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Dear Ms. Davis,

I am writing to you in response to your invitation to participate in the taskforce's examination of what it is to be an active citizen.

Background

I write as Chairperson of Cork Harbour for a Safe Alliance (CHASE), which is an alliance of community groups in the Greater Cork area. We came together in 2001 to oppose the building of a toxic waste incinerator in Cork harbour. Subsequently the company applied for a waste licence for both a toxic and municipal incinerator. As part of campaign we also promote the sustainable management of waste which can be done very successfully without incineration. Lastly, as a community we promote the proper development of Cork Harbour and its environs as drawn down in both our local plan and national plans. These plans have been developed by and with the communities and our local representatives,

All these years and two oral hearings later, the concerns of Cork Harbour residents have still not been addressed. Our questions about health and the environment, public safety, site suitability, and many other issues remain unanswered.

- Local and national plans have been contravened.
- International guidelines misinterpreted.
- Local government and planning inspector decisions overturned.
- Scientific evidence disregarded.
- Public health and safety discounted.
- And the views of over 30,000 people and their public representatives ignored.

As active citizens we engaged in the democratic process at every opportunity, participating in both a planning oral hearing and an EPA oral hearing. We have done all this because we have serious concerns about what is proposed for our community that have still not been addressed fully.

We identified many problems with the planning and licensing process which cause genuine concerns for communities. We made every effort to communicate this information to the relevant authorities and Government Departments because we felt it would be of value to other communities participating in such processes. We also felt it would be of value to the authorities in that the areas of difficulties identified by us could be looked at and rectified so that other communities would not meet with the same frustrations.

We attempted to meet with relevant Government ministers, sent our concerns and observations to various departments and competent authorities but to no avail.

As active citizens we took part in the planning and licensing processes. When we then show that these processes are flawed, it is clear that nobody is willing to deal with or answer the serious questions and concerns raised. While we note in the responses received from those we wrote to, that the planning and the licensing processes are believed to be robust, we have clearly shown that this is not the case.

We have pointed this out time and time again in the hope that the situation will be addressed so that we can have a more meaningful process. Despite this, there is a total lack of real and meaningful engagement by any of the competent authorities or anyone we have corresponded with in relation to this situation.

No matter what our query has been to date or to whom it is directed, we are receiving the same “cut and paste” letter which fails to address our genuine and grave concerns. The evidence which we have repeatedly presented to the above departments and individuals has been ignored.

The above is by way of background to give you an understanding of the level of active citizenship we have engaged in, to date. As a community we have given our time over the last five years at our own expense and that of our families. We have relied on our community and friends to pick up our children and help with their care at times when we have had to attend Oral hearings for weeks on end, or travel to Dublin to seek judicial review.

We have had to fundraise to support two Oral Hearings and are now facing the costs of supporting two high court cases. Engaging fully as active citizens, we as a community feel strongly that we have had no choice but to go down this route to ensure a quality of life for ourselves and our children. This is what active citizenship has meant for us.

However, sadly, we feel that we have been excluded from real and meaningful active citizenship as we have found that there is no true consultation and interaction between the citizens of this country and the Government or their competent authorities. Neither is there any communication between the competent authorities, they all work as if in a vacuum. This causes serious problems for citizens in relation to how their concerns are dealt with. Decisions are made by faceless people, who hold positions which make them inaccessible and unaccountable to the public at large.

While the idea of being an active citizen is laudable, in our experience it has been a cynical exercise. The Government are not really interested in citizens being active and vocal in relation to issues that concern them. They ignore and do their best to belittle the concerns of citizens in the hope that we will get tired. Over the years Government ministers have referred to such citizens as “those people who object to everything”.

They introduced charges for seeking information under the Freedom Of Information Act..

They introduced charges at the planning level which can make it cost prohibitive for communities to participate.

The new Strategic Infrastructure Bill recently introduced is totally at odds with the idea of “active citizenship”. It excludes the community at the beginning thus reducing their active participation in any decision making process for their area. It also excludes citizens from participation, as the only point of entry will be through a legal challenge which would be cost prohibitive. The new bill also makes a mockery of local democracy and citizen participation as local and regional plans can all be set aside and superseded by Government policy.

The Government and their authorities exclude citizens from participating in issues that are of interest or concern by financially excluding them. This is done by imposing high costs on entry to seminars and conferences which might be of interest, i.e. the recent EPA conference on waste management where the EPA would not give a concession rate to citizens wanting to participate.

The Government previously commissioned the Democracy Commission, in which many communities participated. We raised many of our concerns in our submission to the commission. In its publication, the Democracy Commission report noted the degree of frustration felt by communities in their efforts to be active citizens. Nothing has been done to date, to our knowledge, to address any of the concerns raised in that report.

The success of this task force will depend on its honesty in reporting the true feelings of communities such as ours. It will also have to be more than an information gathering process.

On foot of the information gathered change has to occur in relation to the areas identified by communities that limit or hinder their success as active citizens. If this does not happen then it will result in further undermining of the role of the active citizen in their community.

If the Government wants communities to believe that they are truly stewards of our society and not mere book keepers, they will have to take seriously the findings of this task force.

I thank you for your time and attention and look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Mary O’Leary,
Chairperson,
CHASE