



European Citizens' Initiative

Campaign Report

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Introduction

As we say goodbye to 2010, it's time for us to close one of our campaigns in order to make way for new ones. For this reason we are closing the Citizens' Initiative Campaign; which tracked the European Citizens' Initiative ("ECI") from the Green Paper stage to final agreement last December.

The Citizens' Initiative Campaign, one of the first campaigns of our new strategy 'Making the Connection 2010-2012', was a return to the original objectives of European Movement Ireland and saw us establish ourselves once more in the field of advocacy. Highlights of the campaign for this organisation included our appearance before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs and the clear influence we had on their report on the ECI; our attendance at the Commission Representation's consultation evening in Europa House and the way in which internally tracking an initiative from Green Paper stage to final agreement proved to be a real and manageable learning curve for the team.

The Citizens' Initiative Campaign was also a campaign that saw a lot of member involvement. From helping with the design of our survey to canvassing on the streets, this campaign showed us how willing our members are to get involved and how well it can work when they do. We would like to thank our members for all the insight and support they contributed to this campaign.

We will continue to track the European Citizens' Initiative as one of the indicators in our Accountability Campaign throughout 2011, and keep you up to date throughout the year. If, in the meantime, you would like to access this document online, it is available on our website www.europeanmovement.ie.

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The European Citizens' Initiative: What is it?

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) was one of the major innovations of the Lisbon Treaty. A new democratic tool, its goal was to allow one million citizens to ask the European Commission to take action in an area in which it has a power to act.

While the Treaty stated this was the intention, legislation was required to clarify the details. That process was launched under the Spanish Presidency in January 2010. The Spanish stated that they were adamant that the legislation would be concluded under their Presidency which ended on the 30 June of the same year. This was not to be however, although that June a meeting of the European Council did agree on a draft proposal which was then passed to the European Parliament.

It fell to the Belgian Presidency to finish the process and agreement was reached by all EU institutions at the end of the Belgian Presidency in December 2010.

Our Campaign

Our Citizens' Initiative Campaign marked a return to the first principles of European Movement Ireland and was an important step back into the field of advocacy for this organisation. Our attendance at the Commission representation's consultation evening in Europa House and our appearance before the Joint Committee on European Affairs on how the Citizens' Initiative could and should work, helped to make EM Ireland a visible player in the debate and consultation.

The focus of this three-phase Campaign was to:

1. **Track the development** of this new democratic instrument as it moved from the consultation to implementation phase. Our goal was to keep an eye on the progression of the ECI and to see how committed the various EU and national institutions were to fulfilling its potential.
2. **Influence key institutions** on our views of the best implementation practices for the Citizens' Initiative.
3. **Establish the level of public awareness** of the Initiative among Irish people through a nationwide poll and find out the best channels to communicate to people how they could use the ECI.
4. **Lobby key government departments** on how to communicate the European Citizens' Initiative.

1. Tracking the development

How we tracked

We tracked the progression of the ECI through a number of sources.

Firstly, we tracked the stance each Institution was taking in relation to the Initiative via their official websites and via their members' websites. The European Commission's dedicated ECI website proved particularly helpful in this regard.¹

We also followed the development of the ECI via the blog site 'Campaign for a citizens-friendly European Citizens' Initiative'², which was most helpful in terms of giving us an insight as to how citizens across the EU felt about how the ECI was progressing.

Finally, due to the attention the ECI received during the Lisbon Treaty campaign in Ireland, the ECI was frequently the subject of newspaper articles and press releases in Ireland. All of these were useful for tracking the development of the Initiative and also as a gauge for public opinion on the ECI in Ireland.

The tracking nature of this campaign was the first of its kind for EM Ireland, and we learned a lot from the experience. In truth we were somewhat naive in thinking that there would be agreement on the ECI among all institutions by June 2010, just because the Spanish Presidency had set it out as one of its goals. The progression of the ECI was slower than had been hoped and than had been promised, and it was a good learning curve for us to understand that these things don't always go as planned. Originally intended as a six month campaign, as a result of the delay in getting agreement between the EU institutions we extended this campaign out until the end of 2010.

The ease with which a piece of draft legislation can be followed as it moves through the various EU institutions made the tracking fairly straightforward and the process proved to be transparent and open.

¹ European Commission, The Citizens' Initiative - http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/citizens_initiative/index_en.htm

² Campaign for a Citizens Friendly ECI - http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/?page_id=2

2. Influencing institutions

Our submission

After consulting with our Advisory Council about their views, European Movement Ireland presented a submission to the European Commission on the Citizens' Initiative. The key views were as follows:

- **Transparency**

EM Ireland members strongly urged that an independent body such as the European Ombudsman be given responsibility for both the admissibility of initiatives and the validation of signatures, to reduce any skepticism about the actual transparency of the initiative, with any decision on admissibility being made within three months. This would involve an amendment to the current remit of the role of the European Ombudsman, and this is something that we would see as hugely worthwhile in terms of transparency and good separation of powers.

- **Inclusion**

Our members felt that this initiative should be as inclusive as possible so that the image of the EU as undemocratic could be erased. By this we mean the following:

- lower the age limit of participation to 16. By utilising PPS numbers to avoid an excessive administrative burden, the signing of an Initiative could be a 'learner permit' for fully-fledged voting at the age of 18;
- allow for an Initiative to be deemed valid with the minimum number of EU countries (one quarter);
- and use the figure of 0.2% for the minimum number of signatories required from each country.

- **Signature Verification & Access**

EM Ireland's members felt that the Internet should definitely be utilised in this initiative to inform and mobilise citizens across the EU and provide that sense of horizontal communication. However, it was stressed that there is a need to be mindful of the fact that access to the Internet in Ireland is very much characterised by demographic variables such as age, income etc. To have a Citizens' Initiative as something that only those with the internet have access to would be contrary to the ideals that form the very basis of this project. Therefore it was felt that there should be depots available for people to sign up to an Initiative such as in a local post office, a citizen's information office or local library.

Oireachtas influence

In January we were asked to present our submission on the Green Paper in relation to the Initiative to the Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs, which we then submitted to the European Commission. Our submission was appended to the Committee's report and there was also evidence of our influence on the Joint Committee on EU Affairs' Report to the Commission on the Citizens' Initiative:

- European Ombudsman: *'the Committee proposes that the European Ombudsman, as an impartial actor separate from the Commission, should be given the responsibility for the verification of admissibility'* (p.8)
- Age Limit: *'the Committee believes the Citizens' Initiative is an excellent opportunity to get young people actively involved, engaged and interested in the EU. This could also raise the level of understanding about the EU which is low across the Union'* (p.6)
- Signature Verification and Access: *'to avoid excessive administrative burden, the Committee would also suggest using social security numbers (ie PPS numbers) to verify the signatures'* (p.6)
- Time line: *'the committee proposes that an initiative should be deemed to be admissible within two months of registration'*(p.8) (We suggested three months but were the only submission to suggest formulating any sort of timeline in relation to admissibility.)

After this stage, the progression of the European Citizens' Initiative moved to the European Institutions and entered the formal legislative process, which we continued to track.

Final outcome & a quick analysis

On 15 December, over a year after the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the Commission, Parliament and Council finally agreed on admissibility criteria. The main points are as follows:

Number of EU countries

The one million signatures that will make up a Citizens' Initiative must come from a minimum of a quarter of EU countries – currently that means seven. However, the figure of a quarter was arrived at on the basis that it was felt that this would ensure a European dimension to any Initiative.

Age of Participation

It was agreed that anyone of voting age in their home country should be entitled to sign a Citizens' Initiative. This means that in Ireland you have to be eighteen or older to sign an initiative.

Number of signatures needed from each EU country

In order to calculate the minimum number of signatures needed for a country to be represented in an ECI that country's number of MEPs has to be multiplied by 750. For example, in Ireland, with our 12 MEPs, that means that 9,000 people must sign a given Citizens' Initiative petition to be included as one of the seven countries. This figure of 9,000 represents 2% of the Irish population. Whereas in Germany, where they have ninety-nine MEPs, they need to collect 74,250 signatures, representing 0.09% of their population.

Time-frame

The 1 million signatures from across the EU must be collected within a time-frame of 12 months. This reflects EM Ireland's call for a time limit of one year for the collection of signatures in order to maintain momentum.

Decision on Admissibility

There was much debate as to what stage a decision should be made on whether an Initiative was deemed admissible and in line with the powers of the Commission. For example, what if one million signatures were collected only for participants to be told that their Initiative was not in an area in which the Commission had the power to act. This could result in credibility problems and cause people to feel that they had wasted their time.

On this basis it was decided that each initiative must establish a "Citizens' Committee" which will be made up of members from the seven EU countries participating in the Initiative. It will be the responsibility of the Citizens' Committee to ensure that the Initiatives are serious and European from the start, and that they are in an area in which the Commission has authority to act i.e. that they are in line with the terms of the European Regulation dealing with the ECI.

This means that the Commission will not make a formal admissibility decision. However the Commission will be required to register any proposed initiatives if the conditions laid down in the Regulation are met. The flip side of this is that the Commission may refuse to register an Initiative, which means it will not have to give it any consideration if it is deemed outside its powers to act. It would appear that any disagreement between the Commission and the Citizens' Committee on admissibility criteria will not be dealt with until the last hurdle and this is regrettable.

If the Commission refuses to register an Initiative, the Citizens' Committee will be informed of its right to appeal and any legal remedies available.

If an ECI is deemed admissible and is registered, the Commission will have three months to respond and the Citizens' Committee will be afforded an opportunity to present their initiative to the Commission. The European Parliament has also said that they will offer the Committee a public hearing.

If an ECI is deemed admissible, and is registered but the Commission refuses to act, they must outline their reasons clearly but there is no right of appeal. This is based on the principle that the Commission reserves the right of Initiative.

European Movement Ireland had called for an Initiative to be deemed admissible after three months, in order to avoid time wasting on the collection of signatures for an Initiative that won't be deemed admissible. It is likely that the current situation could result in some confusion and it remains to be seen how this format will work out. It appears to lay a lot of responsibility on the Citizens' Committee and leaves any disagreement between the Committee and the Commission to be resolved at the very last minute.

Collection & Verification

Each EU country has been left to decide the best method for collection and verification of signatures in their own country, and they have one year to pass legislation in this regard. EM Ireland argued that there should be an active component of the initiative and that the physical act of signing the initiative could be completed in either libraries, post offices or local authority offices. It was felt that this would inculcate a sense of civic duty, and add legitimacy to the initiative.

While EM Ireland supported the idea of an online component for any initiative in terms of encouraging trans-European communication, ensuring transparency, and awareness raising, it was felt that given the discrepancies throughout Ireland with regard to internet access, that to allow e-signatures would not be fair. However, it was felt that if Ireland had a functioning e-voting system in place that the attitude to collecting signatures via the internet would change considerably. As online signing is encouraged for the Initiatives it will be interesting to see how Ireland fares in this regard.

EM Ireland also suggested using PPS numbers or passport numbers to verify participants in an initiative. It was felt that this would limit excessive administrative burden, as not only those registered to vote will be entitled to sign an initiative.

Much of the specifics of how the Citizens' Initiative will be implemented in Ireland still have to be worked out nationally, and it is important that this is worked out in conjunction with those who plan to use the system so that is easy to work. The goal here is to make things easy for citizens.

It was for this reason that we at European Movement Ireland carried out a nation-wide poll about the ECI to find out the level of awareness among Irish people and to establish how people would like to find out more information about the ECI. Our poll methodology and results are below.

3. Public awareness

Our poll methodology

On 7 May 2010, European Movement Ireland carried out a national poll to establish the level of Irish knowledge and interest in the European Citizens' Initiative. Polling took the form of a street canvass in Cork, Galway, and Dublin North and South. A further poll was taken on the afternoon of Monday 31 May in Dublin South so that a fair and equal sample was taken from this constituency. An online poll was also carried out and ran from 7 May from 1 June 2010, of which the vast majority of respondents of which were members of European Movement Ireland. Between our street canvass and our online poll, 545 people in total were polled.

After the following statement was read out to the respondent: *"When the European Citizens' Initiative is introduced, it will allow one million European voters to ask the EU to take action in an area where it has the power to act. This new democratic tool is set to be up-and-running in Ireland by the end of the year. We want to know what you think"*, they were then asked the following three questions³:

1. *Now, honestly, had you heard about the Citizens' Initiative?*
2. *Do you think you would ever use it?*
3. *How would you like to hear about it? Rank these options from 1 to 5 – Newspapers, TV, radio, Internet and Social Media*

Main poll findings

From our street canvass, 86% of respondents had not heard of the Citizens' Initiative. When the online poll is included, this number drops to **78% of those surveyed had not heard of it.** This improved awareness when both polling sources are amalgamated is to be expected, as our online poll overwhelmingly comprised of European Movement Ireland members who by their membership are more likely to be aware of EU matters. In light of the fact that our members could distort the information, the online information has been omitted and **focus has been placed exclusively on members of the public chosen** at random on our street canvass. Therefore, please note all the information below is excluding the responses we received online.

In every location and in every age bracket, it was very clear that there were more people who had not heard of the Citizens' Initiative than who had. The highest percentage of people who had heard of the Citizens' Initiative was in Galway, with those in Dublin South being the least aware.

Despite the fact that most people across all age groups had not heard of the Initiative, **70% said they would consider using the Citizens' Initiative.** Of particular note is that over **70% of those under 18 said they would use the European Citizens' Initiative** which, given the lack of opportunities for those under-18 to directly engage in the democratic process, we felt this response bodes well for younger age groups and developing their 'political potential'. This

³ Age group and gender were also ascertained for the purposes of analysis

further strengthens European Movement Ireland's assertion that participation in the Initiative should be open to those under 18, allowing for young people to engage in a democratic process at an early age.

Other findings

Question 1: Now honestly, have you heard about the Citizens' Initiative?

- There were similar trends in the answers to this question across all different locations apart from the online poll.
- Slightly more men (16%) had heard of it than women (13%).
- The under 18 (5%) and over 65 (4%) were least aware it while all other age groups came in at the same level of awareness. However, Dublin bucks the trend in under 18s awareness with 20% being aware in North Dublin and 17% being aware in South Dublin.
- Overall, men aged 30-49 were most aware (20%) while not one woman over 65 had heard of it.

Galway						
	<18	18-29	30-49	50-65	Over 65	Total
Yes	0%	10%	4%	3%	0%	17%
No	8%	39%	25%	9%	2%	83%

Cork						
	<18	18-29	30-49	50-65	Over 65	Total
Yes	0%	5%	6%	1%	1%	13%
No	13%	29%	25%	14%	6%	87%

Dublin North						
	<18	18-29	30-49	50-65	Over 65	Total
Yes	1%	6%	5%	1%	0%	14%
No	5%	36%	21%	16%	9%	86%

Dublin South						
	<18	18-29	30-49	50-65	Over 65	Total
Yes	1%	7%	1%	4%	0%	13%
No	6%	46%	23%	8%	4%	87%

Table 1.1: Basic percentage of Citizens' Initiative awareness based on age

Question 2: Do you think you would ever use it?

- Unsurprisingly, the highest percentage of people who said they would use the Initiative were those who polled online (65%).
- Those ages 30-49 were the most likely to use it (79%).
- Overall, the highest number that said they would use it were women in South Dublin (85%).
- Surprisingly, a large number of those aged 50-65 in Galway said they would use it (88%).
- 100% of those under 18 polled in South Dublin said that they would use the Initiative.

Question 3: How would you like to hear more about it? (“1” rankings)

- Interestingly, social media ranked lowest from all different locations apart from the online poll.
- Men and women didn't differ hugely on how they wanted to hear more.
- Women across all ages were more consistent in wanting to hear more via TV whereas men were more diverse in their different age groups.
- Social media ranked last in all age groups apart from under 18 where 8% would like to find out more through that medium; newspaper ranks last in this age group.
- The only location where under 18s want to hear more via newspapers was South Dublin (8%).
- Television ranked exceptionally high for men (36%) and women (42%) in Cork.
- Radio is the most popular choice for those over 65 based in Galway (50%).

4. Lobbying Government Departments

Our recommendations for the Irish government

- **Reduce age of participation to 16**

European Movement Ireland calls for the age of participation to be reduced to 16, enabling younger people partake in this new democratic exercise. This is in line with the National Youth Council's "Vote at 16" campaign, and recent calls by the Committee on the Constitution to reduce the voting age to 17. By only allowing those over 18 to take part EM Ireland feels that this is a missed opportunity, particularly in light of the results of our poll where over 70% of those under 18 said they would use the European Citizens' Initiative.
- **PPS/Passport Numbers**

EM Ireland proposes that PPS numbers or passport numbers be used to verify participants in an initiative. As not all people entitled to take part will be on the voting register, a broader system will need to be used in order to verify signatures and this would appear to be the option with the least administrative burden.
- **Signing Depots**

EM Ireland suggests that signing depots for participants be opened such as Local Post Offices, Citizens' Information Offices or local libraries, given the discrepancies in access to the internet in Ireland. However, the internet should be used to encourage trans-European communication, to ensure transparency, and to raise awareness.
- **Communications Campaign**

A decent communications campaign to roll out the ECI will be necessary. The current level of public awareness is quite low and a good awareness campaign will be needed once the ECI becomes a reality in Ireland and across the EU. EM Ireland is happy to play a role in this awareness raising.

