



**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on  
Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the  
General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill, 2020**

**James Doorley, Deputy Director, NYCI, 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2021**

Chairman, Deputies, Senators, on behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland (\*NYCI is the National Representative Body for 54 voluntary organisations, working with up to 340,000 young people-see list of members in appendix 1). I want to thank to committee for the invitation to speak to you today concerning the General Scheme of the Electoral Reform Bill 2020.

NYCI has a long track record of promoting the active citizenship of young people and supporting their participation in our democracy. (See appendix 2 for details of our advocacy work in print/broadcast media in advance of General Election, 2020. We also ran online campaigns through Facebook, Instagram and Google ads.) As a result, we have organised campaigns to encourage and support young people to register to vote and to vote in all elections and referenda. We welcome the fact that there has been increased participation by young people in recent elections and referenda. The level of pre-election engagement, voter registration and participation in recent referenda and the 2020 General Election was unprecedented in our experience.

As a result, we have a strong interest in this legislation. In the interests of brevity, I will focus on those areas of the draft legislation on which we have substantive comments and concerns. I do at the outset want to welcome the long-awaited establishment of the Electoral Commission, the introduction of a rolling electoral register, the move away from household to individual registration, the greater availability of online voter registration and the pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds. I will now outline our comments and concerns.

#### **Head 5: Membership of the Electoral Commission**

The integrity and independence of our elections is vital and we understand the rationale for using the current membership model of both the Referendum Commission and SIPO with regard to the membership of the Electoral Commission. However, if we are serious about promoting greater participation by young people and underrepresented groups, we believe the legislation should also explicitly include provision for a youth representative and/or those with experience of promoting participation in the electoral process. We also believe that the Electoral Commission should have a member with expertise in IT systems/digital/cybersecurity given the remit of the Commission and importance of this expertise now and into the future.

#### **Head 28: Functions of the Electoral Commission**

We are disappointed that the remit of the Electoral Commission omits key functions. We note that the proposed functions are referred to as “initial functions” and that other functions will be assigned

to the Commission over time, but since it has taken 14 years to get this far from the first commitment to establish an Electoral Commission in 2007, we believe additional functions should be included in the legislation, which can be enacted and commenced over time. For example, under Head 30 the Electoral Commission will have the remit *“to promote public awareness of the referendum and encourage the electorate to vote at the poll”*, however the Commission hasn’t been assigned the same role with regard to promoting awareness of an election and encouraging the electorate to vote. We believe that the Commission should have an explicit role in increasing electoral participation and should be empowered to undertake it’s own actions and supports actions by non-governmental and non-partisan bodies who are solely concerned with promoting voter participation. **Head 77** refers to the Electoral Commission having a role to *“increase participation in our political processes through voter education.”* That in our view appears to be vague and limited, this needs to be clarified and expanded further on when the full bills is published.

Likewise, the Commission has not been given an explicit function to promote voter registration, which we believe is a significant omission. In 2017, a poll conducted for us by Red C, found that 22% of young people were not registered to vote, based on the current population of young people aged 18-29 years, that would be almost 155,000 young people. Democracy is diminished and undermined when so many young citizens are excluded. The work to promote voter registration should not be largely left to voluntary youth organisations such as NYCI, USI, Spunout, etc, who on a shoestring budget do our best to ensure young people are registered to vote.

### **Head 77 Research Function**

We welcome the inclusion of a research function in the remit of the Commission, but it does appear limited to *“electoral policy and procedure”*, I think a previous contributor to your deliberations, Dr Jane Suiter referred to it as *“tightly defined and unambitious”*. We agree, the Commission should have a wider remit to undertake and commission research on electoral participation, means to increase turnout, barriers to registration/voting etc. We would be particularly interested in research on examining ways to support and increase the electoral participation of young people. The CSO did produce a report on the 2011 General Election, but we have had two General Elections, two sets of local and European elections and numerous referenda since then and there is no detailed research or data available on voter participation. In the absence of regular and robust data it will be difficult for the Electoral Commission to contribute to policy and advise Government.

### **Head 80 Oversight of the Electoral Register**

We believe that many aspects of the electoral system currently function well and most importantly have the confidence and trust of the people, but we are very concerned about the voter registration system. We are of the view that it is not fit for purpose, as it is under resourced, inconsistent and incomplete. We are running 21<sup>st</sup> century elections with 19<sup>th</sup> century processes. (This is no reflection on the staff of the franchise/registration units in the Department and in the Local Authorities, who do tremendous work on tight timeframes, especially in advance of elections, however the system is outdated/under resourced). We welcome the move towards a rolling register and towards online registration. We had anticipated that the legislation would have assigned responsibility for the electoral register to the Electoral Commission, instead it has been given an oversight role. We are concerned that instead of having a regulatory body which will have the powers and resources to reform and improve the register and registration process, the Commission appears limited to undertaking research and making recommendations. This does not in our view will not give the Commission explicit authority to address the inadequacies in the individual electoral registers.

#### **Head 90 National Electoral Register Shared Database**

While Head 90 makes provision for the development of a national shared electoral register, it is not clear if and when this will happen. This has already been provided for in legislation (Electoral Amendment Act, 2001) for twenty years and has not occurred. While the establishment of an Electoral Commission may make this more likely, we would prefer this to be more definitive. We know from other jurisdictions, (Canada) that up to 17% of electoral information changes each year. This is particularly an issue for young people who are highly mobile and therefore it is vital that we have a national database that is accurate and that doesn't lose voters in the administrative cracks.

#### **Head 104 Pending Electoral List**

We welcome the introduction of the pending electoral list which will allow young people aged 16 and 17 years to register to vote so they do not have to wait until they turn 18. However, we call on the Government to implement the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention to extend voting rights to young people aged 16 and 17. As a first step, this can be done by means of legislation for the 2024 local and European elections.

#### **Conclusion**

Thank you for your attention, I am happy to respond to any questions or comments you may have.

## **\*Appendix 1**

### **NYCI MEMBERS LIST 2021**

#### **FULL MEMBERS (with voting rights)**

1. An Óige
2. BelongTo
3. Blakestown and Mountview Youth Initiative
4. Blossom Ireland
5. Boys Brigade
6. Catholic Guides of Ireland
7. Church of Ireland Youth Department
8. Colaiste na bhFiann
9. Crosscare (Catholic Youth Care)
10. ECO – Unesco
11. EIL Intercultural Learning
12. Exchange House
13. Feachtas
14. Finglas Youth Resource Centre
15. Foroige
16. Gaisce, The President's Award
17. Girls' Brigade Ireland
18. Girls' Friendly Society
19. Involve Youth Service Ltd
20. Irish Association of Youth Orchestras
21. Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Youth Committee)
22. Irish Girl Guides
23. Irish Methodist Youth and Children's Department
24. Irish Red Cross Youth
25. Irish Secondary Students Union
26. Junior Chamber Ireland
27. Killinarden Community Council Youth Project
28. Labour Youth
29. Love and Care for People
30. Macra na Feirme
31. Migrants Rights Centre Ireland
32. No Name Clubs
33. Ógra Fianna Fail
34. Ógras
35. Order of Malta Cadets
36. Localise
37. Scouting Ireland
38. Sphere17 Regional Youth Service

39. Spunout.ie
40. St Andrew's Talk about Youth Project
41. Swan Regional Youth Service
42. The West End Youth Centre
43. Union of Students in Ireland
44. Voluntary Service International
45. YMCA Ireland
46. Young Christian Workers
47. Young Fine Gael
48. Young Irish Film Makers
49. Young Social Innovators
50. Youth Theatre Ireland
51. Youth Work Ireland

#### **AFFILIATE MEMBERS (no voting rights)**

1. Amnesty International
2. Enable Ireland
3. Irish Wheelchair Association

## **\*\*Appendix 2**

### **Media coverage:**

Media coverage of NYCI's young voter registration and engagement campaign for GE2020 (data from 01.01.20-15.02.20):

Featured 239 times in national and regional print, broadcast and online media, resulting in coverage with a value of €268,390 and reach of 28,424,089.

[irisht Examiner.com](http://irisht Examiner.com)

### **Youth Council issues instructions for first-time voters as they push for over 600,000 young people to vote**



The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) has said it expects a strong turnout of young voters in tomorrow's general election.

Up to 603,987 Irish and UK citizens aged 18 to 29 are entitled to vote and more than 226,000 of them are first-time voters.

The NYCI - which represents organisations working with over 380,000 young people nationwide - is encouraging them to get to the polls.

Polling stations open between 7am and 10pm on Saturday.

Any Irish or British citizen aged 18 or over, ordinarily resident in Ireland and on the Register of Electors, is eligible to vote.

Polling cards are issued to voters in the days before polling day to tell people where to vote.

A polling card is not needed to vote - however, people may be asked for evidence of identity at the polling station.

James Doorley, Deputy Director of the NYCI said there has been a high level of youth voter

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