galway, Cork and Tullamore** in September and early October 2006. The Taskforce invited individuals, communities and organisations to have their say on what it means to be an active citizen in today's Ireland. As well as getting feedback from those already helping in, and engaging with, their communities, the Taskforce is interested in hearing from people who would like to get involved but feel there are factors preventing them from doing so. The Chairperson of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, Ms Mary Davis, CEO of Special Olympics Ireland, said that she was keenly aware that in today's society the most difficult thing for people to give is their time. "Pressures of time, changing values and modern lifestyles have contributed to a sense that it is harder to be an active citizen in Ireland today", she said. "The Taoiseach has asked the Taskforce to consider the issues that help and hinder people's participation in society, locally and nationally."

At Croke Park on September 14th Bertie Ahern announced the establishment of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship and said " Its job will be to inform the Government on ways in which it can encourage greater participation, locally and nationally, and to advise us on measures that contribute to the development of strong, civic-minded independent citizens. A healthy democracy depends on the extent to which citizens engage in the issues that affect them. Our job in Government is to ensure that communities are supported in that process. ... I have sensed a very positive response to the establishment of the Taskforce - reflecting a desire to talk and think about some of these important issues underlying the future of Irish society. I am delighted that the Taskforce is making such an effort to stimulate that debate - and raising awareness of these issues is a valuable outcome in its own right."

"Together We're Better"

Nation Active Citizenship Regional Meetings!!

Three very successful meetings were held in Munster in June. The meetings were held in Tralee, Ennis and Mallow. The feedback from all meetings was very positive and all who attended felt the meetings helped focus and energise them and generate enthusiasm to prepare and focus on Election 2007. At all meetings there were brainstorming sessions on slogans and ideas for promoting Voter Registration and ideas for Election 2007 as well as focusing on the needs of individual areas and organisations. At all three meetings, members felt some refresher training would be helpful as well as the provision of posters and ideas for Voter Registration drives in the autumn.

Tralee

Our first meeting was attended by members from all over Kerry from urban Tralee to the more rural Caherciveen. Different ideas were put forward regarding Voter registration. One of these ideas was incorporating into computer classes, the E-Reg facility now available on most local authority websites. The E-Reg allows everyone to check if they are on the electoral register by keying in their name and address. A table with information and forms would then be available in each centre to encourage and make it easy for people to register. Another idea was to incorporate the registration form into literacy classes as an example of form filling.



Tralee Network Meeting - June 2006

It was also felt that other organisations in Tralee and Kerry should be made aware of the VPSJ and the Voter Education workshop in order to further the work into all areas.

Ennis

Ennis has a very strong Active Citizenship Network and great many members attended. The meeting was very focussed and already there have been many worthwhile initiatives resulting from the meeting. Aobhan Haverty, Clare's VEC Community Education Facilitator attended. Aobhan had not previously attended a training trainers workshop and subsequently a very successful trainers workshop took place in Ennis in September. Clare network members organised themselves to focus on a Voter registration week in October. They have identified 40 venues in Clare where they will have a display, brochures and registration forms available. Alongside this they are hoping to promote this registration drive and run a competition on Clare FM. The competition will involve people composing catchy slogans to encourage Voter Registration and Voting. It is hoped the V.P.S.J. and the NACN can avail of all slogans later for future posters!

Members from Limerick city also attended the Ennis meeting and realised they needed more members before they could organise a registration drive or similar events in Limerick city. Mary Flannery, Community Education Facilitator from Limerick VEC subsequently organised a training trainers workshop in Limerick in early September. The workshop was a great success with community workers/adult educators from CDPs, Resource centres, the VEC and Paul Partnership attending. We now look forward to expanding our Limerick network and it is hoped the Active Citizenship/Voter Education workshop will become better known in Limerick city and environs.

Mallow

The Mallow meeting was attended by network members from Cork city, Fermoy and Mallow representing many different organisations. The members appreciated meeting people from other areas and organisations. Wonderful brainstorming and discussions took place in Mallow on a Monday morning and the group gave wonderful feedback on how useful, energising and inspiring they found the meeting. It also focussed them on Election 2007 and different initiatives that can be taken in Cork city and county to encourage registration voting and political participation. Towards the end of the meeting the large group formed themselves into three smaller ones, with one group coming together to organise Voter registration in the Mahon, Togher and Ballyphehane areas of Cork City, another group focussing on Mallow and a third on Fermoy. All three areas will hold Voter Registration drives in the autumn.



Mallow Network Members busy after a well-deserved cuppa!

A training trainers session has been booked for Blarney for November and any community worker/youth worker/adult educator who would like to avail of this training is welcome to attend. Please contact Caitriona Horgan on 022 43553 or email c.horgan@avondhudevelopment.ie if you would like to attend.

Bernadette and Carina would like to thank Sharon Browne in Tralee, Mary Flanagan in Ennis and Margaret Desmond and Caitriona Horgan in Mallow for their help with organising the venues and refreshments for the meetings.

If any of our members would like to the VPSJ to host an Active Citizenship Network meeting in their area in order to focus on preparation and initiatives for Election 2007, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

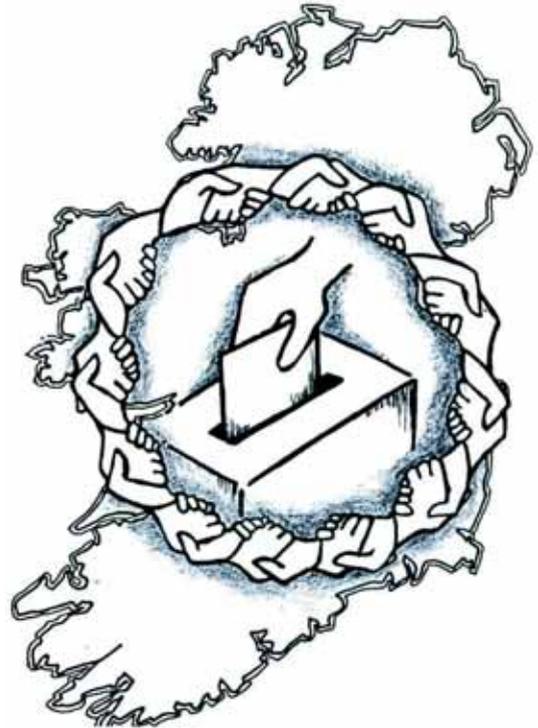
REMINDER – GENERAL ELECTION 2007 !!

Elections are getting closer!
There will be a General
election in Ireland in 2007!

There are many silent voices in Ireland. Many people do not vote and as a result families and communities lose out.

Do you know that in some areas voter turnout is less than 30%? The non-voters may include people in the area where you work, people in the groups you work with, your family or your friends.

Voter turnout in General Elections has declined from 76% in 1969 to 62% in 2002.



National Trends for General Elections (1969 – 2002)

1969	1977	1987	1989	1992	1997	2002
76%	75.66%	72.69%	67.66%	67.46%	65.26%	62.05%

Movement towards a society that is more fair, more just and inclusive is unlikely when the government is elected by fewer and fewer citizens. Such a society requires the active participation of all citizens. People in disadvantages area need to find a voice to express their concerns and needs.

If the same trend continues the turnout in 2007 may drop below 60% !

Help reverse this trend -

Encourage people to REGISTER and VOTE to stand up for
Themselves, their Family, their Community and their Country.

Organise a Voter Education workshop to encourage people to look
at their issues and use their vote wisely.

Voter Education Drive in Tallaght!

Active Citizenship Tallaght (ACT) is a coalition of local organizations with an active interest in citizenship. Members include Tallaght Partnership, Tallaght Volunteer Bureau, Tallaght Citizens Information Centre, The Vincentian Partnership, Killinarden Active Citizens, Tallaght Intercultural Action, Tallaght Youth Service, Comhairle na nOg, Tallaght Travellers CDP and the Disability Interest Group. Many of the participants organise individual citizenship projects and use ACT as a forum to exchange news and ideas. In 2005 it was decided to organize a voter registration drive as registration proves to be a key barrier to voting. ACT wants to ensure that as many people in the area as possible are registered to vote. To achieve this, ACT organised a 2-day voter registration drive in The Square shopping centre in Tallaght on November 17th and 18th 2005 in conjunction with South Dublin County Council. During the 2 day event, 41 volunteers approached people shopping in the Square and informed them of the opportunity to register as a voter

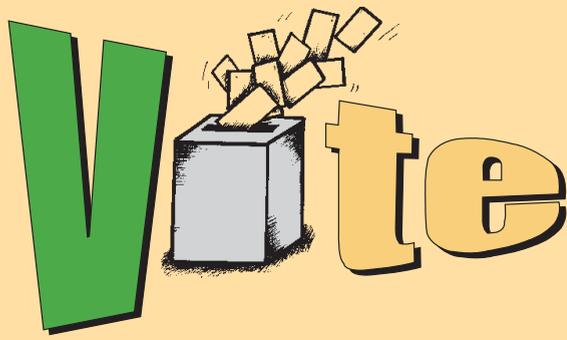


NACN member Sheilann Monaghan at the Tallaght Voter Registration Drive

or to check their details on the Voter Register. ACT occupied a desk where both paper and digital versions of the current Register were available to check and people were assisted with completing the Voter registration forms. The voter registration drive was widely publicised in the Tallaght area. Over 200 ACT posters were displayed within the community and 1200 ACT bookmarks were distributed over the 2-day registration drive. Tallaght FM did an interview with Valerie Scully from Tallaght Youth Service to highlight the event. Based on anecdotal evidence voiced by the volunteers who approached people and supported them to fill in the Registration Form, a high proportion of the people who registered over the two days were young people aged between 18-24 years old and many non Irish nationals. There were also a large number of parents who registered their children who had recently turned 18. In total 323 forms were filled in over the two days. The registration event was an enormous success and it will be repeated this year on November 9th and 16th. The Vincentian Partnership wants to congratulate ACT on such a successful event and for providing a model that other members can use when organising a similar event. The full evaluation report on the Tallaght Voter Registration Drive can be got from Marjo at Tallaght Partnership. Email: Marjo.moonen@tallpart.com.

Organise a Voter Registration Drive in your area!!

For any of our members who would like to organise a Voter Registration drive in the autumn, posters and leaflets/brochures are available from the VPSJ and are also available to download from our new website www.VOTE.IE. The posters should ideally be printed on a colour printer. Another resource that has been used with great success is pictures from the Gallery Walk (A3 size) along with the relevant stories. The stories could be laminated and placed on a hook so people can take away if they wish. These materials could be displayed on the walls of Adult Education Centres, CDPs, Resource Centres, libraries, CICs and other public places. Ensure registration forms are available in these venues. The Voter Registration Drive could be mentioned in local/parish newsletter as well as local radio and newspapers. Some areas may wish to organise a public event in a local shopping centre and it would be helpful to get the support of the local franchise authority as well as volunteers to help people register.



Launch of website
www.vote.ie

...Its your voice

A Further Resource To Encourage Voter Participation!

The Vincentian Partnership for Justice are delighted to announce the launch of a new website called WWW.VOTE.IE. This website is a resource for anybody seeking information on Voting and Elections in Ireland and the website promotes Voting and participation in the democratic process. There are practical information sections on registration, voting, completing a ballot paper, how we are governed and further ways to engage with politicians. There is also a section highlighting General Election 2007 and information on key date for registration and who is entitled to vote in the different elections.

As well as that there are the attention grabbing - *'Interesting Facts'* - this details instances where one vote changed the course of history; *'It's Your Right'* - where the history of the vote is traced and the picture and stories from the gallery walk are displayed; *'Why Bother'* and *'Lookout Spin'* - highlighting media messages and bias!

Last but not least there is a separate section for member of our National Active Citizenship Network ! Members can log in, exchange ideas and promote any Voter Education workshops/courses they are running. There is also a very useful toolbox for members where for example they can download poster and brochures that would be helpful for a Voter registration drive, a house to house leaflet drop or to promote a workshop or active citizenship event.

Feedback from our members regarding the website would be most welcome as well as letting us know of any extra information or resources they would find useful from this website.

" Democracy is too important to be a spectator sport
Get off the fence and VOTE "

Acknowledgements:

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice warmly acknowledges:

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- The illustrations by Helen Mac Mahon
- The article from Niamh Farran - The Media Co-op.
- ACT Tallaght and Tallaght Partnership for the article on their Voter Registration Drive

" Democracy is necessary because of the limitation of human beings.
Democracy is possible because of their goodness" .

Websites:

Voter Information: www.vote.ie

Community Media: www.mediacoop.ie

TASC www.tascnet.ie

Active Citizenship Taskforce: www.activecitizen.ie

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