



European Ombudsman
Emily O'Reilly

Address to the Conference for the launch of Benefacts Report

28 April 2017

Good morning everyone and thank you Patricia for the invitation to speak here this morning. I do have a sense of déjà vu as I did the exact same thing some years ago when you were still struggling for support for Benefacts and unfortunately the timing at that stage wasn't exactly opportune.

But I have to commend you for your dedication and your drive and I also commend the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for its commitment to this initiative and for its recognition of its value to the state.

Under Brendan Howlin, and now under Minister Donohoe, and supported by Secretary General Robert Watt, the Department has driven through an impressive reform programme over the last number of years, much of which touched on my former office of Ombudsman and Information Commissioner.



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This kind of progressive administrative reform is sometimes overlooked by the general public as its value isn't always immediately obvious or tangible and it is therefore to the credit of the political and administrative heads of the Department that they have driven it through, despite, as some might see it, getting precious little thanks for their efforts. I also commend Atlantic Philanthropies for their vision in seeing the value of and financially supporting this work.

When Patricia Quinn approached me some years back to launch this fledgling initiative I could immediately see why it was important. She and her team were, in effect, opening up an area of Irish life that the vast majority of us take for granted and tend to have little curiosity about. As a country we are used to the activity of the nonprofit or voluntary sector. It's been part of our history, partly arising from the young state's reluctance, under the then very strong influence of the Catholic Church, to socialise many essential services and to leave their provision to the voluntary and – in the case of health and education for many decades – to the religious sector. I should say that I wrote that sentence before the row over the siting and ownership of the National Maternity Hospital blew up but the controversy, I have to say,



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has given an extra dimension to the appraisal of Benefacts and the landscape it reveals in this regard.

Having followed this controversy through the media, I cannot and indeed should not – take a view on this matter although for the sake of transparency I should say that Peter Boylan did deliver four of my five children, and knowing that man's great compassion and skill, I will say that I am personally very sad to see him sever his connection with that hospital. History will be the final judge of a saga that is most regrettable given the excellent, intensely public service minded people involved on both sides

It struck me as I listened to the back and forth about the relevance of Catholic Church ownership of public and private health and education institutions, that we have indeed accepted this, like Kerrygold butter, as part of what we are, or certainly were. I suspect that the move to St Vincent's would not have raised an eyebrow two decades ago but context is everything.

Curious about the issue, I scanned through the Benefacts site to look at other hospitals through the prism of the current controversy. Many of the best known hospitals do indeed very openly assert their Catholic ethos. The debate of course is around whether it continues



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to matter. What ordinary citizens want to know is whether those assertions are meaningful – in the sense that may have clinical care implications - or are they simple recitals of a Catholic model of holistic compassionate care?

The Bons Secours group, which owns four private hospitals around the country, describes its mission as “to carry forward the healing ministry of Jesus Christ in the Church through the ownership, management and governance of facilities, programmes and services intended to improve the health and wellbeing of the community in general, and dedication to bringing 'Good Help' to those to whom it ministers, and in particular to the sick and the dying among them, through compassion, healing and liberation, all in a manner consistent with the teachings and laws of the Roman Catholic Church.”

MATER CAMPUS HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENT LIMITED

describes its purpose as “The relief and prevention of sickness and disability in the community in general through the continuance and furtherance of the aims and purposes of the Religious Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in relation to caring for the sick”



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Benefacts also notes that the Chairman of OUR LADY'S CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, CRUMLIN is the “Archbishop for the time being of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin or when the See is vacant the person entitled to exercise the powers of the Archbishop in accordance with Canon Law”

While St John of Gods aims “to facilitate the mission of the Hospitaller Order of the Saint John of God, a religious Order within the Catholic Church, to serve the Church in the assistance of the weak and the sick and those in need”.

Perhaps the value of the Holles Street controversy is that it has prompted at the very least some exploration of all of this. Any citizen over this past week – listening to the equally passionate yet diametrically opposed views of healthcare leaders in this country – would be understandably concerned as to whose views they should accept.

The idea of a large non-profit sector – at varying degrees of arm’s length from direct state control – is historically enmeshed in the lives of our villages and towns and cities and we rarely question it in the way we would the explicitly public or the commercial sectors.



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Our image – at least up until the relatively recent scandals in the charity sector – is a benign one. It suggests altruistic amateurs doing good work on behalf of the needy either here or in the developing world, at most a sort of cottage industry unmoored from the normal regulation and scrutiny of other sectors.

But while that image isn't entirely inaccurate, Benefacts has opened our eyes not just to the breadth and depth of the nonprofit sector but to its economic muscle. The 20,000 nonprofits represent ten percent of all Irish organisations, have an annual turnover of roughly 7 billion euro, employ 14,000 paid staff and receive roughly half their funding from central government.

Of course we have to be careful with those figures as many nonprofits, as Benefacts point out, are quasi public bodies such as the voluntary hospitals and third level institutions and those two sectors – representing just 242 bodies - receive well over half of the total government funding. One quarter of the nonprofits, roughly five thousand, don't receive any.

The scale of the sector is probably what is most noteworthy. I'm not sure how Ireland compares with similar jurisdictions but 20,000



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nonprofits for a population of 4 million does appear at least to be quite high.

When reading through the website and drilling down into the various sectors, I was particularly struck by the number of nonprofits engaged in the housing sector. Three hundred and seventy eight are recorded as being involved in social housing with a further 38 involved in sheltered housing.

Again, I don't have the expertise to assess whether this is rational or not but the value of this data is that those involved currently in dealing with the housing crisis can presumably use it to assist in developing a rational and sustainable model of both private and social housing in the years ahead.

Does it suggest an inefficient piecemeal approach or is it important that local nonprofits can more nimbly deal with issues in their own areas? Again, the more data we have, the more comprehensive that data is, and the more accessible it is through a central database, the better informed government and others can be when it comes to finding solutions.



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Some might argue that central government has access or should have access to this type of information anyway and perhaps query the added value. Yet the point of Benefacts, I think, is that by opening up this information, by offering it in ways that are comprehensive and logical, other minds can set to work on these matters and feed into government decision making. In addition, it may well be that a central database will enable more cross cutting work and simple joined up thinking across all relevant Government Departments.

This country, in an initiative overseen by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is a member of The [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#) . This is an initiative, which began in the US some years ago, currently comprises 70 countries.

It aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance and is run by a steering committee composed of governments and civil society organisations.

It has perhaps worked particularly well in countries troubled by under development and corruption where the ability to secure vital



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information for communities through open data portals has led to very tangible improvements in many areas of people's daily lives.

It could be something as simple as finding out how much a middleman gets to supply a particularly vital product to a rural community or more broadly the leveraging of technologies to enable the state to become more transparent in its activities. OGP activists in many African countries see it as a way of exploring wealth disparities on the continent.

I see Benefacts as feeding into that global work in an Irish context. The work undertaken by the nonprofits is not marginal. It feeds into every element of our lives from the arts right through to health, education, the environment, migrant and asylum matters, animal welfare, and to our role in the developing world.

I believe it should be open to everyone who wishes to contribute to the nonprofit sector to be enabled to do so as easily as possible but when it comes to the area of vital social services where fragmentation may impede the creation and the implementation of optimum and sustainable policies then we need forensically to examine the work in



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a sense outsourced by central government to make sure that the operational model is the best one.

But in our drive to regulate, and in our commendable drive to apply high transparency standards to nonprofits, we must not lose sight either of the higher value of their work and contribution. As I scrolled through the various lists, grouped in their sectors, I was struck by the human stories that shimmer through the facts and the figures. A foundation created in memory of a beloved parent or child or partner, an organisation dedicated to a cause which is below the radar of most of the world, tiny bits of utterly selfless giving that seek no reward either public or private. The Friends of FAID Ireland provide education for deaf people in the Lebanon. The Harty Trust gives small bequests to retired and impoverished housekeepers in Kilkenny, the Munster Female Bounty Fund supports the educational needs of Quaker children.

The richness of that landscape, a map in a sense of the humanity of the people of this country is given expression in this initiative, even if that is not its core purpose.

I congratulate Patricia and her enthusiastic and talented staff for bringing this initiative to this point. I look forward to seeing how the



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collaboration of Benefacts and the Dept. will enrich its work, enrich also the work and the value of this sector and enable a wider pool of engaged people to use the data provided to seek better solutions to problems that we should, collectively, be capable of finding solutions to.