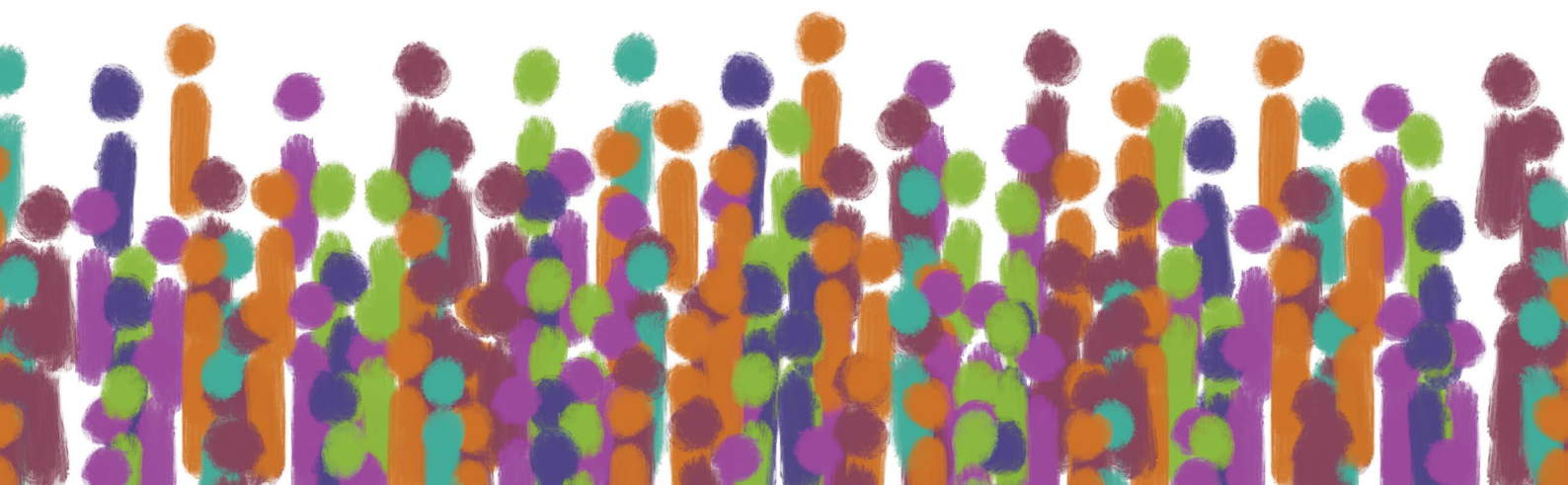
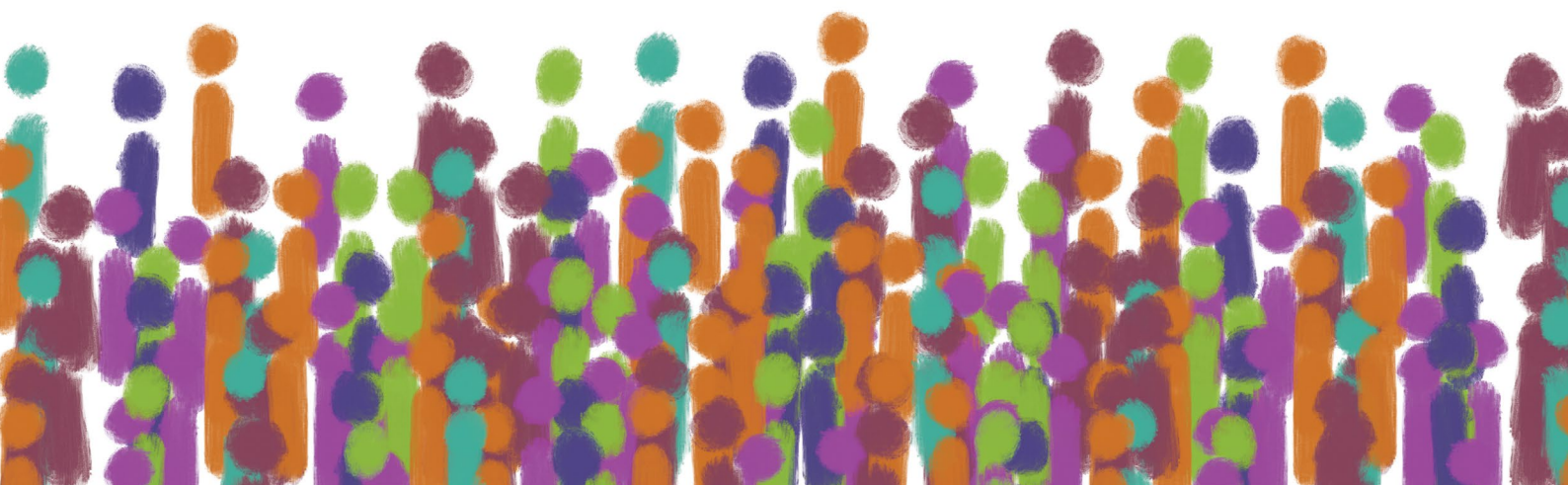


# civic initiative





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# Foreword

**The Civic Initiative aimed to test the appetite of people in Northern Ireland and cross-border communities for engagement in economic and social issues in conjunction with wider involvement in devolved political institutions. The timing was not propitious, in that it commenced during a period when the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were not functioning.**

A backdrop to the initiative was a recognition that the Civic Forum envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement/ Belfast Agreement as the umbilical cord between citizens and political institutions had long been shelved and was not going to resume. Nonetheless, Northern Ireland's political parties in New Decade, New Approach in January 2020, endorsed that 'the principles and practice of citizen and community engagement and co-design will be a key part of the development and delivery of the Programme for Government and supporting strategies. This commitment included the reform of the Compact Advisory Civic Panel, agreement by the political parties to identify one or two issues a year for civic engagement and through the panel to propose the most appropriate model of engagement including a Citizens Assembly once a year'.

We wanted to see if the community engagement and Citizen's Assembly model could work in practice. The Civic Initiative transcended the restoration of political institutions, and it was clear from the findings of the report that there is a genuine desire for greater involvement in community and political life. A third of the participant in the Citizen's Forum on Housing had not voted in the last election yet participated fully in the forum. Moreover, the increased knowledge and awareness of housing issues as a result of involvement coincides with a greater willingness to become more politically involved in the future. This suggests that

civic engagement strengthens local democracy and enhances the connection to devolved political institutions. Further, there was a willingness to examine issues on a border region and all Island basis where there were potential benefits for co-operation.

Having observed all three days of the Citizens' Forum on Housing I can confirm the significant enthusiasm and interest among participants to become more directly engaged. The evidence was crystallised by how many people overcame public transport problems due to flooding to attend in person on the third day of the forum.

There is a need to revisit and build on the recognition of the need for increased civic engagement as anticipated from the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement though to New Decade, New Approach. Now is the time to turn the commitments into tangible action.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues on the Oversight committee and their organizations for their support and commitment alongside the members of the Content Curation and Process Design groups for their expertise. In particular, I want to thank the Internation Fund for Ireland for funding the initiative and Disability Action and particularly Greta Gurklyte and Sarah Campbell who so ably provided the administration and management of the funding. Finally, I want to thank Emma De Souza who came up with the initial idea and whose determination and skill saw it through to fruition and who was critical to the success of the whole venture.



**Les Allamby**

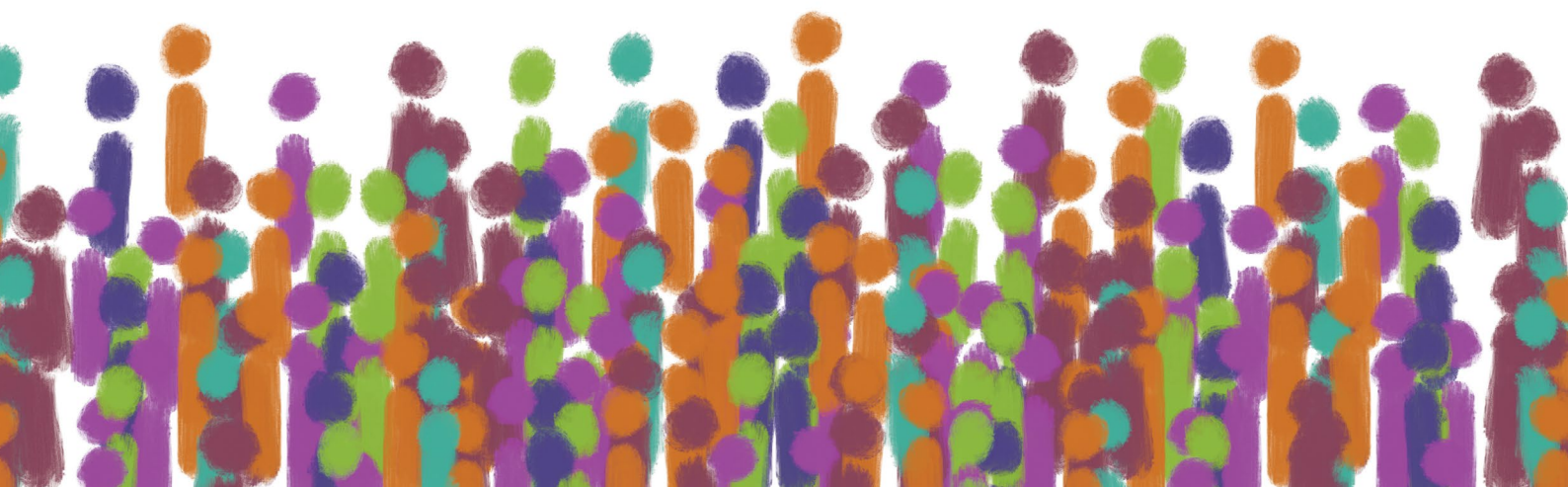
Independent Chair of the Oversight Committee



# Acknowledgments

The Civic Initiative is funded by the International Fund for Ireland's (IFI) Communities in Partnership Programme (CiPP), which aims to build genuine connections on a cross-border basis and provide meaningful benefits to communities involved.

The Civic Initiative would like to extend thanks and gratitude to the independent chair of the oversight committee, Les Allamby, for his extensive support, the former independent chair of the committee Roisin Wood, and all members of the oversight committee, process design group and content curation committee. We would like to acknowledge the considerable work undertaken by Emma DeSouza in the delivering the aims of this project, alongside administrative assistant Greta Gurklyte, with support from Sarah Campbell and the wider team of facilitators and volunteers. Additionally, the Civic Initiative would like to extend thanks to all of the organisations that supported and participated in this process, as well as our recruitment partners Sortition Foundation.



# Introduction

**The Civic Initiative was not designed to resurrect the Civic Forum, but rather to test and action a new, informed approach to participatory democracy based on successful global models and other learning over the past 25 years**

Citizen engagement and activity has increased globally over time while not necessarily being directly linked to established political institutions. In the UK over 30 deliberative democracy processes have been actioned over the past three years on topics from Climate change to Covid-19 recovery. Meanwhile, other countries such as Denmark, have been holding “consensus conferences” since the 1980s, have long recognised the value of wider citizen engagement in policy and decision-making.

Participatory processes can take many forms from town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, deliberative polls, to forums and assemblies, decentralising participation over policy design to the local level and increasing citizen participation in decision making. Evidence demonstrates that this form of civic participation can lead to stronger decision-making as well as having a positive impact on the social fabric. Citizen empowerment

through deliberation can have an even greater outcome in post-conflict societies, breaking down barriers between communities and fostering greater cooperation.

Participatory democracy ensures citizens have the opportunity to be involved in decisions that impact their lives, strengthening representative democracy. However, for both to coexist in harmony there must be an acknowledgement of the relevance of public opinion and civic voice. The Civic Initiative sought to demonstrate the value and necessity of this form of civic engagement.

Civic society has played an active role in bringing about positive change in communities. The need for this role has not diminished. If anything, it has grown. Communities have never lacked ideas, but there has been an absence of an effective structure and framework to harness those ideas – the outcome of the Civic Initiative demonstrates the effectiveness, and appetite, for a permanent structure for civic engagement through for example, a Citizens’ Forum or regular Citizens’ Assemblies.

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<sup>1</sup> Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action Across States and Societies. A Summary of Findings from a Decade of Collaborative Research on Citizen Engagement. - GOV.UK



# Civic Initiative

## Structure and Format

To achieve the purpose of providing a meaningful space for civic engagement across Northern Ireland and the border counties the Civic Initiative developed a four-stage process.

### Stage 1:

Organize regional community-based forums and workshops across Northern Ireland and border counties to provide views, suggestions, and recommendations on a broad agenda of identified socio-economic and cultural areas including healthcare, poverty, housing, education, culture, rural access, human rights, and political institutions

### Stage 2:

Make an open call for submissions and survey responses from individuals and organizations on areas identified as a priority for communities at stage 1.

### Stage 3:

Create a Citizens' Forum of randomly selected participants to take forward a priority area identified through stage 1 and 2.

### Stage 4:

Produce a final report with recommendations agreed by the Citizens' Forum, alongside conducting public opinion polling.



## Oversight Committee

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Content Curation Committee and Process Design Group

### Oversight committee of the Civic Initiative

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The organizations represented on the Oversight Committee were:

Community Foundation Northern Ireland, Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Northwest Cultural Partnership, CRAICNI, Disability Action NI, HEReNI, The Corrymeela Community, Migrant Centre Northern Ireland, Youth Action NI, TASC, and individual members; Eileen Weir, and Tara Grace Connolly

## Process design group

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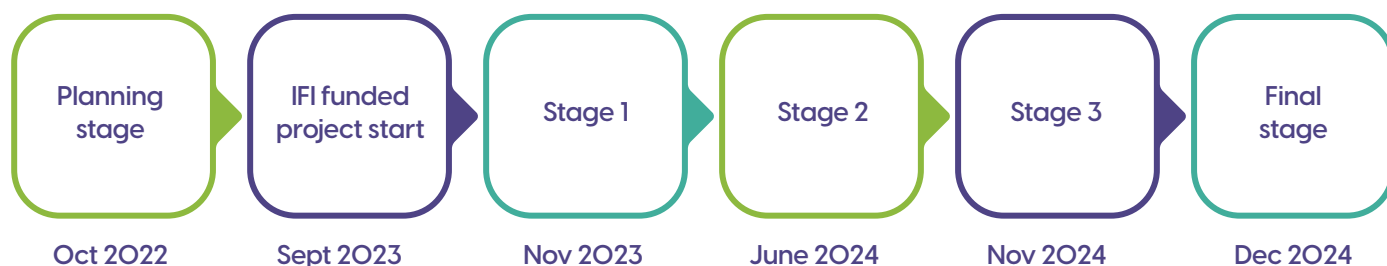
The work of the Civic Initiative is further informed by two expert panels which includes the following members; Dr Jamie Pow, QUB, Dr Joanna McMinn, Sara Singleton, TASC, Rebekah McCabe, Involve, Suzie Cahn, iCommunity, convened by Emma DeSouza

### Content curation committee

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Prof Rory O'Connell, Ulster University, Seamus McGuinness, ERSI, Prof Tony Gallagher, QUB, Ann Watt, Pivotal, Joanne Vance, Community Health and Development Network, Prof Paddy Gray, Ulster University, convened by Emma DeSouza.

## Project Timeline





# Key outcomes

09

38 community-based workshops and forums

- 518 participants
- 61% of participants had not taken part in a similar workshop before

118 survey responses and written submissions

84 participants in a Citizens' Forum on Housing

- 38 ratified recommendations
- A shared vision for housing
- 85% agree citizens' forums and assemblies should be used by government

Public Polling of 1,051 number of citizens



# Stage 1

## Organize workshops

Thirty-eight community-based workshops were held between November 2023 and May 2024 across Northern Ireland and the border counties. Over five hundred people attended the workshops with 61 per cent of the participants having never attended such an event before.





## Objective

“ Having totally believed in Citizens Assemblies for decades, I am so pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the early steps leading up to actually having one set up.”

Enniskillen participant

The purpose of stage 1 of the Civic Initiative process was to create an open, safe, and inclusive space for people to identify and examine key issues impacting their communities then explore possible ways forward. The objective was to establish common priority areas and to narrow a broad agenda to core topics for further discussion.

## Key outcomes

“ This was an engaging workshop which offered equal opportunities for all participants to voice opinions, share experience, knowledge, and expertise. Thoroughly meaningful and collaborative steps toward a shared and inclusive society.”

Dundalk participant

Women's Aid, Reclaim the Agenda, Women's Support Network (WSN) Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), ArtsEkta, African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI), Migrant and Minority Ethnic Thinktank, CRAICNI, Community Advice Fermanagh, Diverse Youth Northern Ireland, Disability Action NI and YouthAction.

The following organizations and groups took part in a one-to-one facilitated workshop; Carlingford Heritage Trust, North West Community Network, North Belfast Women's Network, Action Mental Health, Compass People Ballymoney, Youth Action Young Men's Leadership Keady, Lenadoon Community Forum, NI Alternatives, Positive Youth Outlooks Ballinamallard, Women in Loyalism, Community Development and Health Network (CDHN), Minority Ethnic Sports Network, Save the Sperrins, AYE youth club and Rathcoole Community Partnership.

The Civic Initiative held 38 community-based workshops across Northern Ireland and border counties, two of which were virtual. These workshops consisted of public people's forum, and one-to-one workshops with community-based groups.

The initiative partnered with the following organizations to deliver public people's forums; Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, TADA, Women's Collective Ireland, Politics in Action, NUS-USI, Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland, Migrant Centre NI, Cooperation Ireland, Community Dialogue,

Public people's forums were held in Cavan, Enniskillen, Strabane, Magherafelt, Coleraine, Monaghan, Bangor, Downpatrick, Armagh, Newry, Derry/Londonderry, Cookstown, Ballymena, Dundalk, Portadown and Belfast. Two workshops took place online; Cross-Border People's Forum, and the Disability Forum.

The Civic Initiative used a variety of methods to engage communities to take part in this process including social media campaigns, posting events at local community centres and placing flyers on community notice boards, outreach

to community-based organisations, local newspapers and press, and outreach through the networks of partner organisations.

A total of 518 people took part in stage 1.

Key demographics of participants included:

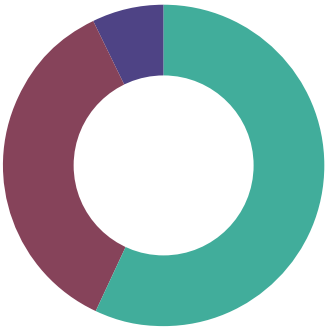
Age

14-17	8%	45-54	19%
18-24	14%	55-64	16%
25-34	13%	65+	12.5%
35-44	17%		



Gender

Female	57%
Male	36%
Other	7%



Religion

No religion	21%
Catholic	35%
Protestant (including Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist)	28%
Other	16%



Thirty per cent of participants identified themselves as having a disability or long term health condition. A full breakdown of demographics is available in Annex 1.



## Delivery

"An excellent facilitative process very well delivered by Emma and team. An incredible amount of information gathered effectively and quickly which will assist in directing the 'Civic Initiative'."

### Belfast participant

All participants in stage 1 took part in a three hour facilitated workshop. The workshops contained three parts: information sharing, deliberation and discussion, followed by recommendations. To take part in the

process participants were provided with an information sheet, consent form, equality forms, and feedback sheets. At the beginning of the process facilitators provided information on the practice of deliberative democracy, objectives of the session, and created shared guiding principles. Participants initially engaged with a broad agenda of topics including; housing, education, political institutions, culture, rural access, human rights, healthcare, and poverty. Through a process of prioritization each group selected three topics for further discussion. A key difference between stage 1 and stage 3, is that this stage of process did not involve expert testimony or voting, rather stage 1 focused on collating a broad range of community perspectives across a variety of key areas.



# Topics and themes discussed

From a very diverse range of subjects, and a diverse group, we managed to gather together the most important issues across a broad spectrum of ages and cultural background. Great potential for change available to those with a will!"

Derry/Londonderry participant

## Healthcare

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### Overview

Health care emerged as a high-priority issue in nearly all stage 1 consultations, participants consistently highlighted access issues, whether that was seeing a GP, accessing treatment, or waiting at a hospital. The overarching view was that healthcare providers were overworked, that the system was underfunded, and that patients are suffering as a result, there was a view that politicians are not willing to make necessary decisions around healthcare reform.

**Aspiration:** Free, accessible, healthcare, at all stages of life

**Key issues identified:** Access was the primary issue, with many participants stating that they could not access a GP, additionally access to hospital care, and a lack of public transport links to access hospitals and health, was a consistent issue. Concerns around greater private health care provision at the expense of NHS services emerged with the view that this increased the class divide. A lack of mental health services was also a key issue regularly identified, as was the view that the voluntary sector was having to fill the gaps.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- Implement the Bengoa report in tandem with reconfiguring the healthcare structure with one health trust rather than five
- Make greater use of technology, for example an online appointment system and online prescription ordering available at all practices
- Address rural access; an incentive scheme for rural staff and increased public transport links that directly connect communities to health centers
- Community healthcare, and community prescribing was also suggested, as was increased mental health services, and rehab facilities.
- Borders were deemed unnecessary when it comes to health, and there was a strong desire for more cross border cooperation with all-island excellence centres and a focus on community care.

## Education

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### Overview

The conversations on education focused on access, reform, and modernization of the education system. There was a consistent view that the education system is underfunded, outdated, segregated, and costly. When examining aspirations and solutions participants tended to suggest a more inclusive education system, community education, and lifelong learning opportunities as well as a complete overhaul of the curriculum.

**Aspiration:** A values-based education system that empowers all citizens to reach their full potential

## Issues identified

There was considerable opposition to segregated education, with participants frustrated by the slow roll out of integrated education options. The education system in place was viewed as punitive, restrictive, and outdated. Rather than free and accessible, education was viewed as costly and inaccessible to many. With school uniforms were deemed unnecessarily expensive, and a further vehicle for segregation both in terms of economic segregation and as a marker of community designation and therefore a symbol of division, while the lack of SEN and mental health supports was referenced as a barrier to access. The curriculum was perceived as not fit for purpose, with significant gaps in life skills, and addressing modern issues like the impact of climate change. The absence of adequate studies on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland and Ireland was also raised. Many concluded that the education system was too exam focused, and that there were not enough alternative pathways and apprenticeships. University fees, cross-border university access, and gaps in adult education opportunities also emerged as common themes.

## Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

Integrated education as the primary education system in Northern Ireland

- Reform of the curriculum to include education on life skills, modern issues including climate change, and mandatory teachings on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland and Ireland
- Create a direct pipeline between industries and education with five-year needs strategies, increased training to fill future skills gaps, and investment in additional apprenticeship schemes

- Addressing inequality by ensuring every child has a warm meal, reducing the cost of school uniforms and increasing funding provision for SEN supports and mental health services
- Remove university fees, and provide all students with a free travel pass, including cross-border students.

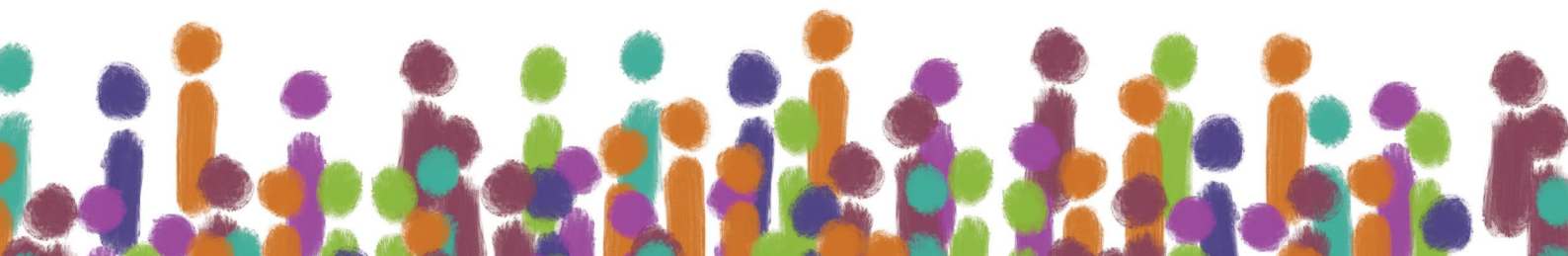
## Housing

### Overview

There was a clear emerging trend of identifying housing as a significant issue including the availability and cost of housing, systemic problems with access to social housing, alongside issues with the private rented sector. Participants expressed the feeling that housing was a neglected issue, with little to no interventions to address fundamental issues such as quality, access, and affordability. It was considered that there was potential for greater levels of cross-border research and a more joined-up approach, particularly in developing the required infrastructure needed to support housing development and the need for sustainable housing.

**Aspiration;** Housing for all, and a recognition of housing as a human right.

**Key issues identified;** Housing was deemed too expensive, low quality, and unavailable. The social housing system was a common issue with participants referencing the points system for allocation of social housing as outdated and unfair, inadequate quality social homes, and failures to address homelessness. The private sector was viewed negatively with disrepair, evictions, and the lack of regulation and oversight of landlords voiced by renters, while homeowners pointed to a lack of proper incentives to retrofit homes and high mortgage rates. Failures to protect the environment, build sustainable housing, and a lack of public



transport links to housing developments also emerged through the conversations on housing.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- An independent monitoring body to review regulation and practices within the private sector
- Legislate to provide the Housing Executive with more powers to build homes
- Taking a holistic and joined up approach to housing including homes for life, adaptable homes, and integrated developments that ensure access to health services, public transport, and other public services.
- Reform of the planning system to speed up decisions, and to tackle derelict building.
- Cross border cooperation on infrastructure development and sustainable housing plans.

## Poverty

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### Overview

Participants explored poverty through an intersectional and intergenerational lens, often pointing to direct links between child poverty and educational attainment to outcomes and recognizing the complex range of circumstances that can trap generations in social and economic deprivation. There was a clear consistency in calling for a holistic approach to addressing poverty and to tackling what participants described as stigma and social class divisions.

### Aspiration

A holistic approach to eradicating poverty with an anti-poverty strategy that enshrines an objective definition of poverty

### Issues identified

Many people taking part were aware of the absence of an anti-poverty strategy, and a child poverty strategy, and raised the absence of a government action plan as a significant failure. There was a perception that the social security system is now operating punitively rather than as a safety net, and that social class stigma and bias persists. Participants made a direct link between poverty and education, citing disparities in educational opportunities, a lack of youth development and a lack of opportunities. The continued prevalence of paramilitaries, and the connection between addiction, poverty, and paramilitary influence was viewed as an underreported issue. Additional issues cited focused on geographical disparities, and the challenges faced by working families on low incomes and lone parents.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- Trial the use of a Universal Basic Income
- Launch a Citizens' Forum on poverty with access to experts
- Bring forward legislation and funding for affordable childcare
- Deliver effective, accessible mental health services, including cross border access
- Bring forward a funded anti-poverty strategy and a child poverty strategy

## Political Institutions

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### Overview

A deep sense of frustration, apathy, and distrust of political institutions and political representatives was evident in every session that selected the topic as a priority area for



discussion. Those taking part had a primary focus on Stormont, though a strengthening of local government and local democracy did emerge to a lesser degree. The repeated collapses of the power-sharing executive led many to conclude that the structures designed under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, and changes made under the St Andrews Agreement were not functional or representative and that reform was essential to desegregate society and restore faith in political processes.

### Aspiration

Reformed political institutions that are stable, accountable, representative, and work toward the common good.

### Issues identified

There was a clear and consistent appetite for reform of the political institutions with participants expressing the view that the structures designed under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement were outdated and locking society into segregation. The ability of any one party to collapse the institutions, and the use of the Petition of Concern regularly featured when discussing issues. A failure to deliver effectively for communities was attributed to a lack of political leadership, with the observation that politicians are not making the hard decisions, which many felt led to an overreliance on the community and voluntary sector that is underfunded and overwhelmed. Adding to the feeling of disenfranchisement was the absence of a structure for civic participation, and the view that public consultations were a tick box exercise.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- Intervention from the UK and Irish governments to reform how Stormont operates so that no one party can collapse the Assembly.
- Strengthened local democracy with all parties holding regular town hall meetings.
- Reform Stormont arrangements including amending the pledge of office with an agreement for parties not to walk out of the Assembly. Review the complaint system for breaches of the pledge of office.
- Launch regular citizens' assemblies on key issues including Stormont reform.
- Increase co-operation between border county local councils with a rural border strategy specific to border regions and driven at departmental level by both governments

## Human Rights

### Overview

Human rights discussions focused on emerging communities, equality, and a feeling that advancing human rights was not a political priority. There was a clear recognition that Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly diverse in culture and ethnicity and a view that Northern Ireland remained unfairly focused on a two-community narrative. Refugee rights, reform of equality legislation, and addressing economic inequalities including gender pay gap were frequently raised as



priorities. A perspective that the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement does not account for all communities in Northern Ireland was frequently referenced, and yet there was considerable support for advancing pillars of the Agreement including a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights and an updated version of the Civic Forum.

### Aspiration

Enforceable human rights protections that can be enjoyed by all

### Issues identified

One of the primary focuses of human rights discussions were barriers to equality and inclusion for asylum seekers. In addition, housing conditions including temporary accommodation and homelessness as well as barriers to employment and education were seen as debilitating for refugees. Many expressed the view that racism is a significant problem, which is getting worse. In the context of Northern Ireland, it was considered that the prevailing two community narrative that focuses on Protestant and Catholic communities led to underreporting of racist incidents. In cross border sessions, the increase of anti-immigrant sentiment in Ireland was a point of concern. The absence of a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights was seen as an example of a failure to prioritize human rights by parliamentarians in London and Belfast and an absence of education on human rights was considered a limiting factor in empowering communities to freely enjoy their rights. Further issues cited related to economic disparity such as the gender pay gap.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- Integrated education alongside mandatory education on human rights, including rights highlighted within the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

- Equality Impact Assessments should be used more effectively and S75 used correctly
- Legislation should be improved and updated to tackle the gender pay gap and enshrine stronger workers' rights
- Race equality legislation should be strengthened
- Implementation of a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights and new forms of civic engagement.

## Rural Access

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### Overview

Discussions on rural access focused on barriers to healthcare, employment opportunities, and education. There was a persistent view expressed that rural communities have been left behind with a lack of investment, infrastructure support and political focus. Rural participants recognized that rural communities could not expect the same level of access as urban areas but contended that all citizens should be entitled to a basic level of access to public services. In border counties there was a desire for greater cross border cooperation between local councils to develop region specific development plans and encourage greater cross border travel. Public transport was a dominant theme with many concluding that services were not sufficient, it was suggested that the lack of services was limiting economic opportunities, healthcare access, and youth development with many rural young people unable to take part in afterschool activities due to a lack of public transport options. The disconnect between rural areas and urban areas, as well as rural to rural, was also increasing a feeling of isolation particularly within an ageing population.

### Vision

Sustainable, vibrant, rural communities with equitable access to services.

## Issues

The issues impacting rural communities were wide-ranging, access to services including healthcare, education, employment were considered to be a significant barrier to equality of access with the view that all citizens should be entitled to a basic level of access to public services. Transport and road infrastructure were dominant themes with participants expressing frustration by a lack of bus routes, both urban-to-rural and rural-to-rural as well as poor road infrastructure which was considered a factor in a lack of investment from companies. The absence of opportunities for young people was believed to be a reason for ageing rural communities and many viewed rural proofing as nothing more than a tick box exercise.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged.

- Independent review of capacity and social need for all bus routes alongside multi-year funding for community transport.
- University delivery to rural communities.
- Cross border regional development plans connecting rural counties and communities.
- Implement the rural needs white paper to ensure rural needs are being met.
- Review sustainability policies to protect natural resources.

## Culture

### Overview

Culture was the least selected topic at stage 1 of the Initiative project, selected only four times out of 38 events. Those that did prioritize culture

as a theme for discussion expressed clear consensus that culture is overtly politicized, and that there were not enough opportunities to celebrate cultural diversity or encourage a positive expression of cultural identity.

### Vision

A culture based on equality, inclusion, and respect that celebrates diversity and is accepting of difference

### Issues

The politicization of culture was a dominant issue raised by participants in addition to a view that segregation through education was hindering progress toward acceptance of cultural diversity. A lack of funding for cultural events, and in particular cross community, and cross border events was commonly cited. Cultural representation in terms of statues and landmarks were also referenced. In the context of Northern Ireland, sectarianism in sport, arts, and LGBTQI+ events were considered examples of a deterioration of cultural acceptance.

### Common trends and suggested solutions that emerged

- Increase funding and access to cross border and cross community events within the education system North and South.
- Appoint a social cohesion minister.
- Develop long term, accessible funding for the community and voluntary sector.
- Create an expansion of civic spaces and culture and increase general tourism while seeking to reducing reliance on tourism based on past traumas.
- Make integrated education the primary education model in Northern Ireland.



## Future planning

"I welcome the concept of engaging with ordinary people on the street to establish what matters and actually garner ideas that may not be immediately evident to those in government."

### Magherafelt participant

There were several challenges identified early in the process related to participation levels. The Civic Initiative had initially planned to hold just six public people's forums as part of stage 1.

However, the backdrop to the period of engagement in late 2023 was that the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly had not been sitting for almost two years engendering significant scepticism about the value of engaging with devolved political institutions. It became clear that in order to reach marginalised communities, and those who aren't normally in the room, we would have to adapt our event plan to be far more flexible and focused covering more locations and targeting specific communities including ethnic minorities, PUL groups, and young people.

Low levels of participation in community-based projects is a common issue to overcome for civic society, with political apathy, and sector overload creating real barriers to participation. There is also a barrier to cross-border participation in outlining effectively how the issues relate to both jurisdictions. The

Civic Initiative had to overcome community gatekeeping in some areas and had to make a concerted effort to depoliticise the aims and objectives of the project.

There was a degree of sectarianism and discrimination, and on very limited occasions, facilitators experienced hostility, this was from a small number of community sector representatives rather than members of the general public. It is considered that the civic space in Northern Ireland in particular poses specific challenges for advancing a deliberative democracy model. One of the causes is the underfunding of community-based projects, which leads to competition between groups who should be working toward shared aims.

Despite challenges, the Civic Initiative tapped into some enormous potential. Moreover, it was noticeable that the return of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly created a better sense of the need and purpose for community engagement. The capacity for people to engage in complex policy issues and to build a shared sense of purpose is a testament to the empowering nature of deliberative democracy structures. In terms of future planning, and lessons learned, the Civic Initiative would recommend greater levels of community-based engagement with local groups in advance of holding a public forum, to achieve this, greater staffing levels than available to the Civic Initiative project would be required. Additionally, the Civic Initiative suggests examining the viability of taking forward other key areas identified at Stage 1 including a citizens' forum on healthcare that might examine health system transformation and access, and one on education that might focus on integration and modernisation.



## Stage 2

### Gathering of submissions and survey responses

Stage 2 of the Civic Initiative carried-over the three most selected topics from stage 1 for further consideration. Evidence and viewpoints on health, education and housing were sought through a public call for written submissions and a public cross border survey. These responses to stage 2 confirmed the data from stage 1. Notably there was overwhelming support for greater levels of cross border cooperation in all three areas.

#### Submissions

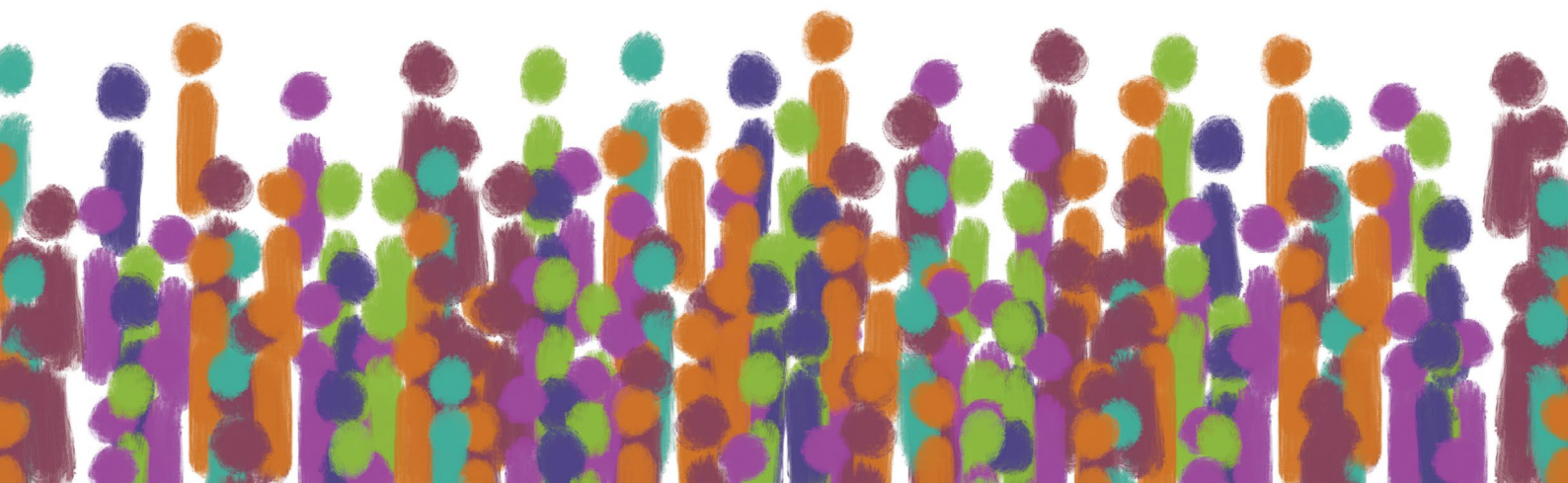
Further evidence and information was requested via two response options, written submissions, and a public cross border survey.

All participants in stage 1 were invited to respond, as were partner organisations and stakeholders.

Detailed written submissions were received from;

- Integrated Education Fund
- Northern Ireland Children's and Young Person's Commissioner
- Cooperation Ireland
- Housing Rights
- Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR)
- Apex Housing
- Homeless Connect
- Mid Ulster Seniors

**A downloadable copy of all written submissions is available at:**  
[www.disabilityaction.org/TheCivicInitiative](http://www.disabilityaction.org/TheCivicInitiative)



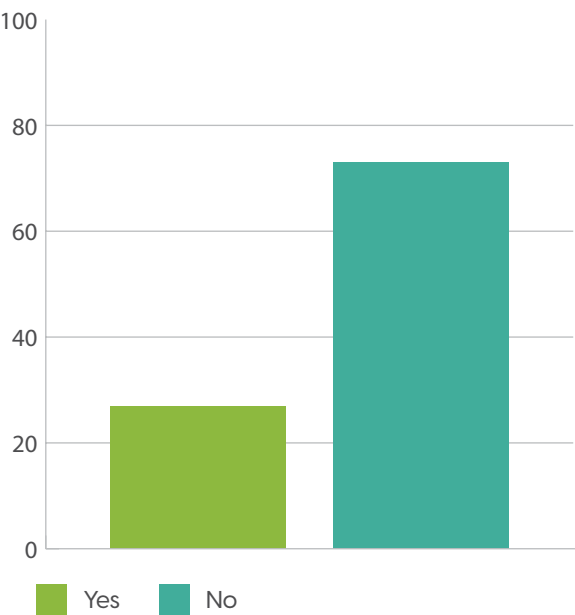
# Survey responses

122 responses were received to the public survey, participants answered a series of quantitative and qualitative questions related to housing, education, and healthcare.

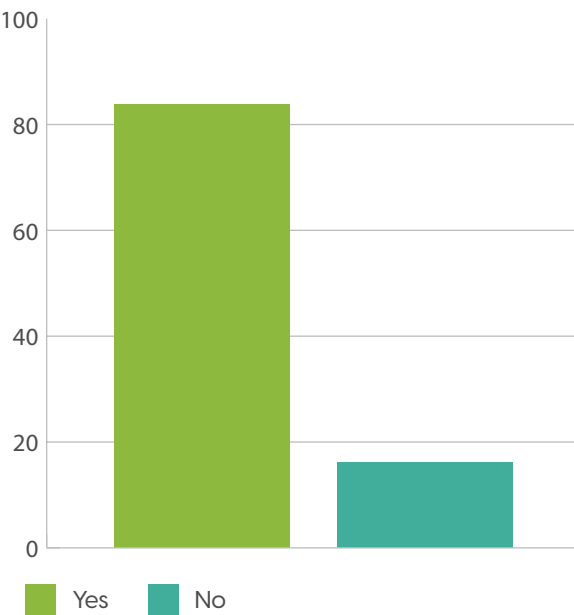
The responses received to specific questions were as follows:

## Quantitative data

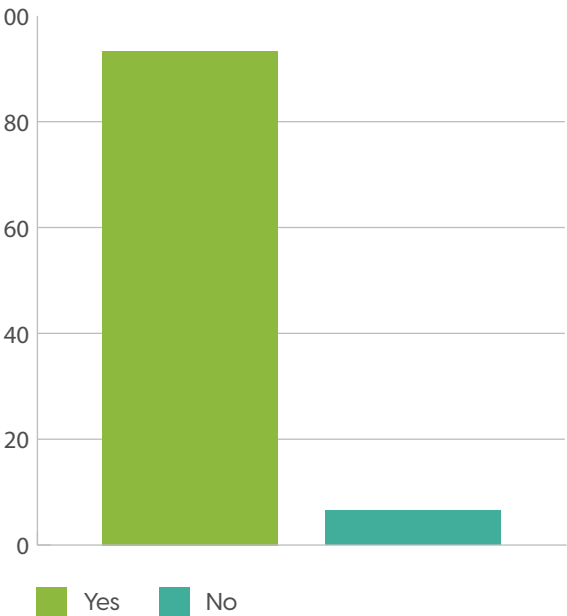
Do you believe that there are adequate and accessible, formal / non-formal, lifelong learning opportunities?



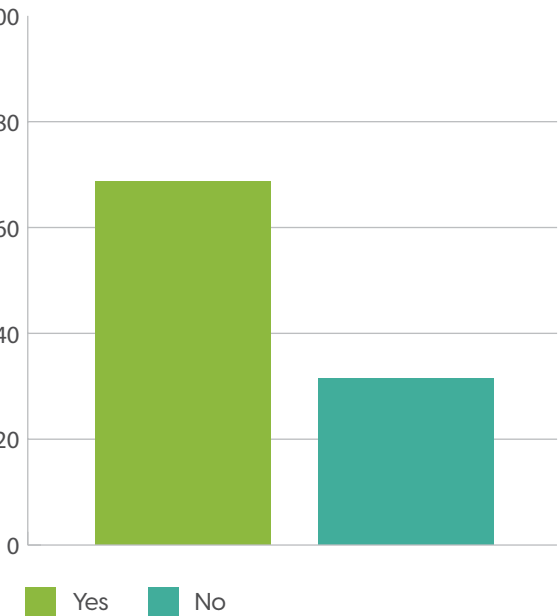
Do you believe that you have benefited from the time you spent in formal education?



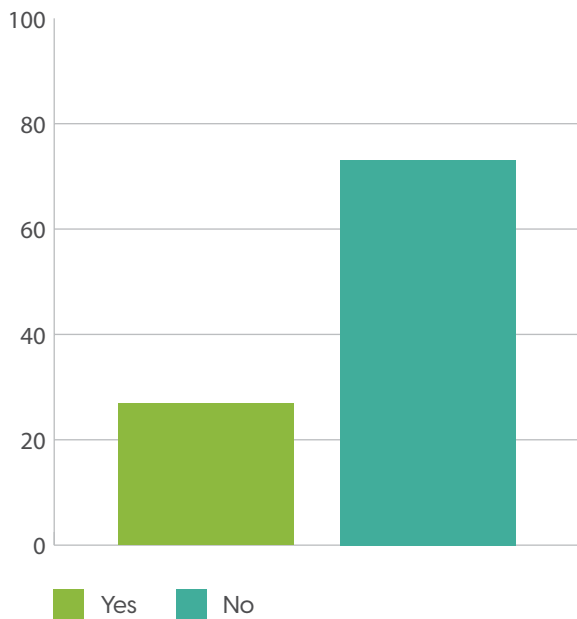
Would you support the creation of an independent commission on Housing?



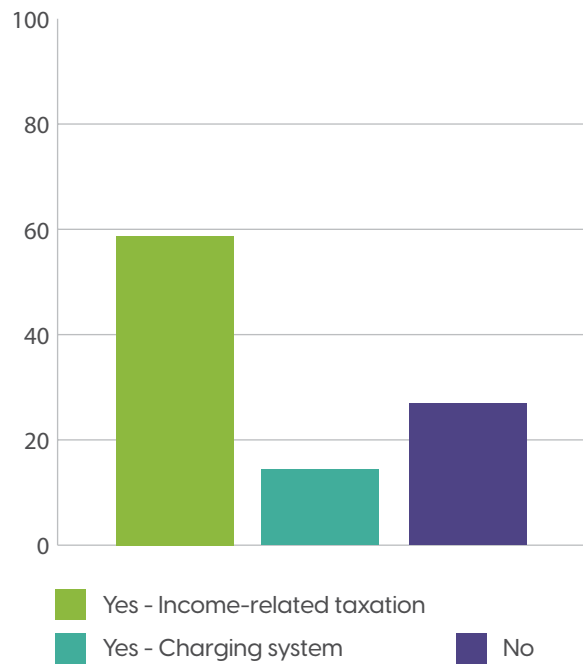
Do you believe there is a stigma attached to social housing? If so, how might that stigma be overcome?



Do you think it would be possible to provide local access to healthcare services in the context of a smaller number of specialist hospitals, if so how?



Would you be will to pay income-related higher taxes or additional charges so that everyone can benefit from better quality public services? If so, is your preference to do this through a taxation or a charging system.



Do you believe there could be greater cross-border cooperation in any of the following areas



# Qualitative data

## Education

A number of specific comments were received from people who answered the survey including:

- // *More Hybrid Educational Courses and Opportunities should be in place for all people who either suffer from health issues, work full time or have caring duties so they are able to further their educational knowledge and experience."*
- // *Recognising different methods of learning and also measuring what is learnt. Access to learning support and access to appropriate accommodations tailored to your needs to be on par to your peers. Complete reform on current curriculum and the need for this."*
- // *Bring the access to educational opportunities out of the formal venues and into the community at a grass root level. Work directly with the voluntary and community groups to enable access to educational opportunities from their venues to reduce barriers, stigma, and a range of other challenges that young people and adults face. Work with local employers to enable them to open up opportunities for educational pathways from within their organisations so people can earn a living while also advance their educational potential."*

## Healthcare

- // *There are benefits in accessing new technologies for access to public healthcare services - such as online consultation tools to help patients living in more rural and remote areas to access information without initially having to travel long distances unnecessarily."*
- // *Transport issues and care packages must be resolved. We need road improvements, public transport improvements, more free car parking at hospitals and strong support for volunteer car schemes and Community Transport."*
- // *Aim to provide specialist services at key centres but have patients rehabilitate post-operations closer to home. Further develop local community based hospitals for day care and outpatient services so people only have to travel for acute and specialist care. Get consultants to travel to clinics closer to where people live rather than have people without the resources to do so having to travel to access healthcare. Not good for the environment to have all the unnecessary travel to work for staff and travel to services for the public."*





## Housing

- // *End privatisation / semi-privatisation of social housing. End the sell-off of social housing, as they have done in Scotland. Build more 'mixed estates'. The private sector needs to be regulated: introduce rent control, ban no fault evictions and don't allow landlords to rent out houses that have been found unfit for habitation."*
- // *Critical need for more support through the social security system to ensure that those on the lowest incomes can afford housing, can manage their housing costs as well as meet their essential bills. Too many people are unable to afford the essentials on current levels of social security, meaning they often prioritise their housing costs at the expense of eating/heating. Politicians need to realise that it is cost effective in the long-term to ensure that people can afford their housing costs, can live in a secure home and have a reasonable chance of living in the areas they want to live in without fear. More must be done to tackle debt and the risks associated with housing stress, eviction and repossession."*  
*Include the voices of social housing renters is important in overcoming the stigma. Involving renters in projects, policies around the social housing to improve it and giving people pride and ownership of their area."*

# Stage 3

## A citizens' forum on Housing

Participants in the Citizens' Forum on housing worked over three days to create a shared vision for housing and to ratify a series of policy recommendations for the Northern Ireland assembly, and UK and Irish governments.



"Excellent project, feel privileged to have been able to take part in it and do something constructive for the society I live in."

Housing Forum member

# Methodology

## Selection of topic and question design

A Citizens Assembly works best with a specific topic and a clear question. Given the limited time available for participant involvement in the Citizens' Forum structure, only one topic could be carried forward to this stage. The selection of this topic was informed by the responses to stage 1 and stage 2, alongside the advice from the process design and content curation groups. The final decision was undertaken by the Civic Initiative Oversight Committee.

To inform the decision of the Oversight Committee both the process design and content curation groups scored the topics that progressed to stage 2, namely, healthcare, housing, and education. Topics were scored by five criteria which included feasibility, public and political interest, and the likelihood of success.

The process design group concluded that health as a topic was too broad and had been thoroughly examined in a number of recent reports. Education and housing were seen as having more merit for a Citizens' forum approach.

Accordingly, the three topics scores were:

- Education 105/125
- Housing 104/125
- Healthcare 93/125

The content curation committee adopted the same process and reached a similar conclusion with scores of committee were

- Education 107/125
- Housing 106/125
- Healthcare 96/125

## Decision of the Oversight Committee:

The oversight committee recognized the reasons that health was a long way behind education and housing due to the number and depth of reports on the area in the past decade or so including the Bengoa, Donaldson and Compton reports and the human rights public inquiry conducted by the NI Human Rights Commission into Accident & Emergency hospital care and services.

There was a recognition that it had been difficult to separate education and housing in terms of priority. The oversight committee invited both the process design group and the content curation committee members to its meeting to lay out their thinking on the merits and otherwise of both areas of work for a citizens forum. It was clear from the detailed discussions that there was not a clear view from either group that one topic automatically held sway over the other.

A key consideration was the point made by the content curation committee that housing has been a relatively neglected topic for research and policy discussion in Northern Ireland compared to education where a report and action plan on Tackling Disadvantage had been produced by Noel Purdy and an expert panel for the Department for Education in May 2021 and a report on the consequences of cuts to education produced by Ulster University in 2023 among others. There was also considered to be specific rural as well as urban dimensions to housing and significant supply and demand issues on housing across the island of Ireland.

Ultimately, this was a fine grained decision and agreement that consideration would be given to whether the impact of inadequate housing has on lifetime opportunities including the impact of education and health could be built into the deliberative discussions. On this basis, the oversight committee chose housing as the topic for the forum.

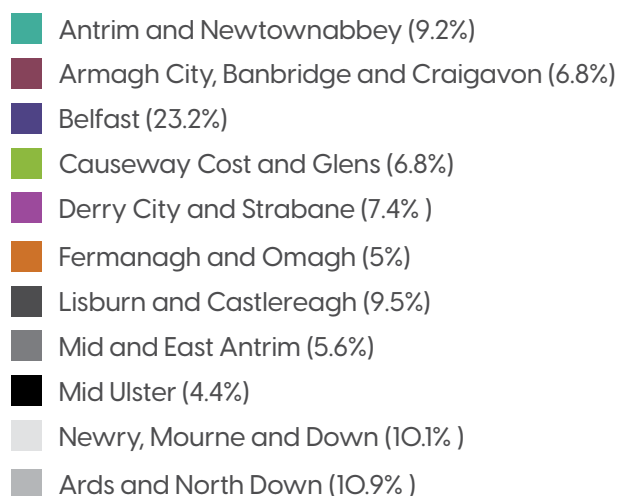
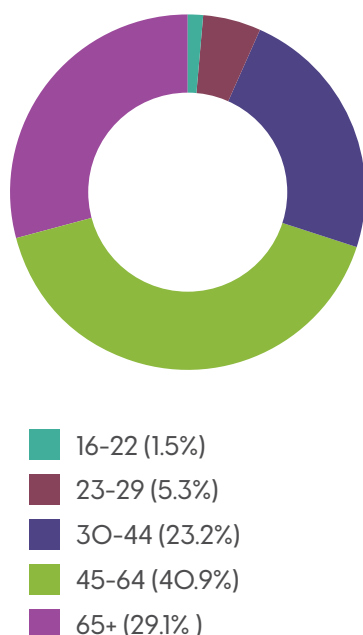
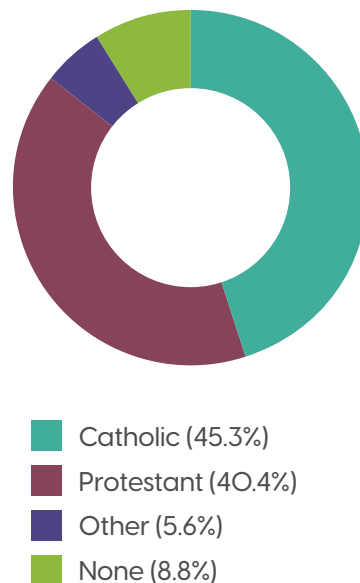
The design of the final question for the Citizens' Forum on Housing was informed by members of the process design group, content curation committee, and oversight committee.

## Selection of participants

Participants in the Citizens' Forum on Housing were recruited by UK based NGO Sortition Foundation, who promote the empowered use of citizens' assemblies, via a postal lottery system. 25,000 letters of invitation were issued across Northern Ireland, respondents registered their interest in taking part via an online form, or telephone.

343 people across Northern Ireland registered to take part in the Citizens' Forum on Housing. The age, community background, and regional spread of respondents supports the view that a broad section of society is interested in participating in a citizens' forum/assembly structure.

## Demographics of 343 members of the public who registered their interest in taking part in the Citizens' Forum on Housing



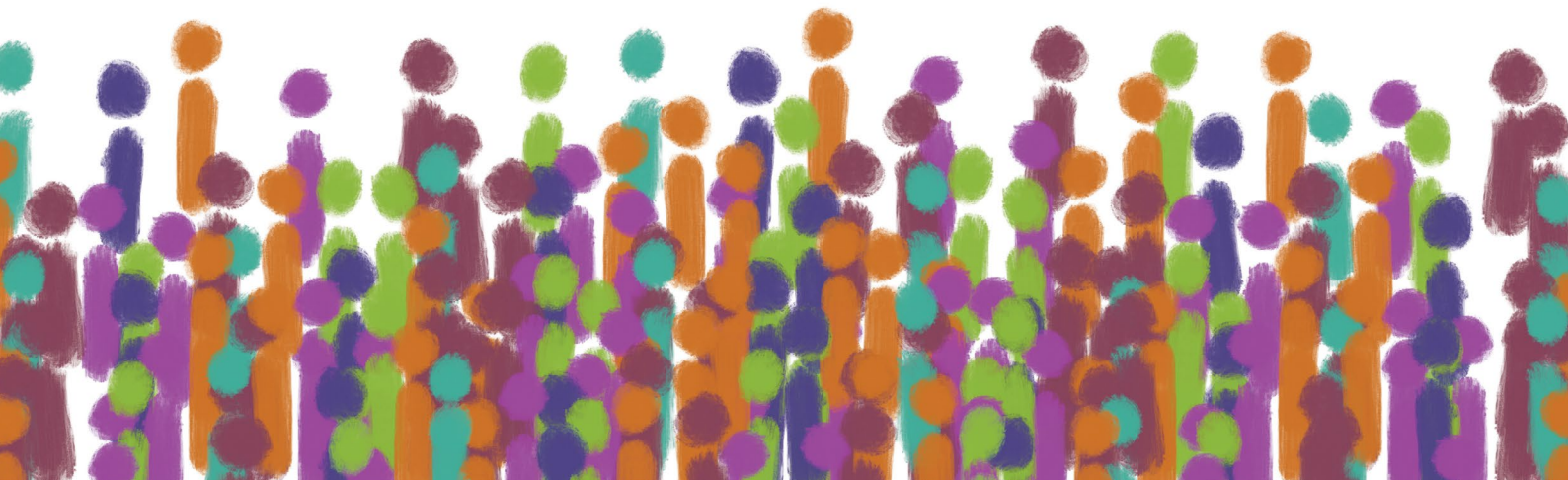


## Selection of content

Members of the content curation committee reviewed data from stage 1 and stage 2 as they related to housing. Bearing in mind the Forum question, members formulated a draft content plan that included suggested speakers, and necessary information including relevant reports, and key statistics. The purpose was to ensure that public and private rented sector housing and owner-occupation were all covered alongside questions of rural, urban and border region housing needs. The programme was designed to ensure participants heard from a diverse range of experts and interests including developers, housing advisers and campaigners, senior public housing officials, Departmental civil servants, and academics. Members of the process design group contributed to the drafting of information packs including equality monitoring forms, evaluation forms, consent

forms, and general information on data protection and the facilitation process.

The Oversight Committee reviewed and ratified recommendations from both groups and invited the following speakers to present to the Citizens' Forum on Housing; Rebekah McCabe, Involve, Prof Paddy Gray UU, Housing Rights, Prof Kieron McQuinn ERSI, Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR), Homeless Connect, Grainia Long Housing Executive, Justin Cartwright CIH, Prof Martin Haran UU, Prof Rory Hearne, Mark Spence CEFNI, Renters Voice, CATU, Department for Communities. The following were invited but were unavailable: Landlord's Association Northern Ireland (LANI), NI Water, Northern Ireland Federation Housing Associations (NIFHA), APEX Housing, Cluid Housing, Threshold, Department for Infrastructure, and Oaklee Housing.



## Delivery

"This is a really laudable project, and it has been so excellently organized and managed. I have learnt a lot from the process and management of the programme."

Housing Forum member

The Citizens' Forum on Housing consisted of three days of deliberation. In advance of the first session selected participants were briefed on the process and expectations by the project manager and administrator, all participants received a minimum of two phone calls, two emails, and a detailed information pack in advance of taking part.

The delivery of the forum was supported by a team of facilitators including Gordon McCabe, Demi Laverty, Daryll Elwood, Danielle Roberts, Deborah Erwin, Gareth Gould, David Halloway, David Gardiner, and Joanna McMinn. Project manager Emma DeSouza also acted as a facilitator.







The three days of deliberation consisted of the following:

#### Day one:

understanding deliberative democracy and the housing system, followed by expert testimony and small group facilitated discussions.

#### Day two:

expert testimony, creating a shared vision for housing, and small group facilitated discussions to create draft recommendations.

#### Day three:

Ratifying the vision for housing, editing, amending, and finalizing recommendations before putting all recommendations to a vote.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend. Not only did I acquire a lot of information with regard to the housing situation in Northern Ireland, but I met some lovely people and enjoyed the social interaction with them."

**Housing Forum member**

On arrival participants received a further information pack, this pack included the agenda, presentations and reports from speakers, a detailed overview of the housing system and relevant statistics, a summary list of speakers, equality monitoring, evaluation, and consent forms plus background context including written submissions from housing stakeholders and data from stage 1 and stage 2 of the Initiative project. Members of the forum sat at round tables and each table had a facilitator for the two days to assist and moderate discussion.

Members of the Forum heard evidence from 18 speakers over the course of two days, each speaker took questions from members of the Forum, and the majority of sessions were livestreamed via the Civic Initiative Instagram page for the wider public to view.

The first two days of deliberation took place at La Mon Hotel in the format of a residential

weekend, the third day took place at St Columbs Hall in Derry/Londonderry. All draft recommendations gathered during the two day residential were reviewed and consolidated, by the Civic Initiative in the three weeks between day two and day three.

On the third day all draft recommendations were edited, amended, and reviewed by all members of the Forum. Once finalised the recommendations were compiled into a ballot sheet. Each member of the forum voted for the recommendations they supported; members were instructed that recommendations would be passed by a consensus vote of 80 per cent or higher. Votes were tallied and announced at the end of day three. The Citizens' Forum on Housing was observed by representatives of the Alliance party, Sinn Fein, SDLP, and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). All political parties were invited to observe.







## Participation supports

Members of the Citizens' Forum on Housing received a £120 participation payment, in addition to remuneration of travel costs, all meals and accommodation were also included.

Several members of the Citizens' Forum on Housing were carers, the Civic Initiative provided flexibility and accommodations to remove barriers to participation for those with caring responsibilities, including allowing a member to be joined by their elderly father, and other members to have their children on site.

The final day of the Forum was impacted by the fallout of a significant storm, public transport was affected with trains cancelled due to flooding. Despite these challenges over 70 people (over 85 per cent of members) travelled to Derry/Londonderry for the final session. To account for the unforeseen nature of transport issues the Civic Initiative provided members impacted with a digital vote to support their continued participation, eleven members of the Forum voted digitally.



## Key outcomes

"A truly positive experience. The information provided and the guest speakers were very informative, and the statistics were shocking and in some cases eye opening!"

### Housing Forum member

Participants in the Citizens' Forum on Housing created a shared vision for housing, and ratified 38 recommendations by a consensus vote of 80 per cent or more. These outcomes are particularly impressive when considering the participants base knowledge of the topic, and the short deliberative time of just three days. It is worth noting that comparable structures in neighbouring jurisdictions are often longer and include a higher level of compensation for participants' time. The Civic Initiative and facilitation team were struck by the level of commitment demonstrated by members of the Citizens' Forum on Housing and the speed at which members organically created a shared determination to reach a successful outcome.

"It has given me a completely new perspective on the housing situation and has opened my eyes to many new possibilities and initiatives."

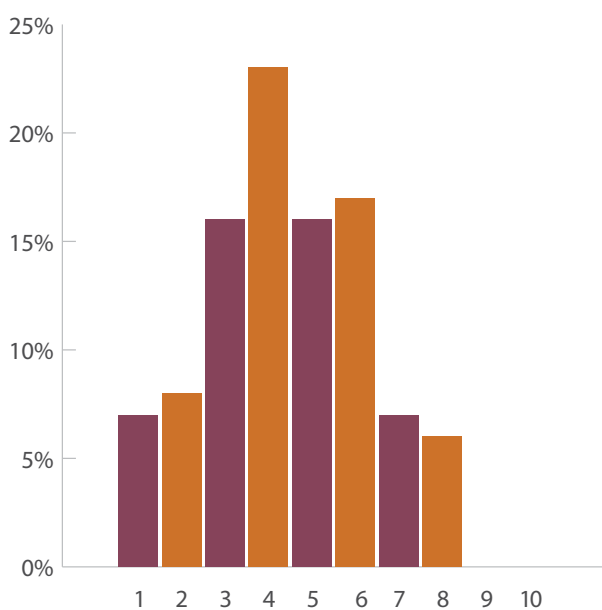
### Housing Forum member

### Participant Evaluation

- Participant knowledge on Housing increased from an average of 4.4 to 7.9
- 96% found the presentations useful and agreed that they covered a wide range of perspectives.
- 93% felt they were given plenty of speaking opportunities during table discussions.
- 65% expressed the view that most people seemed willing to change their minds during the table discussions.
- 89% would take part in another citizens' forum or assembly.
- 91% agree citizens' forums should be used more often to inform decision-making
- Interest in politics increased from an average of 6.4 to an average of 7.2.
- 54% of participants stated that they felt more inclined to engage in politics following their participation in the Citizens' Forum.
- The Citizens' Forum on Housing received an average rating of 9.1 from participants.

On a scale of 1-10, much would you say you feel you know about the Housing system in Northern Ireland?

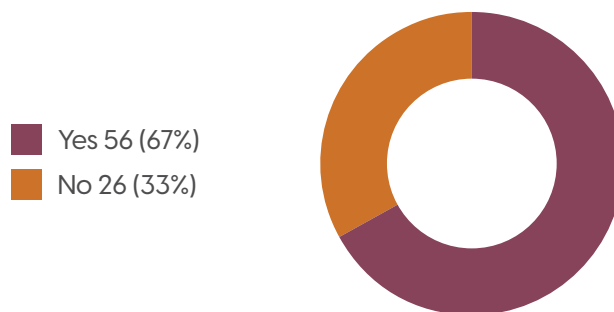
### Day 1 (84 responses)



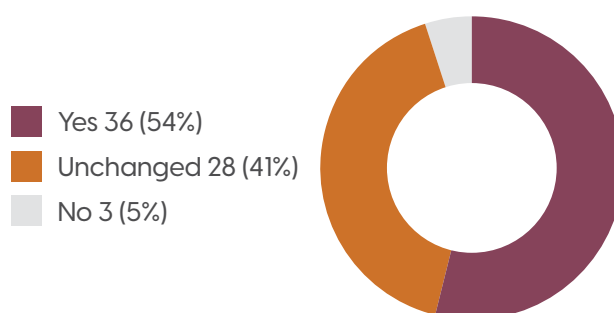
1 = Know nothing at all 10 = Know a great deal

**Average: 4.4**

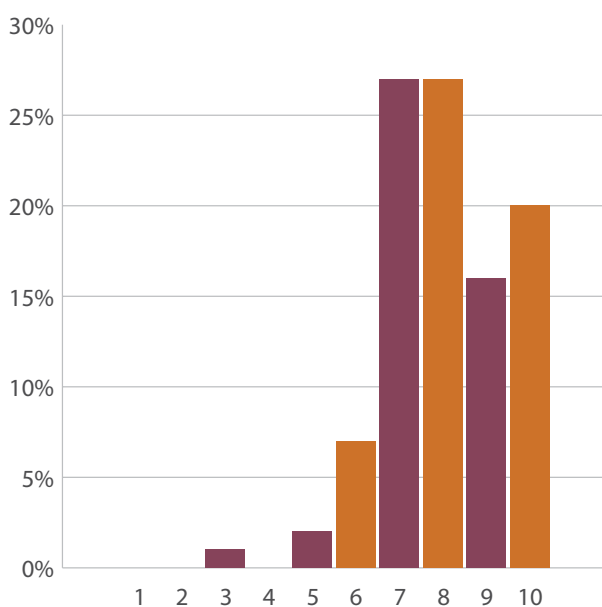
Did you vote in the last election?



Do you feel more inclined to engage in politics following the Citizens' Forum?



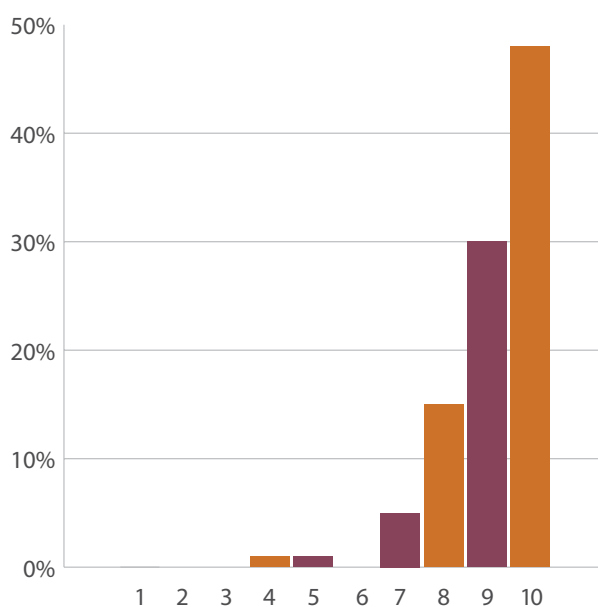
### Day 3 (67 responses)



1 = Know nothing at all 10 = Know a great deal

**Average: 7.9**

Overall, on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the Citizens' Forum on Housing?



1 = Know nothing at all 10 = Know a great deal

**Average: 9.1**



## Outcomes - Citizens' Forum on Housing

### Vision

#### **The vision agreed by the forum over the three days was:**

To create a holistic people-centered housing system that provides accessible, affordable, safe, and energy-efficient homes to meet the needs of all individuals and households in a way that fosters greater community cohesion, and a shared sustainable future for all.

### Principles

#### **A number of key principles were also agreed namely:**

Stable political institutions that action short, medium, and long-term goals can be achieved. A cross-government department commitment to take a holistic, people-centered approach to housing that meets the needs of all.

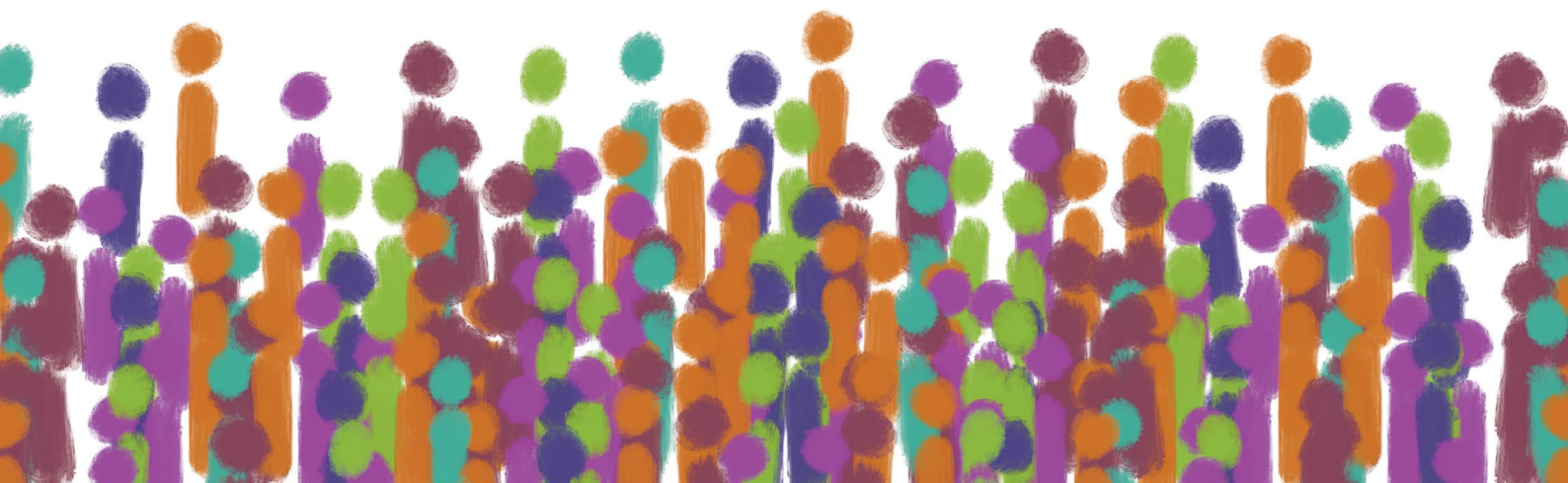
A housing system that recognizes the importance of community cohesion with every effort taken to desegregate society and improve access to shared community spaces

Joined up thinking and collaboration between all stakeholders within the housing system to remove silos, pool resources, and create a shared strategy to urgently alleviate housing pressures.

A robust, enforceable set of goals and legal requirements to deliver energy efficient and sustainable housing for all.

Recognition of the importance of access to services, community, and place with integration between planned infrastructure, housing developments, and public services to create a more connected society that enjoys a basic level of access to meet their needs.

A holistic approach to addressing housing needs alongside other public services including increased access to mental health services, investment in rehabilitation centres, and a homelessness prevention plan that ensures every person is treated with dignity and respect.



## Characteristics

1. Stable political institutions with a cross-government department approach that depoliticizes housing and delivers a holistic approach to meet housing needs within clear timelines.
2. A future needs plan based off a population forecast that includes a variety of housing options to meet the needs of all
3. The use of modern construction methods and international innovation to speed up new builds and refurbishments
4. Diversified funding options to increase housing stock and improve current stock.
5. A North-South approach that fosters collaboration, shared learning, and shared resources
6. Urgent investment to improve public transport links with increased services to rural areas and healthcare facilities.
7. Investment in education with a school-to-trades pipeline, incentives for apprenticeships, and a curriculum that teaches young people about the housing system and their rights.
8. All-island investment in infrastructure, water, and sustainable housing
9. An ambitious strategy with clear responsibilities and timelines to repurpose derelict buildings and unused land
10. Accessible and publicly available data on housing stock, need, and land use.
11. A planning system that innovates by removing red tape, speeding up the consultation process, and regularly reviews performance.
12. A voice for communities with local citizens' assemblies on housing, as supported in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Strategy, and other areas of importance in tandem with a region-wide citizens' assembly.

## Forum recommendations -

The recommendations put forward by the groups which reached the 80 per cent threshold were as follows:

### Access and increasing supply was:

Allow NIHE to buy large disused public buildings and refurbish to meet temporary accommodation needs 92%

Legislate to allow NIHE to borrow and access private finance to build more homes 92%

Demolish properties deemed unfit for human habitation that cannot be redeveloped or refurbished within 18 months 85%

Instruct local authorities to identify commercial property in city centres to repurpose for residential use within 12 months. Begin the repurposing process within 18 months 85%

Legislate to allow Housing Executive to keep income to reinvest in public housing 85%

Provide more supported living/ sheltered living schemes that are stepping stone before a vulnerable individual is ready to maintain a tenancy 82%

Adopt the Scottish 'flat over shop' model to increase housing supply in town and city centres 82%

Increase awareness of the social housing selection scheme provide clear information on how to challenge decisions through an appeal. This information should be provided to all those seeking social housing 82%

Review and update the points allocation system for social housing to reflect current

status and requirements on an annual basis 82%

Bring forward a requirement that all new developments should have a percentage of blended housing including social and co-ownership homes with a streamlined planning process that requires decisions within 12 weeks 80%

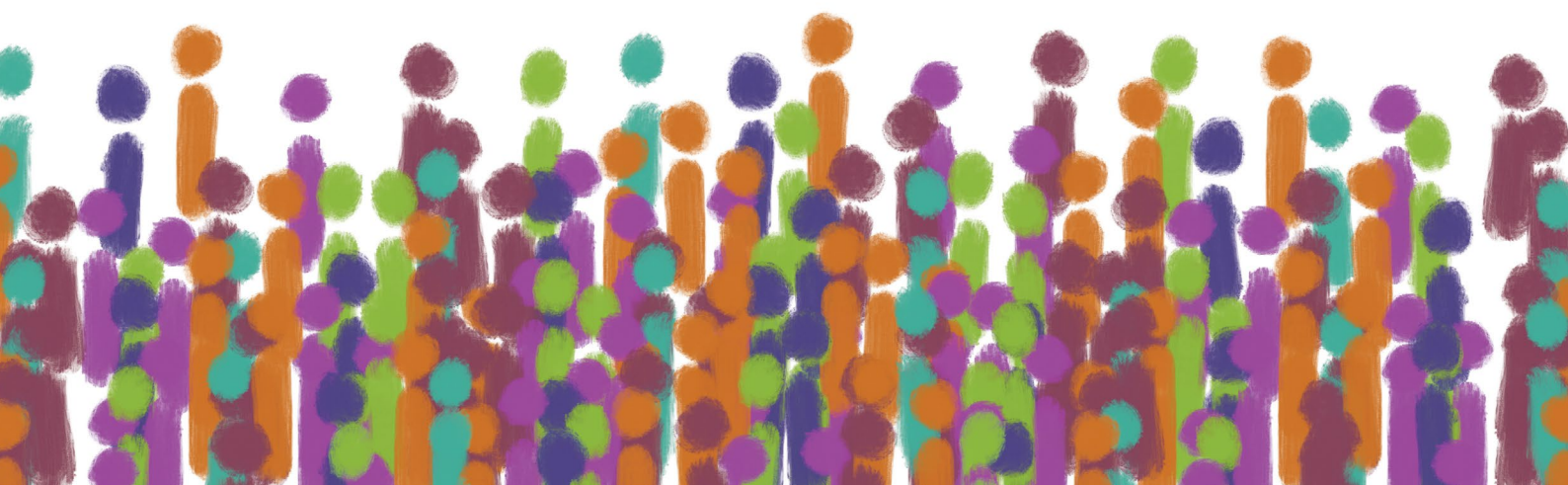
Provide an accessible homelessness intervention hub that offers support to people who are at risk of homelessness but have not met all criteria yet 80%

Review and update regulations on the private rented sector to create "guardrails" for a fairer, more transparent system to strengthen tenants' rights 80%

Give local authorities the ability to issue compulsory purchase orders at market rate for vacant buildings with a requirement that the authorities must begin preparing the buildings for housing within 12 months 80%

Prevent private land banking by enforcing a requirement that land must be assigned within 12 months of purchase for a stated purpose 80%

Enforce a three strike rule for antisocial behaviour in social housing and rental properties 80%



## **Affordability**

Examine the viability of alternative building methods such as 'open system', prefab, tiny homes or Wiki houses 82%

Financially incentivize 21-35 year olds with low interest mortgages, co ownership options and a route to owning your own home as a single owner 80%

Remove VAT charges for renovations, upgrades and retrofitting old properties 80%

A government subsidy for construction material for social and sustainable housing 80%

Review the Local Housing Allowance freeze on support with Housing Benefit 80%

## **Infrastructure and Environmental**

Take forward an integrated approach for all new developments, to include housing, transport, green spaces and access to other public services including schools and healthcare 91%

Provide attractive grants to all to increase retrofitting of older housing stock 88%

Improve and increase public transport links from rural locations to larger towns 85%

Enforce a requirement that all new builds are to be built to 'Part L' (energy efficiency) of building regulations to ensure highest level of insulation, efficiency and affordability 82%

Ensure building regulations are enforced within a specific timeline and routine inspections of private rented and social housing completed with repairs/ checks started within 14 days of inspection report being issued. 80%

Provide increased grants to landlords to improve the energy efficiency of homes including solar, wind, and double glazing 80%

Bring forward a carbon neutral energy plan with clear objectives to leverage advantages from solar, wind and tidal sources with published annual updates on progress 80%

## **A holistic approach to housing**

Update the curriculum to include education in primary and secondary schools on money management, getting on the property ladder, housing rights, understanding homelessness and anti-social behaviour 85%

Create a pipeline between schools and trades with onsite learning, external trade speakers and increased apprenticeships 85%

Integrate the education system so that all children and young people are educated together regardless of community background at all stages 80%

Offer free adult courses to allow people from other career paths to retrain and join the construction industry 80%

Legislate to enforce the removal of all flags and emblems from shared infrastructure in housing developments and public spaces 80%

## **North-South Cooperation**

Seek cross-border investment from the Irish government to improve water infrastructure in Northern Ireland 85%

Implement the All-island Rail Strategy to reopen closed rail lines 82%

Set up a North-South independent research group to examine potential for cooperation to improve infrastructure and sustainability 80%

## **Governmental**

Reform Stormont so that no one party can collapse the government 94%

Launch citizens' assemblies in each Council Area, in tandem with a region-wide citizens' assembly. Hold a Citizens' Assembly every year 85%

Introduce housing as a recurring agenda item at the North South Ministerial council 82%

A full list of the other recommendations which did not make the 80 per cent threshold are set out in Annex 3.



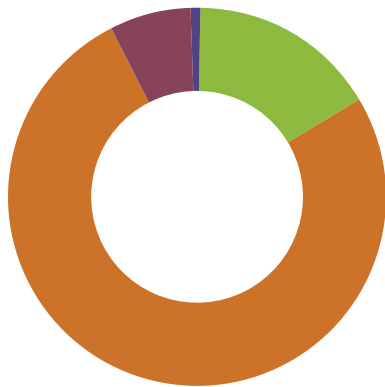
# Public Opinion Polling - Introduction

In order to test the temperature of public opinion toward core objectives of the Civic Initiative project and the Citizens' Forum on Housing results, the Civic Initiative procured the services of Polling and Market Research Company LucidTalk Limited. The polling was carried out online and by telephone for a period of five days from 22nd to 26th January 2025. The polling targeted the established Northern Ireland (NI) online Opinion Panel which is balanced by age, gender, area of residence, and community background in order to be

demographically representative of Northern Ireland. 2,343 full responses were collated and after data auditing to ensure; one person-one-vote responses, and the collation of a robust, accurate, and balanced representative NI sample, **1,051 full responses** were recorded and used for analysis in terms of the final results. All data results have been weighted by gender and community background to represent the demographic composition of Northern Ireland. The margin of error is +/-2.3%.

## Poll Question 1

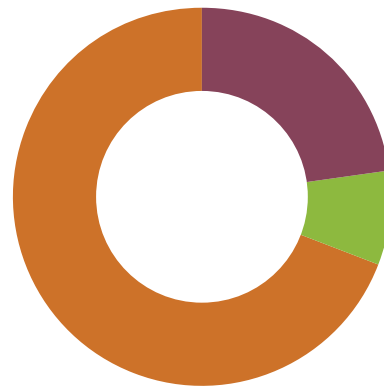
Do you think that NI political parties are giving the issue of housing enough attention?



- Political parties are giving the issue too much attention (1%)
- Political parties are giving the issue about the right amount of attention (16%)
- Political parties are not giving the issue enough attention (76%)
- Don't Know / Not Sure / No Opinion (7%)

## Poll Question 2

Do you think Citizens' Assemblies or 'Citizens Forums' should be actioned by the NI Assembly to give people a voice on key issues?

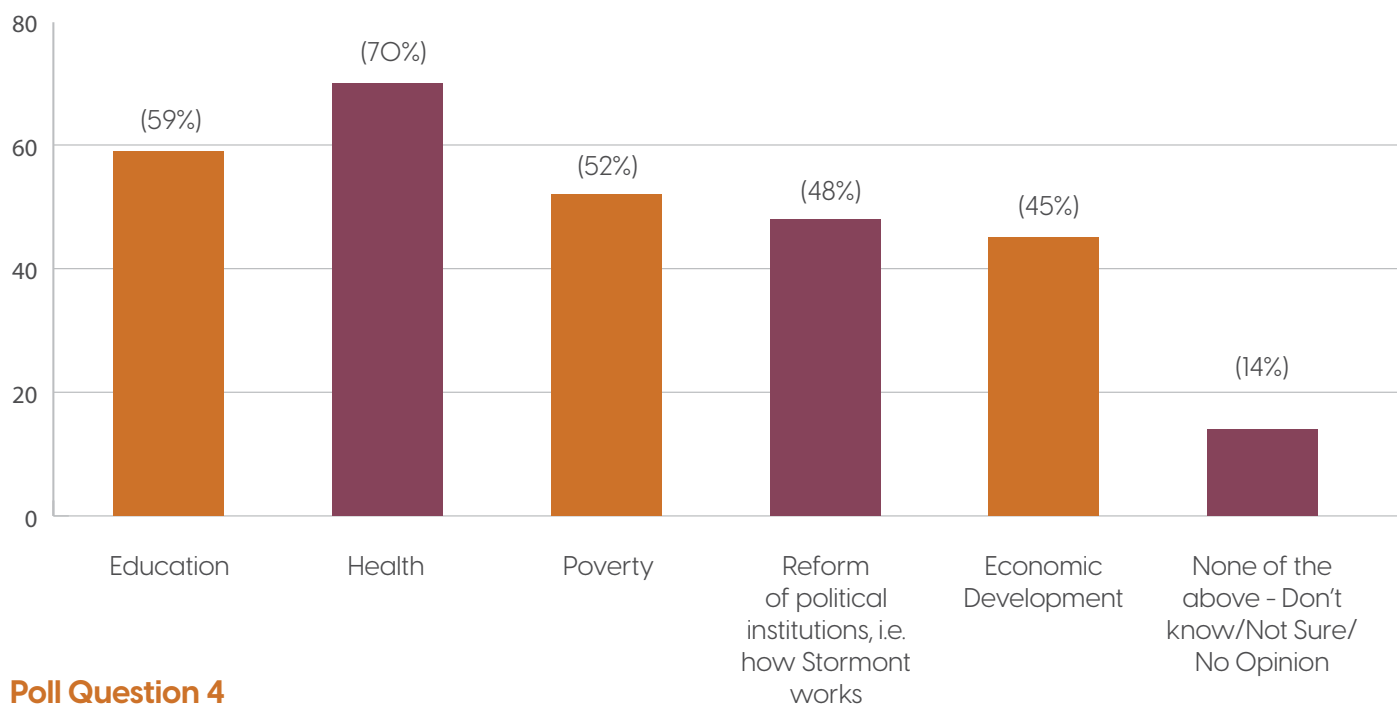


- Yes - I agree (69%)
- No - I don't (23%)
- Don't Know / Not Sure / No opinion (8%)



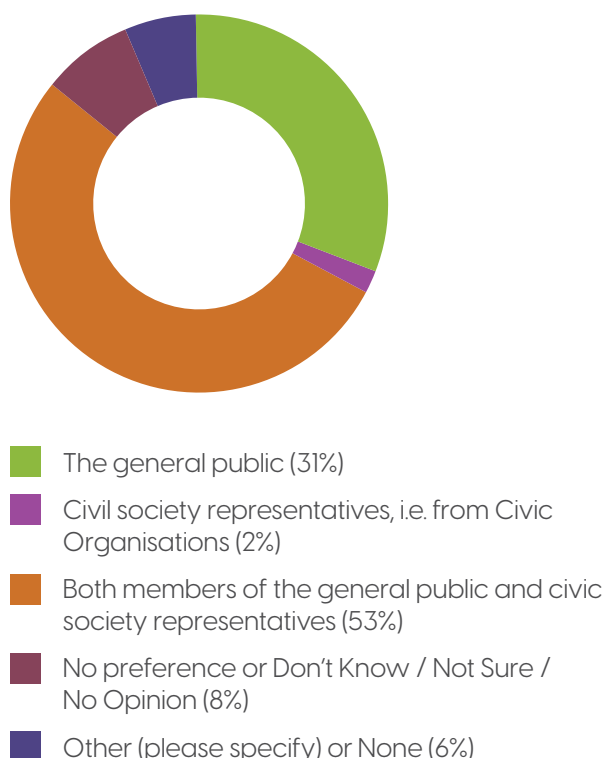
### Poll Question 3

In the context of NI, what topics would you like to see discussed in a Citizens forum/assembly structure?



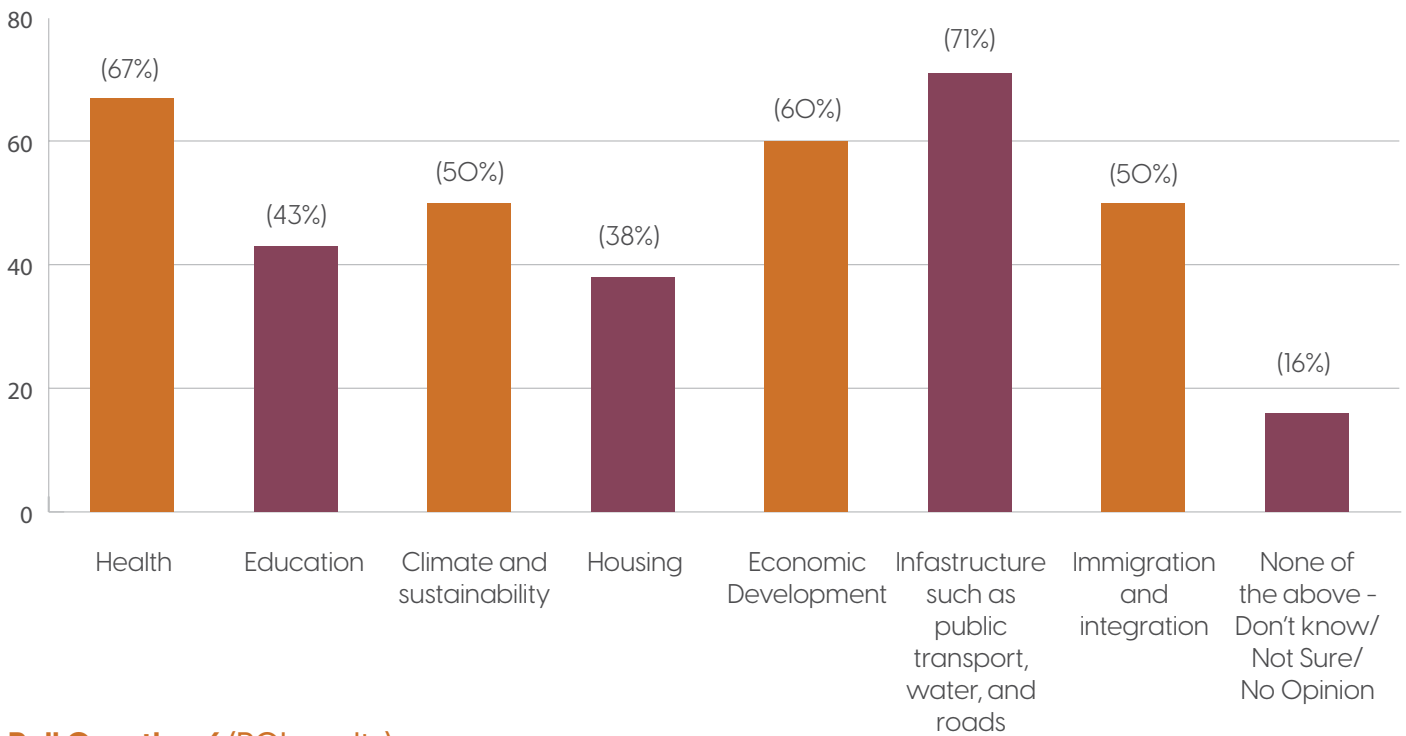
### Poll Question 4

In your view, should a Citizens' Assembly or Citizen Forum structure consist of members of...?



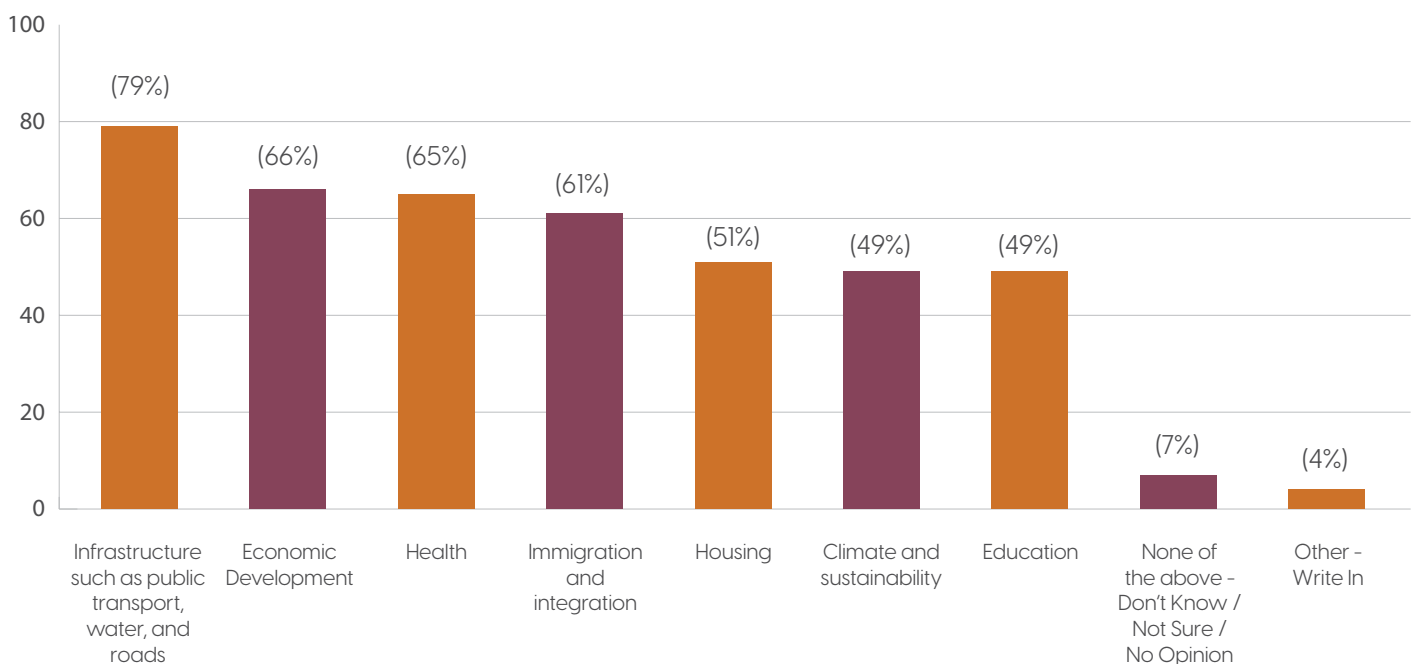
### Poll Question 5 (NI results)

Would you like to see greater Northern Ireland/ Republic of Ireland cross border cooperation in any of the following areas?



### Poll Question 6 (ROI results)

Would you like to see greater Northern Ireland Republic of Ireland cross border cooperation in any of the following areas ?



## Concluding remarks

It is notable that public opinion has aligned closely with other methods of opinion collation during the span of the Civic Initiative project. 69% of all respondents endorsed the view that the Northern Ireland Assembly should be launching citizens' assemblies/forums in order to give people a voice on key issues.

An analysis of the qualitative responses indicates those not in favor, or unsure, have valid concerns around the composition and selection process for an assembly structure. By contrast the Citizens' Forum on Housing voted 85% in favor of assemblies. It is considered that the Citizens' Forum on Housing benefitted from having a greater level of knowledge and understanding of the composition and selection process, thus leading to a stronger level of endorsement with perceived concerns from the public opinion polling addressed in this context. The Citizens' Forum on Housing recommended the use of citizens' assemblies at a national level on an annual basis, as well as the launching of citizens' assemblies in each council area.

Members of the unionist community were more likely to express skepticism of an assembly structure with 55% of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) voters answering 'no' to the use of assemblies/forums, however 58% of Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) voters supported their use. High levels of support for assemblies were evidenced across all age groups. Registered non-voters voted 68% in favor, reinforcing the view of the Civic Initiative that

assembly structures can increase the political participation of those currently disenfranchised or disengaged from the political system.

Health, education, and poverty received the highest levels of support for a future citizens' assembly/forum, health and education were also the two most selected topics by participants in stage 1 of the Civic Initiative project. Of note, is the preference for the composition of a future assembly/forum structure. Respondents preferred a structure that includes members of the general public alongside civic society representatives (53%), while a further 31% preferred only members of the general public. Notable for discussions on the Civic Forum under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is that only 6% of respondents agreed with a structure that includes representatives of civic society alone. This was the primary composition of the original Civic Forum. It is considered that the replication of the composition of the Civic Forum would be unlikely to receive public support, and that a hybrid model, as used by the Civic Initiative, that combines civic sector organizations, and the general public, is likely to receive greater levels of public support.

Public opinion polling also resulted in a similar endorsement of greater levels of cross-border cooperation, particularly in the areas of health, infrastructure and economic development. These three areas also received the highest levels of unionist support.





## Future Planning

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement promised the people of Northern Ireland a link between citizens and political institutions and subsequent agreements including most recently New Decade, New Approach, endorsed such an approach including a commitment of one citizens' assembly a year. To date, there has been no government actioned assembly.

The work undertaken by the Civic Initiative demonstrates the value and importance of giving citizens an opportunity to engage on key policy challenges and shows the untapped potential and enthusiasm among people for engagement.

The Civic Initiative opted for a different approach from a standing Civic Forum, due to advances in participatory democracy structures. The Citizens' Forum applies a more inclusive, focussed and involved model of participation.

It is clear that there is considerable potential for all-island cooperation in a range of socio-economic areas, which can be effectively harnessed through citizen engagement. Whilst the Civic Initiative consciously limited the citizens' assembly stage of this project to Northern Ireland, an all-island assembly could be successfully launched.

Politically, the civic forum, was not sustained in Northern Ireland, the evidence of the engagement through the Civic Initiative suggests that citizen involvement is

complementary to representative democracy, and citizen assemblies can be an effective vehicle for gauging public opinion on complex and sometimes contentious issues. The Civic Initiative project and its citizens' assembly and forums shows how disenfranchised communities can re-engage with political institutions, build an understanding of the policy dilemmas faced by politicians, provide citizen feedback and strengthen trust in political institutions. We encourage political parties to reconsider their support for a permanent or regular vehicle for civic engagement either through actioning a civic structure, or through delivering the New Decade New Approach commitment to holding one citizens' assembly a year.

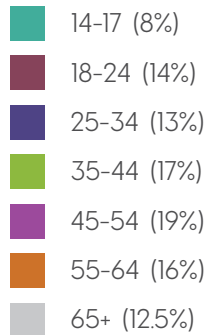
Whilst focus remains on the Stormont Assembly to deliver a vehicle for civic voice, both the Irish and UK governments also hold responsibility as co-guarantors of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. It is imperative that future planning for a citizens' assembly or civic structure is supported, funded and encouraged by both governments.

The Civic Initiative produced a wealth of perspectives across education, health, housing, rural access, culture, human rights, political institutions, and poverty and is available to stakeholders with an interest in advancing a citizens' assembly in any one of these areas. It is suggested that the two most pressing areas that could be effectively tackled in such a structure would be education and reform of Northern Ireland's political institutions.

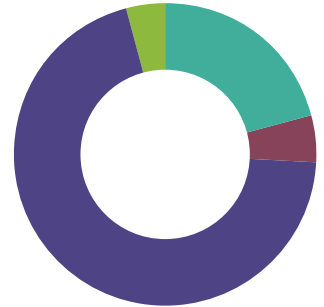
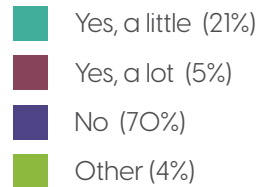
# Annex 1

## Full demographic breakdown of stage 1

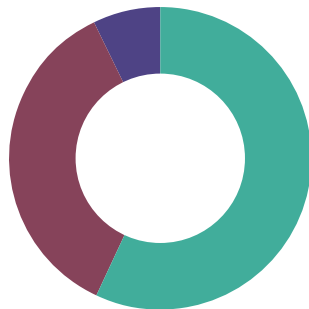
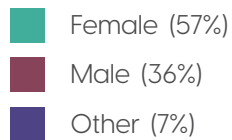
### Age



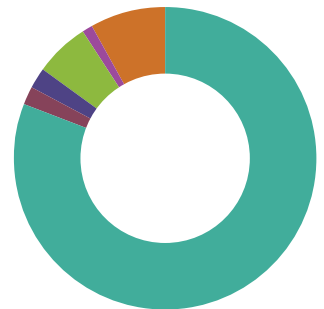
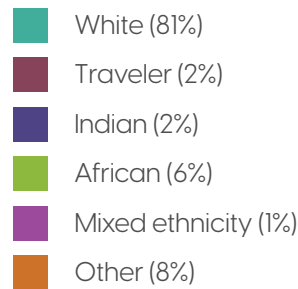
### Disability/health condition



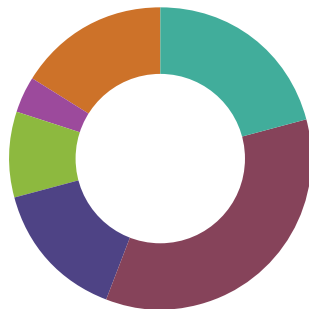
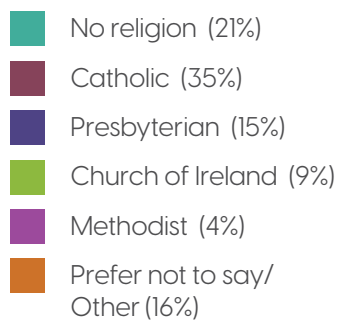
### Gender



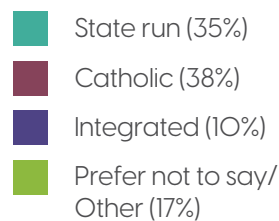
### Ethnicity



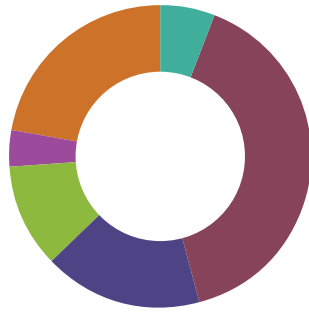
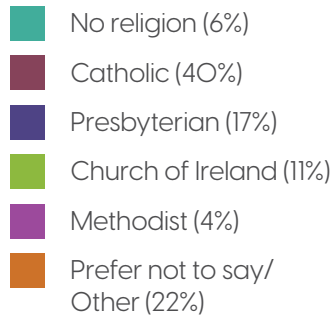
### Religion



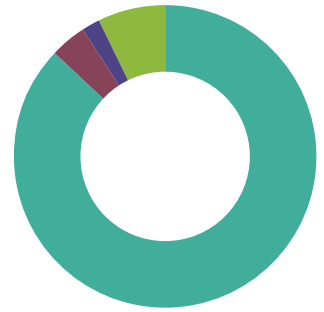
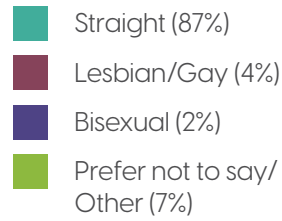
### School attended



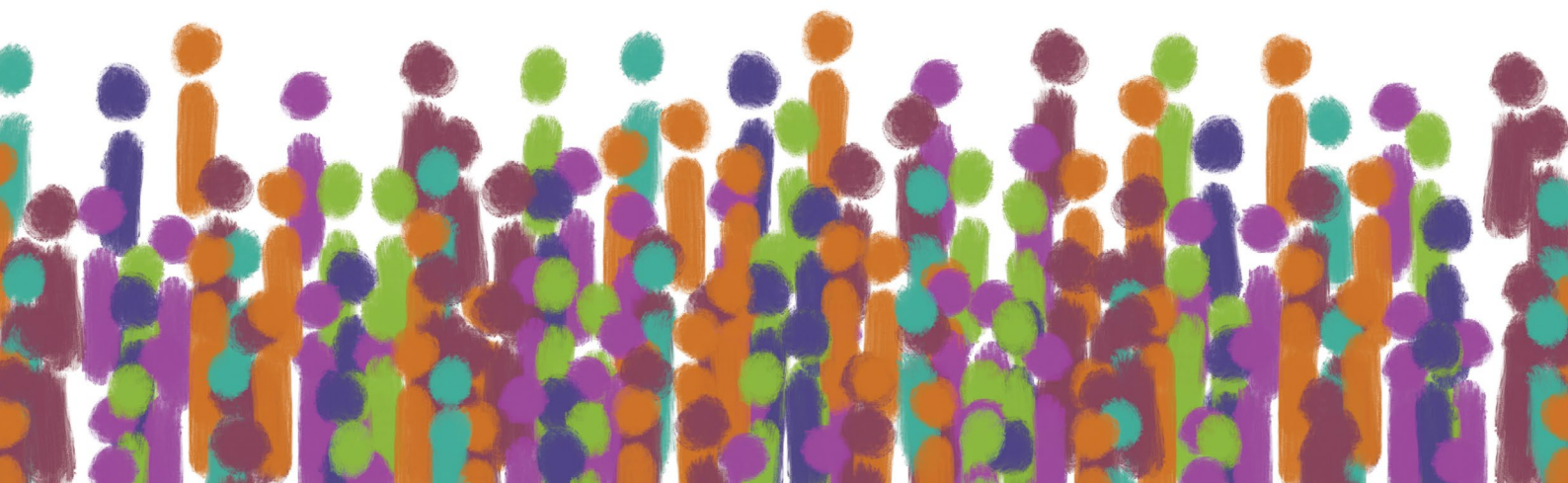
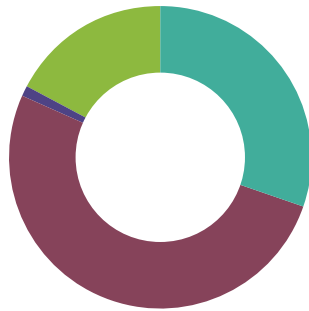
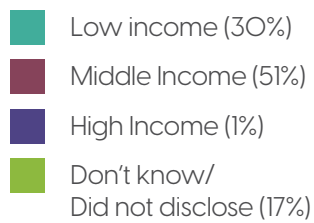
### Religion brought up in



### Sexual Orientation



### Income range





# Annex 2

## Demographic breakdown of Stage 3 participants

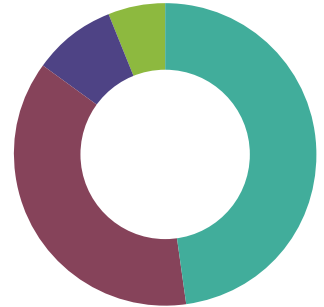
### Gender

- Male (53%)
- Female (47%)



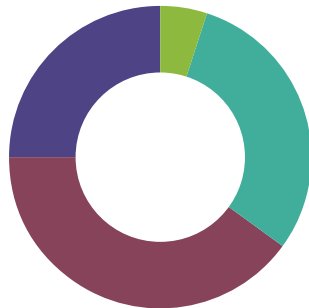
### Community background

- Protestant community (48%)
- Catholic community (37%)
- None (9%)
- Other (6%)



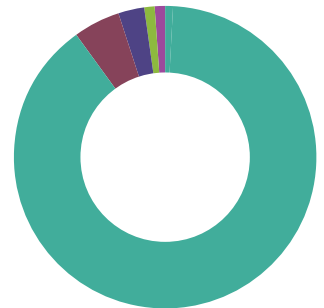
### Age

- 23-29 (5%)
- 30-44 (30%)
- 45-64 (40%)
- 65+ (25%)



### Ethnicity

- White (90%)
- White Other (5%)
- Black, African, or Caribbean (3%)
- Asian (1%)
- Mixed or Multiple Ethnicity (1%)



### Current religion

- Catholic (30%)
- Presbyterian (17%)
- Church of Ireland (13%)
- None (18%)
- Other Christian (15%)
- Prefer not to say (7%)

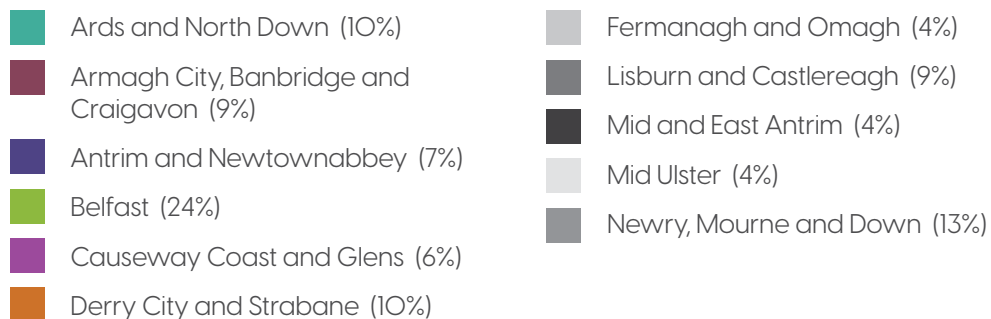


### Educational Attainment

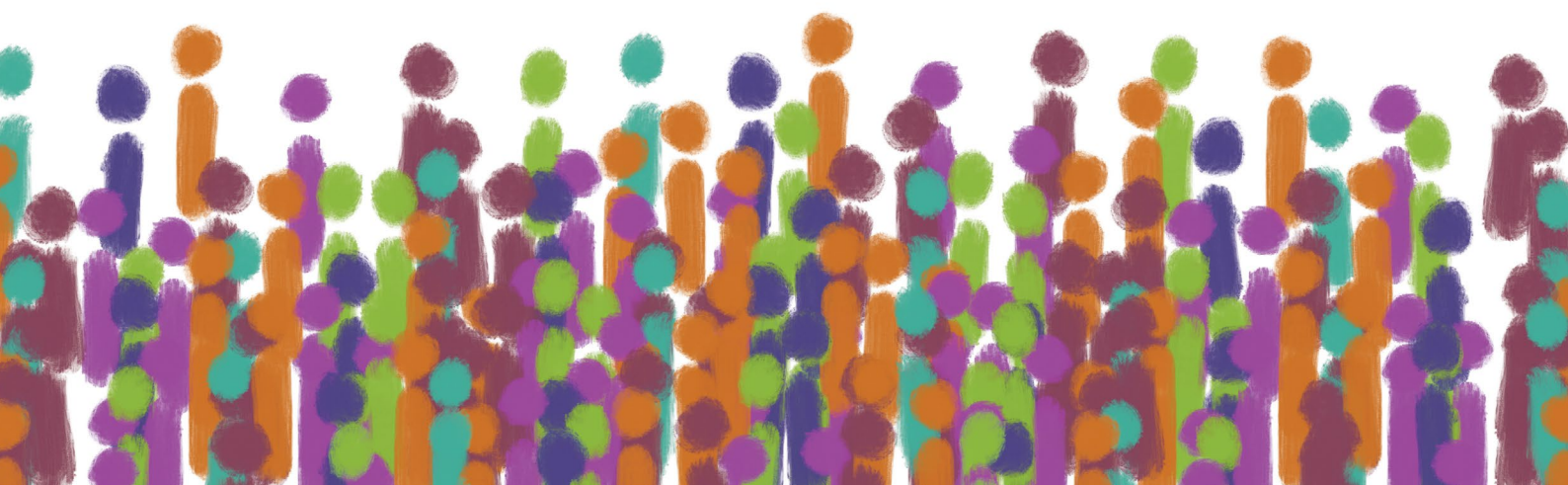
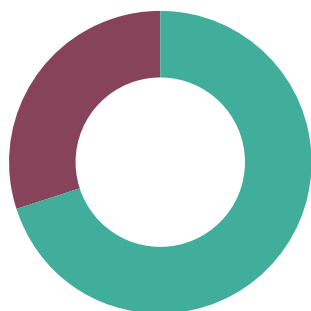
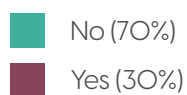
- No qualifications (6%)
- Level 1 (15%)
- Level 2 (10%)
- Level 3 (27%)
- Level 4 or above (42%)



## Local Council Area



## Long term Health Condition/Disability



# Annex 3

## Full voting records

### Votes that met the 80 per cent threshold Access and increasing supply

Allow NIHE to buy large disused public buildings and refurbish to meet temporary accommodation needs 92%

Legislate to allow NIHE to borrow and access private finance to build more homes 92%

Demolish properties deemed unfit for human habitation that cannot be redeveloped or refurbished within 18 months 85%

Instruct local authorities to identify commercial property in city centres to repurpose for residential use within 12 months. Begin the repurposing process within 18 months 85%

Legislate to allow housing executive to keep income to reinvest in public housing 85%

Provide more supported living/ sheltered living schemes that are stepping stone before a vulnerable individual is ready to maintain a tenancy 82%

Adopt the Scottish 'flat over shop' model to increase housing supply in town and city centres 82%

Increase awareness of the social housing selection scheme provide clear information on how to challenge decisions through an appeal. This information should be provided to all those seeking social housing 82%

Review and update the points allocation system for social housing to reflect current status and requirements on an annual basis 82%

Bring forward a requirement that all new developments should have a percentage of blended housing including social and co-ownership with a streamlined planning process that requires decisions within 12 weeks 80%

Provide an accessible homelessness intervention hub that offers support to people who are at risk of homelessness but have not met all criteria yet 80%

Review and update regulations on the private rented sector to create "guardrails" for a fairer, more transparent system to strengthen tenants' rights 80%

Give local authorities the ability to issue compulsory purchase orders at market rate for vacant buildings with a requirement that the LA must begin preparing the buildings for housing within 12 months 80%

Prevent private land banking by enforcing a requirement that land must be assigned within 12 months of purchase for a stated purpose 80%

Enforce a three strike rule for antisocial behaviour in social housing and rental properties 80%

### Affordability

Examine the viability of alternative building methods such as 'open system', prefab, tiny homes or Wiki house 82%

Financially incentivize 21-35 year olds with low interest mortgages, co ownership options and a route to owning your own home as a single owner 80%

Remove VAT charges for renovations, upgrades and retrofitting old properties 80%

A government subsidy for construction material for social and sustainable housing 80%

Review the Local Housing Allowance freeze on support with Housing Benefit 80%



## Infrastructure and Environmental

Take forward an integrated approach for all new developments, to include housing, transport, green spaces and access to other public services including schools and healthcare 91%

Provide attractive grants to all to increase retrofitting of older housing stock 88%

Improve and increase public transport links from rural locations to larger towns 85%

Enforce a requirement that all new builds are to be built to 'Part L' (energy efficiency) of building regulations to ensure highest level of insulation, efficiency and affordability 82%

Ensure building regulations are enforced within a specific timeline and routine inspections of private rented and social housing completed with repairs/ checks started within 14 days of inspection report being issued. 80%

Provide increased grants to landlords to improve the energy efficiency of homes including solar, wind, and double glazing 80%

Bring forward a carbon neutral energy plan with clear objectives to leverage advantages from solar, wind and tidal sources with published annual updates on progress 80%

## A holistic approach to housing

Update the curriculum to include education in primary and secondary schools on money management, getting on the property ladder, housing rights, understanding homelessness and anti-social behaviour 85%

Create a pipeline between schools and trades with onsite learning, external trade speakers and increased apprenticeships 85%

Integrate the education system so that all children and young people are educated together regardless of community background at all stages 80%

Offer free adult courses to allow people from other career paths to retrain and join the construction industry 80%

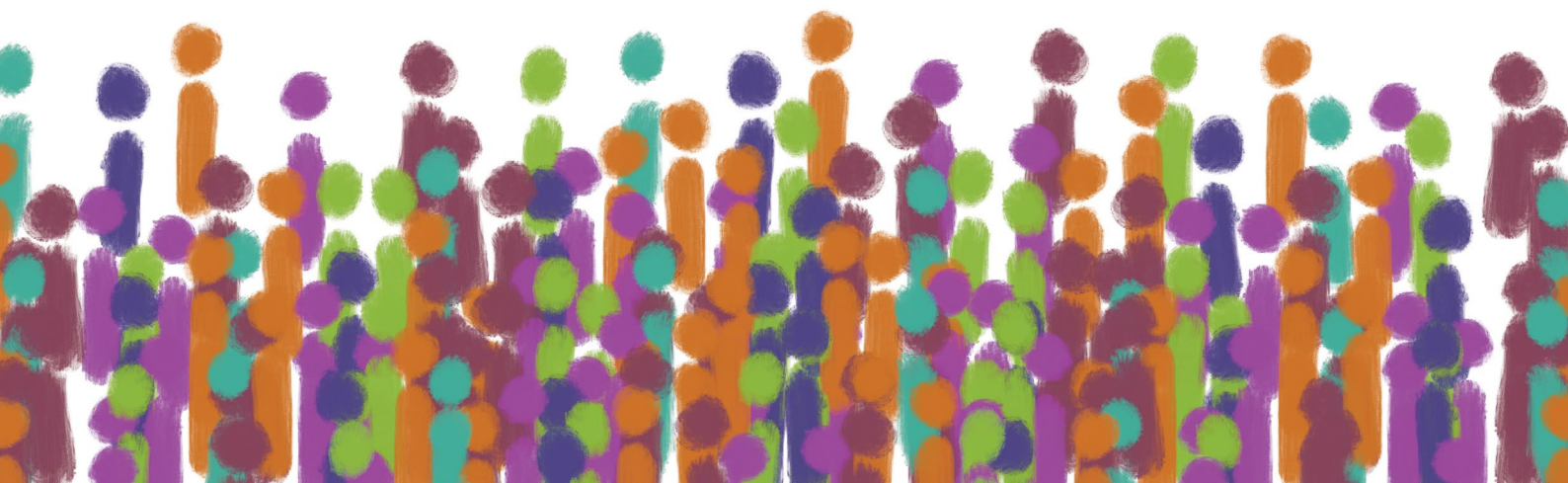
Legislate to enforce the removal of all flags and emblems from shared infrastructure in housing developments and public spaces 80%

## North-South Cooperation

Seek cross-border investment from the Irish government to improve water infrastructure in Northern Ireland 85%

Implement the All-island Rail Strategy to reopen closed rail lines 82%

Set up a North-South independent research group to examine potential for cooperation to improve infrastructure and sustainability 80%



## Governmental

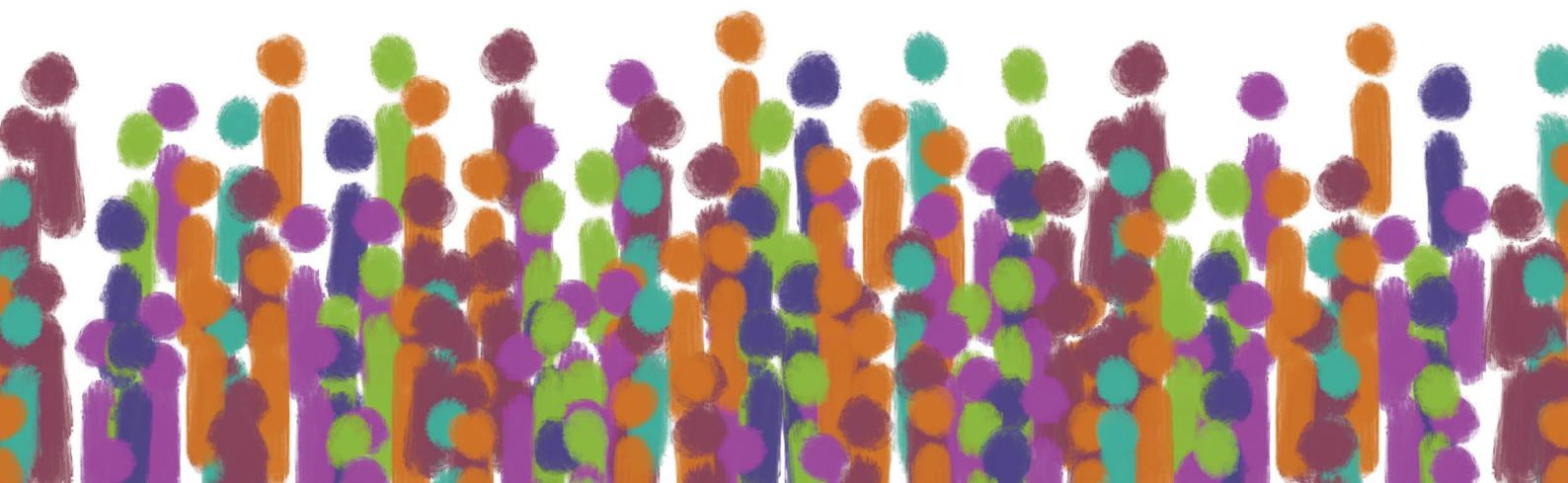
Reform Stormont so that no one party can collapse the government 94%

Launch citizens' assemblies in each Council Area, in tandem with a region-wide citizens' assembly. Hold a Citizens' Assembly every year 85%

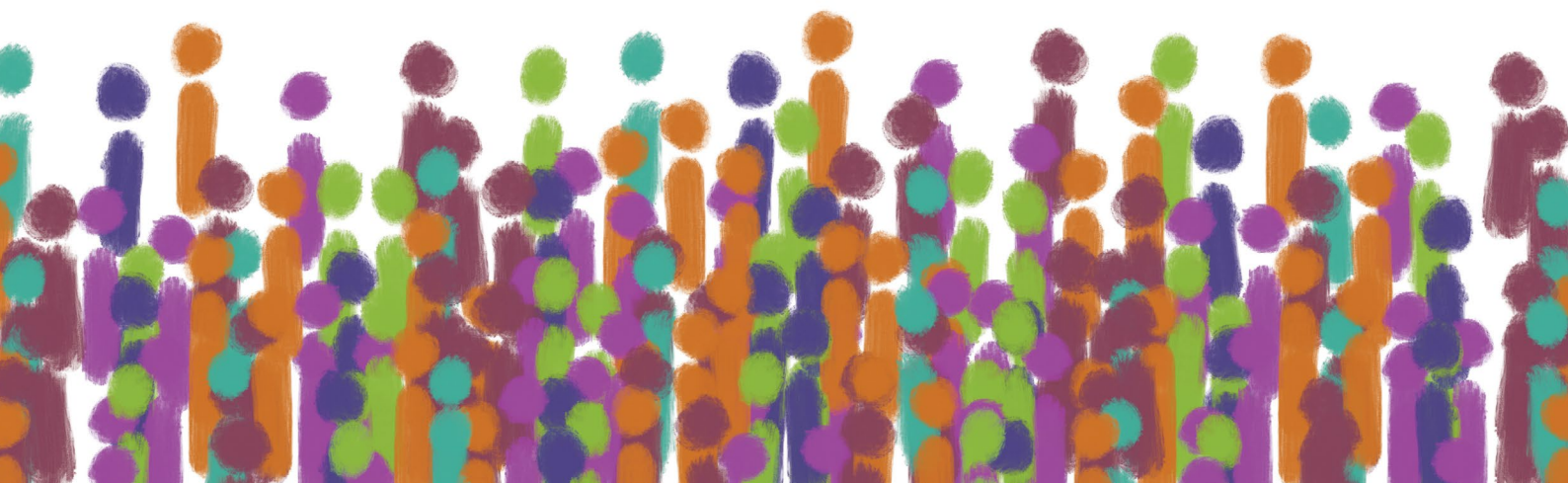
Introduce housing as a recurring agenda item at the North South Ministerial council 82%

### Votes not reaching 80 per cent support level

- Launch a media campaign to promote building trades as a career path 74%
- Stormont reform brought forward as a debate in Westminster and Oireachtas to create a more stable Government and institutions 72%
- Roll out an ambitious sustainable green energy scheme with 5, 10 and 15 year goals 68%
- Research the viability of community eco-based housing involving production of green/ renewable power including wind turbines 67%
- Collated data across all areas should be shared and published annually for a fuller picture of housing stock need and local issues 65%
- Review the accessibility of new builds to ensure they are as accessible as possible 64%
- Bring forward increased taxes on second and third homes 64%
- Research and report on the impact of immigration on the housing system to inform the government and public on housing needs 64%
- End the use of guarantors for renting 64%
- Legislate a rent cap on profit that a landlord can make to 15% above average area rental, rent increase are capped at CPI 63%
- Set up independent body "with teeth" to monitor and regulate the Private Housing Sector 63%
- Urgently advance mixed housing schemes to desegregate society 62%
- Bring in water charges to include a rebate scheme with a requirement that the revenue raised must be used to improve water infrastructure 61%
- Instruct the NIHE and Housing Associations to liaise with Trust Disability services to determine the needs and demands of people with disabilities to ensure they have access to suitable housing 56%
- Create an incentive scheme to encourage immigration that fill skills gaps in construction 56%



- Restructure the Housing Executive points system to ensure the immediate reaction times are quicker. Homeless people to be in accommodation in one to three hours from point of contact 55%
- Create an independent steering group, to review housing decisions. At both government and local planning level with the ability to appeal the decision 55%
- Request a joint revenue funding option report from Housing Association and Housing Executive to detail future need funding options 53%
- Create a new policy that requires social tenants to update on housing changes of circumstances with a fine for failure to declare changes that have been unreported for 12 months 52%
- Increase and improve government funded rehabilitation centres for addictions 51%
- Increase the provision of social and domiciliary care with greater levels of ring fenced funding to facilitate people living independently 49%
- Perform an annual assessment of benefits individually means - tested in line with rent increases 47%
- Legislate a limit on how many property any one private landlord can hold 45%
- Extend the NIHE term of lease from one year to 5-10 years to protect tenants from annual fee increases from private landlords 43%
- Legislate to increase the notice time required for eviction 44%
- Bring forward a refugee integration strategy 39%
- Trial a tower block communal areas and shared services initiative eg laundry services and gym facilities 32%
- Abolish the "right to buy" scheme 31%
- Increase funding provision for university courses to run larger intake numbers on mental health courses 25%
- Increase inheritance tax with the revenue raised used for public infrastructure 23%



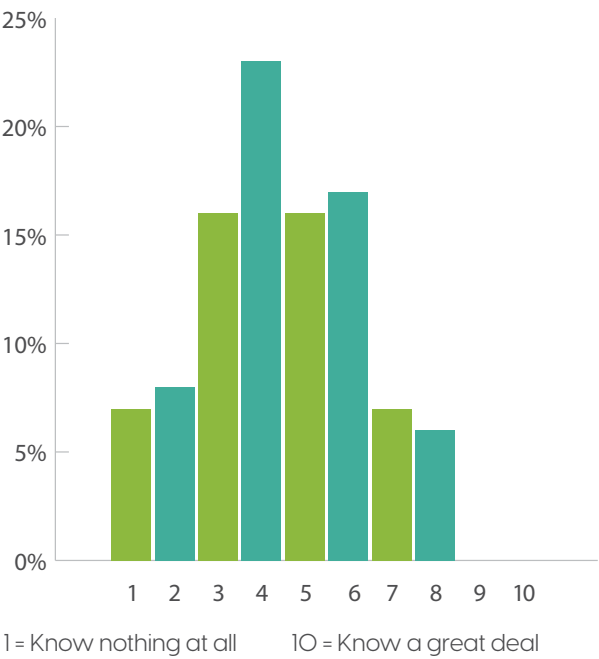
# Annex 4

## Participant Evaluation Full results

### General

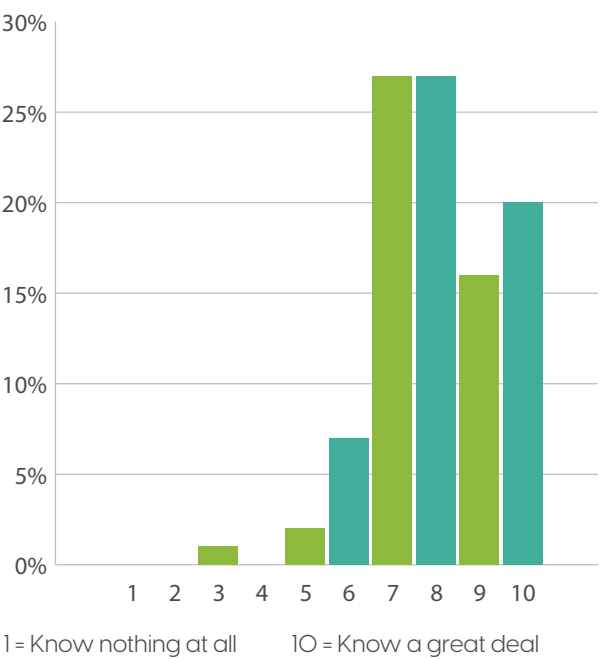
On a scale of 1-10, much would you say you feel you know about the Housing system in Northern Ireland?

#### Day 1 (84 responses)



Average: 4.4

#### Day 3 (67 responses)

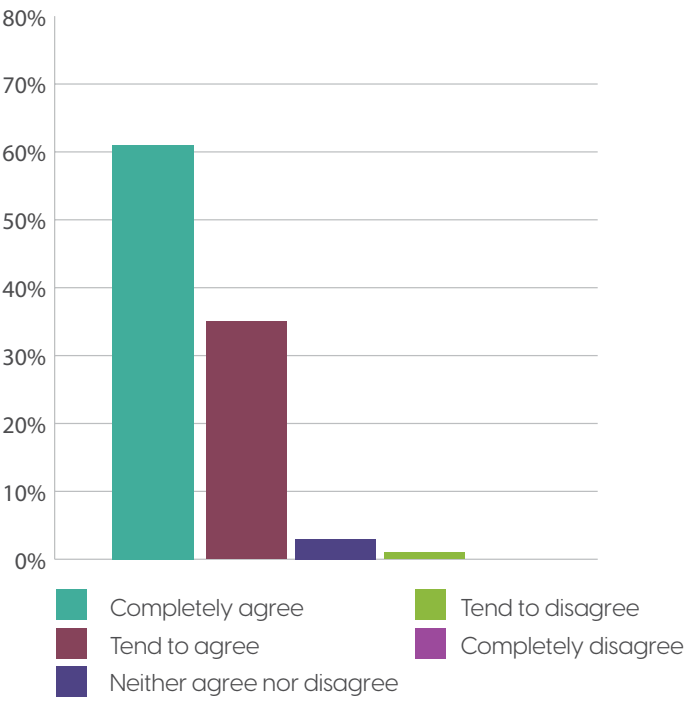


Average: 7.9

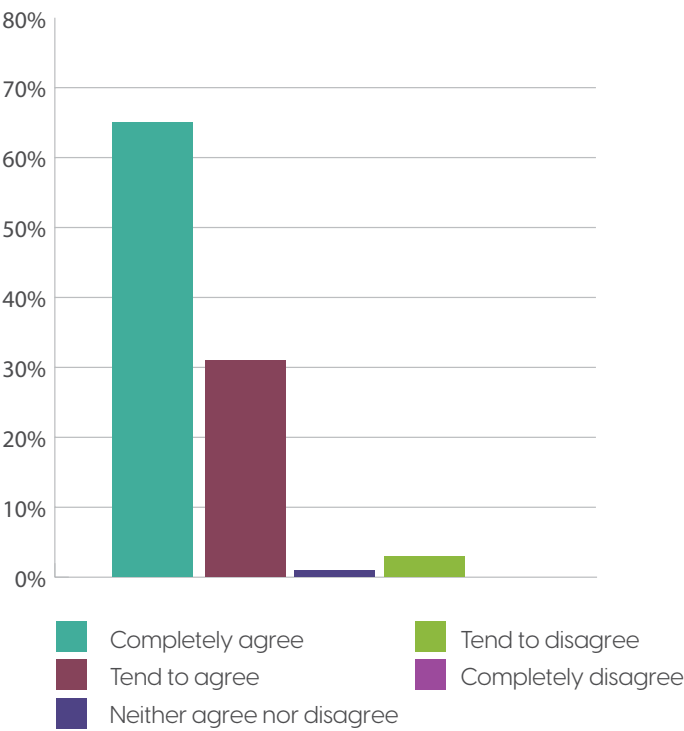
### Presentations

The presentations were useful.

#### Day 2 (80 responses)



The presentations covered a wide range of perspectives.



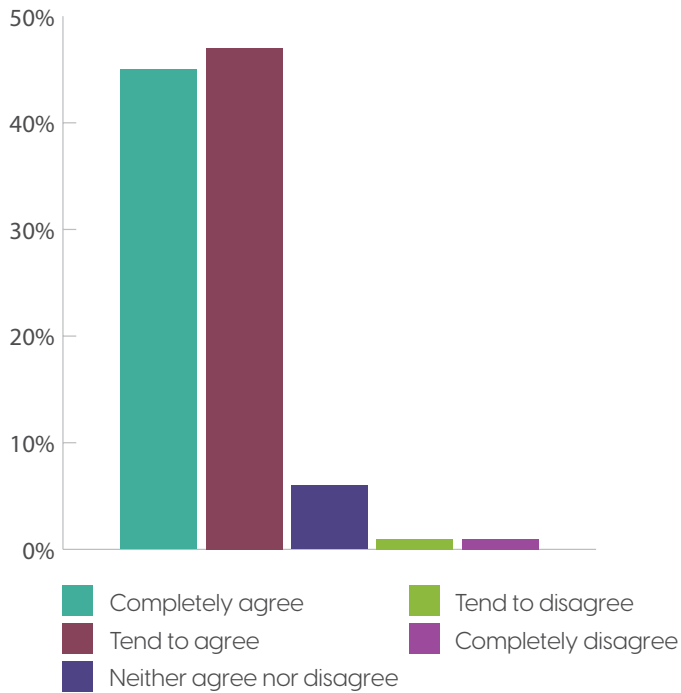


## Discussion

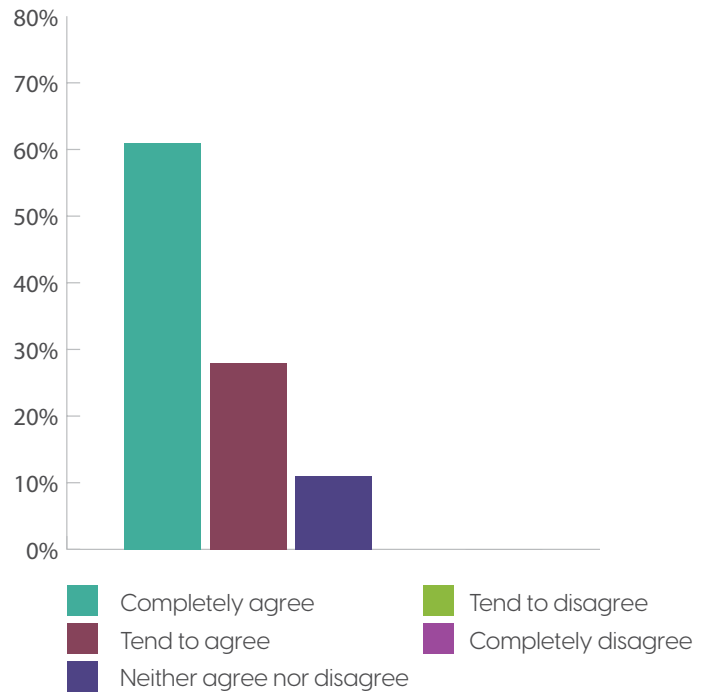
Overall experience.

### Day 3 (67 responses)

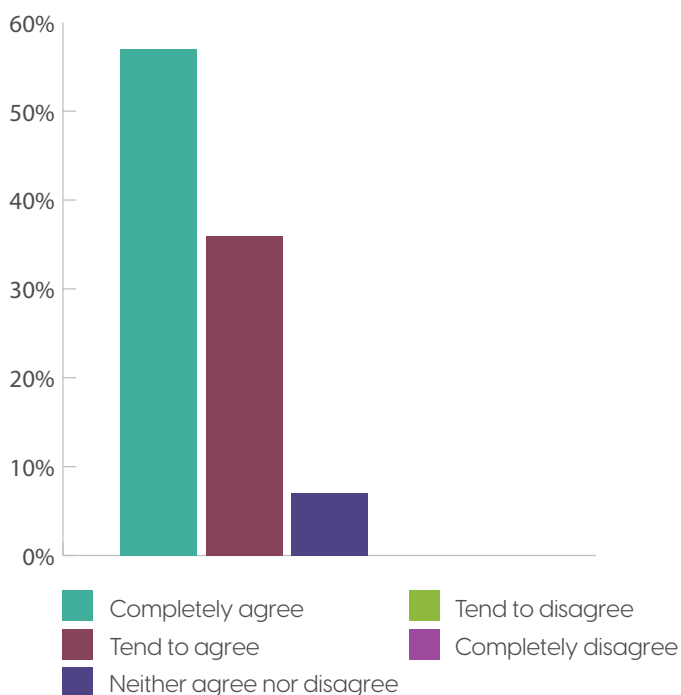
Overall, I believe that good arguments were brought to the discussion.



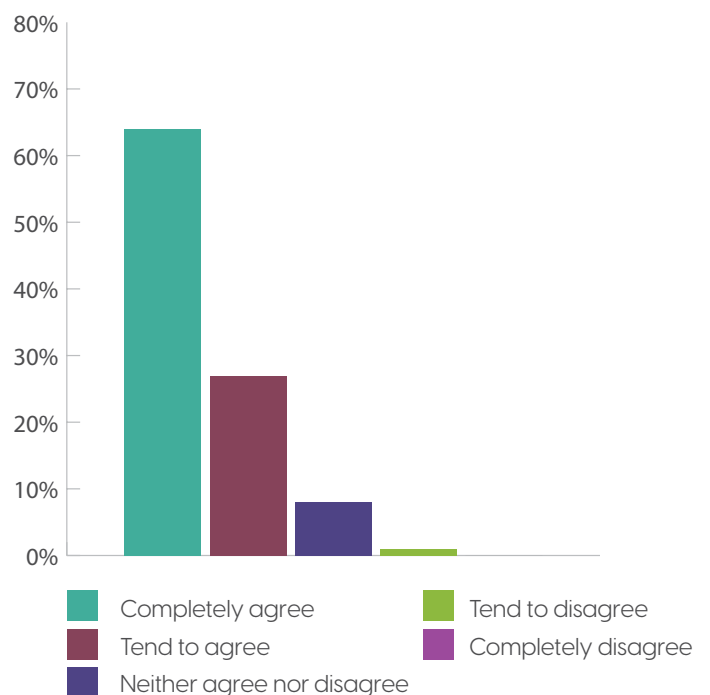
The table facilitators made sure that opposing arguments were considered.



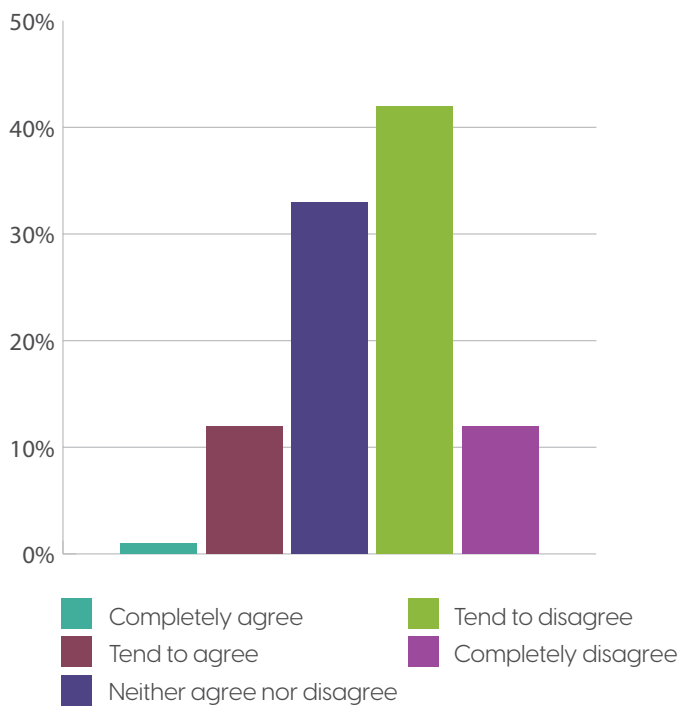
I was given plenty of speaking opportunities during the table discussions.



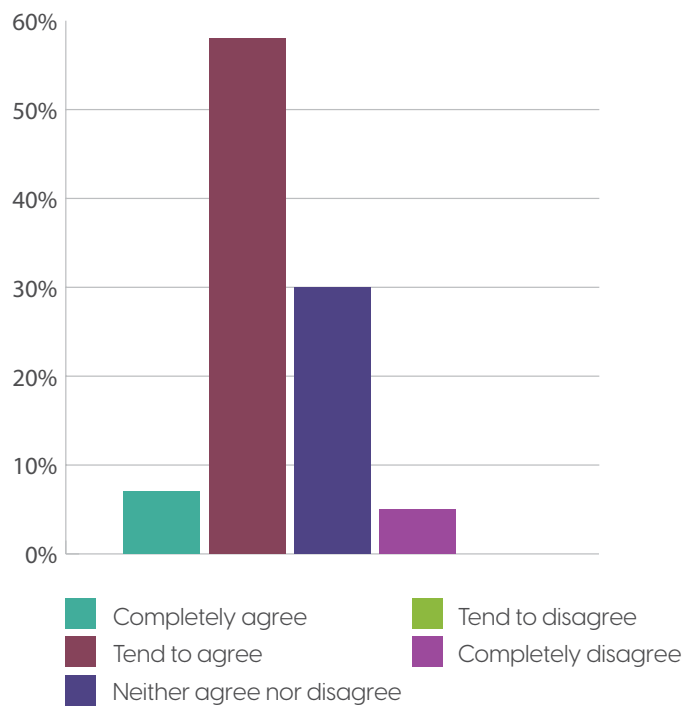
My fellow table members respected what I had to say, even when they didn't agree.



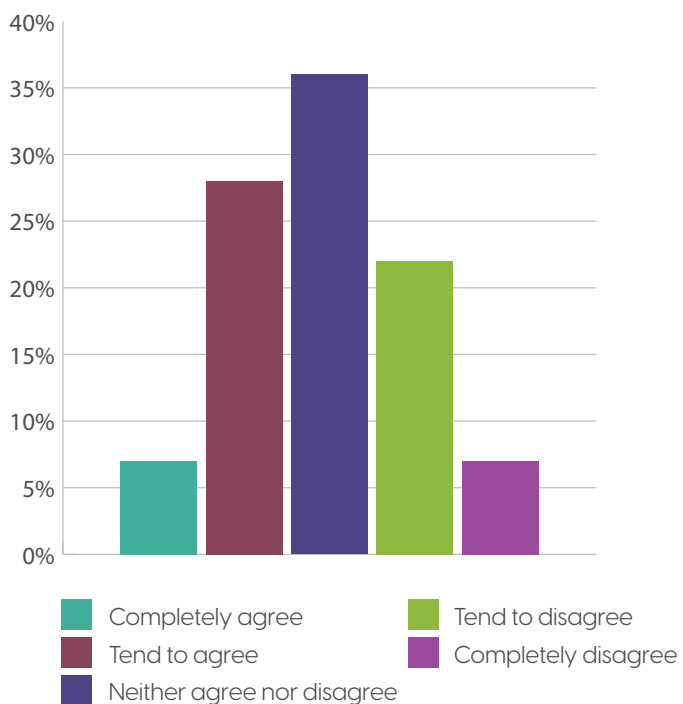
Most people had made up their minds and the discussion had little effect on them.



Most people appeared willing to change their minds during the discussion.



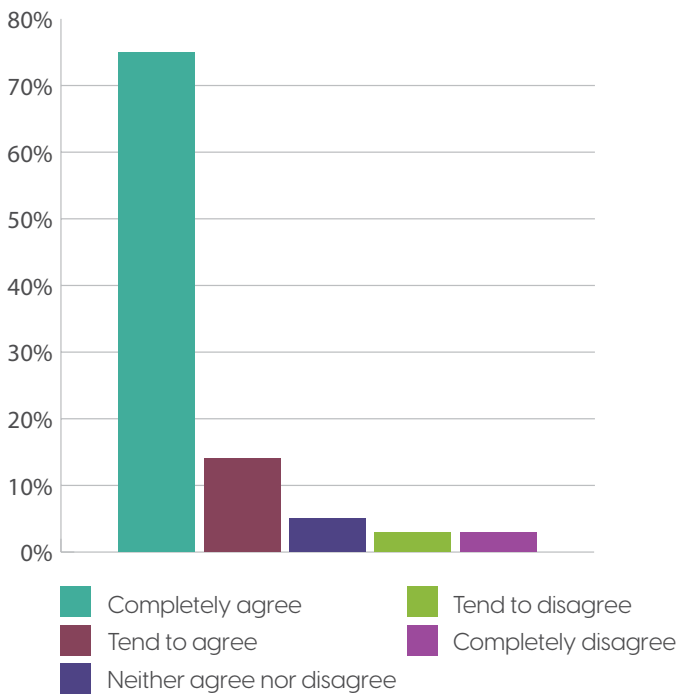
I changed my views as a result of the table discussions.



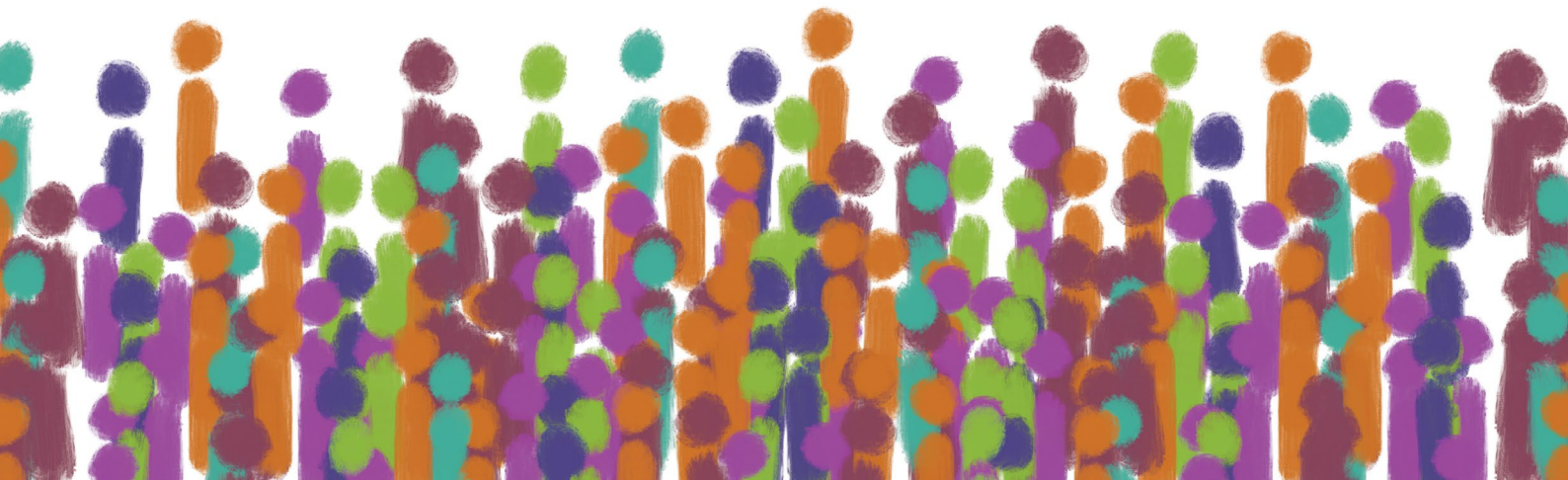
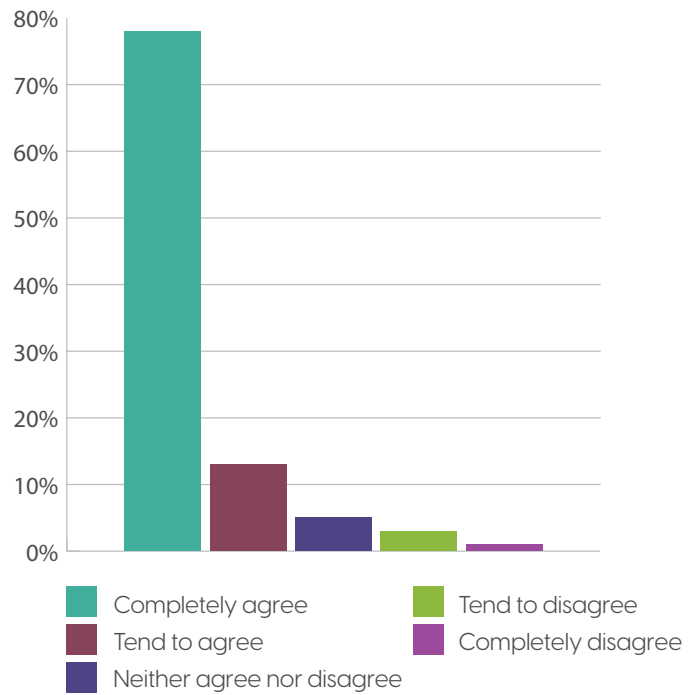
## Future use of Citizens' Assemblies

### Day 3 (67 responses)

From participating in the Citizens' Forum on Housing I would feel encouraged to participate in future initiatives like a Citizens' Assembly.



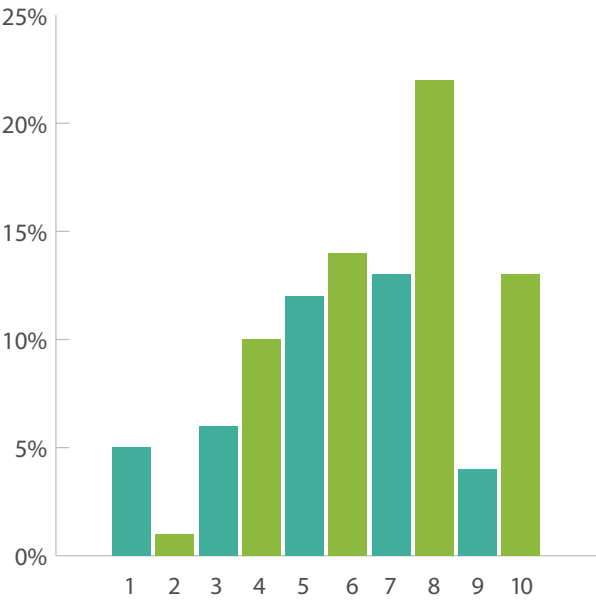
Citizens' Forums like this should be used more often to inform government and parliament decision-making.



Political attitudes

On a scale of 1-10, how much would you say that you are interested in politics?

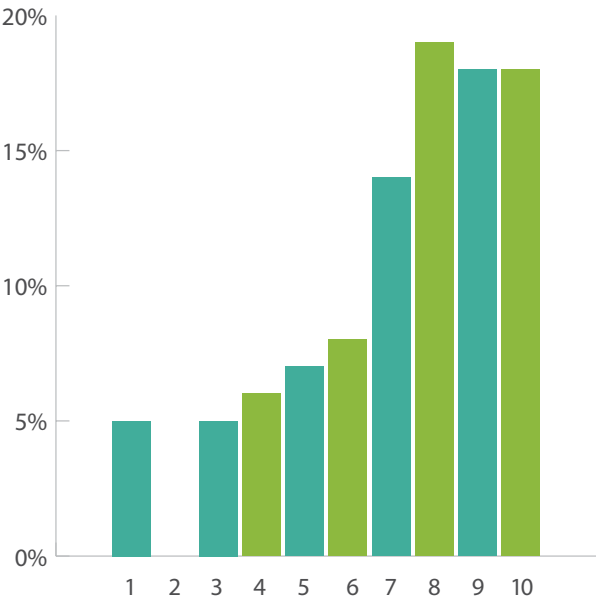
Day 1



1 = Not at all interested      10 = Extremely interested

Average: 6.4

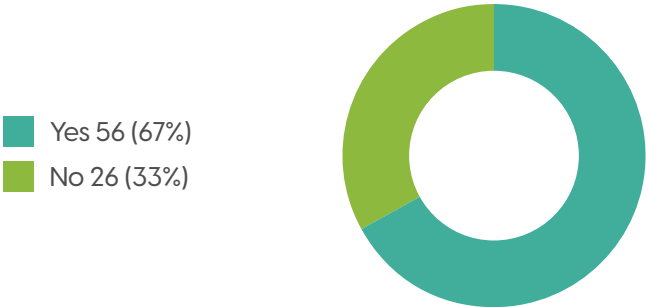
Day 3



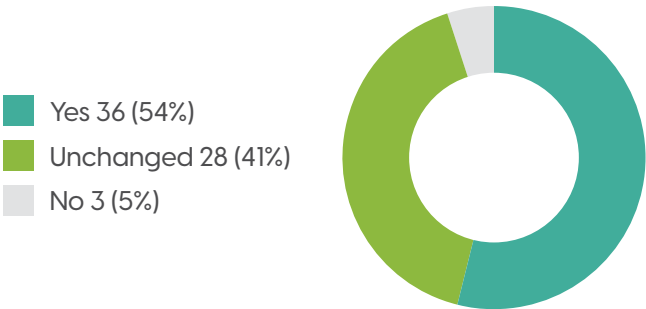
1 = Not at all interested      10 = Extremely interested

Average: 7.2

Did you vote in the last election?

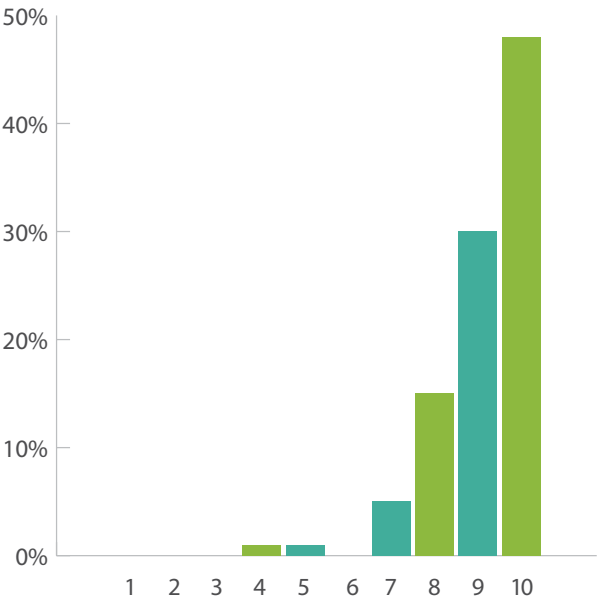


Do you feel more inclined to engage in politics following the Citizens' Forum?



Experience

Overall, on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the Citizens' Forum on Housing?



1 = Know nothing at all      10 = Know a great deal

Average: 9.1





# civic initiative

For more information on the Civic Initiative Project  
visit [www.disabilityaction.org/the-civic-initiative](http://www.disabilityaction.org/the-civic-initiative)  
or follow us on Twitter/X @CivicInitNI

