



## Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: [Northern Ireland and the EU Referendum](#), HC 760

Wednesday 2 March 2016

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Conor Houston, Centre for Democracy and Peace Building](#)

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Members present: Mr Laurence Robertson (Chair); Tom Blenkinsop; Oliver Colvile; Lady Hermon; Kate Hoey; Danny Kinahan; Jack Lopresti; Dr Alasdair McDonnell; Nigel Mills; Ian Paisley; Gavin Robinson

Questions 229–288

#### Examination of Witness

Witness: **Conor Houston**, Programme Director for EU Debate NI, Centre for Democracy and Peace Building, gave evidence.

**Chair:** We will begin the public session. Just before I come to you, Mr Houston, could I just ask Gavin to come in here?

**Gavin Robinson:** Thank you, Mr Chairman. Can I just declare an interest that Mr Houston and I trained together at the same time, and when he practised as a solicitor I was engaged professionally by his firm and received professional fees for that work?

**Ian Paisley:** Can I declare that Mr Houston's company represented me in one of my several appearances in court?

**Kate Hoey:** Can I declare that I have never met Mr Houston?

**Dr McDonnell:** Can I declare that I know Conor and I can vouch for him?

**Q229 Chair:** Mr Houston, you are very welcome. Thank you very much for joining us. Would you like to make an opening statement to tell us about your organisation and what you are set up to do?

**Conor Houston:** Certainly. First, thank you very much for having me here at the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee this morning; it is a great privilege and a great honour. I



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am the Programme Director at the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building. The centre was founded two years ago. Our chairman is Lord Alderdice. Our directors are Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Liam Maskey who runs Intercom in West Belfast, Professor Deirdre Heenan from the University of Ulster, and Chris Maccabe, a former NIO employee. My CEO is Eva Grosman. The centre does a number of programmes, really about capacity-building with politicians at the Assembly, with civic society and with community groups.

I started employment with the centre last October. In November the centre decided that there had been very little debate taking place in Northern Ireland about the referendum that would be happening in relation to the EU, so it was decided to launch a programme called EU Debate NI. The purpose was simply to stimulate and inform debate on the issues that may affect Northern Ireland in the upcoming referendum. We decided as a centre to take a neutral position in that we were not going to try to lobby one way or the other. Our purpose was to ensure that there was a debate. In order to do that we collaborated with Professor David Phinnemore who is based at Queen's University in Belfast. He, along with other academics, produced a briefing paper. The briefing paper set out a number of issues that were identified as being particularly pertinent to issues that may affect Northern Ireland in the upcoming referendum. It posed a series of questions to consider both if we remain part of the European Union or if we leave the European Union, so it was again written from a neutral standpoint to try to stimulate the type of questions that people right across Northern Ireland, whether in business, civic or the public, needed to consider.

We then decided, in order to promote the briefing paper and to stimulate discussion, we would host a number of events. I have sent details of those events to the Committee. We are about half way through the programme. It is running over a period of about four weeks. Our first event was at Belfast City Hall where we had about 100 delegates from the business and civic community coming together. It very much had an ethos of being interactive. People could ask questions and engage. It was trying to reach out to as diverse an audience as possible. Our next event took place at Queen's University Belfast with students from across the two universities and other higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. We had an event last Friday at the Europa Hotel, which was a legal conference in which we had speakers such as the Attorney General for Northern Ireland giving their opinion on issues that we need to consider in the referendum. Last night we had a debate between Nigel Farage and Vernon Coaker, the Shadow Secretary of State. We had about 250 students, business representatives, and civic society members in attendance and it was a very lively event. We have two events next week in Derry-Londonderry focusing on border issues and then in Craigavon looking at issues around agriculture. That is an overview of the programme.

**Q230 Chair:** Forgive the bluntness of this first question but we ask all the organisations that come before us. Who actually funds your organisation?

**Conor Houston:** In respect of this programme, the funding has been per event. We have reached out to sponsorship for each event. The City Hall event, for instance, was funded by Diamond Recruitment. We have collaborated with a number of partners such as the University of Ulster, which has given us rooms for free, etc. In terms of funding, there is no funding for this programme. In terms of the centre's funding, that comes from the



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Department of Foreign Affairs and OFMDFM. The public fund some of our programmes, particularly around Music Unite and Together. That money is not used for EU Debate NI.

**Q231 Kate Hoey:** So you do not get any money for anything ever from anything to do with the EU—the Commission or the EU? I do not mean for this event; I mean generally.

**Conor Houston:** Generally we have not received EU funding to date, no. I should say that we are obviously looking at the PEACE IV funding application, which will be opening soon for the centre.

**Q232 Kate Hoey:** But you have not applied for the PEACE funding.

**Conor Houston:** We have not applied as yet but we will be.

**Q233 Kate Hoey:** The PEACE funding, of course, comes from EU, which comes from us and then goes to the EU.

**Conor Houston:** It does. Well, it comes from—

**Q234 Chair:** Why is there felt to be a lack of debate taking place in Northern Ireland as opposed to what is happening in Great Britain?

**Conor Houston:** It was a sense that the Committee across the board shared that there had been little or no discussion, both in civic society and business society, and so it was felt that our centre was well placed—because we were going to take a neutral position—to bring experts together, bring politicians from across the political spectrum together and have a real debate rather than it being focused on one side or the other. That has been very effective to date in that we have been able to engage with all the political parties and with a range of actors across business and civic society at our events.

**Q235 Lady Hermon:** It is very good to see you here this morning, Conor. Do you think the EU referendum debate has been well discussed and well reflected in the media in Northern Ireland?

**Conor Houston:** Since the referendum date has been fixed, there has been interest. I have to say our events have been well covered by local media. It is a challenge in terms of getting really informed discussion and debate in local media. I know that a number of the media organisations in Northern Ireland are working on specific programmes, because, as I say, they have attended some of our events. There is more work to be done in terms of really reaching out and giving people information on issues affecting Northern Ireland specifically.

**Q236 Lady Hermon:** I know that you have only been in this particular post since November, so congratulations on your appointment as a Director. In those first few months,



what do you see as the key issues in the EU referendum as it affects Northern Ireland? Are they different from the rest of the UK?

**Conor Houston:** The first is a very general one, which does not apply just to the EU, and that is the challenge we have about having really good national conversations. That has been touched upon in the role of the media as well. Some really good work goes on within specific business organisations and within specific groups within civic society, but it is coming together and sharing those perspectives and views. That is slightly unique in Northern Ireland. We need to find that space where people can come together and share these ideas and views.

In terms of the actual issues, we have researchers helping us out at the events and I will forward the final report to the Committee when it is done. Issues that come up that will not surprise the Committee would be about agriculture funding, about PEACE funding, and around cross-border issues. They are three issues that can be described as being specific to Northern Ireland, although people are interested in the bigger picture about sovereignty and about where the United Kingdom is going. Obviously there has been some discussion, although limited to date, around the issue of the future of the Union if the United Kingdom were to leave the EU, in terms of what might happen to Scotland. There has been some discussion in relation to that.

**Q237 Lady Hermon:** What percentage of people in Northern Ireland who are eligible to vote do you think are undecided? Is it a case of people either loving the EU or hating it, or how big is the middle section?

**Conor Houston:** It would not be appropriate for me to try to put a figure on it. There is definitely an undecided section. You are absolutely right, as I am sure it is in the rest of GB, that there are people who are very set. They have a very clear view already of what they are going to do and they will probably not be moved regardless of the arguments, and that is fine. There is a sizeable pool of people attending our events who are interested and want to learn more. One of the big challenges has been when we have been trying to ask people what information they would like and where they would like to get it from. One of the issues that comes up time and again is that they do not know who to trust, because they feel that the campaigns will obviously lobby one way or the other and will use statistics to suit their own ends. People feel a real sense of need as they ask who they can trust with information. That is going to be a big challenge across the UK. That is not specific to Northern Ireland.

**Q238 Lady Hermon:** How is your organisation going to address that? How are you going to engage more with undecided voters?

**Conor Houston:** We are having these events. At the end of next week, we will finish this initial phase. We will get a report on what we have done to date, what issues have come up, and where the gaps are. We are also mapping what else is going on and where there are other events. There is a huge momentum. A lot of organisations and campaigns and political parties are involved. There were events on Friday in Belfast. There is a lot of momentum. There is no point our having events for the sake of having them. It is about working with all those key partners, all the political parties, and the actors in business to



say, “Is there something we can assist with? Do you want us to act to bring people together for a debate?” We will also be speaking to academics to see if there is specific research that can be done where there are gaps in information. It would be acting as a facility to assist. We are not trying to control this campaign. Both the “remain” and “leave” campaigns will run respectively. That is not our role. We will very much look to see where we can constructively assist in Northern Ireland in terms of stimulating and informing debate.

**Q239 Lady Hermon:** Do you think there is a gender divide or an age divide? Do you think older people want to remain more than younger people, or the opposite?

**Conor Houston:** I would not be placed to give an informed answer on that. We have a polling company that does a little bit of polling just to keep it interactive. Interestingly, at the City Hall event, it did show more women were favourable to remaining and more men wished to leave, but that was 100 people at one event in Belfast, so I would not take it as litmus test. In terms of age, I do not have any evidence for the Committee as to whether there is a difference between younger and older people.

**Q240 Gavin Robinson:** Good morning and thanks for coming after the event last night. It seemed to get good traction on social media. I want to just turn to your written evidence that you have submitted to the Committee: “By capturing the events using our innovative communication strategy, we will hold events in London and Dublin at senior national Government level to constructively inform on the views and issues from a Northern Ireland perspective.” Are you attempting to get to a unified Northern Ireland perspective when you have those discussions, or at the end of it all will you indicating as at the start that there are various views?

**Conor Houston:** Absolutely. It would not be possible for us to say that there is one unified Northern Ireland perspective. What we are trying to do is identify the issues on both sides of the argument and raise them to national level. That is why last night was important to us to bring two participants from England to come to put the national debate in terms of the UK and the issues there, to bring those to Northern Ireland so people could hear them. It also allowed members of the public who were invited last night to share their views and concerns, and put their questions to those national actors, so it is actually informing at that level as well. It was really constructive and it was a really engaging and lively debate last night.

**Q241 Gavin Robinson:** How do you feel various regions of the UK are going to respond to a Northern Ireland-specific concern? Would you not surmise that folk in the north of England will vote on issues that affect the north of England; maybe it is immigration or industry. They are not going to be too concerned about what Northern Ireland’s issues are. They will play most on the minds of people in Northern Ireland.

**Conor Houston:** I am not naive. People will obviously look at their own community in which they are resident and make decisions based on that. As I say time and time again, this is a United Kingdom referendum so it is important that everybody understands that there are implications for different parts of the United Kingdom in terms of this decision.

It is about presenting them. It is obviously not about forcing them; we cannot force people to accept that there are issues in Northern Ireland. It is just trying to make sure that they are articulated. Even being here today and the work that this Committee is doing to examine this issue is really important.

**Q242 Gavin Robinson:** When you say here that this is “a radical solution to the lack of national conversation and creates a space for a non-sectarian debate”, why do you feel that the debate in Northern Ireland could be sectarian or, worse, is sectarian?

**Conor Houston:** That was really more a general comment that goes back to something I said earlier, which was that the centre was concerned that a lot of debates that take place in Northern Ireland, not just on this issue but on many issues, sometimes and often do fall down on the traditional sectarian divide. We were very conscious that if that were to happen, it would not be good for Northern Ireland. We want to have a really engaged debate. This is an important issue whatever side of the community you come from. We wanted to move it beyond what would be considered traditional political lines in Northern Ireland. I have not seen evidence of that to date and that has been encouraging.

**Q243 Gavin Robinson:** The reason we established this inquiry was to start establishing facts rather than take a view, and to challenge perceptions that are out there as well. Since our inquiry with economists, I have heard proponents of one side or another use evidence that has been significantly rebuffed in this Committee and challenged and disregarded, but which is still used as an argument for or against the EU. Do you intend to publish a myth-busting document at the end as part of your report? Do you intend to assert facts and challenge myths, or are you prepared to leave competing arguments in the ether?

**Conor Houston:** That is a very good question and one that I will say to you is under consideration. We obviously would need to be extremely careful, because the last thing we would want to do by trying to inform is to further confuse or to dismiss one side or the other. We are looking at whether there is a way to do that constructively. It would definitely be in consultation with the two campaigns, political parties, business representatives, economists and academics. We do not have plans to do it immediately but we are certainly considering the question. Again, if we can meaningfully and constructively add to this then we will. Otherwise we will not. We are not running the campaign; we are very clear on that. That is for the leave and remain campaigns.

**Q244 Gavin Robinson:** That is why if someone were to do it, it would be better if it was a neutral party.

**Conor Houston:** One option, as the *Economist* magazine had, is to have two statistics, one produced by the leave campaign and one produced by the remain campaign, and put them side-by-side so people could look and decide. I do not know if that is helpful or not but we will look to see how we could construct that. I appreciate the work the Committee is doing on a cross-party basis, and if the Committee were interested in exploring that further, I would be very happy to discuss it further with you.



**Q245 Ian Paisley:** Conor, you are very welcome. You mentioned at the beginning of your comments a scoping report that you had carried out. Would you be able to furnish us with a copy of that report? That would be very helpful.

**Conor Houston:** I can, yes. It is really a stakeholder mapping. I would be very happy to send that to you.

**Q246 Ian Paisley:** I can sympathise fully with you in terms of the issue of trying to get publicity. We had the Prime Minister enter the Province on Saturday and it got very little publicity. It was solely on the remain campaign. If the PM has problems generating a lot of publicity for events like that, I can understand how difficult it is for other organisations, so I have full sympathy with you. I will ask you this: what is your impression of the level of public knowledge among the general public in Northern Ireland about Europe? Do you think their minds are already made up?

**Conor Houston:** In terms of knowledge, I suppose that is why this programme was set up; we were very concerned that there was very, very limited knowledge. That was clear even at the debate last night where we were doing little vox pops—all of this I will send to the Committee—of the comments that were coming from people. A number, particularly at the student events last week, were saying, “I did not know we were getting a vote on this”. Because now the referendum date has been set, there has certainly in the last week to 10 days been a noticeable momentum and more coverage in local press. There is a growing awareness.

It goes back to the point I made to Lady Hermon: it is difficult to say what percentage have their minds made up and how many are undecided. It is clear from the events we are having there are people who are coming that are very strongly one way or the other, but then you have a lot of people who see that it is complex and that perhaps there is a benefit to remaining on one issue but there is a benefit to leaving on another issue. That is what is making it difficult for people who want to try to inform themselves in respect of this.

**Q247 Ian Paisley:** What danger do you think there is of this European campaign overlapping into the Assembly election campaign?

**Conor Houston:** That is really a matter for the political parties. I watched at length the debate, which was held a couple of weeks ago—I think it was a DUP motion—that asked for the referendum date to be moved from 23 June to later in the year. I can understand that the political parties, because it is an Assembly election, will want to focus on the local issues in Northern Ireland. It is inevitable that Europe is going to feature as part of that. How much it will take over, I just do not know. We will have to wait and see.

**Q248 Ian Paisley:** You do recognise the conflict. If you are out trying to generate publicity on this issue and local parties are trying to focus for the next 10 weeks on Assembly issues, there is an opportunity for conflict there.

**Conor Houston:** Absolutely, but there is also an opportunity that you have the election period to engage with the public about Europe while you are talking to them about other



local issues as well. There is another way of looking at that as well. There is also a period after the election of a quite sufficient number of weeks, I would have thought, for the campaign in Northern Ireland.

**Q249 Ian Paisley:** This morning the Prime Minister has published a dodgy dossier of so-called facts claiming that if we leave Europe there will be a trade barrier of 50% on trading goods that are in the EU. At the moment the average trading barrier is 3% on trading goods. Do you think those sorts of scare tactics further cloud the actual debate and are unhelpful?

*Conor Houston:* I will not make any comment in respect of the dossier because I have not yet had an opportunity to read it and what is contained in it. The issue of scaremongering has come out from all our events, from both sides. It featured heavily in the debate last night. The one thing that comes out from both sides is the vision of where the United Kingdom is going either within Europe or outside of Europe. That is where people want the campaign teams to focus. What is the vision of the United Kingdom if we leave the European Union? What does it look like? What is in it for me? And the opposite, obviously, if we are going to remain in the European Union: what does the United Kingdom look like in a reformed Europe or as part of the current European Union?

**Q250 Ian Paisley:** Finally, Conor, will you vote to remain or will you vote to leave?

*Conor Houston:* I will not declare what way I will be voting. I am very much enjoying the neutral role, being objective and informing myself on the issues to date, thank you.

**Q251 Dr McDonnell:** Thank you for the early start this morning; it must have been difficult after a hard night last night. You have probably covered what I was wanting to ask about the level of public knowledge and how we go down through that, but I would not mind if you could flesh that out a bit further. What further events do you have planned beyond this present cycle?

*Conor Houston:* At this stage, as I said, we have an event in Derry-Londonderry; that is in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce there. We have an event in Craigavon, which will look at agriculture issues and we have a number of speakers on that. After that we are going to get all the data for the research paper and I will produce all of that for this Committee. We will stock-take. We will go back to all the stakeholders that we have engaged with throughout this programme and we will look to see what we can usefully and meaningfully contribute. We are not just going to set up a series of events for the sake of having a series of events. I can see already when I look in the newspapers that there are different campaigns and events that are coming up. There is no point our duplicating or running events in competition. We are not here to compete with people. We are genuinely here to try to facilitate and to collaborate to help ensure there is an informed debate.

**Q252 Dr McDonnell:** Are you getting any sense of what the results of an “out” would look like, or is it just jumping out of an aeroplane without a parachute?





**Conor Houston:** If you look at the range of speakers we have had to date, particularly in the debate last night, there have been a lot of arguments put forward in respect of reasons to leave the European Union. It would be fair, going back to the point I made to Mr Paisley, to say on both sides that there is a need for the campaigns to focus on the vision of either remaining in the UK and what that really looks like and how that is really going to work, or, if we are going to leave the European Union, what the United Kingdom would look like and how it is really going to work. I would answer it in that way.

**Q253 Dr McDonnell:** So you do not get a sense, at this stage, that there is a vision on either side?

**Conor Houston:** The debate has only really got going. There have been a lot of arguments articulated on both sides to date across our events. Again, I will happily share the research paper, which is identifying the issues that are coming up and the things that are coming up. Earlier I touched on the specific areas that keep coming up in our events, around agriculture, PEACE funding and cross-border issues. They have been the issues to date.

**Q254 Dr McDonnell:** In the issues or the debate to date, is there any raising at all of the geopolitical implications of “in” or “out”—in other words, the implications for a broader European peace and stability?

**Conor Houston:** It has come up. I referenced earlier that it has not featured as prominently in the debates in Northern Ireland to date but it has come up at the events. There are implications for remaining in the European Union in terms of the geopolitical status of what the EU is and where it is going. There is also the impact on what remains of the European Union if the United Kingdom leaves, and of course of the United Kingdom itself and its current constitutional make-up.

**Q255 Chair:** Particularly since the date was announced and since the Prime Minister came back from Brussels, each time you switch on the radio there is a debate going on. Do you think that pace will carry on right through to the referendum date, or do you think there will be a bit of a dip? How do you see it going?

**Conor Houston:** I have to say it really has been quite intense in both local and national media. Trying to keep on top of it is nearly a full-time job in itself. It is hard to imagine that that momentum would continue. It would be very hard on both sides to keep that momentum going. Just to go back to something Mr Paisley referred to, one of issues during the election is that purdah applies, so it is going to be interesting to see how events can be run around the European issue during that period of time. Perhaps that will allow a slight breathing space for the two campaigns. There are so many issues. There is a lot still to be got out in terms of implications on both sides. There will be a fairly sustained campaign.

**Q256 Danny Kinahan:** Thank you very much for coming today. You just referred to there being a lot to get out. What do you think the barriers are that are stopping that information coming out?



**Conor Houston:** That is a very good question. I am not sure if there are necessarily barriers. There is a need, and it is why we produced the briefing paper. In terms of who we engaged with in the public, it was a real mapping process to see who the key influences are across business, agriculture and the political parties. Sending them the briefing paper was the first step to say, “When your party, your business organisation or your community group is looking at this issue, just remember there are a breadth of issues.” Our briefing paper covers 18 different areas. We were trying to say to people, “Just remember that this is not just about one issue such as PEACE funding or agriculture spending. This is much bigger. Whilst it might not affect your organisation or your group directly, please do bear it in mind and understand that what may be a benefit for you could be a negative for another group.”

**Q257 Danny Kinahan:** Virtually all the meetings I have had so far with business have been talking about the economy and wanting to know what the future of trade would look like if we were out. It is easier to know the facts from being in. Are you aware of anybody that is sitting, studying where the future is? Is it South America, China, the Pacific Rim? Is there anybody out there really trying to gather the facts of where we go?

**Conor Houston:** In a Northern Ireland context, I do not think so. I know there is some academic work being done in a piecemeal fashion but I am not sure if anyone is doing it in that level of detail specific to Northern Ireland. I have to say a lot of the business organisations, community groups, civic groups, and political parties have done some really great work in terms of hosting events and engaging with their members. The challenge, and where we saw our role, was to try to bring those voices together. If you simply look at this as an economic issue, you are missing other very important issues in this referendum. That is why we thought it would be very important to create the space to bring lots of different opinions together. The other thing is that to date there has been a lot of high-level discussion around trade and GDP. When I have been speaking to people in community centres across Northern Ireland, they want to know how it is going to affect what is in their pocket, their opportunities to get jobs, etc. Both sides of the campaign need to try to make it relevant. It is one thing to talk about GDP falling or rising; that has to be translated so that people understand that means they are better off, have more money in their pocket, better access to a particular service or whatever it is. It has to become relevant to people’s day-to-day lives. That is the barrier at the moment. I do not know if it is quite trickling down. However, we have only just begun. I do stress that: these campaigns are really only getting off the blocks now. We will see how that materialises.

**Danny Kinahan:** I got exactly the same message from senior citizens last week. They wanted to get away from this “Project Fear” and from all this labelling of people scaring each other; the dodgy dossier does not help either. We need facts.

**Lady Hermon:** So-called, allegedly.

**Chair:** It is not its official title

**Q258 Oliver Colvile:** Thank you, Mr Houston, for coming to see us. You are obviously at the early stages of it but have you got a theme of the top three issues that are coming out during the course of your conversations and debates?



**Conor Houston:** I would maybe say slightly more than three; because of the diversity of the events there has been a slightly different focus on each, so it is maybe not fair to pin it on just three. Higher education obviously was a really big issue last week and the impact on the higher education system in Northern Ireland. Immigration has come up as an issue at all the events and the impact cross-border, an issue I have referred to earlier, has come up at the events. On both sides, it is accepted that there is a lot of scaremongering going on in the peripheries of both, in terms of talk of effectively a sealed border with the Republic of Ireland. That is not helpful, as with some of the other positions being put forward by people supporting a remain position.

**Q259 Oliver Colvile:** It seems to my mind that there is a real concern, both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, that people feel that they hear both sides shouting at each other, but they do not actually get a particularly well balanced argument coming out. First of all, who do you think would be the most trusted person that people would believe would give a balanced position? Do you have a view on that?

**Conor Houston:** It is a really important question. A lot of what I have been doing to date is process, looking at how we put events together and how we construct them. That is why, at the City Hall event, we had roundtables and people came and had breakfast and talked to each other, rather than a panel with four speakers, two for remaining and two for leaving. You are right; people will get fed up listening to people constantly arguing with each other. There has to be a little bit more engagement. What we have tried to do is bring people from across the political spectrum, from business and from civic, together to sit around the table and engage in conversation. That has been effective.

**Q260 Oliver Colvile:** Before I got elected to this place, I ran a small communications company, which I still have an interest in, which gave advice to developers on how to manage public consultation and stuff like that. One of the things that we regularly did was, at the very beginning of the campaign, mark dreams and aspirations and hopes. We would do a “planning for real” weekend where members of the public could come and put on stick-it notes as to what they wanted to see happen. Do you get the impression that anybody has done that with the British public, either in Northern Ireland or anywhere else? Has anyone actually said to them, “What do you want out of our membership of the European Union?” Is that something that you might look at trying to do?

**Conor Houston:** That is certainly a very interesting point. That comes up at the beginning of conversations. People say things like, “I do not know if we have been asked the right question because I might like this type of union or that type of union but of course we have asked a very set question: ‘Do you want to remain in or leave the European Union?’” There is work to be done there. We have not quite dreams, aspirations and hopes but we have been capturing thoughts at the events and, as I say, I will produce a report to the Committee. We have been asking for the reasons people would like to remain or stay and where they would like more information. We will capture some of that, perhaps not using the words “dreams” and “aspirations”; it is certainly something that I would be interested in exploring further.



**Q261 Oliver Colvile:** First, is the relationship between Northern Ireland and southern Ireland becoming an issue during the course of the conversation? Secondly, can I encourage you, at the very end of all the process you have done, because I expect you are a balanced organisation, to write a paper that states the issues that came out and the conversations that were had?

**Conor Houston:** We will be producing a paper.

**Oliver Colvile:** Can we have a copy of that?

**Conor Houston:** Absolutely. I have sent you links to some of the videos; anything we have got to date I have sent. I will send you the full report. We will probably get that done externally so it is objective as well.

**Q262 Jack Lopresti:** Hello, Conor. Thanks for coming. In your view, what are the percentages of people that have not yet made their mind up in this debate in Northern Ireland? How much do you think that might change between now and polling day?

**Conor Houston:** It is very difficult for me to answer that question without having done some really detailed polling.

**Q263 Jack Lopresti:** You do not even have a rough idea of how many people have made their minds up, for instance.

**Conor Houston:** It is difficult. It depends on the event and on the audience. I have to say that the perception I had from the event we did at Queen's last week was that there were a lot of students who were genuinely seeking to understand the issues, and that means they are probably undecided. That was interesting to me because the perception was that this might be very pro-remain but actually I felt the sense that people were actually undecided. They want to understand because it is complex. The word "certainty" gets thrown around as if on one side there is an absolute certainty over the other. People are starting to understand that there are uncertainties both in remaining in the European Union and in leaving. That is why my advice to the campaigns is to focus on the vision: what does the United Kingdom look like if we remain in the United Kingdom? What does the United Kingdom look like if we leave the European Union? That is what will engage people the most: to buy into the vision.

**Q264 Jack Lopresti:** In your opinion, do you think all the ridiculous scare stories we are getting from the remain camp will damage the very case they are seeking to make, by being so negative and trying to frighten people?

**Conor Houston:** That could be said of both sides in terms of scaremongering. I am not saying this just to be overly neutral, but I would say there are scare stories on both sides. It has not been overwhelming in Northern Ireland to date, but people are really looking to see the vision. That is what they want.

**Q265 Chair:** Is the scaremongering not typical of all elections though?



**Conor Houston:** It is but it is an opportunity for people in Northern Ireland to really engage in something, in terms of uniting around a vision that is not around traditional constitutional issues. That is why it is potentially very exciting from a Northern Irish perspective.

**Chair:** That is a very good point.

**Q266 Kate Hoey:** Dr McDonnell asked you about whether there was any vision of what they wanted to have from the leave campaign. Have you heard about any vision of what the remain campaign feel about what the EU is going to be like in a year or so?

**Conor Houston:** I probably answered that question in that both sides have work to do in making sure that that is the central tenet—

**Q267 Kate Hoey:** Fine. I just wanted to get that clarified. The only reason the debate in Northern Ireland might be slightly different from the rest of the United Kingdom is the issue of the border. Do you think people there see that in fact the relationship is already different between Northern Ireland and the Republic unlike the UK and other parts of the EU in relation to the fact that thousands of Irish citizens with Irish passports living in mainland Great Britain will be able to vote on the status of the United Kingdom staying in or leaving the EU? Does that ever come up: that there is almost a double standard?

**Conor Houston:** It has not come up specifically at our events but obviously I am aware that there is work being done. There is an organisation working to mobilise the Irish vote in GB. That is an interesting campaign in and of itself. I am not sure there is evidence of that happening in other elections or campaigns.

**Q268 Kate Hoey:** Does it come up that if we can have that special relationship that Irish citizens have a vote in mainland Britain on the UK's relationship with the EU it will surely not be beyond the wit of the two Governments to work out special relationships as they have done with the Republic having the euro and Northern Ireland not?

**Conor Houston:** That goes to the heart of the scaremongering. On both sides, to be fair, I have heard the scaremongering that there would be a hard border back and there would be all kinds of issues in travel. Particularly in border towns and cities, they feel a sense of vulnerability on that, and that their voices are not being heard on the national stage. There is a responsibility on both sides to try to find—I am being very idealistically here—some kind of space that gives reassurance to people on both sides of the argument about what the future relationship between Britain and Ireland looks like, both in and outside of the European Union. There are a lot of things thrown around. This has not just been a Northern Ireland issue but generally in the campaign; there are a lot of things presented as things that will definitely happen but I am not sure whether you can present it as being a certainty. I would like to see a little more clarity; if we are saying Irish people would be able to continue to vote in GB outside of the EU then let's make sure that everybody agrees with that on both sides. Otherwise it becomes a bargaining chip for something and creates division, and that is not good for anybody.



**Q269 Kate Hoey:** Would individuals at director level in your organisation all have their own views on the EU that would be public?

**Conor Houston:** My directors would all have different views on not just this issue but on many issues. That is why it was felt that our role was not to push an agenda or a side. That is why we simply wanted to create the space.

**Q270 Kate Hoey:** You mentioned earlier the word “sectarian”. Do you not think this referendum is a real opportunity for people in different political parties to actually share platforms and work together? No political party, whatever they say, has unity on this issue; even Sinn Féin probably have a few people who might feel slightly different. Do you not think this is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to step out of the mould of one party thinking one thing?

**Conor Houston:** I absolutely agree and I have touched on that already. This is why we wanted to help to create and foster that space, because there is a real opportunity here for people in Northern Ireland to engage in and be excited about a real and important political issue and to move outside of traditional moulds. That would be very good for our society generally.

**Kate Hoey:** Whatever the result of the referendum.

**Conor Houston:** Whatever the result, yes.

**Q271 Nigel Mills:** Can I just ask how you feel the level of engagement with this referendum is compared with the level of engagement with, say, the upcoming Assembly elections? Do you think people are more informed and more interested in the referendum than they are in a set of elections?

**Conor Houston:** I do not know if I would be in a position to properly answer that question. It is a good question but I do not know the answer.

**Q272 Nigel Mills:** Your centre is the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building. I thought knowing how in tune people are with probably the most important set of elections in Northern Ireland is quite fundamental.

**Conor Houston:** It is difficult for me to say whether there is more engagement, because obviously the Assembly is still sitting and has not dissolved yet for the election. Therefore, it is difficult for me to say whether there will be more engagement in the elections that are coming up or there will be more engagement with the EU issue. At the minute there is certainly more discussion about the EU issue because it is very relevant. It is in the national headlines. Obviously the Assembly has not dissolved yet for the election campaign, so it is difficult for me to pre-empt what the level of engagement will be versus the EU referendum.

**Q273 Nigel Mills:** You have not felt a need to create a Northern Ireland-wide debate to try to promote democratic engagement and try to move people away from voting on sectarian lines. That is not something you have felt a need to do?

**Conor Houston:** It is absolutely the purpose of the events that we have held to date and the events we are holding next week. They are geographically spread. All the political parties across Northern Ireland are involved. There are civic leaders, business leaders, people in agriculture, youth leaders, and community groups involved. We very much wanted to move the conversation on and generate a real national discussion, and also move it away from what I call the silo mentality of people preaching to the converted. We are trying to bring different groups together, people who would not ordinarily share platforms on the same issue, and get them to engage in a very informed discussion. That is absolutely at the heart of what we have been doing.

**Q274 Nigel Mills:** You do not fancy a guess as to which vote will have the higher turnout between the Assembly elections and the referendum.

**Conor Houston:** I cannot say.

**Nigel Mills:** I suspect we can guess, though; it will be the referendum, will it not?

**Q275 Lady Hermon:** You have given me the opportunity to come back on a couple of points. You made the point on a number of occasions, which is very interesting, that when you held the event in Queen's, young people expressed the view they did not know enough about the EU referendum. You also indicated that they were asking whether or not they had a vote. The line of questioning I want to pursue is whether you have actually made some inquiries yet about voter registration. It is a huge issue right across the United Kingdom but in Northern Ireland we have had a great system of individual registration. Have you had those conversations yet with the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland?

**Conor Houston:** We have not but it is in the next phase of what we wanted to look at. Getting voter registrations up benefits everybody, so we need to look at how we could constructively assist in that. Obviously the campaigns will be encouraging people, when they are out on doorsteps, to register to vote. We did, with the NUS-USI, a student body, have a voter registration campaign, and when we held the event at Queen's we promoted that as well to encourage students to register to vote. We will look to assist where we can meaningfully do so.

**Q276 Lady Hermon:** Was there physically a table at which people could pick up a form?

**Conor Houston:** No, there was not. It was a social media campaign that the NUS-USI run.

**Q277 Lady Hermon:** Are there any plans within your organisation to actually speak to the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland about improving voter registration? These are hugely important—the Assembly election but also the EU referendum. It is the future for the



next generation of young people. Voter registration should be one of the key areas in which your organisation could, in a very neutral stance, be making a real effort to encourage people to vote. Once they are on the register, they are taking part in democracy.

**Conor Houston:** I have no doubt that when we do our evaluation and pull all of this together, I will come, out of courtesy to the Committee, to advise what we are doing and where we are at. Because we have not completed the programme I have not got the evaluation and the outcomes and the report done. That would be one of the issues that we could constructively add to; I absolutely agree with you. I would like to look at how we can do that going forward. We need to stock-take after we have done these events to see where we can constructively add.

As I say, we are not going to just run other events for the sake of doing it. I do not know that that is a good thing to do. We will speak to key stakeholders and to the campaign teams and we will see where we can constructively assist. You are absolutely right; voter registration is exactly the type of issue that everybody would agree would be useful for us to assist with, as well as perhaps initiating other debates like we had last night because people did enjoy being able to hear both sides and interact with questions. We can create the space for that type of discussion to happen. We will look to see how we can best assist in really stimulating people to get involved in the referendum and absolutely getting them to vote.

**Q278 Lady Hermon:** Was that a “yes” that you will actually be speaking to the chief electoral officer?

**Conor Houston:** I have written down that that is an action that we should take.

**Q279 Lady Hermon:** You also happened to mention the phrase “key stakeholders”, who you are going to get in touch with to take their views. How do you define key stakeholders from the perspective of your organisation? Who would you see as key stakeholders?

**Conor Houston:** This whole Committee is a key stakeholder. I will send you the initial document, which Mr Paisley was asking about earlier, in which we examined that, using the briefing paper, the business community, agriculture and cross-border bodies. We then mapped, looking at those, who the key people were.

**Q280 Kate Hoey:** The public are stakeholders. This word “stakeholders” is so Blairite. Everybody in Northern Ireland is a stakeholder.

**Conor Houston:** Absolutely, but you will appreciate it is how best to engage, and we use the community groups and organisations in order to make those contacts. You are absolutely right; the public are the ultimate stakeholder in this. It is working out how best to connect. Connecting with a community organisation or a community centre could be the best way to get the people who are connected to that centre to come along to the event. When I am talking about that mapping, it is so that we can make sure that we are reaching as diverse an audience as possible in terms of public engagement.



**Q281 Lady Hermon:** On your mapping, you have individual people's names and contact details?

**Conor Houston:** It is more the organisations. Subsequently yes, but the initial map was to identify all the political parties and business organisations such as the CBI in Northern Ireland, the Institute of Directors, and others like the FSB.

**Lady Hermon:** What if a person does not happen to be in a political party?

**Dr McDonnell:** They will be in Northern Ireland.

**Q282 Lady Hermon:** Are they notified?

**Conor Houston:** I have to accept that there may be people that I have not—

**Lady Hermon:** That just slipped through the net.

**Conor Houston:** That is absolutely why we have done this initial phase of events with the briefing paper. We can then look to see where the gaps are. I am not saying this has been exhaustive, that everybody is covered, we have done the debate, it is all over and we have spoken to everybody. This has been an initial exercise in order for us to understand what is going on, what the issues are and how we could then build the next phase to constructively engage all of the public and all of the stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

**Q283 Lady Hermon:** All of the stakeholders instead of just the key ones.

**Conor Houston:** Yes.

**Q284 Tom Blenkinsop:** Good morning, Mr Houston. I just wanted to ask a question because you did raise the issue of stakeholders—businesses, agriculture and border towns. I was wondering what the level of engagement has been of your organisation with trade unions and vice versa?

**Conor Houston:** Trade unions have been in touch. Some of them came to the City Hall event and some of them were at the event last night. The engagement was across the board because people like what we are trying to do and like the fact that we are trying to stimulate the debate. One of the challenges has been that many organisations until recently felt that they did not know what position they would take because they did not know what was happening. They did not know when the referendum would be; they did not know what Cameron's reform package was going to look like. There were a lot of people, like a lot of political parties, waiting to see what the outcome would be before taking a position. Some organisations still have not taken a position and some will not. Some will just remain neutral.

**Q285 Tom Blenkinsop:** You were talking about trying to create spaces for dialogue as opposed to didactic, top-table politicians giving their opinion. Do you think the workplace, for example, is a good venue for those types of dialogues so workers debate these subjects among themselves?

**Conor Houston:** I am a fan of debates taking places in any space. That is one of the issues. How do you engage all of the public, and how are you going to get people really involved in this debate? You are right; conversations need to happen in schools, in university halls, in community centres, in church halls and in the workplace. It is that level that will get people really involved. We will look to see, again, how we can constructively add to that grassroots, community-level debate.

**Q286 Oliver Colvile:** Taking up on what Kate says about using the word “stakeholder”, I thoroughly agree. I think it is an appallingly bad word and expression. You are quite right that we are all stakeholders in this because we have all got exactly the same vote. It seems to my mind that the people who you need to actually be identifying and talking to are those people who are what they call opinion formers. It is the opinion formers who will help form the agenda and the debate that takes place, which is incredibly important to do. Can I encourage you to use the expression “opinion formers” rather than “stakeholders”?

**Conor Houston:** I am grateful to the Committee and I very much do take that on board. You will see “opinion formers” featuring in future correspondence.

**Q287 Oliver Colvile:** Ultimately the stakeholders are the decision makers.

**Conor Houston:** I am quite confident that “opinion formers” would cover the people that we have engaged with.

**Q288 Chair:** If there are no more questions thank you very much. It has been a very interesting session and we wish you well with your very important work.

**Conor Houston:** I wish the Committee the very best with its work and I commend you for holding these sessions. I know it is a very intense schedule for you all, so thank you very much for looking at this issue seriously. Thank you for having me this morning.

**Chair:** Thank you very much.