

Ireland's Democracy Gap & EU Presidency Opportunity

The Minister's Brief

Public Citizen Infrastructure and Ireland's EU Council Presidency Legacy

by Seán Lynch, Founder, OpenLitterMap & LitterWeek, December 2025/January 2026

Decision sought	Establish LitterWeek as an eligible instrument for ETB and Local Authority-funded climate and education programmes.
Purpose	Enable a pathway for citizen-generated environmental data and digital skills development as an EU Presidency legacy.
Recommended	Consider SBIR funding (€2–5M) for EU expansion.

Minister's Decision Note

Issue

Ireland lacks the capacity to recognise or evaluate digital civic infrastructure created outside of institutions.

Why This Matters Now

Ireland's EU Council Presidency (July–December 2026) coincides with international commitments requiring improved environmental monitoring, including citizen-generated data (Global Plastics Treaty, OECD, UN Statistical Commission Copenhagen Framework).

The Democracy Gap

In a Democracy, the fundamental unit of governance is the citizen. In the 2nd quarter of the 21st century a vote every 4 years is minimalist. Modern democracies require continuous active citizen participation in society.

Evidence

Ireland's National Litter Pollution Monitoring System has operated largely unchanged for 26 years. A modern system should combine official sampling with citizen evidence and create complementary data streams that can provide better & more meaningful coverage.

Minister's Decision Note

Decision Required

1. Approve LitterWeek Pilots at Local Authorities & ETBs.
2. Consider SBIR funding (€2–5M) for national coordination and Presidency delivery.
3. Note the intention to showcase Ireland's innovation potential at Cork Mayors' Summit (October 2026).

Cost

€1m — Coordination & Proof of Concept

Establishes the minimum viable capability to test feasibility and governance.

- Delivery of below-tender paired-method pilots (official sampling + citizen data) in local authorities and ETBs.

Outcome: Clear evidence on whether citizen-generated data can be safely & usefully integrated and into public systems.

€2m — National Pilot Coverage

Extends validated methods with SBIR funding across a representative national cohort.

- Digital Skills Training for Ireland.
- Expansion of pilots across all local authorities.
- Refinement of procurement, data standards, and reporting workflows.
- Capacity-building training for local authority staff and participating partners.
- Comparative analysis of legacy monitoring outputs and paired-method results.

Outcome: Robust national-level evidence on scalability, cost-effectiveness, and administrative impact.

€5m — EU-Facing Deliverables & Presidency Legacy

Positions Ireland to deliver on its leadership during its EU Council Presidency.

- Digital Skills Training for Europe.
- Consolidation of pilot outputs into Presidency-ready materials (reports, videos, summit)
- Support for EU-facing events and knowledge exchange.
- Significant EU Council conclusions.
- Influence of the Irish model on other Member States.
- Nurture domestic innovation ecosystem to harness and lead on the emerging global geospatial market.

Outcome: A tangible, evidence-backed EU Presidency legacy demonstrating how citizen-generated data can strengthen democratic participation and environmental monitoring.

Timeline

- **Approve LitterWeek for ETBs and LA (now)**
- **Name departmental lead (Q1 2026)**
- **Launch paired-method pilots (Q2 2026)**
- **Approve SBIR funding (Q2 2026)**
- **Evaluation and Reporting (Q3 2026)**
- **EU Presidency deliverables (Q4 2026)**

Institutional Gap Identified

No agency has a remit to identify, validate, or support citizen (incl. postgraduate) innovation:

Research Ireland / Science Foundation Ireland	Supports institutions & IP transfer. Does not support independent innovators pioneering globally scalable civic & geo tech.
Enterprise Ireland	Supports scaling companies, not pre-market citizen science category-creating innovators. Limited SBIR at EI is centrally planned. DTIF does not have a pathway for solo founders.
Local Enterprise Offices	Supports local businesses, does not know how to process civic technology
Dept. of Environment	Implements the NLMS, does not require innovation.
Dept. of FHERIS, Education & Youth	In 2025 Ireland's x2 departments of education spent €16.5 billion and achieved nothing for citizen science. There are 0 PhDs in the citizen science of litter & plastic pollution following the launch of the iPhone.
European Research Council	Requires institutional affiliation and IP transfer to qualify for €150,000 "proof of concept" grants. Solo founders are excluded.

International Context

The Copenhagen Framework (March 2025) recognised citizen-generated data in national statistics. The OECD (April 2025) called for dedicated citizen science funding. The Global Plastics Treaty (INC-5.3, February 2026) requires citizen monitoring data. Ireland has endorsed these frameworks but lacks pathways for research and innovation in citizen science.

Supporting Evidence

OpenLitterMap (28 Dec 2025)	Value
Geotagged observations	505,859
Countries with adoption	110
Peer-reviewed citations	98+ (incl. Nature, World Bank)
UN Digital Public Good	Recognised 2020
Personal investment	€100k
State funding	€0
State opportunities (research, pilots, PhD)	0

International Comparison

Germany	Supported Plastic Pirates, Go Europe! During the EU Presidency 2026. Citizen Science Strategy 2030;
Austria	Sparkling Science: 299 projects, €34.7m
UK	UCL supported OpenStreetMap from the very beginning; Geovation have supported 150+ startups since 2010 and call for more.

Ireland has no strategy for citizen science or the geospatial renaissance.

EU Presidency Opportunity

Germany used its 2020 Presidency to champion citizen science through Plastic Pirates across 13 countries. Ireland's Presidency offers the same opportunity with significantly more advanced digital public infrastructure that has already been adopted in 110+ countries.

Cork City—home of OpenLitterMap & LitterWeek—will host the European Mayors' Summit on Climate and Health in October 2026—*the constituency of the Taoiseach and the EU Commissioner for Democracy*. This provides a unique opportunity for Ireland to update its innovation pipeline and demonstrate its leadership in citizen science and fill the gap.

Recommended Decision

Approve LitterWeek for ETB & LA pilots and initiate a strategic SBIR instrument to create a EU Presidency legacy and assign a departmental lead (DFHERIS + DFA recommended) to monitor implementation for delivery of EU Presidency resources.