



**IFA Submission to Standards in Public Office Commission  
on Consultation on “Code of Conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities”**

**July 2018**

## Background Information

The Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) is a professional representative organisation with a membership of over 72,000 farmers.

The Association is recognised nationally, in Europe and internationally as the main national representative organisation for Irish farmers.

## Objects of the Association

The objects of the Irish Farmers' Association are clearly set out in its Constitution and Rules<sup>1</sup> as follows:

- a) To promote, foster and develop agriculture in all its Branches including horticulture, arboriculture, mariculture and farm tourism by doing all such things as are, or may be incidental and conducive thereto, including affiliation to such National and International Organisations as shall be deemed appropriate, provided always that it shall remain non-sectarian and shall not sponsor, put forward or support any candidate for political office.
- b) To secure an adequate living, evolving in line with prevailing standards, economic and social, for the maximum number of families living on the land in Ireland as enshrined in Article 45 of Bunreacht na hEireann and within the European Community in Article 39 of the Treaty of Rome (EEC) and economic and social cohesion within the European Community required by Title V Part Three of the European Community Treaties.
- c) To have effective negotiating rights for farmers and farm families and full recognition by the Irish Government and the Institutions of the European Community.
- d) To represent, advance and protect the particular interests of members, both collectively and where appropriate individually, and to develop services for members and the direct benefits of IFA membership.
- e) To promote and defend the particular interests of the farming community.
- f) To improve the expansion of industrialisation and the development of tourism, fishing, forestry and other activities beneficial to rural areas.
- g) To improve the conditions of rural life generally.

## Democratic Structure

The Association is a voluntary organisation of farmers and has a democratic structure of representation to ensure the views of members are effectively represented at local, county and national level.

**Branches** - the Association's 947 Branches are the basic organisational unit in IFA, providing a countrywide network, reaching into every parish across rural Ireland. Each branch elects four delegates to represent the branch at county executive level. The Association has over 3,700 officers nationally.

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<sup>1</sup> IFA Constitution and Rules

**County Executives** - the Association's 29 County Executives provide the link in each county between the membership in the Branches and the organisation at national level. Each County Executive is led by a County Chairman. The job of the County Executives is to canvass the views of members and Branches on policy and other issues, and to represent those views within the Association, through the various National Committees and at the National Council.

**National Council** - the 59-member National Council is the governing body of the IFA, bringing together the democratically elected County Chairmen, National Committee Chairmen and National Officers under the leadership of the President.

**President** - the President is at the head of the organisation, democratically elected by the ordinary members as leader and chief spokesman of IFA.

**Professional Staff** - the Director General is the Chief Executive Officer of the Association and is supported by 16 executive staff based in head office and 10 regional development officers based in IFA offices around the country. IFA also has an office in Brussels, headed by a European Director.

## **Introduction**

IFA recognises the objective of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015 to achieve greater transparency in regard to the lobbying of office holders and public officials on matters of public policy and other relevant decisions.

Lobbying is a legitimate activity which plays an important role in the efficient functioning of a modern democracy.

IFA has at all times held the position that it is essential that this legislation does not place excessive, impractical or costly requirements on bodies engaged in legitimate lobbying.

## **Draft Code of Conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities**

IFA welcomes the draft Code of Conduct for persons carrying on lobbying activities. Since its entry into force in 2015, IFA has at all times made every possible effort to comply with the Regulation of Lobbying Act in reporting our lobbying activities.

IFA notes the principles set out in the draft Code of Practice and sets out below our comments on each. Our main observations are on principles 1) and 3) below.

### **1) Demonstrating Respect for Public Bodies**

IFA always endeavours to show proper regard and respect for Public Bodies. The Association is solely involved in the legitimate pursuit of the interests of its members.

In regard to the references to “preferential access or treatment”, IFA expects access and treatment based on objective criteria commensurate with our unique democratic mandate and the scale and importance of the economic sector that we represent.

### **2) Acting with Honesty and Integrity**

As a voluntary body in civil society, with a national network, IFA is a transparent and democratically structured representative organisation that upholds the values of honesty and integrity.

### **3) Ensuring accuracy of information**

IFA has invested considerable staff resources, time and costs to ensure that our lobbying returns are reported accurately in the manner intended under the Act and the online Register.

SIPO will be well aware that the media reporting after each quarterly return has focused mainly on the number of returns per organisation and measured lobbying activity based on this, rather than on the content of the individual returns.

On reviewing returns on the website, it appears that some organisations are generating a number of returns from a single event / lobbying day etc, by making a separate return for each DPO communicated with / met at the same event. Clearly, some organisations see this as a way to increase their number of returns per quarter, which is not what is intended in the legislation.

However, the above approach is effectively creating multiple returns out of a single relevant matter.

IFA would encourage SIPO to address this misleading practice in order to eliminate the over reporting involved.

#### **4) Disclosure of identity and purpose of lobbying activities**

IFA fully supports the proper disclosure of identity and the purpose of lobbying activities.

IFA acts openly on behalf of its members. Our submissions, policy proposals and views are widely published in the farming, local and national media and online. All public submissions and all media releases are placed in the public domain and are available on the Association's website.

In addition, IFA regularly makes written communications to Government Ministers and senior civil servants on issues relating to the food and agriculture sector and the wider rural economy. All of these communications can be accessed through the Freedom of Information route and are therefore accessible to the media and available for public scrutiny

#### **5) Disclosure of interests**

IFA views the point regarding the disclosure of interests as mainly relevant to professional lobbyists acting on behalf of private clients.

#### **6) Preserving confidentiality**

IFA endeavours to treat all information received from public bodies or elected or appointed public officials in the manner for which it was intended. IFA supports the concept of preserving confidentiality as laid out in the draft code.

#### **7) Avoiding improper influence**

IFA supports the sentiments set out in the draft code with regards to gifts or hospitality to elected or appointed public officials and accepts the conflict of interest situation they can create.

#### **8) Observing the provisions of the Regulation of Lobbying Act**

##### **A) Registrations and Returns**

IFA has at all stages, both in the passage of the legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas and in its implementation through the Regulation of Lobbying Advisory Group, been constructive and pro-active in our efforts to be compliant.

As per the Act, IFA registered as a lobbyist, with full details as required.

IFA has made returns for all the periods as required since its commencement on 1 September 2015 and fully cooperated with any requests by the Standards Commission.

To ensure IFA's compliance with the legislation, we have invested considerable time and effort in the on-going training and support for our staff in completing returns on [www.lobbying.ie](http://www.lobbying.ie)

##### **B) "Cooling off" period**

This section is not applicable to IFA.

#### **9) Having regard to the Code of Conduct**

IFA will endeavour to have regard for the Code of Conduct and to conform fully to the letter and spirit of the Code.