



## **Aarhus Convention: National Implementation Report**

The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the second draft report on the implementation of the Aarhus Convention in Ireland.

SVP is the largest charity of social concern and action in Ireland, with 11,000 volunteers across the country. SVP is both a service delivery and advocacy charity whose work primarily involves person-to-person contact with people on low incomes experiencing social exclusion. SVP members and staff are committed to providing support and friendship, promoting self-sufficiency and working for social justice on behalf of the people we assist. A key strength of SVP is in the personalised, home-based visiting nature of the help provided, which makes it unique in its role as a charitable organisation.

The following issues are of concern to the SVP in relation to accessing justice in environmental matters and public participation in decision making.

### **Household waste management**

The SVP has been highlighting the issues around waste management services for people on low incomes over the last number of years. SVP members are particularly concerned about the effects of privatisation of the waste management industry for people on low incomes, and the fact that low income groups in different parts of the country face varying waste charge burdens as a result. Indeed, the Society has previously highlighted this issue to the Ombudsman and the Minister for the Environment. To date, the state has failed to develop a consistent and comprehensive scheme to assist poorer households with waste charges. To compound matters, there is often a lack of adequate recycling facilities, particularly in rural areas.

### **SVP recommends:**

- That representatives from organisations working with low income households such as the SVP should be included in decision making in this area.
- The inclusion of specific references to the needs of low income households (those on social welfare or in work on low pay) in waste management policy.

### **Household energy costs**

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul increased its fuel assistance to households in Ireland from €3.8million a year in 2008 to €10.4 million in 2011. The need in Irish society is now so great that more and more people are approaching SVP because they cannot afford the cost of energy. Numerous consultations on issues affecting household energy customers have been carried out by the Commission for Energy Regulation and others. However, for organisations like the SVP which have fewer resources, lower levels of staffing and do not have the institutional memory of the large energy companies, it is not possible to represent the needs of low income and other vulnerable consumers anywhere close to the extent to which industry interests are represented. This is

occurring at a time of sustained energy price increases, and a retrofit programme with scarce resources. SVP and similar organisations require time, concise and less technical documentation and a recognition by Government and CER that we do not have the resources or capacity to respond as frequently or to as great a depth that industry representatives can, on issues of concern to suppliers and consumers alike. Given the current widespread social concern around paying for energy, and its political implications, it is important that representatives of consumers are supported in this task.

**SVP recommends:**

- That Government and the Commission for Energy Regulation carefully consider how best to support and facilitate the voices and representatives of low income and other vulnerable consumers in a meaningful way.
- The use of concise, simple language in consultation documents.

**Society of St Vincent de Paul Social Justice & Policy team**

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