

Political Visions from the Grassroots: Cross-border, cross-community deliberation interim findings

Jennifer Todd (University College Dublin)
Shelley Deane (Dublin City University)
Joanne McEvoy (University of Aberdeen)

From October 2024 to April 2025, we experimented and designed a deliberative café method to facilitate cross-community and cross-border grassroots deliberation on the constitutional future of the island of Ireland.

This participatory and inclusive method enables informed discussion on contentious issues. The deliberative events are designed to address complex political challenges and to depoliticise constitutional discussion on our island, while embedding local and cross-border engagement at its heart.

The model has potential to be replicated across the island in a series of locally-based deliberative cafés with local communities. It can be adapted to grassroots deliberation on wide variety of political topics beyond the constitutional question. The template will soon be available.

The series of deliberative cafés facilitated participation, perspective-sharing and network-building across the island. They increased popular engagement with policy issues, opened up constitutional issues for shared discussion and allowed the creation of convergent political visions which might form the agenda for discussion of a possible future united Ireland.

Convergent findings across jurisdictions included:

- Evidence of alienation from conventional politics and politicians
- Widespread experience of policy dysfunction at the local level
- Consensus on the need for multi-levelled channels of communication and engagement, from the local, to the state, all-Island and EU levels
- Convergent interest in hybrid (mixed) models of island-wide governance





Deliberation

Deliberation involves mutual communication and collective reflection on preferences, problems and values. We designed a template for such deliberation on contentious matters of mutual concern, so that communication and reflection would take place through a sequence of questions, based on shared local information followed by a series of tasks.

Our deliberative cafés brought participants together over a day in a local setting. We provided information that compared local demography, problems, and policies, North and South. Policy experts addressed participants' questions and concerns. In three sessions over the course of the day, participants were invited to:

1. Define shared everyday problems
2. Assess existing policy channels and instruments to remedy the problems in each jurisdiction
3. Explore different constitutional models for their ability to address these problems

"We were all cross border and we all had the same problems. It was just seriously focused on the issues. And one of the things that came up for me was that so many of the issues are the same issues."

Many of the participants quickly saw the value of the deliberative café as a learning opportunity and were keen to continue their involvement in subsequent cafés.

Seasoned participants quickly became co-facilitators, engaging productively, guiding and communicating the point of deliberation to others, and chairing small table sessions. Participation was striking and shows the iterative nature of deliberation, and participants' willingness to engage with contentious issues.

"I hadn't really thought at all about the whole idea of the Constitution. Well, not just this, but now I've been in three different iterations of it. It's helpful to know what you think in the round about things, and whether you thought it was what you thought last time."

We engaged with over 75 women recruited through snowballing from local women's organisations and networks in four council areas across the island. This locally-based approach lends itself to replication among other constituencies – for example youth, farmers, sportspeople – and across other populations. It also gave immediate input into local politics. We asked participants to fill in short surveys before and after deliberation, and after each café, we engaged with a sample of participants for feedback, inviting ideas to help refine our approach in order to enhance opportunities for reflective collaboration. More details of the procedures and participants are outlined in the Appendix.

Here (see link) women reiterated that there are no quick fixes and that discussion has to be ongoing.

[Political Visions from the Grassroots - Mayo](#)

From Alienation to Participation

Typical of public disenchantment with politics in Western democracies, our initial findings underscore a universal sense of frustration with political institutions, parties and politicians. Participants expressed a feeling of alienation from formal political processes and policy making. This alienation was keenly expressed in the first deliberative café in Mid-Ulster. The women felt their views about social problems and how to address them fell on deaf ears, and that official channels for communication with decision-makers were inadequate.

However, they were not disengaged from political issues. On the contrary, participants embraced discussion and found that, despite differences, the core issues – health, security and environmental concerns – were both interlinked and shared, North and South. Participants noted that despite political differences, they found common ground.

“We talked about politics, but not about politics...”
“There’s something about some strangers sitting around a table talking to that level.”
“We seem to somehow manage to agree on a lot of things, especially as the day went on and we got on really, really well and agreed with a lot.”



The women’s reflections underscore the importance of the participatory approach and the desire for ongoing political deliberation about challenging practical problems of public service delivery, health, environment and insecurity. All of these relate to broader policy, political and constitutional issues. Deliberation is a means of advancing otherwise intransigent political issues. Deliberation offers an alternative avenue of engagement, where politicians and public servants can fruitfully listen to grassroots concerns to develop policies that will connect with public needs.

Shared Concerns and Interconnected Problems

Rather than pre-determining the issues to be discussed, the deliberative café method is beneficial in facilitating discussion among participants about their shared concerns.

The participants in our four deliberative cafés collectively identified four areas of shared concern:

- Health (including access to services; cost; waiting times; information)
- Insecurity (including domestic violence; anti-social behaviour; drugs)
- Environment (including its impact on health)
- Delivery of services in rural areas (including health; communications; transport)

During the deliberation, participants explored how their shared problems were interconnected:

- health was associated with the environment, with education, and with poor delivery of services;
- domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour and education were also interrelated, and associated with limited official networks for communicating problems to expedite remedies.

In tackling how social and policy problems could be best addressed, participants discussed how remedies need to be interconnected:

- more local health services are required to offset delays in provision of acute services. This required people educating themselves about health, pollution, and decent services in rural areas.
- education was conceived holistically including childhood socialisation to specialised knowledge in accessing resources and local experience (grants, training, and access to amenities).

Cross-Local, Cross-Border and Cross-Regional Cooperation and new Governance models

Participants wanted greater opportunity to voice perspectives at every level, from local to regional. Participants in Mayo identified the need for opportunities for local people to engage with political bodies in order to identify and define problems, create and assess policies, share and harness local and niche knowledge, thus countering exclusion and closed policy networks.

"We are forgetting all the time that we put those people in power there to answer to us. So we have to find a way to communicate [with] them differently than we currently do. Which has to be a more informal kind of gathering, a space like this..."

Participants favoured North-South integration on important policy issues – environment, security, and domestic violence. They viewed institutionalised North-South cooperation, a ‘shared island’, as a ‘no-brainer’. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement model of cross-border implementation bodies was lauded, but the absence of a cross-border body on issues of domestic violence and insecurity was regarded as shocking. Participants were aghast that safety was not considered.

"Safety is not there. I can't believe it is not there."

As the cafes progressed, the initial challenge of linking everyday issues with constitutional change diminished. From the start, participants suggested alternative decentralised models of a united Ireland. As deliberation progressed, more nuanced and creative approaches were taken: decentralisation seen as best for addressing some issues and integration ideal for managing other policy challenges. There was no consensus; but the need for different approaches to different policy issues was generally accepted by those who did and did not want Irish unity.

"There was a conversation at the end and I think it went along the lines of "I don't think I want Irish unity. I want things like public services to work really really well.""



Participants did not propose quick-fix policy or solutions answers, or a detailed constitutional model, but they converged on an interest in hybrid-governance models and affirmed the need for an effective deliberative problem-solving method.

There were of course differences, even dissonances between Northern and Southern participants: they learned more about each other; their differences as well as their shared problems. But all participants acknowledged the need for greater discussion of North-South relations and extended deliberation over the forms of possible constitutional change. They affirmed the value of North-South engagement, they identified that the deliberations show the need to change the constitutional agenda, and they argued that the deliberative process should be available to others island-wide.

Deliberative Café Methods – Embedding Deliberation in Policy

The deliberative café method shows the value of a participatory approach in widening and refining the constitutional agenda, addressing new ways to overcome the gap between the people and politicians, and informing participants, so they can create local deliberative initiatives.

It demonstrates that meaningful dialogue is not only possible but essential for building a shared constitutional culture and language of debate. This interim report shows the importance of embedding local cross-border participation at the heart of constitutional deliberation.

A final report with comprehensive findings and policy recommendations will be presented in Autumn 2025.

APPENDIX

DELIBERATIVE CAFÉ MODEL: TECHNICAL DETAILS

In preparation for the deliberative cafés, we initially held four public consultation sessions designed to inform our approach and focus (October-November, Magherafelt, Longford, Áras Inis Gluaire, Belmullet, Ballina). Multiple meetings were also held with politicians and local council officials, in MidUlster, Longford and Mayo. This preparatory work helped us to plan four cross-community, cross-local, cross-border all-day deliberative cafés – in Bellaghy, Co. Derry 30 November; Cookstown, Co. Tyrone 8 February, Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford 8 March and Ballina, Co. Mayo 22 March, 2025 .

The largest café in Longford had 40 participants; the smallest in Bellaghy had about 20, and overall we engaged with over 75 participants, (some participants on several occasions). Participants included over 30 women from Mid-Ulster, over 20 from Longford and 20 from Mayo, and several from Monaghan. Each café was cross-community, and cross-border with significant ethnic, socioeconomic, generational, and religious diversity.

Local networks were crucial resources in recruiting participants from diverse backgrounds. Participants in the first cafés were crucial in spreading the word and recruiting new participants for later cafés. While we initially engaged with local womens groups, some participants were recruited from other local networks – friendship, shared interests, community organisations or work.

Cross-border engagement was central to our research design. Participants travelling from a distance were accommodated overnight in a local hotel. The Councils provided logistical support for participants to travel. Though participants reported their enjoyment and positive experience of the overnight stay, a deliberative café involving only a shorter day trip is less costly in time and budgetary resources. In autumn 2025, we will experiment with shorter-format deliberative cafés that do not require overnight stays.

Policy experts attended our cafés gave short presentations and answered questions: Prof Frances Ruane (NCPC; NICSB; ESRI); Caitriona Mullan (European Commission External Expert), Prof Mary P. Murphy (Maynooth University). Local councillors from most of the main parties (DUP, SDLP, SF, FF, FG) participated in sessions in their locality. Media coverage included *The Irish Times*, *The Longford Leader*, MidWest Radio, as well as local community social media support networks.

The deliberative schedule is crucial to the method, and particularly challenging because our approach begins with everyday concerns and not with pre-given questions. We experimented from one café to the next to find the best timing, the best ways to phrase questions, and different modes of expert intervention. In the final sessions we used short videos made by the experts after they had heard participants' main concerns in person. We also found ways to break participant tasks into manageable parts, alternating small group discussions and plenaries, devising ways to schematise constitutional questions that would be amenable to different participant concerns. We experimented too with impromptu voting, and engaging experienced participants as facilitators at each table. We took notes on a laptop (projected onto a screen) of the key conclusions from each table at each session. These notes provide anonymised findings, which show the convergences and divergences among participants and can be taken as summaries of the findings of each café.

The summary findings of each café may be presented to politicians and local councils and can be used to create new questions and options for consideration in subsequent cafés, mini-publics and in surveys.

We asked participants to fill in consent forms, and pre- and post-deliberation surveys. After each café, we engaged with a sample of participants for feedback, and we used their ideas to refine our approach in subsequent cafés. We taped and transcribed the entire deliberation for each café – amounting to more than sixty hours of material, transcribed by experienced transcribers supported by technology. This will allow us to map and assess the value and shortcomings of the method and quality of deliberation, while identifying the reasoning over constitutional issues. This analysis is ongoing and will form part of our final report in the autumn.

We hope that this interim report provides enough detail to incentivise a rollout of our method across other council areas and other populations.

Research is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund, the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, with additional support from the University of Aberdeen, University College Dublin, the Analysing and Research Ireland North and South (ARINS) project, the Royal Irish Academy, Mid-Ulster Council and Longford County Council.



KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS
Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies



UCD GEARY INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

RESEARCH | ANALYSIS | EVIDENCE

Contacts

Jennifer Todd (University College Dublin) Jennifer.Todd@ucd.ie

Joanne McEvoy (University of Aberdeen) j.mcevoy@abdn.ac.uk

Shelley Deane (Dublin City University) Shelley.Deane@dcu.ie

