

Summary report

Constitutional visions from the grassroots



The debate over a possible united Ireland polarises nationalists and unionists and leaves many people disengaged. 'Constitutional visions from the grassroots' uses deliberative democracy to move beyond identity politics and find a shared vision for our constitutional future. Working with groups of women in deliberative cafés across the border, the project set out to allow communities to identify shared problems and values, and articulate convergent visions for the future.

Principal Investigators: Jennifer Todd, UCD; Joanne McEvoy, U Aberdeen; Shelley Deane, DCU

Method: Deliberative cafés

Our objective was to construct a template for grassroots deliberative cafés, with built-in channels to local councils. Four day-long deliberative cafés were held in Bellaghy, Co. Londonderry; Cookstown, Co. Tyrone; Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford; Ballina, Co Mayo; and an evening café in Monaghan. Participants engaged in structured discussion in small groups and plenaries. The cafés, attended by local councillors, included a briefing by policy experts and a presentation of alternative constitutional possibilities. Pre- and post-deliberation surveys and follow-up interviews were conducted.

Participants included 100+ women from rural Mid-Ulster, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan, inclusive of women from religious and ethnic minorities and diverse class positions. We explored common rural problems across Europe, comparing the demographic makeup of areas and policy priorities of councils and comparing health provisions and outcomes in each jurisdiction.

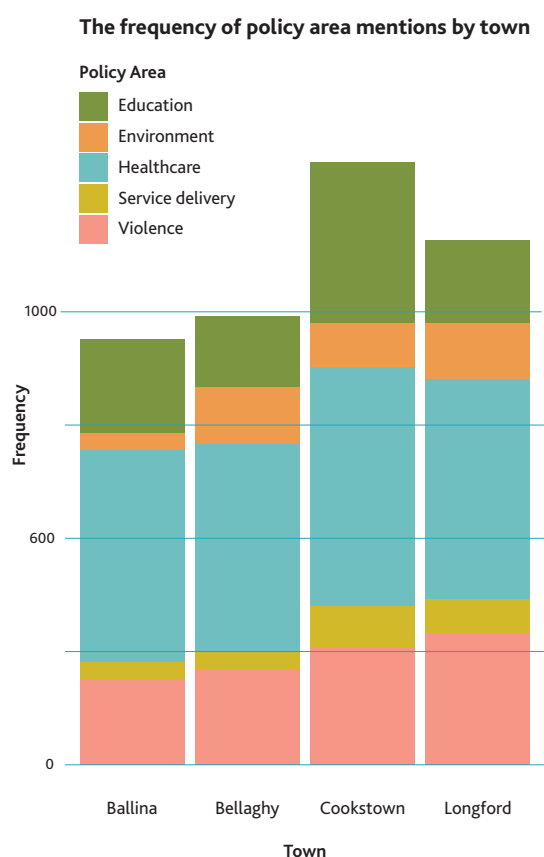
Deliberative tasks were to identify shared problems and assess whether policy channels could address these problems, and if different constitutional options would better address them.



Findings

1. Policy

- Shared problems were found in the fields of health; security; education; the environment, and rural services. They were seen as interconnected. Gender-based violence is aggravated by narrow educational aims; health is affected by pollution, and by the uneven delivery of rural services (from roads to broadband).
- Disillusion with politics was also shared. 'Nothing works', said one participant, as others expressed frustration with siloed, slow and uncoordinated policy-making, where there are few channels of political contact for the public.
- Participants want better cross-sector, cross-border, and EU policy coordination and better channels for the public to assess policy adequacy and to report failures.



2. Constitution

- Participants changed their way of thinking. They stayed unionist, nationalist or 'neither' and retained their initial preferences around Union or Unity. But they became aware of the complexity of the argument, less fixed, more open to evidence, more reflective.
- They gravitated towards some key visions of the future. Some focussed on a much-strengthened and expanded shared island initiative, with more coordinated policy on issues of health, environment and insecurity.
- Others preferred a hybrid new Ireland, with decentralisation of power and decision-making. This combines local participation, and policy that is attuned to local and regional needs, with effective and responsive central government.

3. Process

- Participants were interested in the constitutional future, and keen to engage in cross-border conversations.
- They wanted to learn about the other jurisdiction, and about its channels of policy-making.
- They built capacity to identify and delineate shared problems across the island, to engage with policymakers and other communities, and to lead constitutional conversations not bound by ideology.
- The value of the deliberation for participants and for research was cumulative over time, enhanced by return participation in later cafés and by follow-up discussions.

Recommendations

- **Government** to foster grassroots participation in political and constitutional discussion.
- **Policymakers** to open channels for grassroots communication of policy experiences and failures.
- **Local, regional and national administrations** to create inclusive arenas for popular deliberation, with lasting channels for communication between people and politicians.
- **Researchers and funders** to build an interconnected ecology of research, with feedback between grassroots deliberation, surveys and citizens' assemblies.
- **Officials, think-tanks and planners** to design constitutional models which can be revised in light of grassroots experience.



Analysing and Researching
Ireland, North and South

Acknowledgements

We thank the Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund and the ARINS project, the local councils at Mid Ulster, Longford, and Mayo, University of Aberdeen and UCD. We extend special thanks to our research participants.