

Written evidence submitted by Involve (NDE0012)

Summary

This submission responds to the last two enquiry questions, regarding the sustainability of devolved institutions, and good governance in Northern Ireland. It outlines the challenges to the stability of the current Assembly from a public participation perspective, and how the *New Decade, New Approach* commitment to enhanced civic engagement can be delivered on to address Northern Ireland's democratic deficit and improve public trust in devolved institutions. In particular, it draws on lessons from the region's first citizens' assembly, delivered by Involve in 2018, and makes practical recommendations for putting deliberative democracy at the centre of the Assembly's approach to public engagement.

Introduction

About Involve

The Involve Foundation (Involve) is the UK's leading public participation charity. We're focussed on giving people more power over the decisions that affect their lives. We want to build a stronger democracy that works for everyone – that gives people real power to bring about change in their lives, communities and beyond.

Involve was founded in 2003 to “to create a new focus for thinking and action on the links between new forms of public participation and existing democratic institutions”. We've been promoting and practising participatory and deliberative decision-making ever since. We have worked with governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, academics and the public across the UK and internationally to put people at the heart of decision-making.

Reason for submitting evidence

Involve has been working in Northern Ireland for several years, to support the strengthening of civil society and enhance local capacity for democratic innovation. In 2018, we ran Northern Ireland's first citizens' assembly, and continue to work in an advocacy role championing the potential for deliberative public engagement to connect people with political decision-making, improve the democratic deficit in the region, and make devolved institutions more sustainable.

Submission

Please note: The response below addresses the final two Enquiry Questions, regarding the sustainability of devolved institutions and good governance in Northern Ireland.

1. The restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions after an almost 3-year suspension, in January 2020, was a welcome development. However, though the absence of a working Assembly highlighted the democratic deficit here, it did not create it. Public confidence in political institutions in Northern Ireland has been declining steadily since 1998, and has been heightened by the recent absence of government, by ineffective public services, and by scandals such as RHI.
2. Research commissioned by Building Change Trust (*Beyond Voting*, 2017)¹, highlights significant weaknesses across several dimensions of NI's democracy. Most importantly, from the perspective of public participation, the report identified a lack of opportunities for citizen involvement in decision making on legislative and/or policy issues. Without these opportunities, public opinion on a wide range of issues tends to coalesce around elections. However, Northern Ireland is a divided society with polarised politics, and voting has become a measure of this community division. As a result, elections are blunt instruments for understanding what the public think about the issues that affect them, and are largely inadequate for holding either of the two largest parties to account.
3. Because of this combination of historical community division, polarised politics, low public trust in institutions, and a democratic system that is overly dependent on elections, the Assembly has consistently failed to achieve the social and economic stability that was hoped for after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).
4. Despite these challenges, there is still majority support for devolution under the terms of the GFA. Its functionality and long-term sustainability should be a priority of all parties in Northern Ireland, and of the governments of both the UK and Ireland. Serious stewardship, intervention, and innovation is required to ensure it can function efficiently, decisively, accountably, and with the support of the people of Northern Ireland as the region faces unprecedented difficulties.
5. *New Decade, New Approach* identified the importance of civic engagement for the sustainability of institutions and affirmed a commitment to 'put civic engagement and public consultation at the heart of policy-making, recognising the vital role that wider society plays in supporting effective and accountable Government' (item 17). In Appendix C, points 3.8 and 3.9 provide further detail as to how this will be delivered, including providing for at least one citizens' assembly a year. While this is a welcome and encouraging component of the agreement, how it is met in practice needs careful, detailed, and strategic thinking.
6. Previous mechanisms for involving the public in decision-making, such as the Civic Forum - set out under Strand One of the GFA - was met with uneasiness by politicians and the public alike. This centred on its membership and concerns over how representative it was of the public as a whole. It was suspended in 2002 and no suitable alternative has been found. The Executive should take those concerns seriously when implementing its commitment to

¹ <http://civicinnovationni.org/beyond-voting>

structured civic engagement, particularly with regard to the appointment of the reformed Civic Advisory Panel. Public trust will be crucial to its effectiveness.

7. In the almost 18 years since the Civic Forum was suspended, there has been enormous progress in the field of democratic innovation. The provision for structured civic engagement set out in *New Decade, New Approach* presents an unprecedented opportunity to put those innovations into action in Northern Ireland to restore public confidence in devolved institutions. We wish to make the case for deliberative engagement to be at the centre of the Assembly's approach.
8. Deliberative democracy is an approach to public participation that allows participants to consider relevant information from multiple points of view before making informed and detailed decisions. Deliberation enables participants to discuss the issues and options and to develop their thinking together before coming to a view, taking into account the values that inform others' opinions. It differs from other approaches to engagement because it captures considered public opinion rather than the raw opinions traditionally captured through surveys and opinion polls. The outputs of deliberative processes reflect what the public think after they have had time to learn, consider, discuss and question a wide range of information, expertise, and argument.
9. Deliberation has many benefits over other forms of public engagement
 - a. It can happen at any scale, from a dozen people to thousands.
 - b. It can be done on or offline.
 - c. It is flexible to timescales, budgets, geographic spread, the complexity or contentiousness of the issue, and stage in the policy cycle.
 - d. It is especially effective in overcoming polarisation because it develops the conditions necessary for participants to change their minds.
 - e. The opinions of participants after taking part in deliberation are typically more considered judgements than they held prior, therefore decision-makers can trust them as systematically thought-through.
10. A deliberative approach to civic engagement also has secondary benefits that will help to strengthen the stability of devolved institutions.
 - a. Research shows that deliberation encourages people to think in a less self-interested, more cooperative way, supporting social cohesion.
 - b. It improves the quality of public services, projects and programmes because they are able to respond more closely to people's needs.
 - c. People are better informed about how public institutions work, improving trust.
 - d. It improves governance by providing democratic legitimacy to institutions because of close links with citizens, improved reputations for public bodies, increased opportunities for active citizenship, and greater accountability of public bodies because of more effective information dissemination and better dialogue.
11. One of the best-known methods of public deliberation is a citizens' assembly. A citizens' assembly is a type of deliberative mini-public, where participants have been selected at random to reflect the general population according to demographic criteria and, sometimes, attitudinal criteria. A citizens' assembly should be considered just one tool among an extensive array of options for involving the public with decision-making. Its power comes

from its robust process as well as key features that set it apart from other engagement processes.²

12. In 2018, Involve delivered Northern Ireland's first citizens' assembly. The citizens' assembly was initiated by a number of civil society organisations in Northern Ireland, and was funded by grants from charitable trusts. Its purpose was to demonstrate that this particular model of deliberative engagement could work effectively in the context of Northern Ireland. It brought together 80 participants over two residential weekends in October/ November 2018. Participants heard from senior civil servants, academics, advocates, service users, and care providers, before deliberating, making trade-offs and agreeing on 3 overarching resolutions and 27 detailed recommendations for the reform of social care for older people.
13. The members of the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland were recruited with the help of the polling company LucidTalk to be broadly representative of the Northern Ireland population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, regional spread, community background, and socio-economic status (i.e. a 'mini-public'). The final sample of 80 participants matched Northern Ireland's demographics to within an error of +/-1.3%. People who held elected office or who held senior decision making roles within the Health and Social Care sector in Northern Ireland were excluded from participating as members of the citizens' assembly.
14. The Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland was set the task to (1) explore aspirations for social care for older people, including the role the health service, communities, and individuals need to play, and (2) develop useful, realistic recommendations for delivering a sustainable, fit-for-purpose social care system for older people, future-proofed to cope with the needs of the next generations (within the context of finite resources). Members worked through a three-step process of learning, deliberation, and decision-making. A team of trained facilitators supported this process, with two lead facilitators and ten table facilitators each weekend.
15. The first weekend of the citizens' assembly focused on learning and deliberation. It was designed to give all members of the citizens' assembly a grounding in the topic, an understanding of the key considerations related to delivering social care for older people in Northern Ireland, and an overview of differing perspectives on what could be done to overcome current and future challenges. The first weekend wrapped up with an opportunity for the members to begin identifying what they felt were the most important points, arguments, and considerations they had heard over the weekend. This was used to help frame how the citizens' assembly approached the task of drawing conclusions and making recommendations during the second weekend.
16. The second weekend of the citizens' assembly shifted attention from learning to deliberation and decision-making. An analysis conducted between the weekends of the things that members identified as the 'important things to bear in mind' identified 3 key themes that, while wider than the scope of the citizens' assembly itself, were fundamental contextual considerations for the recommendations the citizens' assembly would later develop. Drawing

² Standards are emerging, compiled by Involve, with contributions from a wide range of practitioners and specialists from across the UK: <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/news/when-citizens-assembly-not-citizens-assembly-towards-some-standards>

on this, 3 overarching resolutions were developed and proposed to the members at the beginning of weekend 2. After a process of discussion and adaptation, these resolutions were put to a vote via private paper ballot by members. To develop the further recommendations of the citizens' assembly, 3 themes were identified by the facilitation and academic teams from the priorities identified by members during the first weekend. Working in smaller groups, members chose to focus on one of the themes in detail. In the 3 groups, they discussed and deliberated on what recommendations should be put forward for a vote by the full citizens' assembly. Recommendations were passed if they received support from more than 50% of the ballot papers cast. In voting however, members were given the option of stating their preference across a spectrum from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The 27 recommendations and the full breakdown of the levels of support for each one can be found in the report on the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland at citizensassemblyni.org.

17. As well as helping to break the deadlock around the issue of social care for older people, the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland piloted a model of deliberative engagement that may be adopted by the Northern Ireland Assembly and/or Northern Ireland Office to address further complex or contested issues in the future. An independent evaluation of members' views conducted by Queen's University Belfast, found significant support for adopting the model in the future:

'[...] by the end of the second weekend, almost every participant (97% of them) agreed that citizens' assemblies should be used more often to inform politicians in decision-making. Again, the level of enthusiasm is noteworthy: 86% of members completely agreed. The vast majority of members appeared to walk away with a sense that citizens' assemblies can make a constructive contribution to political decision-making.'³

18. Members of the citizens' assembly were incredibly enthusiastic about their experience of taking part, and about the role that citizens' assemblies could play in Northern Ireland in the future. This supports the common finding that participants in deliberative processes enjoy and value the experience of taking part and, if given the opportunity, would want to do so again.
19. A survey of the views of MLAs by Stratagem and ComRes found a more cautious but still overall positive reaction to further citizens' assemblies. The survey⁴ was carried out following the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland, during February and March 2019. To summarise, the survey - which was completed by 34 MLAs from all community designations - showed the following:
 - a. There is high level awareness of the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland (74% of MLAs agreed with the statement 'I am aware of the Citizens' Assembly pilot on social care that took place at the end of 2018).
 - b. A small majority (52%) support the findings being taken on board, compared with 19% disagreeing.
 - c. 61% of MLAs support greater citizen involvement with policy-making.

³ Pow, J; & Garry J. (2019) Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland: Summary of Participant Evaluations. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast and Involve. Available from <https://citizensassemblyni.org/resources/>

⁴ The full results can be found in Annex B of the report on the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland at citizensassemblyni.org.

- d. 56% agreed that citizens' assemblies provide decision-makers with useful insight.
- e. MLA opinion is more negative on the role citizens' assemblies can play in tackling contested issues, with only 27% agreeing with the statement 'citizens' assemblies should be used in Northern Ireland to help break the deadlock on other contested issues.' 46% disagreed.

20. Our experience of running Northern Ireland's first citizens' assembly, as well as the extended political and public engagement we have done on the issue of deliberative democracy both before and since, has helped to shape a set of recommendations to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee as they move forward on the ambition of *New Decade, New Approach* and its commitment to civic engagement.

- a. Recruitment of the reformed Civic Advisory Panel will be key to earning public trust in any subsequent processes. It should be treated as a sensitive appointment and made subject to enhanced handling. The Department or Departments given responsibility for this recruitment should establish a small unit that is resourced and appropriately senior to manage the recruitment process and ensure it proceeds in a timely manner. The process of recruitment should be open, well-publicised, and transparent. Criteria for membership should be clearly stated and well-reasoned. It should have representation from key sectors of society, including from across the political spectrum, and should also aim to recruit people with expertise on public participation and deliberative processes. Members' induction should include training on deliberative public engagement to increase knowledge and expertise, and give the Panel a grounding in best practise approaches. It should encourage, as much as possible, members who may be new to public appointments, and should be inclusive and diverse in terms of gender, BAME, disability, occupational background, and geographical spread. As topics are selected to be referred for further public engagement (including citizens' assemblies), its membership should expand to include people with subject expertise.
- b. All practises and procedures of the Civic Advisory Panel should be easily accessed and publicly available in plain English. The diary of meetings, agendas and minutes, and evidence or briefings submitted to the Civic Advisory panel to support their decision-making should be made publicly available.
- c. Opportunities should be created for mass participation as a complement to more in-depth processes such as citizens' assemblies. The use of in-person tools such as Distributed Dialogue⁵ as well as digital platforms to enable participation can bring deliberation to many thousands of people, broaden the scope of viewpoints being captured, bolster the legitimacy of decision-making, and improve community cohesion.
- d. Ensuring transparency and impartiality of the citizens' assembly should be the priority of all Parties. Below, we highlight some of the key stages in the process when extra care should be taken to ensure its integrity is maintained.
 - i. Topic selection:
New Decade, New Approach sketches out a rough process for the selection of topics for consideration. It suggests that the Executive can identify and refer 1-2 topics per year to the Civic Advisory Panel, who will then advise on the appropriate model of engagement to take forward. This recommendation

⁵ <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/distributed-dialogue>

would then get referred back to the Executive. Further detail is required to ensure that the right topics get referred to a citizens' assembly. Clear criteria by which the Executive will identify topics should be made public in advance, including the process for Ministers to bring forward suggestions that come under their remit. Likewise, the criteria on which the Civic Advisory Panel will base their recommendations should also be made public in advance, along with the outworkings of their decision-making. The Executive should commit to responding in detail to the Civic Advisory Panel's recommendations, and to give explicit reasons for their decision on how to proceed.

ii. Clear purpose:

Whatever the topic is, it will need to be framed as a clear question or set of questions for which there are genuinely a range of possible solutions. The Department with responsibility for the topic needs to support the process, and there needs to be non-partisan support for taking it to a citizens' assembly. The scope for making a difference to the decision or policy should be explicitly declared at the start of the process, including clear demarcation of things that cannot be changed. Decision-makers need to make a public commitment in advance to consider and respond in detail to the recommendations of the citizens' assembly.

iii. Participation and recruitment:

For the purpose of this evidence submission, we will focus on the recruitment of participants for a citizens' assembly, where membership is required to broadly resemble that of society as a whole in terms of key demographics. For a citizens' assembly, membership should be around 100 people. Recruitment should be done by an independent body, using a civic lottery process to create a pool of potential members drawn from the general public. From this pool, members are drawn using stratified random sampling based on demographic criteria to be representative of the general public. In some instances, for example where opinions on the topic may be deeply polarised, attitudinal criteria may also be a necessary sampling criteria to ensure representativeness. To make the process more inclusive to those who may face barriers to participation, measures should be introduced, including payment of an honorarium to all members, reimbursing members for any reasonable expenses, and building accessibility into every aspect of the logistical planning and process design.

iv. Process design:

To ensure impartiality and public confidence in the citizens' assembly, its design and delivery should be independent from the commissioning body (i.e. the relevant Department), with oversight from the Civic Advisory Panel. Selection of contributors, experts, and witnesses should ensure participants hear balanced, comprehensive and accurate information and evidence. Participants should be supported by trained facilitators through a process of learning and critical engagement with a range of perspectives, to weigh up different options and discuss issues with their fellow participants, before making collective decisions and recommendations. The process should be well-structured to ensure sufficient time to learn and deliberate, and to support a decision-making stage based on informed and considered

judgement. It should meet for a minimum of 4 days/ 30 hours, but ideally longer, and that time should be spread out over at least two weekends.

21. Involve would like to reiterate its support for the commitment to structured civic engagement in *New Decade, New Approach*. It sets the stage for Northern Ireland to become a pioneer of democratic innovation. While the focus of many will be on high-profile interventions like the annual citizens' assembly, we hope that the Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Civil Service embrace deliberative engagement in its many forms as a step-change in its decision-making.
22. Involve would be willing to provide further information by way of oral evidence to the committee if that would be helpful.

April 2020