



# AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN **PUBLIC RELATIONS 2022**

# Best Public Affairs Campaign



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## Campaign

Saving Horticultural Peat

## Description of Campaign

Despite the catastrophic impact a shortage of horticultural peat would have on Irish horticulture, the issue was dismissed by Government as niche. Our mission was to make it a mainstream issue, an attractive campaign for the wider farming lobby and a priority for Government action.

**GIBNEY**  
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## Public Relations Consultant

Gibney Communications



## Client

Growing Media Ireland

## Background to the Campaign

Growing Media Ireland (GMI) represents the majority of horticultural peat and growing media producers in Ireland.

Horticulture is a significant aspect of the Irish Agri-Food Sector, estimated by the Department of Agriculture to have a farm-gate value of €477 million in 2019. Over 17,000 jobs are supported by the Irish horticultural sector which includes an estimated 6,600 people directly employed full-time, and another 11,000 indirectly employed in value added and downstream businesses.

However, the availability of horticultural peat upon which the sector is dependent is in jeopardy due to confusion in Government as to how to balance commitments to protect Irish bogs with the needs of the domestic horticultural sector.

This developed because of Government's piecemeal efforts over decades to engage with EU Directives in this area. In early 2019 Government issued Statutory Instruments allowing peat harvesting take place within set criteria. These were

challenged and the High Court set them aside, partly on the basis that primary legislation would be required to make such changes.

This High Court ruling in late 2019 led to an effective ban on large scale horticultural peat harvesting in Ireland. The change of Government in 2020 saw Green Party Ministers take responsibility for Horticulture, Heritage and Climate Action.

The result had been an unwillingness within Government to engage with what is seen as the politically problematic issue of peat harvesting. Ignoring the limited progress in finding alternatives to horticultural peat over decades and the inadequate horticultural peat stockpiles, it was hoped, by Government, that alternatives would be successfully researched before domestic horticultural peat stockpiles were exhausted. This left GMI, and the wider horticultural sector, uncertain about the future of the industry.

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## Statement of Objectives

By June 2021 it was clear that, despite warnings from GMI, Government was unwilling to acknowledge that the stockpiles of horticultural peat available to the sector had been significantly depleted, and that horticultural peat would have to be imported in substantial quantities to meet the demand from Irish horticultural growers.

Responsibility for this area was spread over three Government Departments:

- The Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine with responsibility for the Horticultural Sector,
- The Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage with responsibility for peatlands,
- The Department of Environment, Climate & Communications with responsibility for environmental protection and climate action policy.

Government's unwillingness to address the issue was clearly evident from the replies these three Departments provided in response to Parliamentary Questions, with each taking the position that this was a matter for the other Departments.

The overriding objectives for GMI were:

- Ensure the three Government Departments with responsibility for policy development in this area moved away from avoiding the issue and engaged with it in a coordinated way,
- Get the Oireachtas Agricultural Committee to hold hearings on the negative impact that the restrictions on the supply of horticultural peat would have on the sector,
- Have the IFA and horticultural growers' associations prioritise the challenges facing the horticultural sector in their own campaigns and their ongoing engagements with Government,
- Increase the awareness of the issue among TDs and Senators so that the matter would be discussed in the Dáil and Seanad,
- Ensure Government recognises the importance of the issue of the shortage of horticultural peat, gives the matter priority and publishes a Working Paper which would provide GMI with a basis upon which it could engage with Government in working towards a comprehensive solution.

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## Programme Planning and Strategy

### Strategy

The key to unlocking this important issue was a highly targeted public affairs campaign backed up by tactical media relations.

It required deep understanding of a complex issue, distilling this into accessible key messages, a coordinated approach from representative organisations and the mobilisation of public opinion to demand action. Such strategic manoeuvring highlighted the consequences of ignoring the issue which the public related to, undermined Government's rationale for inaction and created a narrative which reinforced preconceived expectations of journalists and politicians.



The initial step was to identify the target audiences that would help achieve GMI's objectives.

### **Key Ministers**

- Minister for Agriculture, Food & the Marine Charlie McConalogue T.D.
- Minister of State with responsibility for Land Use & Biodiversity Senator Pippa Hackett
- Minister of State with responsibility for Research & Development, Farm Safety & New Market Development Martin Heydon T.D.
- Minister for the Environment, Climate & Communications Eamon Ryan T.D.
- Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage Darragh O'Brien T.D.
- Minister of State with responsibility for Heritage Malcom Noonan T.D.
- Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government & Planning Peter Burke T.D.

### **Oireachtas Committees**

- The Chair, Members and Clerk of:
  - > Agriculture, Food & the Marine
  - > Environment & Climate Action
  - > Housing, Local Government & Heritage

### **Politicians**

- Oireachtas members from constituencies where horticulture is economically significant and a major local employer,
- Oireachtas members linked to rural issues (e.g. Regional Group, Rural Group),
- Green Party Oireachtas members unaware of the environmental consequences of horticultural peat importation.

### **Sectoral Organisations**

- Irish Farmers Association
- Kildare Growers Group
- Commercial Mushroom Producers

### **Journalists who focus on Agricultural and Environmental issues**

We developed three key messages as fundamental pillars of our strategy to explain in simple terms the impact of continued Government inaction:

#### **Economy**

- The fact that **imported horticultural peat** is substantially **more expensive** but of a **lower quality** when compared to Irish peat. Irish growers will face **higher costs for lower crop yields** impacting the viability of their businesses, and risk losing a sector worth €477M to the economy.

#### **Employment**

- The **risk of 17,000 job losses** in rural areas, mainly in the Border and Midland regions but also north Co. Dublin, north Co. Cork and Co. Wexford.

#### **Environment**

- The negative environmental impact of importing peat. **Each 4,000-tonne shipment of horticultural peat imported** to meet domestic demand **involved 200 trucks** carrying peat from bogs to Baltic ports, **a 3,000km journey by ship to Irish ports**, and **another 200 trucks** unloading the peat. The environmental consequences of transporting this non-native horticultural peat, rather than using native horticultural peat, is self-evident

### **Tactics**

Major progress was achieved through a combination of tactics including providing politicians with information allowing them to raise the issue, assuring stakeholders that association with the campaign was positive for their organisations and delivering the media interesting stories and striking visuals reinforcing our key messages.

### **Political Engagement**

- Letters issued to target Ministers, relevant Oireachtas Committee Chairs, Oireachtas Members from constituencies with strong horticultural sectors and other Oireachtas members highlighting the crisis.

- Contact Oireachtas members in advance of relevant debates and committee meetings, highlighting the issue.
- Engage with the members of the Oireachtas Agricultural Committee to highlight the crisis and urge the Committee to address the issue.
- Appearance before the Oireachtas Agricultural Committee and, following this, providing a briefing for Committee members in advance of Department of Agriculture meeting the Committee.
- Contact Green Party Oireachtas members to highlight the exhaustion of horticultural peat stockpiles and the environmental damage of mass importation.
- Briefing notes in advance of key Committee meetings, Seanad and Dáil debates.

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

- Engage with the Kildare Growers Group and Commercial Mushroom Producers who were approached about attending the Oireachtas Agricultural Committee with GMI.
- Support the IFA's protests
- Support the publication of the Horticultural Peat (Temporary Measures) Bill 2021.
- Meet with KPMG who were undertaking a review of the horticultural industry on behalf of the Department of Agriculture.

### **Visualisation of the Campaign**

It was vital to the campaign not only that GMI publicly inform Government of the consequences of inaction but that this warning be proven correct and validated by clear visuals. To achieve this GMI informed Government and the Oireachtas Agricultural Committee in July that peat stockpiles would be exhausted by autumn and Ireland would need to import horticultural peat.

As expected, Government and environmental groups disputed these claims. The clear visual images of a shipload of horticultural peat in an Irish port in September and the mountains of imported peat being stored in October undermined the Government's rationale for inaction and confirmed GMI as a trusted source of information for journalists, politicians and even Government.

1. The first 4,000 tonne shipment of horticultural peat into Ireland in September was accompanied by a press statement and photos. This resulted in significant national media coverage and commentary. After this event importing peat into Ireland became a commonly used example of policy failure.
2. Discussions with Ear to the Ground resulted in the programme visiting the site where the mountains of stockpiled Latvian peat were stored and carrying these images and interviews with GMI members in October.

### **Media Engagement**

Press statements were issued to targeted journalists following:

1. Oireachtas Committee meetings,
2. IFA protests
3. Seanad debates,
4. Publication of the Horticultural Peat (Temporary Measures) Bill 2021, and
5. After each Government announcement.

The Journal.ie carried out a Fact Check which analysed the key messages of our campaign and the information we circulated around the importation of peat and rated the coverage as "Mostly True".

The ongoing GMI briefing of Oireachtas members, stakeholder engagement and media campaign has led to organic growth of the issue, including:

- Parliamentary Questions from T.D.s and Senators.
- Ministers being questioned in the Dáil on the issue by Government and Opposition T.D.s.
- The publication of a Seanad Private Members Bill.
- Horticultural peat importation used as a perfect examples of policy failure.
- Irish and European production companies making television documentaries on the issue (e.g. Echo Media, Germany).

We have continued to focus on our three key messages which are now quoted in Government press releases, Oireachtas debates and media discussions.

## Measurement

The campaign moved the shortage of horticultural peat issue from a position of zero public awareness and no Government appetite for action to an issue the public recognises, Government is engaging with and where a roadmap for resolution is possible.

### Oireachtas Committee

- The Oireachtas Agricultural Committee significantly changed its work-programme, holding three meetings on the issue in July and September. It supported GMI's position and strongly opposed Ireland being dependent on imported peat. The hearings raised the campaign's profile and put pressure on Government to act.

### Stakeholder Engagement

- Approaching growers and mushroom producers to appear with GMI before the Agricultural Committee committed them to the campaign.
- GMI's campaign encouraged the IFA to launch its "no peat, no produce" campaign which included:
  - > Protesting outside the Oireachtas in July and October,
  - > Supporting November's Private Members Bill,
  - > Appearing before the Agriculture Committee to highlight the difficulties facing the horticultural sector.

### Awareness at a Political Level

- GMI's briefing of Oireachtas members resulted in the issue being the subject of:
  - > Parliamentary Questions,
  - > Opposition Spokespeople's Oral Ministerial Questions, Seanad debates,
  - > A Seanad Private Members Bill signed by the majority of Senators.

### Government Reaction

- 7th October (after Oireachtas Committee hearings and the publicity of the peat shipment) Government appointed KPMG to review the horticultural sector including how to overcome current challenges. The report was published in July 2022 and endorsed the GMI position by calling for a system to allow for the use of domestic peat.
- 22nd October (following the Seanad Debate) Minister Hackett announced €9M to support horticultural.
- 8th December (following Ear to the Ground and the Private Members' Bill) Minister Hackett announced €1.69M research funding for peat alternatives.
- GMI has engaged with Department officials on these.

### Government Working Paper

- 17th January: Government published the Working Group Report and a Working Paper to address horticultural peat issues. Government's press release quoted Ministers Ryan, McConalogue, O'Brien, Noonan, Heydon and Hackett, all Ministers targeted in our campaign.
- Ministers accepted their Departments' responsibility for the issue (a campaign objective). The Working Paper provides a basis upon which GMI is engaging with Government.

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