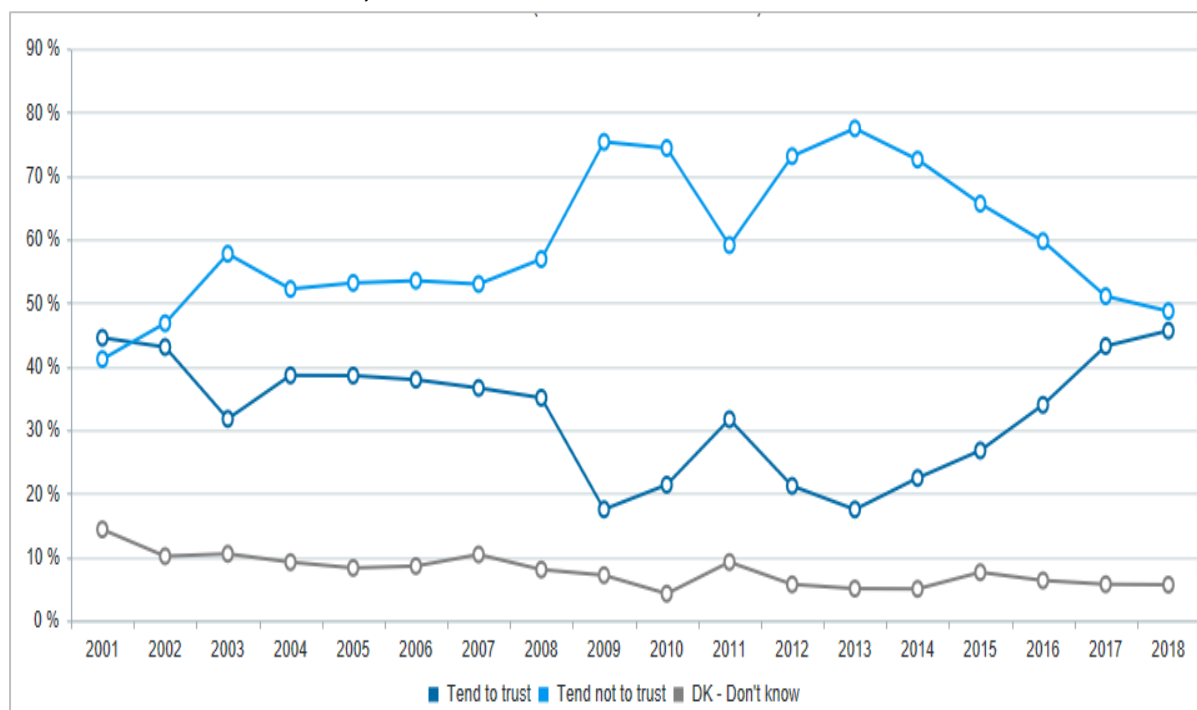


Governance and Participation

Chart 6.1: Trust in Irish Government, 2001 to 2018



Source: Eurobarometer, 2018

Governance and Participation



Trust in institutions is essential in any functioning democracy. Active citizen engagement, whether individually or through civil society organisations, promotes trust through open dialogue, transparent decision-making and accountability. When Ireland's economy crashed in 2008, the Irish people lost trust in their Government. According to Eurobarometer, when asked how much trust Irish people had in their Government, responses of 'tend not to trust' rose from 53% in 2007 to 75% in 2009, while responses of 'tend to trust' fell from 37% to 18% within the same period (Chart 6.1). Since 2013, however the gap between these two responses has begun to narrow, so that by 2018 49% responded that they did not trust Government, compared to 47% who did.

In 2014, Ireland joined the Open Governance Partnership making a series of 26 commitments across the three areas of

transparency, participation and accountability in its first Open Government National Action Plan 2014-2016. The second National Action Plan, for 2016-2018, contained 15 commitments across these three areas, and added anti-corruption and strengthened governance and accountability as a fourth. This plan expired in June 2018. To date, there has been no consultation on a subsequent draft.

While *Social Justice Ireland* welcomed these plans and the commitments made, with almost 50% of people still lacking trust in the Irish Government, it is clear that there is much more action required.

Transparency

Social Justice Ireland welcomed the development of the Parliamentary Budget Office in 2017 as a means to create greater transparency around the national Budget at all stages of the Budget cycle. However, as the

Budget affects everybody in the State, in order for this process to be truly transparent, it must be accessible to everyone. Greater use of infographics, video and audio files, and plain English documentation would greatly enhance the dissemination of information from this service and allow for a more informed citizenship.

The introduction of the Lobbying Register was also a key step towards greater transparency in Government decision-making. *Social Justice Ireland* welcomes the intention of the proposed Code of Conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities. However without recognition of the diversity of those persons, from commercial lobbying agencies to civil society organisations, its operational effectiveness is questionable.

Participation

There are now 31 Public Participation Networks (PPNs) across the State with over 12,000 members (PPN Annual Report, 2017). 882 representatives are actively engaged in a process of deliberative democracy whereby informed citizens engage in a meaningful way with policy makers to effect change for their communities. This takes the form of attendance at consultation events, engaging with their membership through a range of communications channels and making written submissions on policy areas. PPNs operate through a 'flat' structure with a rotating chairperson for Secretariat meetings to ensure that every voice is heard. Considering that PPNs are just coming through start-up phase, and their operational budget is relatively small, the work undertaken has already enhanced citizen engagement. If this engagement is to be sustained, increased funding is required to provide administrative support to the Resource Workers and Secretariat to allow them to fulfil their objectives.

Accountability

Engaging with civil society organisations allows Government to be kept informed

about the issues affecting communities, especially the vulnerable sectors of society. In recent years this engagement has become an information exchange, rather than an active discussion of the issues presenting and the role both Government and civil society can play in developing solutions. The format of Pre-Budget Forums, including the National Economic Dialogue, have changed to the extent that serious policy matters must be reduced to 3-minute soundbites, and a wide variety of organisations are asked to distil their priorities to a 'top 3'. This is not engagement. Civil society is diverse and representative of a wide breadth of areas, with a range of skills and expertise to develop innovative solutions to enhance Government policy. It is therefore incumbent on Government to engage in a meaningful dialogue, through the re-establishment of the Social Dialogue processes, whereby all parties are accountable for their participation and outcomes.

Policy Priorities

- Information dissemination using accessibility principles, to inform the greatest number of people in a way that allows them to engage.
- Review the Lobbying Act, 2015 and the draft Code of Conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities to ensure that it meets its objectives without creating a barrier to meaningful engagement by civil society organisations.
- Increase funding to the PPNs, now that they are coming out of 'start up' phase, to allow them to fully meet their objectives of engaging citizens in deliberative democratic processes.
- Re-form Social Dialogue so that Government and civil society can engage meaningfully to develop solutions to Ireland's many social crises.