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**ENFO – A MODEL PUBLIC ACCESS ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION CENTRE
AND THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN INFORMATION DISSEMINATION**

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Introduction

1. The island of Ireland is situated in the north-west of Europe. The Republic of Ireland has a total area of 70,282 sq. metres with a coastline of 5,631 km. It has a population of 3,750,000, with over one million living in the capital, Dublin. Approximately 43% of the population is under 25 years of age and 27% is under 15 years of age.
2. The economy has traditionally been based on agriculture and up to the 1960's the population was mainly rural based. Since then the natural environment has been affected by policies to promote the establishment and expansion of modern industry, by a major enlargement of urban development and intensive farming.
3. Despite increased pressures on the environment, late industrialisation and the predominance of clean modern industry have had the advantage of enabling major damage to be prevented or controlled. Ireland, with high annual rainfall and prevailing south-west winds from the Atlantic has a good quality of environment, with low population density helping to preserve the integrity of the landscape.
4. The protection of the environment is a major objective of the Government. In addition to its intrinsic value and contribution to the quality of life, a clean environment is recognised as a crucial economic factor. It is vital to the development of tourism, agriculture, mariculture, aquaculture, other resource based industries and the marketing abroad of other quality products and services. The dissemination of information on environmental issues to individuals and organisations is recognised as a critical activity and the Environmental Information Service, ENFO, is the entity responsible for this task. The *Freedom of Information Act* of 1997 provides the legislative authority for broad access to environmental information. The following public authorities are mandated to protect the environment and advance sustainable development in Ireland.

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The Department of the Environment and Local Government

5. The Department of the Environment and Local Government is responsible for policy and programmes in relation to the environment. It is responsible for a range of services provided mainly through the local government system, including environmental protection, environmental awareness, physical planning, urban renewal, roads, road traffic, vehicle and driver licensing, water supply, sewerage, housing, fire protection and building control.

The Environmental Protection Agency

6. The Environmental Protection Agency is an independent body established in 1992 to promote improved environmental protection in Ireland. The main responsibilities of the Agency include licensing and regulation of large complex industries with significant pollution potential on the basis of integrated pollution control (IPC), and the application of best available technologies not exceeding excessive costs (BATNEEC) for this purpose, the monitoring of environmental quality, publication of state of the environment reports, assisting local authorities with environmental functions, environmental audits and eco-labelling. While the headquarters of the EPA is located in Wexford on the south-east coast of Ireland, with regional offices throughout the country, all its publications are available at the ENFO public access centre in Dublin.

COMHAR – The National Sustainable Development Partnership

7. COMHAR was established by the Department of the Environment and Local Government in 1999 and is located at the ENFO premises. The aim of the partnership is to advance the national agenda for sustainable development, to assist in developing suitable mechanisms, advise on their implementation and contribute to a national consensus in these areas. COMHAR's current work programme includes spatial planning, waste prevention and management and local sustainability.

8. COMHAR is a multi-stakeholder forum with representation from five pillars of society:

- Environmental NGOs
- Social and Community NGOs
- State and Public Sector
- Economic Sector
- Professional and Academic Sector.

ENFO – The Environmental Information Service

9. ENFO was established in 1990 as part of the Environment Action Programme of the Department of the Environment. The environmental awareness and information section of the programme indicated that while the Government was taking the lead in strengthening and expanding environmental protection programmes, the quality of the environment could be maintained in the long term only if all citizens and communities played their part. The Government allocated £600,000 to enable a new environmental service, ENFO, to be established at a high street location in Dublin. Ireland held the presidency of the EU, Jan – June 1990 and the major legislation at that time was Directive 90/313 on freedom of access to environmental information. ENFO provides easy access to wide-ranging and authoritative information on all aspects of the environment in a one-stop-shop, open Monday to Saturday, 10am – 5pm. All services are free to users.

10. The aim of ENFO is to help protect and enhance the environment by promoting a wider understanding and fuller awareness of the world around us and to encourage individuals and communities in their efforts. ENFO places emphasis, where appropriate, on the opportunities for individuals to be “environmentally friendly” and to identify possibilities for citizens to play an active part in environmental protection.

11. ENFO celebrates its tenth anniversary this week, coinciding with the INFOTERRA 2000 Global Conference on Access to Environmental Information, and conference delegates are welcome to visit ENFO and gain first hand experience of the services available at the centre.

Public access centres - location and services

12. The location of public access centres is critical to their success. They should be located near city centres, on the ground and lower floors of buildings and should remain open all day to encourage the public to visit. ENFO’s location is close to the main shopping street in Dublin and open to the public during normal business hours. Each year ENFO is host to approximately 50,000 visitors and the centre handles about 500 information requests per week, received by e-mail, fax, telephone and letter. A staff of 12 provides the various ENFO services operating from a premises that is 1,400 square metres in area.

ENFO services available countrywide

13. Although ENFO is a Dublin-based centre, its services are available countrywide via the following channels:

- Local Authority Offices
- Public Libraries
- School Libraries
- College Libraries
- University Libraries
- Internet
- Lectures
- Exhibitions, Conferences and Courses
- Advertising channels

14. Exhibition stands are provided to Local Authority offices with a package of ENFO publications that are updated regularly. Contact is maintained with the Local Authority Environmental Awareness Officers and the Agenda 21 Officers through regular meetings with ENFO staff.

User groups

15. Information on environmental issues is made accessible to the following categories of user:

Government	Colleges	Secondary schools
Local Authorities	Researchers	Primary schools
Industry	Decision Makers	Children
Business	Consultants	General public
Universities	NGOs	

ENFO resources and facilities

16. The following is brief overview of the information resources and facilities available to users at the ENFO public access centre:

Information leaflets and posters

17. Repackaging information in a format that is substantive, focussed, well presented and comprehensible to a non-technical user is one of ENFO’s most important services. ENFO publishes a wide range of leaflets and pamphlets including:

Air Pollution	Asbestos	Biodiversity
Forestry	Global Warming	Green Consumers
Hedges	Environmental Legislation	Ozone Layer
Peatlands	Radon	Rainforests
Recycling	Sewage	Sustainable Development
Trees	Waste Disposal	Water Pollution
Water Supply	Wetlands	What On Earth Can I Do

18. For many citizens, 'environment' is their own back garden, therefore ENFO produces a series of gardening leaflets include:

Wildlife Gardens	Water Conservation In The Garden
Organic Gardening	Composting and Leaf Moulding
Energy Conservation In The Greenhouse	

19. The term 'sustainable development' is not widely understood or appreciated by the general public and therefore it is necessary to educate the public in this area and catalyse citizen action. The sustainable development series of leaflets include:

Sustainable Living	Pressures On The Environment	Agriculture
Government Strategies	Marine Resources	Forestry
Transport	Trade	Tourism
Local Agenda 21	Public Action	Waste
Schools and Colleges	Landscapes	Air

20. Recognising the role of young people in protecting the environment now and in the future, ENFO attaches high priority to the task of targeting the youth with relevant information. For example, publications for children include a series of information leaflets on animals presented in an attractive format.

ENFO Booklets

21. ENFO also produces a number of booklets:

- *A Shopping Guide For Sustainable Living* - outlines practical steps that can be taken to move to a more sustainable lifestyle by making informed choices for a better environment.
- *A Better Place To Live In – Your Home And The Environment* - this booklet was published by ENFO as part of a major initiative by the Department of the Environment and Local Government entitled *It's easy to make a difference*. It shows how you can make a difference by outlining a number of steps to make your house more environmentally friendly.
- *Choices For Sustainable Transport* - gives tips on how to save energy in the transport field.
- *A Community Guide To Waste Management* - this publication by Muintir Na Tire and the Rural Dublin Leader Company in co-operation with ENFO is an example of a project involving a national organisation, Muintir Na Tire; the four Dublin Local Authorities; and community and parish groups.

22. All ENFO materials are distributed through the Local Authority network as part of the centre's strategy to reach a countrywide audience and deliver information down to the grassroots community level. Local access to information on the environment is recognised as being complementary to Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

Teachers resource packs

23. ENFO has over 140 Teachers Resource Packs available for use at the centre or for loan by teachers to help develop environmental projects in the schools and incorporate environmental awareness into the school curricula and primary and secondary levels. Subjects covered include Water - a precious resource; School Nature Area; and Our Vital Wetlands.

Reception and exhibition area

24. The ENFO reception area houses copies of all pamphlets, leaflets and booklets. It has a series of video booths for viewing any of the 140 environmental videos, which are available for loan by Local Authorities, schools and community groups. Exhibitions on various environmental themes are changed every six weeks and many of the exhibitions are prepared by NGOs in co-operation with ENFO. When the exhibitions are changed at ENFO they are then distributed to Local Authorities for display throughout the country. This area has a children's corner with material suitable for the 4 to 8 year old age group. Computer games with environmental themes are also available in this area.

Documentation Centre

25. The documentation centre has a collection of over 20,000 books on a wide range of environmental subjects and subscribes to over 100 journal titles. Information on these publications is available on the internal database site and on ENFO website (www.enfo.ie). There are 100 box files of pamphlets on current environmental topics available to users.

26. ENFO has agreements with the European Environment Agency and the Irish Environmental Protection Agency to have a special display of their current publications in the documentation centre. This display highlights the work of these organisations and copies of all new materials are available immediately upon publication.

27. A collection of approximately 1300 environmental impact statements (EISs) is available in hardcopy and fiche formats. ENFO is the only centre where all the EISs are available and the demand from users to consult these statements is very high. Copies of the Regional Waste Management Plans for the eight regions of Ireland are a popular source of information. Public access is provided to the ENFO bibliographic database, the Internet and the CD ROM collection. Photocopying facilities are available free of charge, subject to copyright restrictions.

International floor

28. The international floor includes a lecture room where a variety of environmental awareness raising lectures and workshops are provided for children, teachers and adults. The UNEP/INFOTERRA room houses a collection of UNEP publications - both monographs and serials.

29. The microfiche room contains 350,000 reports from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency covering the period 1965 – 2000. These reports are a vital source of environmental information on a wide range of environmental issues including air pollution, biomass, biological indicators, database management, emission control, environmental impact, groundwater, infrastructure, and pollution.

30. Display units of publications from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, The European Union and The Regional Environmental Centre For Central and Eastern Europe (REC) give researchers and teachers access to a range of international materials in a quiet area away from the main documentation centre. The Teachers Resource Packs are located on the international floor.

Domestic outreach activities of ENFO

31. From the foundation of ENFO in 1990 there has been very close co-operation with Local Authorities to get the environmental protection message to all parts of the country. This has continued through work with the Agenda 21 Officers and recently with the Environmental Awareness Officers. All Local Authorities have the ENFO publications and many are now preparing their own environmental material to suit local needs. External lectures are given to community based organisations to promote environmental awareness at the local level.

International activities of ENFO

32. ENFO has participated in the Southern African Sub-Regional INFOTERRA Network (SASIN) since 1991 in a joint project with UNEP/INFOTERRA and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) to develop environmental databases and increase public awareness of environmental issues in Southern Africa. ENFO provides a customised database package with on-site training for database development and has sponsored fellowships in Dublin to provide training in the provision of environmental information services. US EPA provided equipment to recipient countries and finance for annual regional management meetings of SASIN. UNEP/INFOTERRA co-ordinates the SASIN work programme.

33. In 1994 ENFO and Irish Aid constructed an environmental awareness centre in Lesotho to be used as a training centre for the region. There are now 26 operational databases in 6 countries and an Internet site. Two excellent examples of outreach activities to local community areas are the LEINET project in Lesotho and the BEINET project in Botswana. Both projects have established national networks comprised of member institutions with and without electronic tools and have reached remote areas to spread the environmental awareness message.

34. ENFO participates in the EU Phare projects to develop publicly accessible environmental awareness centres in Bulgaria, Hungary and Estonia. Technical assistance has also been provided to Trinidad and Tobago and Kenya.

Local Authority linkages with ENFO

35. All Local Authorities in Ireland provide the public with access to local materials including Environmental Impact Statements, Development and Draft Development Plans and Planning Applications. ENFO has always worked closely with Local Authorities to make environmental information available throughout the country. All Local Authorities have ENFO stands and receive regular supplies of new and replacement ENFO publications. The ENFO exhibitions are distributed through Local Authorities after their display in Dublin.

36. In 1997 the Department of the Environment and Local Government published a major document entitled *Sustainable Development: A Strategy for Ireland*. The document invites Local Authorities to appoint Environmental Information Officers and to draw on ENFO as a key resource in the provision of environmental information. These Environmental Information Officers have been appointed on a full-time basis and a meeting held with ENFO to discuss further close co-operation in getting the environmental message out to the public countrywide. Regular quarterly meetings will be held at ENFO to discuss local environmental initiatives and explore with staff of the Department of the Environment and Local Government and ENFO how best to expand the partnership to strengthen environmental awareness countrywide.

37. Many of the Local Authorities have published very useful local environmental information including the *Community Guide to Waste Management*. This publication was a joint venture of Muintir Na Tire, four Dublin Local Authorities, local community groups, ENFO and the EU. The Guide highlights the need for local action to prevent waste and how to devise waste minimisation programmes.

38. Among the Local Authorities publishing on environmental issues are:

- Limerick - School Projects
- Galway - Community Activities
- Mayo and Roscommon - Estates Management
- Wicklow and Wexford - Composting
- Kerry - Water Quality Leaflets
- Cork - Bantry Bay Charter

County and City Development Boards

39. County and City Development Boards (CDBs) have recently been established in each county and city. The establishment of the CDBs was one of the central recommendations of an inter-departmental Task Force chaired by the Minister for the Environment and Local Government. They are representative of local government, local development bodies, state agencies and the social partners operating locally. The CDBs will draw up and oversee the implementation of a County/City Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development which will be the template guiding all public services and local development activities locally. Consultation with local communities is an important element in the CDB process. There will be consultation through new community and voluntary organisations. The area committees of local authorities will be expanded to include representatives of the wider community as well as county and city councillors when dealing with community development issues.

40. The CDBs will:

- (a) Respect and enhance local democracy by building on our local government system
- (b) Build on experience and insight which all the CDB members will bring to the process
- (c) Allow individual group's efforts to have more impact through co-operation and co-ordination
- (d) Emphasise the need to involve local communities in decisions about their own futures
- (e) Provide opportunities for participation and feedback
- (f) Promote imaginative, flexible and creative initiatives
- (g) Avoid duplication of effort and ensure gaps are filled in meeting the needs of the community

Conclusion

41. ENFO has proved to be a very successful one-stop shop for all environmental information during its first ten years in operation. It has assisted all segments of the community to have a better understanding of the environment and how it must be protected for future generations. It has provided a meeting place for the exchange of environmental protection ideas and has brought together many strands of interest working together for a better environmental future for Ireland and the world.

42. The Local Authorities are working very efficiently and effectively with ENFO to make sure the environmental message reaches the whole of Ireland. Many of the initiatives taken by the Local Authorities and the recently appointed County/City Development Boards will ensure the commitment of Ireland to the EU Directive 90/313 and the Aarhus Convention are fully implemented through enhanced public access to information and public participation in decision making processes.

43. The recent EU proposal for a new Directive on Public Access to Environmental Information, COM(2000)402, to update EU 90/313 incorporates many of the Aarhus Convention principles and will strengthen and the EU legislation on freedom of access to information.