INDEPENDENT PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Northern Ireland Civic Initiative

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tasc

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1   Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation by Think Tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) of the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative (NICI). TASC is an independent think tank with a mission to address inequality through research, public education, and policy work.

1.1   Context

The Northern Ireland Citizens' Initiative (NICI) aims to foster meaningful civic engagement across Northern Ireland and its border counties. The initiative began a year-long planning stage in October 2022. From September 2023, it was funded by the International Fund for Ireland's Communities in Partnership Programme. A small project team, including a project lead and an administrative assistant, delivered the final stage of the programme in December 2024.

The model adopted by the NICI involved regional workshops with civil society organisations to identify key issues, one of which (housing) was selected to be deliberated on by a randomly selected, representative group of individuals in order to make recommendations to inform policy. The NICI's final report was launched on Monday, 24 February 2025.

This impetus for the initiative emerged from several contextual factors, notably the dissolution of the Civic Forum, established under the Good Friday Agreement, which was intended to provide a platform for social, economic, and cultural consultation. The Forum's lifespan lasted briefly from 2000-2002. More recently, the 'New Decade, New Approach' Agreement (2020) has renewed the focus on civic participation, emphasising citizen engagement in government policy development. Alongside this, a key motivation for NICI is to respond to declining trust in politicians' ability to effect change, exacerbated in Northern Ireland by prolonged periods without a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

Against this backdrop and informed by encouraging examples such as Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, the NICI aimed to demonstrate the potential for deliberative democracy to deepen civic and political engagement beyond traditional voting. In doing so, it aimed to include individuals outside established advocacy networks, empowering marginalised voices and fostering a sense of shared space.

1.2   Research aims

This evaluation aims to better understand the process of implementing the NICI, including:

- gauging the overall fidelity of programme delivery against what was originally proposed;
- surveying documented outputs (including KPI targets);
- understanding barriers and facilitators to implementing and delivering the programme;
- exploring perceived impacts of the programme; and
- developing recommendations for future delivery of similar programmes.

This evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach and was conducted between January and February 2025. Documentary analysis was used to review NICI's application to CiPP and the final report, including pre- and post-deliberation surveys. This aimed to map implementation fidelity and documented outputs.

Qualitative data were gathered through interviews and focus groups with forum participants, as well as members of the oversight committee and the process design committee. These

encounters explored the programme's rationale, implementation barriers, perceived impacts, and recommendations for future deliberative initiatives.

1.3 Report structure

The report is divided into the following sections:

- Chapter 2 provides an overview of the study methodology.

- Chapter 3 describes study findings related to the set-up and implementation of the programme, including barriers and facilitators.

- Chapter 4 describes study findings related to delivery of the initiative, including barriers and facilitators.

- Chapter 5 summarises the impacts of the programme, including its success in engaging a diverse cohort of participants, impact on individual participants, public awareness and policy.

- Chapter 6 provides recommendations made by stakeholders and forum participants as to how learning from the NICI could inform improved implementation and delivery of similar deliberative initiatives in Northern Ireland.

2   Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the evaluation, which was conducted between January and February 2025.

This includes an explanation of how documentary analysis and qualitative methods were employed as part of the research, as well as guidance on how readers should approach the research findings.

2.1   Documentary analysis

Documents produced during the implementation and delivery of the NICI were reviewed and analysed by TASC. These included the application submitted to CIPP in August 2023 and the final report. Findings of data collected from workshops and the Citizens' Forum on Housing participants are reported throughout this evaluation report, including a pre-discussion survey (n=84) collected at the beginning of day one of deliberation at the Citizens' Forum on Housing and a post-discussion survey (n=67) collected at the conclusion of day three. This involved:

- **mapping** documented implementation of the NICI;
- **gauging** the overall level of fidelity to the model initially proposed to CIPP;
- **surveying** documented outputs, including targets met and documented impacts.

This phase of the research aimed to understand how implementation of the programme played out in practice, as compared to the programme as originally proposed and to explore the rationale for any changes. This stage of research informed the evaluation report findings, as well as feeding into the design and delivery of subsequent qualitative research conducted as part of the evaluation.

2.2 Interviews and focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with participants who took part in the two-day Citizens' Forum on Housing held in December 2024. Focus and interviews were also held with members of the oversight committee and process design committee, who played a key role in designing and implementing the initiative.

Interviews and focus groups explored stakeholders' views of the implementation and delivery of the NICI, including the rationale for the programme; barriers and facilitators to implementation and delivery; perceived impacts of the programme; and recommendations for how learning from the NICI could shape delivery of future deliberative democracy initiatives in Northern Ireland.

Interviews were approximately 60 minutes, with focus groups lasting around 90 minutes. Interviews and focus groups were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams. A topic guide was developed that could be used flexibly between different stakeholder groups to ensure overlap between research encounters and enable multiple perspectives on how the initiative was implemented and delivered to inform the evaluation.

Topic guides ensure consistency in data collection by outlining key issues to explore with each participant. Researchers use these topic guides flexibly and responsively to shape the content of interviews and focus groups. The order of topics and time spent on each varied between interviews and focus groups. Qualitative research allows interviewers to delve into unexpected

but relevant themes that arise during discussions. The topic guide used to deliver these encounters is included as Appendix A of this report.

2.2.1 Sample

Table 1 below summarises the achieved sample for the study, which included twelve participants across five research encounters.

Recruiting forum participants to take part in focus groups for this research proved challenging. Though researchers employed a number of strategies, such as oversampling and arranging additional research encounters, the overall level of participation remained below the targeted number of 3-6 participants per focus group. Though all participants were asked to confirm attendance and were sent reminders ahead of the focus group, there was a high level of non-attendance, with some participants cancelling at the last minute and others failing to attend without advance notice.

TABLE 1 - QUALITATIVE SAMPLE OVERVIEW

Participant group	Number of Encounters	Number of Participants
Oversight committee	1	4
Process design committee	2	3
Forum participants	2	5
Total	**5**	**12**

2.2.2 Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and the resulting transcripts were analysed. This qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using the Framework method, developed by Ritchie and Lewis. This matrix-based approach to qualitative data analysis facilitates both case-based and theme-based summaries of findings. Key themes relevant to the research questions were mapped as columns, with individual cases (interviews or transcripts) represented by rows. Participant views and experiences were summarised in detail within the appropriate matrix cells. This enabled the subsequent analysis of themes and subthemes, as presented in the report's main findings.

2.2.3 Ethical considerations

TASC invited participants to opt in to take part in research. To ensure that participants were able to make an informed decision whether to take part in the evaluation, the research team shared an information sheet with all potential participants, which included a clear summary of what the study aimed to achieve, why they had been selected, and what taking part would involve. These were verbally summarised for participants at the beginning of each research encounter, and participants were given an opportunity to ask questions before verbal consent was sought to take part and allow the encounter to be audio recorded. Included in the information sheet was a link to the TASC privacy notice, which explains how TASC processes participant data in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

2.3 Interpreting findings

This report presents findings of documentary analysis, and those based and qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups

Qualitative findings provide in-depth insights into the range of participant views, experiences, and motivations we encountered when conducting the fieldwork for this study. Throughout the report, verbatim quotes are used to illustrate key findings and to ground the report's findings in participants' own words.

2.3.1 Limitations

To contextualise the findings presented here, readers should note that this research features several key limitations, as follows

- **Limited respondent participation.** Due to challenges in recruiting participants, outlined in Section 1 Sample, researchers were unable to purposively sample participants. As such, qualitative responses fall below the aimed-for sample size and do not reflect the diversity of views that the research aimed to include. The recruitment strategy used by NICI to recruit forum participants aimed for diversity across key characteristics, but the limited opt-in skews the sample for this research toward male, white participants from Protestant backgrounds.
- **Evaluation timing.** Another key limitation arises from the deadline for presenting the research findings. This meant that data collection for this study took place prior to the Initiative producing its final report. Consequently, participants were unable to reflect on the overall process, including its immediate outcomes. As discussed in section *5.4 Political and policy impact*, several participants we spoke to reported that their views on the success of the Initiative were strongly linked to their perception of the degree to which the published findings reflected the deliberations they took part in and the capacity of those recommendations to impact policy.

3 Setup and implementation

3.1 Background and context

The NICI aims to provide "a meaningful space for civic engagement across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties."[1] Several contextual factors prompted the NICI to pursue a deliberative approach to addressing pressing social issues in Northern Ireland. These included the discontinuation of the Civic Forum envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement to "act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues,"[2] and was to be composed of representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors. Though the Civic Forum only lasted between 2000 and 2002, a renewed focus on civic engagement featured in the New Decade, the New Approach Agreement (2020) to restore the Northern Ireland Executive following a three-year hiatus. The agreement included a provision 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 its supporting strategies," recognising "the value of structured and flexible engagement with civic society to assist the Government to solve complex policy issues." Stakeholders stressed that while the discontinuation of the Civic Forum was a major contextual factor for setting up the NICI, the initiative did not aim to act as a replacement or surrogate for it. Rather, it was hoped that the NICI could act as a 'proof of concept', which demonstrated the potential of deliberative democracy in Northern Ireland.

Key stakeholders involved in implementing the NICI discussed how growing interest in deliberative democracy around the world had influenced the NICI's approach. They cited several positive examples, including the role that the Irish Citizens' Assembly had played in the marriage equality and abortion referendums in the south, as well as a 2018 Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland looking at the issue of social care for the elderly. Stakeholders described participatory democracy as enabling greater understanding and fulfilment of citizenship and rights. They felt that deliberative democracy created the potential for deeper forms of democratic engagement and that it had the potential to enrich democratic engagement beyond the model of voting for a new candidate every four years under representative forms of democracy. Stakeholders acknowledged the role that voluntary organisations play in giving communities, including marginalised communities, a voice in civil society. However, they felt that deliberative democracy could include individuals not connected to networks or communities engaged in advocacy. It was felt that deliberative approaches can give participants who do not have a public platform confidence, empowering them in the practice of sharing a space with each other and having their voices heard. It was hoped that the NICI could include people not typically involved in community-level organising, to understand the needs of marginalised groups that stakeholder organisations work with.

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[1] NICI Final Report
[2] The Good Friday Agreement, ' Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations, 10 April 1998, available at:
https://web.archive.org/web/20250103165125/https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/good-friday-agreement.pdf.

"It wasn't about those people who have already actively engaged in their communities. It was about giving an opportunity to people who perhaps weren't actively engaged. And that's really getting down to another level of participative democracy." **Stakeholder**

Another contextual factor mentioned by participants, and one that had motivated forum participants to take part, was dwindling trust in the effectiveness of politicians to bring about change. Participants implied that the long-term challenges in forming a Northern Ireland Assembly and appointing a Northern Ireland Executive had damaged perceptions among Northern Irish Citizens regarding the efficacy of politics. One view was that in Northern Ireland, politicians are constrained within a 'populist vice' that means they are afraid to lead on radical change. It was hoped that greater citizen participation could offer a way out of this deadlock, giving politicians a license to advance policy agendas that have demonstrably emerged directly from citizens.

3.2   Programme setup

CiPP funded the NICI from September 2023, following a year-long planning stage beginning in October 2022. The programme was delivered in four stages between November 2023 and December 2024.

The project was conceived and implemented as a multi-stage process involving regional workshops with civil society organisations and activists across six geographical areas of Northern Ireland, including cross-border participation in the southern Northern Irish border counties. These workshops would discuss and identify issues and recommendations. The issues and recommendations identified by the regional workshops would inform, together with invited submissions from civil society organisations and individuals, the topics discussed at three deliberative gatherings involving randomly selected individuals. Recommendations from these deliberative events would form the basis of a report to be launched with a livestream and 150 guests in attendance.

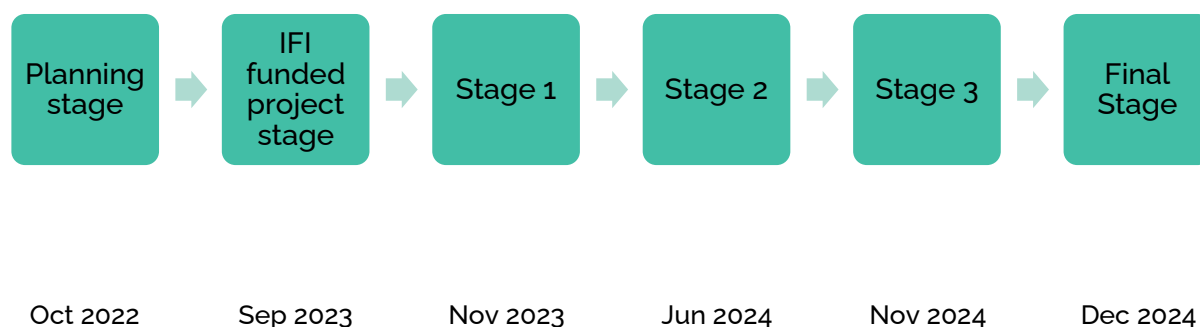| Planning stage	IFI funded project stage	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Final Stage
Oct 2022	Sep 2023	Nov 2023	Jun 2024	Nov 2024	Dec 2024

FIGURE 1 - PROJECT TIMELINE (SOURCE: NICI FINAL REPORT)

3.2.1   Managing structure

The NICI was initially conceived by the Project Lead during lockdown, and an Oversight Committee was convened to oversee implementation of the project. The Project Lead was responsible for delivering the project, supported by an administrative assistant.

The oversight committee was composed of members from community and voluntary sector organisations based in Northern Ireland. In addition to overseeing the programme's implementation, the Oversight Committee played a role in delivery by aiding recruitment of participants for regional workshops from organisations and activists in their networks.

In addition to the oversight committee, two additional committees were formed to advise on different aspects of the project implementation. A Process Design Group provided expertise on deliberation and designing the workshops and forums. A Content Curation Committee was constituted somewhat later (March 2024) and provided expert knowledge on substantive topics, notably housing, the topic chosen for the Citizens' Forum.

All three committees had individual terms of reference which detailed the purpose, ways of working, objectives, and scope of each committee. The terms of reference also specified how meetings would be chaired, and contribute to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the NICI. The terms of reference for the Oversight Committee and Process Design Group committed them to meeting every six weeks, whereas the Content Curation Committee committed to meeting irregularly "as and when required to meet the objectives of the committee." The advisory committees held their final meetings in January 2025, between the delivery of the Citizens' Forum and before the launch of the NICI final report. Three joint sessions were held between the committees on September 11th 2023, April 9th 2024 and July 2nd 2024.

Disability Action NI was designated as the 'Lead Applicant' in charge of project finances, and the project was delivered by two project staff, a project lead supported by an administrative assistant. Sortition Foundation acted as a delivery partner, selecting participants for the deliberative fora.

3.3 Barriers and facilitators to implementation

Stakeholders involved in implementing the programme identified several barriers and facilitators they experienced during the course of implementing the NICI, and these are discussed in this section.

3.3.1 Facilitators/enablers

This section provides an overview of facilitators and enablers that supported successful implementation.

3.3.1.1 A long planning stage

Stakeholders who had been involved in the Oversight Committee since early on described the early stages of implementation. They reported that a lot of work had gone into developing the project over a year prior to approaching funders.

> *"How many times do people just get the funding and work? You know, it's not a great way to be, especially when you want to work with a project at this level."*
> **Stakeholder**

They reported that the Oversight Committee had emerged out of a group of community and voluntary sector organisations that felt informal at first, and that the process for implementing and delivering the initiative had grown organically through the input of committee members.

3.3.1.2   Expertise and input from committee members

Stakeholders felt that the input and expertise of the committee members were a large contributing factor to the success of the programme. This included the Oversight Committee, which had strong networks within diverse communities and facilitated the NICI to access workshop participants from a range of groups, including those representing disabled people, LGBTQI+, ethnic minorities, and rural communities. They also cited the expertise and experience among the Process Design Group and in facilitating workshops and deliberative events.

> *"It was a very nice range of insights and expertise that we were able to bring together." **Stakeholder***

While committee members were not always able to attend each meeting, it was reported that there were opportunities for them to contribute by email after meetings that they had been unable to attend.

3.3.1.3   Effort and initiative of the project team

Stakeholders commended the important work of the project team, highlighting the work of the project lead. They emphasised the project lead's initiative in generating the initial idea for the project and dedication in delivering the project with little support (see 3.3.2.1 *Insufficient resources*).

3.3.2   Challenges/Barriers

This section provides an overview of challenges and barriers that hindered successful implementation.

3.3.2.1   Insufficient resources

Some stakeholders felt that the project was insufficiently funded given its scope and ambition. They commended the effort and dedication of the project lead and the administrative assistant and felt that funding constraints put a lot of pressure on the project lead to deliver the project with only administrative support.

> *"I think that she did a fantastic job in trying her best to, you know, reach out to the relevant people and to draw on the relationships that she already had with, you know, quite a lot of groups" **Stakeholder***

Though the Oversight Committee and advisory committees offered support to the project's staff, during interviews they reminded that they were acting in a voluntary capacity and not in a "formal" supportive role. Some stakeholders questioned the sustainability of this approach as the budget did not include funding to compensate individuals who contributed to the oversight and advisory committees. It was felt that it would be more difficult to recruit stakeholders in this role in future without compensation, as the process proved time-consuming and required stakeholders to contribute many free hours.

3.3.2.2   Project oversight structure

Stakeholders characterised the project oversight structure as "labyrinthine," with many committees and unclear responsibilities. Members of the oversight committee reported their role was not "clear-cut" as they had overseen the work of various committees, made decisions about the progression of the Initiative, and offered advice and support to staff.

Added to this, the Oversight Committee reported that they had limited powers; for instance, they were not in charge of the project's finances, nor were they the employer of the project staff, including the Project Lead. They felt that there were potential issues that luckily did not arise, but which the Oversight Committee would have been unable to address. For example, their limited powers meant that they would have had little latitude to act if they had been unhappy with the project staff's performance or become aware that the organisation overseeing finances had mismanaged funds.

Some participants also expressed frustration over communication channels that existed between the committees; they reported that the project lead acted as the sole liaison between the committees (except for a single meeting attended by all three committees), and consequently, committee members felt unsure if information was always fully and accurately relayed with the level of nuance needed.

Some participants gave the impression that this lack of clarity was because the governance structure emerged in a somewhat ad hoc way. It was reported that the need for a Process Design Group was only articulated somewhat late in the planning stage, when it was identified that the Oversight Committee lacked expertise on deliberative democracy.

3.3.2.3 Ensuring deliberative democracy is perceived as legitimate.

Stakeholders cautioned that deliberative initiatives are unaccountable, unelected bodies that aim to intervene within policy processes that are traditionally the preserve of elected members. Deliberative democracy initiatives speak directly to decision makers about what they think policymakers should do in the public interest, and due to the unelected nature of deliberative initiatives, there exists a possibility that the wider public can become suspicious of the approach and question its legitimacy. Stakeholders felt that the onus was on the organisers and Oversight Committee to ensure that good practice is followed so that the process is perceived as legitimate.

> *"There is a prevailing, quite conservative understanding of what democracy is, that democracy is voters deciding who their government is and then leaving the government to it for the next four or five years"* **Stakeholder**

However, stakeholders also felt that the question of legitimacy might be applied to those involved in overseeing the process. They felt it was important that the Oversight Committee could demonstrate that it was reflective of diversity within Northern Ireland's civil society, including organisations representing disabled people, LGBTQI+, ethnic minorities, and rural communities. Some stakeholders felt that the legitimacy of the oversight committee had not been fully accepted by everyone within the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland:

> *"There was some questioning of the legitimacy of the groups involved, [but it is] inevitable that there is gatekeeping within the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. [...] There were a small number of organisations in public meetings who said, 'Who the hell are you? On what basis are you doing this?"* **Stakeholder**

As the NICI final report suggests, one potential explanation is the underfunding of community-based projects, and consequent competition between groups otherwise working toward shared aims.

Stakeholders expressed concern that, in the context of Northern Ireland, some sections of the public might see deliberative democracy in a partisan way, associating it with Citizens' Assemblies in the South and Sinn Féin's stated aim to hold a Citizens' Assembly for a united Ireland. Some stakeholders felt that the involvement of the International Fund for Ireland as the project's funder could itself garner suspicion and be seen by some as a 'Trojan horse', and that the project lead had a public profile that could also be seen as partisan and invite additional scrutiny and criticism.

Stakeholders felt there was a lot at stake with the implementation and delivery of the NICI and expressed concern that these issues could impact not only how the NICI was perceived, but also that if the NICI was not successful, it could potentially damage the reputation of deliberative approaches within Northern Ireland.

3.3.2.4 Lack of institutional buy-in

Stakeholders expressed some concern about the lack of up-front buy-in to the process from policymakers. They felt that the legitimacy of deliberative democracy rested in part on its ability to bring about change and that failure to do so would undermine participants' faith in the process. Consequently, the 'entrepreneurial' origin of the NICI was seen as problematic.

While some stakeholders felt that people, particularly from minority groups, tend to be suspicious of 'consultation' events led by politicians and see them as 'tick-box' exercises, others raised the possibility that lack of institutional buy-in would make it easier for politicians to ignore the NICI's recommendations as "it's really challenging to get policy makers to listen to something that they didn't ask for." Although the 2020 *New Decade, New Approach* Agreement emphasised citizen engagement, the Northern Ireland Assembly has yet to pursue any Citizen Assemblies or make other serious attempts to implement more deliberative democracy. Consequently, stakeholders reflected that political inaction highlighted the necessity for the 'entrepreneurial spirit' seen in the NICI's creation, while acknowledging the need to balance this with ensuring the future credibility of its recommendations among policymakers.

4 Delivery

4.1 Overview of delivery

The NICI project team delivered the project's activities beginning in November 2023, and the project concluded with the launch of the final report on February 24th 2025.

A phased approach was taken to deliver the project, based on the model originally proposed to CiPP. As illustrated below, this involved building from regional-level workshops involving community groups and activists to a three-day deliberative event.

Regional 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

Open submissions and survey on areas identified as a priority for communities at stage 1.

Citizen's Forum of 84 randomly selected participants to take forward a priority area identified through stage 1 and 2.

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

FIGURE 2 - NICI DELIVERY (SOURCE: DRAFT FINAL REPORT)

4.1.1 Regional workshops

The NICI originally proposed to carry out regional workshops across six geographical areas of Northern Ireland (North-West, South West, Northern, Mid-Ulster, South East, and Greater Belfast Area), with 4-8 civic society workshops per area and six forums (30-54 events in total). The purpose of these was to "[consult] with community-based sectors and activists." The original target was for 200 participants in each geographical area.

The NICI met the target of 30-54 events, with a total of 38 events held, including two virtual workshops. This comprised both Public People's Forums delivered in partnership with 20 voluntary organisations, as well as one-to-one facilitated workshops with 15 organisations.

NICI initially proposed that 1,200 participants would take part in stage one workshops (a target of 200 for each of the six geographical areas), achieving a total of 518. While the original proposal set a target of 50/50 cross-border participation for workshops in North-West, South-East and South-West areas (to include participants from Cavan, Leitrim, Louth, Sligo, and Donegal), it is unclear whether this target was reached.

Participants reported that community organisations were recruited by the Oversight Committee, drawing on the committee's network of civil society organisations across Northern Ireland. Organisations that took part in the NICI were active in recruiting participants to take part in workshops. The Process Design group were active in designing workshop activities, drawing on the expertise of committee members with lots of experience in facilitating this type of event.

Stakeholders reported that a key concern when organising workshops was that they should be open to anyone who wished to attend. The Final Report reports that 61% of stage one workshop participants had never attended such an event before.

Monitoring data for participants captured key demographics for those who took part across the workshops. These are discussed briefly below, and a table containing a full breakdown of stage-one workshop attendants is included as Appendix B.

Demographic data of stage-one workshop attendants
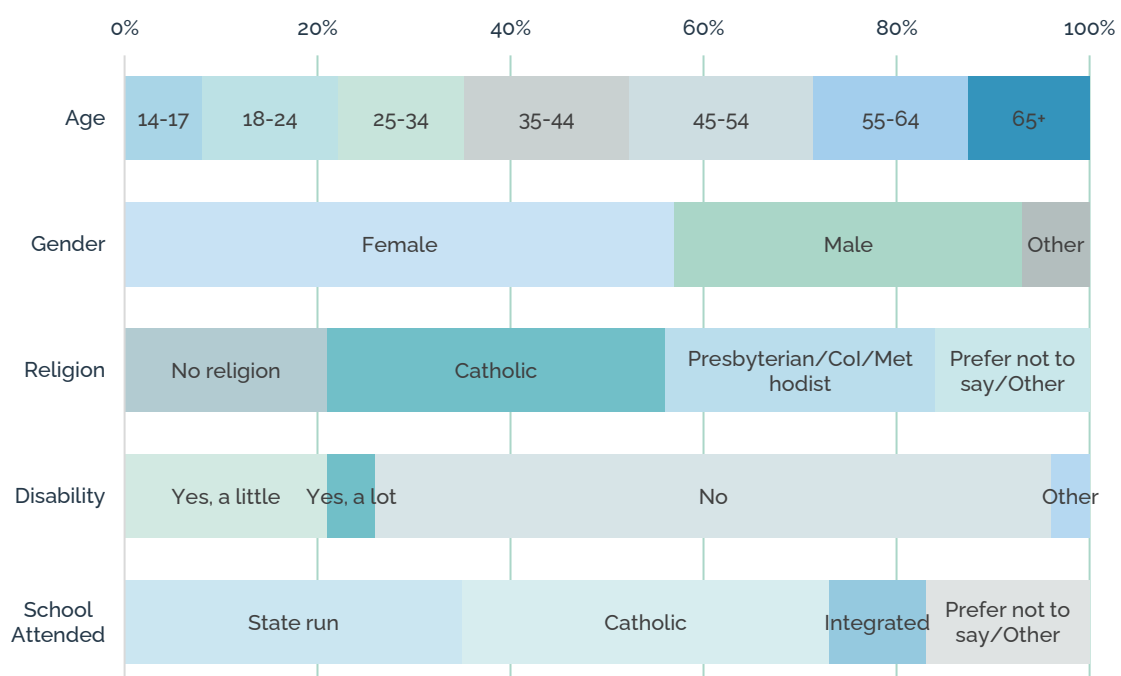
FIGURE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

As can be seen from Figure 3 above, there was an even spread of participants across age groups. More women (57%) than men (36%) took part in the stage one workshops. Those who

reported that their religion was Catholic accounted for the largest group (35%), followed by Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist (28%, 17%, 11% and 4% respectively). 21% reported that they had no religion, and 16% replied 'Prefer not to say/other.' 26% reported having a disability compared with 70% who did not. 38% of workshop participants reported having attended a Catholic school, with 35% having attended a state-run school, 10% an integrated school and 17% reporting 'Other/prefer not to say.'

Ethnicity
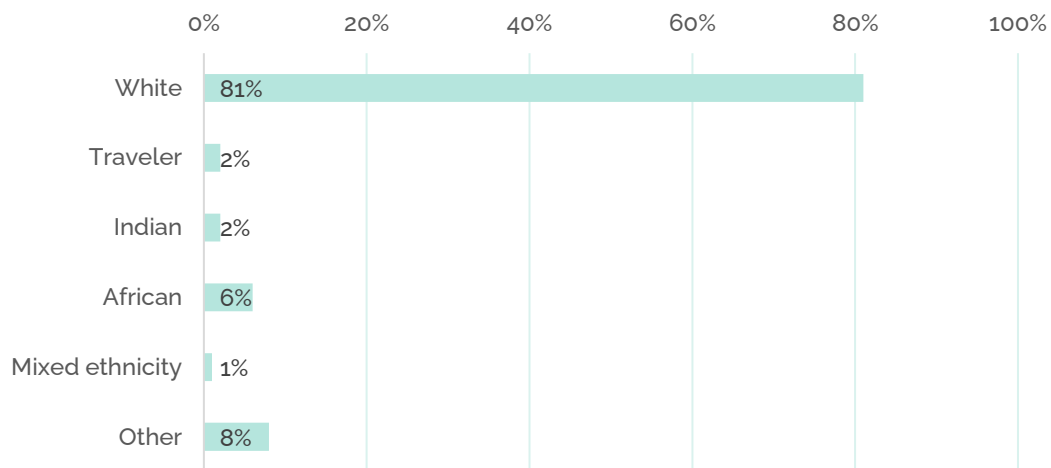
FIGURE 4 - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (ETHNICITY)

The majority (81%) of workshop participants reported that their ethnicity was white, with 6% reporting African. 2% reported that they were travellers, 2% Indian, and 1% reported that they were of mixed ethnicity.

Sexual Orientation

FIGURE 5 - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (SEXUAL ORIENTATION)

Most workshop participants reported that their sexual orientation was straight (87%), with 4% reporting that they were lesbian/gay, 2% bisexual and 7% reporting 'Other/prefer not to say'.

Stage-one regional workshops followed a three-hour format structured in three parts: information-sharing, deliberation and discussion, and recommendations.
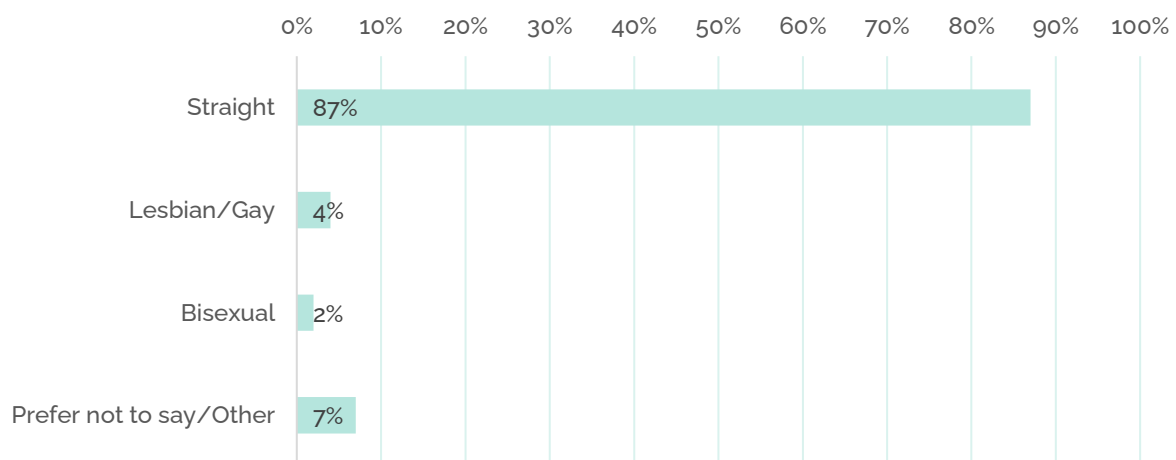
Six themes emerged during the stage-one regional workshops. These were healthcare, education, housing, poverty, political institutions, and human rights. Participants selected three of these (housing, healthcare, and education) for further discussion in subsequent stages of the project.

4.1.2   Open submissions and survey

Following the stage-one workshops, NICI sought further input on the three topics selected (housing, education, and healthcare) from civil society organisations and individuals, either by submitting written submissions or responding to a public survey. Eight civil society organisations submitted written submissions, and 122 responses were received to the public survey.

While the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner, PPR and Mid-Ulster Seniors contributed submissions that addressed all three topics, other submissions covered a single topic only. Integrated Education Fund and Co-operation Ireland's submissions addressed education, while Housing Rights, Apex Housing and Homeless Connect addressed housing. In total, six submissions addressed housing, five addressed education, and three addressed healthcare.

In addition, survey respondents were asked to select whether they believed that there should be greater cross-border cooperation on housing, education or healthcare.
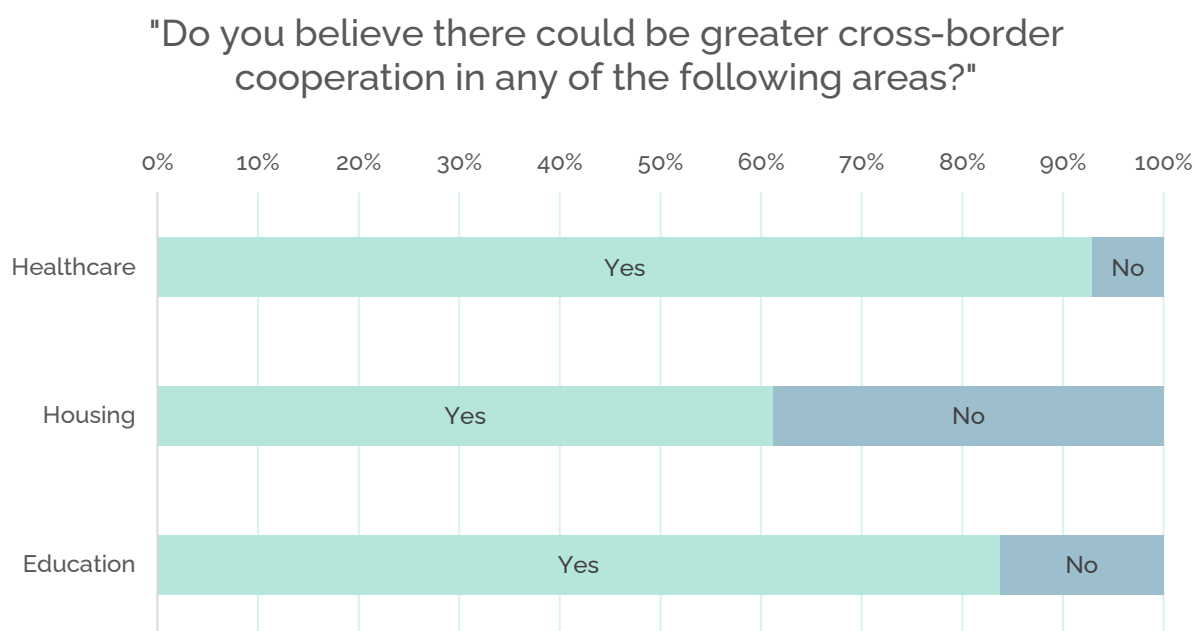

FIGURE 6 - VIEWS ON AREAS APPROPRIATE FOR CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

The decision to focus on housing as part of the deliberative event was made by the Oversight Committee.

4.1.3 Citizens' Forum on Housing

Based on the assumption that a citizen's assembly "works best with a specific topic and a clear question" and due to the limited time for deliberation over the three-day Citizens' forum on Housing, NICI decided to focus on a single topic.

The oversight committee decided on the choice of topic that would be deliberated on at the Citizens' Forum, based on outcomes of the stage-one workshop deliberations and input from the two advisory committees. Both of the advisory scored all three topics based on five criteria, including feasibility, public and political interest, and likelihood of success.

TABLE 2 - VOTES BY ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Topic	Process design group	Content Curation Committee	Maximum Score
Healthcare	93	96	125
Housing	104	106	125
Education	105	107	125

The NICI partnered with the Sortition Foundation, a charity that promotes the use of citizens' assemblies and offers "bespoke selection and stratification services"[3] for deliberative events, via a postal lottery. The Sortition Foundation contacted 25,000 randomly selected participants by post, with a letter of invitation that included an overview of the NICI, what taking part in the Citizens' Forum would involve, and how the selection process had been conducted. Of those initially contacted, 343 potential participants registered, online or by telephone, to take part in the Citizens' Forum.

From the 343 individuals who registered to take part in the Citizens' Forum on Housing, the Sortition Foundation randomly selected 100 participants to align with 2021 Census results for Northern Ireland and levels of voter turnout at the 2023 General election.[4] The Sortition Foundation found replacements when participants who had opted in subsequently withdrew. Those invited to take part in the event received an information sheet, including key information about the event. All participants were contacted by telephone at least twice before the event. However, the final list of participants fell slightly short of the target of 100, with 84 individuals taking part in the deliberative events.

The advisory committees played a key role in designing the Citizens' Forum on Housing, which was delivered by the project lead with support from facilitators. The advisory committees advised on appropriate speakers as well as providing general support and advice on facilitating a deliberative event, including assisting in the production of participant information packs. The Process Design Group had input into drafting equality monitoring forms, evaluation forms and consent forms.

The Citizens' Forum on Housing was held over three days, with the first two days held at Le Mon Hotel outside of Belfast and the third day held at St Columb's Hall in Derry/Londonderry. The purpose of the two-day event, as summarised in Figure 7 below, was for participants to

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[3] https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/services
[4] Selection criteria used were age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, religion, geography, and whether participants had voted in the last election.

deliberate on the topic of housing in response to presentations from the invited expert speakers. Through this process, participants were asked to generate a concrete policy recommendation.

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Introduction to deliberative democracy Expert testimony Small group facilitated discussions	Expert testimony Small group facilitated discussions to create draft recommendations	Ratifying the vision for housing Editing amending and finalising recommendations Voting on final recommendations

FIGURE 7 - OVERVIEW OF FORUM ACTIVITIES (SOURCE: FINAL REPORT)

Upon arrival on day one, participants received an information pack containing consent and equality forms, a detailed project overview document, and an agenda for each day (including expert-speaker biographies). The pack also included submissions and presentations by previous speakers as part of the stage-one regional workshops.

The project lead delivered a presentation explaining the background of the NICI, how the first two stages of the initiative had been conducted (including the selection of housing as the topic for the Citizens' Forum) and the selection process for the Civic Initiative. This was followed by a presentation on deliberative democracy, and subsequently presentations by expert speakers on different aspects of housing and housing policy. A list of expert speakers, including organisations invited to attend but who were unavailable, is included in Figure 8 below.

Expert Speakers
Rebekah McCabe (Involve) Prof Paddy Gray (Housing Rights) Prof Kieron McQuinn (ERSI) Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR) Homeless Connect Grainia Long (Housing Executive) Justin Cartwright (CIH) Prof Martin Haran (University of Ulster) Prof Rory Hearne Mark Spence (CEFNI) Renters Voice (Renters Voice) CATU Department for Communities

Invited speakers (unavailable)
Landlord's Association Northern Ireland (LANI) NI Water Northern Ireland Federation Housing Associations (NIFHA) APEX Housing Cluid Housing Threshold Department for Infrastructure Oaklee Housing

FIGURE 8 - LIST OF EXPERT SPEAKERS

Facilitators supported participants to reflect on the challenges highlighted by expert speakers in their presentations, as well as their own lived experiences, to generate concrete policy recommendations. Participants were asked to vote on which recommendations they would like to see developed by putting stickers next to the ones they agreed with. Voting was used to prioritise recommendations, and these were taken away and written up. A final day of deliberation at St Columb's Hall in Derry involved participants agreeing on final recommendations.

4.2 Facilitators and barriers to delivery

This section discusses a range of facilitators and barriers to the delivery of the NICI. These range from broader discussions of the model adopted by the NICI and how this impacted delivery, to practical issues related to logistics and catering and the impact these had on perceived impacts.

4.2.1 Facilitators/enablers

During focus groups, stakeholders and forum participants described several facilitators and enablers to delivery that they felt had contributed to the success of the initiative.

4.2.1.1 Project staff

Stakeholders and forum participants strongly commended the work of project staff. They highlighted the increased flexibility of having a freelance project lead, who, it was felt, was able to use her time in a way that would be challenging for someone working directly for an organisation. Forum participants praised the competence of the project lead and facilitators throughout the research encounter.

4.2.1.2 NICI model

Stakeholders praised the overall model proposed by NICI, offering the view that having regional dialogues was a good opportunity to "broaden the net" compared with the more standard model of conducting a Citizens' Assembly that would begin selecting participants to take part in the main forum. Stakeholders felt that this was an innovative approach that deepened the model of participation by involving both a wider pool of civil society in deliberation, as well as those chosen to take part in the main assembly. Stakeholders characterised this as involving both those "with things to say, who want to share them" and those who are not typically involved in public political discourse.

Stakeholders also felt that building from the regional workshops with community organisations meant that people could trust the process better because it came from a grassroots level rather than being led by a politician.

4.2.1.3 Diversity of participants

Stakeholders reported that the choice of recruiting assembly participants through the Sortition Foundation was a key enabler in realising the NICI's aim of including people who are less likely to be politically active or involved in their local community. They compared it with the alternative of using a polling company that typically conducts political polling using panel recruitment. This method, it was explained, was less likely to reach those ordinary participants who were not politically active since panels are likely to have a high proportion of political-party activists making up their numbers.

Forum participants were positive about the diversity of the forum participants. While they felt there was possibly a high proportion of older white men, they reflected that this was somewhat inevitable due to national demographics and the challenges of getting younger people and people with families to give up a weekend to take part in this type of initiative. Nevertheless, they were happy to see a diverse mix of people in attendance, including people from immigrant backgrounds. The inclusion of people from immigrant backgrounds was thought particularly important in light of increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in Northern Ireland, something participants discussed firsthand accounts of witnessing.

4.2.1.4 Motivations for taking part

Participants described a wide range of motivations for taking part in the Citizens' Forum on Housing. These ranged from the opportunity to hear more about housing and have access to high-quality speakers, to those whose description emphasised its social dimension, an occasion to meet people from outside their network or bubble. Some mentioned a sense of 'civic duty' and felt that it was something they should take part in because they had been selected, with some describing how they felt 'lucky' to have been selected and therefore did not want to turn down the opportunity. While some highlighted secondary motivations, such as the opportunity to have a nice weekend away in a hotel, all the participants we spoke to described a mixture of motivations. Stakeholders highlighted the risk that using the Sortition approach might have resulted in low uptake compared to recruiting via a panel, but felt that the strong level of engagement from participants, despite limited financial incentives, indicated a real appetite for deliberation among the wider public:

> *"There isn't a huge financial incentive for the participants, you know, they're making a big commitment for their weekends, multiple weekends, travel and all the rest of it. So given all of that, I thought it was really fascinating then that there was that level of uptake in the first place,"* **Stakeholder**

4.2.1.5 Facilitation

Advisory committee members emphasised the importance of having high-quality facilitators as a key enabler of deliberative democracy. Stakeholders stressed that facilitating deliberation is different from facilitating other types of encounters that may appear similar, such as focus groups. While stakeholders acknowledged that deliberation does share certain features of those other types of encounters, such as managing group dynamics and ensuring participants have an equal say, they described how the aim of deliberation is not for people to share views or

opinions but rather to reflect very deeply on why they have those views or opinions. Participants are asked to consider the underlying beliefs, values, fears, and needs that shape those views, something that requires a level of safeguarding.

> *"You're asking people to show up in quite a vulnerable way, and you have to, you have to create a sense of safety, to support people to do that so that you're not causing harm"* **Stakeholder**

Stakeholders reported that deliberation involves surfacing underlying dynamics, including norms and power dynamics, to enable participants to engage in topics through an 'expanded lens.' There was concern expressed that project staff may not have sufficient experience in deliberative democracy and understanding of these key differences.

Forum participants felt that facilitation was of good quality; they described how the session began with an ice-breaker to build rapport and that the facilitator established a "code of conduct" at the outset, described by one participant as participants being asked to "be nice to each other." Participants expressed ambivalence about establishing a code of conduct at the outset:

> *"It's sort of standard. It's a wee bit too woke for me, but, yeah, but I think some people need to be told at the start, 'This is what it is.' You know? People have certain opinions. You might not agree with them."* **Forum participant**

However, the overall view was that establishing a code of conduct was appropriate.

> *"I sort of got why they had to do it, you know, you know, because not everyone comes from a background where you know how to [...] play that sort of role and understand the role. It did help people to sort of, sort of collectively come together. So, there's obviously no harm in it."* **Forum Participant**

Stakeholders who attended the Citizens' Forum reported that questions were not provocative or likely to raise conflict, but were very "inviting" with the emphasis on getting participants to talk about their experiences. This view is affirmed by forum participants' post-discussion survey responses; most respondents (77%) completely disagreed, or tended to disagree with the statement "I didn't always feel free to raise my views and ideas for fear of others' reactions".
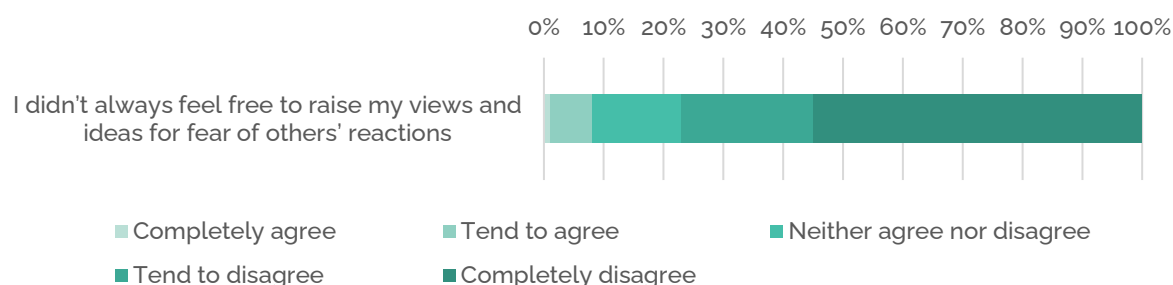

FIGURE 9 - FREEDOM TO SHARE DIFFERENT VIEWS

The conduct of facilitators seemed to play a key role in this, with the majority of respondents (89%) agreeing that table facilitators ensured that opposing arguments were considered, and some forum participants describing how facilitators had handled challenging participants (see section *4.2.2.3 Challenging participants*)

4.2.1.6   Choice of expert speakers

Participants in the Citizens' Forum on Housing commended the selection of expert speakers. They reported that the experts began their testimony by introducing deliberative democracy, which they felt effectively set the stage for the following process.:

> *"That blew my mind, the whole idea that you got plebs like us together, we discussed something, came up with solutions, and then you went back to being a pleb again. And when you had another issue, it was another crowd of people [convened to deliberate]. I think nearly everyone went, 'I wish it was like that now!' It surprised me, because I was sort of thinking, 'Oh, here we go. Here comes the sort of boring bit.' And it wasn't!"* **Forum Participant**

Participants reported that, afterwards, they heard from a range of experts representing industry, academia, and charitable organisations. Participants characterised the choice of speakers as balanced and informative.

> *"I wondered, would it be a little bit biased, maybe in favour of agitating for the inadequacy of public housing and the problems in the private rental sector, but I thought they gave us the big picture as well."* **Forum Participant**

Participants also described how, together with how discussion was facilitated at tables, presentations were successful in moving participants away from preconceived opinions or agendas:

> *"I thought they did a really good job of sort of getting people to that point, you know, through presentations and stuff like that, and giving people a much greater oversight of the whole sort of situation of housing. Not just you know 'me and my rented house,' or 'me and my social house'"* **Forum participant**

While some participants felt that the presentations verged on 'information overload' at times, it was also felt that the scope of topics covered was necessary due to the complexity of the topic of housing. Participants' enduring interest in topics raised by experts was evident in focus groups, which sometimes lapsed into discussion of topics covered by speakers during these presentations. It was felt that the tone of the presentations was appropriate.

> *"Most of the people really were good at, you know, adapting that sort of level of communication to sort of cover everybody. It wasn't all highbrow stuff. even though you had a professor…"* **Forum participant**

Participants found that presentations involving statistics were more challenging, and reported that there were others at their table who struggled to keep up with some of the more technical presentations. However, it was reported that discussion groups were supportive and that participants enabled each other to unpick and understand more complex talking points.

While some participants felt that they would have liked to have heard directly from people with lived experiences of homelessness, others disagreed and felt that this would have seemed exploitative and unnecessary, with the reality of homelessness well-expressed by the speakers and present through the lived experiences of some participants.

4.2.1.7   Choice of topic

The choice of housing as a topic was identified as a key facilitator by several participants, including stakeholders and forum participants. It was felt that since housing is an issue that affects everyone in some way, there was a lot of scope for people to bring their own lived experience to bear.

> *"Whether you live in private, rented or social housing or your own home, you will have an experience of home ownership, or you don't have. Or you've been homeless at some point in your life, [regardless] you have some experience and knowledge based on your own experience, and that is legitimate"* **Stakeholder**

> *"I ended up choosing a table just by chance, where it was very blatantly obvious that I was the only person from a nationalist background. But it didn't make a difference, because we were just people getting on and expressing views. And it was, there was a level of respect being shown on both sides, and that's all that matters."* **Forum participant**

In the post-discussion survey, when asked what they thought of the statement that "many people genuinely cared about the common good rather than their personal situation or interests," 85% of respondents completely agreed or tended to agree.
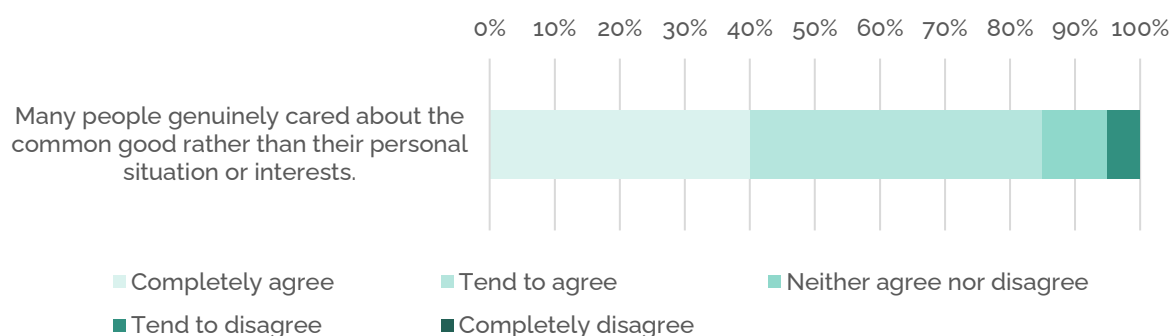
FIGURE 10 - PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT WITH FORUM TOPIC

The openness engendered through discussion was also evident in the prevalent view among forum participants in the post-discussion survey. Few agreed (13%) with the statement that "most people had made up their minds and the discussion had little effect on them." 33% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement; most respondents (54%) either tended to disagree or completely disagreed with the statement.

One stakeholder who attended the Citizens' Forum reported that it was remarkable how well-informed participants were and what strong opinions they had, very much grounded in their own experiences, including people with experience of homelessness. Forum participants echoed this sentiment and suggested that the group discussions had been successful in enabling diverse views to be heard.

> *"The majority of people got fully involved. […] Everybody had a story of some sort. I think everybody, almost everybody, had a story to do with housing or something around that, you know, personal experience."* **Forum participant**

*"Everybody had their own story to tell. Nobody just went 'It's nothing to do with me.'
It's like, 'Well, actually it does!' or 'It's to do with me or my family or my children' or
whatever it may be. So, I think it touched on an issue that everybody has some
experience, whether it's positive or negative,"* **Forum participant**

4.2.2 Barriers/challenges

In addition, participants discussed several barriers and challenges encountered during delivery,
and these are discussed below.

4.2.2.1 Recruitment at local workshops

Stakeholders reported low turnout at stage-one regional workshops as a major delivery
challenge. They stated this remained an ongoing problem during the first stage, and some
partner organisations did not recruit participants as effectively as expected. To counter this, they
took several approaches, including holding additional workshops and reaching out to different
partners. For example, they shifted from prioritising the geographical spread of partner
organisations that facilitated workshops to prioritising the diversity of represented communities.

Some stakeholders felt that enabling more widespread opt-in would have taken more time, as
community engagement of this sort tends to be a slow process. As there wasn't time to build
relationships with communities organically, the project team had to rely on cold-calling.
Moreover, stakeholders felt that the more online-based organisation of community groups since
Covid-19 acted as an obstacle in this regard, as it his harder to meet people face-to-face, as
would be the more traditional approach.

4.2.2.2 Perceived lack of transparency

Stakeholders described the importance of a robust and transparent approach to delivering
deliberative democracy initiatives. However, forum participants identified what they felt were
shortcomings in the level of transparency, which consequently somewhat undermined their
trust in the process.

As outlined in section *4.1.3 Citizen's Forum on Housing,* forum participants were randomly
selected by the Sortition Foundation and stratified in line with demographic-based criteria.
Information on the selection process was included as part of the invitations and an introductory
presentation on the first day of the Citizens' Forum. Despite this, and despite participants
reporting that communication in advance of attendance was clear and comprehensive, some
participants felt that the selection process had not been explained to their satisfaction. This led
one participant to suspect that the process contained an element of subjectivity.

> *"I asked at the meeting, and I never got a very straight answer as to how that
> process of selection was done. Now I'm sure it was done with absolutely the right
> intent, but at the same time it does, I think we probably should have been told how
> the selection had been done"* **Forum participant**

Other participants felt that the wording of recommendations presented at the final day of
deliberation did not match the tenor of the discussion at the first two days.

> *"I just remember thinking, 'Where did this come from?' It wasn't the content that I
> wasn't happy with. It was just the fact that it seemed to come out of left field that I
> and when I asked people, they went, No, we didn't."* **Forum participant**

Some participants were dissatisfied with what they felt was a lack of transparency around how recommendations had been arrived at, and suggested that the process for doing so had been undertaken solely by the project lead, something they felt would inevitably entail a level of bias.

> *"I said to them, I don't see how that can be objective. One person cannot take all that information and write it up objectively. [...] If that's true, I felt, was almost like all that work wasn't really getting reflected properly."* **Forum participant**

Added to this, participants were dissatisfied with what they felt was a diminishing level of input asked of them as deliberation progressed. They reported that at one stage they were asked to agree or disagree with some recommendations, but were unsure what to do when there were multiple clauses, one of which they agreed with and the other they didn't. They reported that in the final stage, they had been asked to vote on whether the wording of recommendations adequately conveyed the intended meaning, but not whether they agreed with this meaning. Consequently, some participants felt as though in the final stage of deliberation they were being asked to 'rubber stamp' recommendations, though others acknowledged that otherwise participants "[would] have probably still been there, debating."

4.2.2.3   Challenging participants

While stakeholders and forum participants alike reported that discussions were respectful and constructive, some participants proved more challenging or problematic. At stage-one regional workshops, facilitators encountered some hostility, and a degree of sectarianism and discrimination was evident. While forum participants did not report this type of challenging behaviour, they did encounter individuals who, despite attending, did not engage in deliberation.

> *"Our particular group there was out of what was it? 10 of us, maybe, besides the moderator and three of them, didn't really participate in the discussion, wouldn't, didn't do much. Just one guy in particular was completely silent the entire time, never spoke, never contributed, never, you know, did anything."* **Forum participant**

In contrast, others reported that there were individuals who spoke over others or contributed extreme views. Some stakeholders felt that the presence of challenging views could be seen as evidence that the NICI had been successful in including ordinary people, who, it was acknowledged, have views that are more varied and plural than what is represented by the community and voluntary sector.
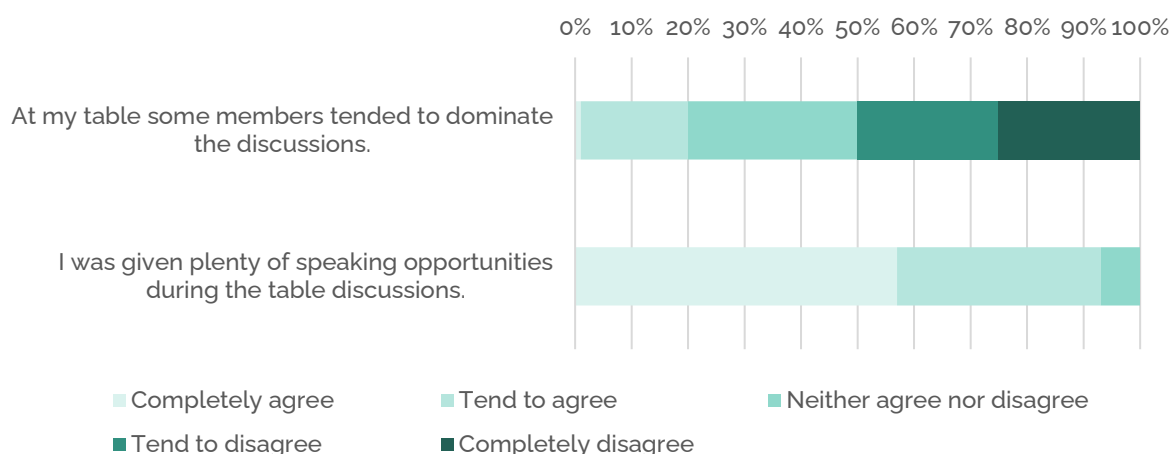
The chart shows a stacked bar graph with a percentage axis from 0% to 100%.

Statements:
- "At my table some members tended to dominate the discussions."
- "I was given plenty of speaking opportunities during the table discussions."

Legend: Completely agree, Tend to agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Tend to disagree, Completely disagree

As Figure 11 above shows, while forum participants had quite mixed views about the degree to which some participants tended to dominate discussions, there was overwhelming consensus that respondents were given plenty of speaking opportunities, with 93% completely agreeing or tending to agree with the statement and none disagreeing. In addition, almost all (92%) of forum participants responded to the post-discussion survey that good arguments were brought to the discussion.

4.2.2.4   Practical challenges

Finally, participants highlighted organisational problems, including catering issues, that hindered the smooth running of the Citizens' Forum on Housing. On the final day of deliberation, this was exacerbated by a major storm that disrupted transport networks and led to many participants running late. Perhaps as a result, it was reported that for the final day, they were one facilitator short and that the project lead had to step in, meaning she had to fulfil several roles on the day.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of detailed planning to limit the potential for logistical concerns that could potentially distract from deliberation. Forum participants discussed issues with catering and logistics at length. For instance, they reported that there wasn't what they felt was an adequate mid-morning snack, which meant that by the time lunch was served, many rushed their final task to get served first. Those who stayed to finish this activity properly found that the lunch offering was already somewhat 'picked over', with some complaining that vegan/vegetarian options were already gone.

> *"There were a few people who obviously weren't happy. And I don't know whether part of that was, I'm really, really hungry, therefore I am not happy, as opposed to not happy with, you know, in the big scheme of things"* **Forum participant**

Participants felt that the last day was significantly less well organised than the first two, reporting that the day went continually over schedule, which led to some leaving early and others engaging in the final exercises in a perfunctory way to get away faster.

> *"…As I watched the day slip, I was conscious of my restless leg going up and down, and I was getting really hacked off"* **Forum participant**

5 Impacts

5.1 Engaging a diverse cohort of participants

Stakeholders felt that the NICI was successful in engaging ordinary people who are less likely to be politically active or engaged in their local community. They highlighted the success of the initiative in reaching seldom-heard communities and individuals.

> *"I think the impact is that it has given voice to and given discussion to hard-to-reach groups, and that's something that we should be proud of"* **Stakeholder**

Stakeholders felt that a key outcome of engaging diverse participants was that participants from less politically active communities learned how they can influence policy. This was considered particularly important for individuals who typically feel excluded, such as non-citizens and individuals from BAME communities more broadly, in part due to a tendency in Northern Ireland for political questions to be framed in terms of nationalist and unionist debates, which can exclude those from other communities.

5.2 Building knowledge and skills in civic engagement

Stakeholders felt that the NICI was successful in building individual participants' knowledge and understanding of housing as a social issue and how policy processes work. This included understanding the policy challenges faced by politicians, which stakeholders felt had the potential to reduce cynicism and build trust in politics and democratic institutions.

> *"There was a bit of learning from citizens when they realised the complexity of housing as an issue and its breadth, and that what politicians are often grappling with is actually much more complex and difficult"* **Stakeholder**

> *"There was a better understanding of political processes and discourse and how it works and why it operates in the way that it does, not necessarily endorsing the way that it currently happens, but a better understanding of it"* **Stakeholder**

Participants felt that the deliberative process had been successful in helping them recognise common experiences and the shared nature of societal challenges.

> *"I think more of these forums [can only be] a good thing, because people will see that that is actually how we are as a people. There's always going to be little side factions and everything. But when it comes to the common goals of everyone, it doesn't matter. [...] this is a problem that affects everyone. So, everyone's going to [have to] work together on this."* **Forum participant**

In this sense, some participants reported that they found it to be a "humbling" experience that had deepened their awareness of issues like homelessness and helped them understand it better from the perspective of those experiencing it.

> *"I find it very humbling, actually, because I'm fortunate that I'm in a house and I've got a roof over my head, and I've got an income that covers all my bills. You know, I felt really quite humbled by the lady from housing explaining exactly what's going on about homelessness and houselessness"* **Forum participant**

The pre- and post-deliberation surveys with participants in the Citizens' Forum on Housing found that their self-reported rating of knowledge on housing increased from an average of 4.4 at the beginning of day one to 7.9 at the end of day three. As Figure 12 below shows, after day three, few participants still felt that they had limited knowledge of housing, with only 10% rating themselves six or lower, whereas before day one, 87% rated their knowledge as six or lower.

Self-rated knowledge of housing
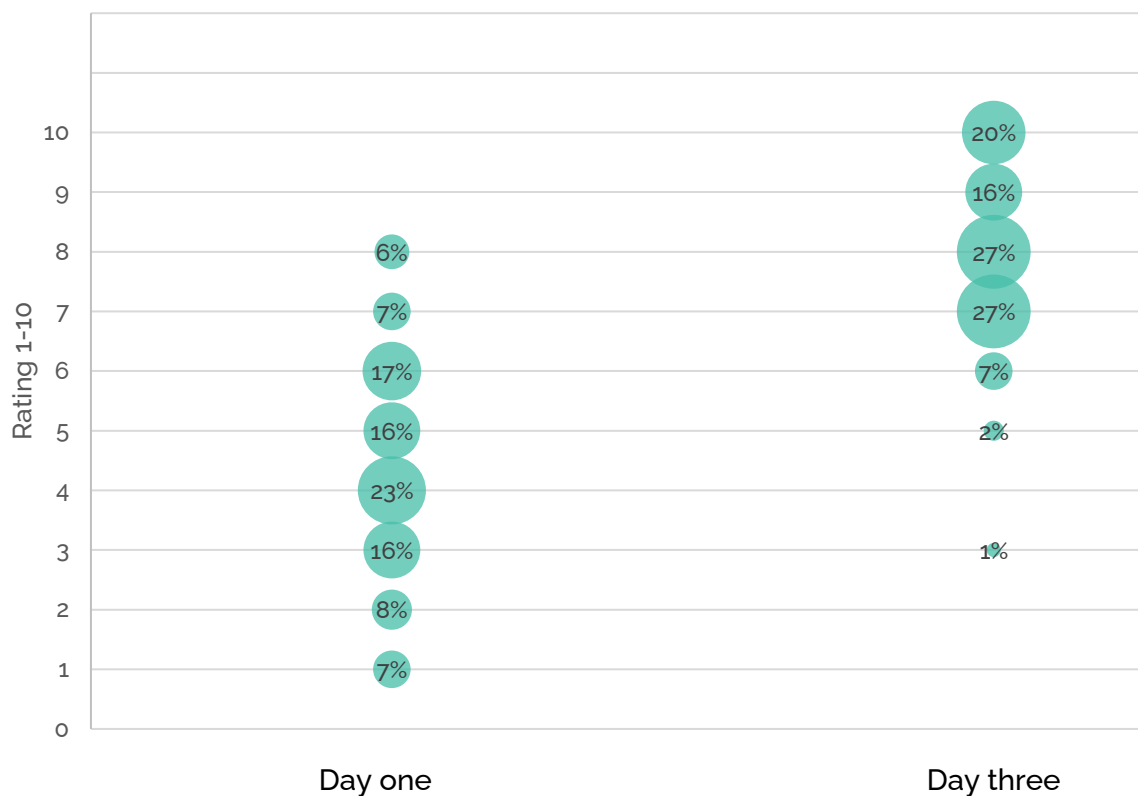
FIGURE 12- CHANGE IN SELF-RATED KNOWLEDGE OF HOUSING

There was a small change in forum participants' self-rated level of interest in politics, from an average of 6.4 to 7.2 out of ten, with 54% reporting that they felt more inclined to engage in politics following the Citizens' Forum.

On a scale of 1-10, how much would you say that you are interested in politics?
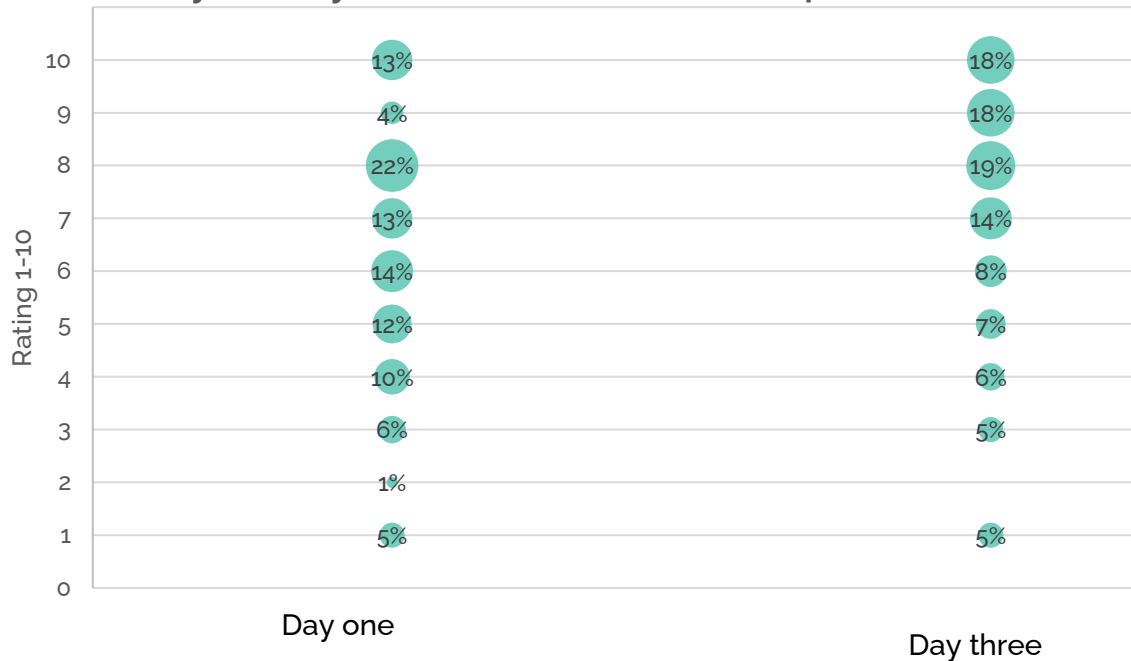
FIGURE 13 - CHANGE IN SELF-RATED INTEREST IN POLITICS

5.3 Public awareness

Though it should be acknowledged that fieldwork for this evaluation took place before the launch of the final report, forum participants perceived that there was not wide enough awareness of the NICI among the wider public. They felt that more should be done to raise awareness of the NICI's activities and recommendations to increase the chances of them being acted on by politicians.

> "So far, I think the impact is close to zero, because I think the population at large has no idea that there's anything called a civic Initiative, or whatever it is called. And I don't think they're there. I think they're scarcely aware of it." Forum participant

However, there was hope that this would change as a result of future events, including the launch of the final report.

5.4 Political and policy impact

Stakeholders and forum participants alike felt that the political and policy impact of the NICI remained unknown at the time that fieldwork for this evaluation was conducted. Some forum participants were optimistic about the impact the NICI could have on politics and policy. Some reported that they had seen evidence of political parties acknowledging the NICI's recommendations and incorporating them into their current agenda, pointing to the attendance of political representatives as observers at the final day of deliberation in Derry to support this point.

"I'm seeing it more from local SLP and Alliance here. They're actually using some of the issues that were brought up; they are now coming to the fore. So that's definitely something they've taken from it, although they're not giving it credit" **Forum participant**

However, others were sceptical about the likely impact of the recommendations on policy, particularly in light of the cost of some of the recommendations. These participants were more cynical about the likelihood of recommendations being watered down.

"I know what politicians are like. They'll smile and go, 'Yeah, yeah, we'll look at that.' And then… […] all we can do is our best, you know, present them with a nice wee product and see what they do. By the time they kick it around the place, it comes out looking a very different creation.' **Forum participant**

This point was agreed by some stakeholders who reported that it would likely be "quite messy" when policymakers consider recommendations alongside other considerations, and that consequently "it's not going to be something that generates sweeping impact."

There was a prevalent view among participants that the initiative would not have been worthwhile if it did not bring about tangible political or policy impacts. Some felt this quite strongly:

"This could be the spark that causes great change. But […] if nothing ever really changes and all we do is talk, then pat ourselves on the back. 'Hey, you know, look, we came up with some good ideas, ' but if they're never implemented, and politicians aren't spurred to action, then, yeah, it was a waste of time, absolutely" **Forum participant**

Others reported that though they would feel that the NICI had not achieved its aims if it did not impact policy, they would still feel there were other positives that came from taking part, including demonstrating how the process could work. In the post-discussion survey with forum participants, 89% agreed that after participating in the Citizens' Forum on Housing, they would feel encouraged to participate in future initiatives like a citizens' assembly, and 91% agreed that citizens' forums of this type should be used more often to inform government and parliament decision-making.

This view was also emphasised by stakeholders, who felt the delivery of the NICI acted as a " proof of concept" that deliberative approaches can work in Northern Ireland. This was felt to be particularly valuable in Northern Ireland, a region where some participants felt "people generally don't meet across differences.

"[It's] a remarkable achievement actually, whatever the outcome of the policy, part of it, the actual fact that people could get together and actually speak to each other." **Stakeholder**

6 Recommendations

6.1 Ensure buy-in from policymakers at the outset

Participants felt that, while in their view the Civic Forum had insufficient political buy-in, the NICI shows the need for policymakers to recognise the complementary role that participatory democracy can play within a representative democracy. This entails understanding that participatory approaches are by their nature process-based and require sustained and long-term investment and political buy-in.

> *"I would recommend [continued funding and that the shared partnerships and dialogue continue as well. Otherwise, we lose out on all that we've built over the last couple of years" **Stakeholder***

6.2 Build on the intended cross-border focus

Participants felt that future delivery should explore the potential of shared Island/cross-border initiatives. The Irish government have invested significantly in the Shared Island Fund, but that involvement from the Northern Ireland Office in cross-border work is currently lacking, including engagement with the NICI. Participants cautioned that advancing progress on the cross-border aspect of the NICI does require sensitivity, and the NICI should avoid becoming mired in constitutional issues by focusing on practical issues with tangible cross-border implications, such as healthcare.

> *"I think everybody cries out for things like health, education, housing, you know, that may be an area that brings people together, because that's what is lacking in government. So maybe that is the way forward, if we expand. But I mean, it certainly has worked here, and it would be interesting to see" **Stakeholder***

6.3 Encourage greater public awareness and political engagement

Participants recommended that greater public awareness of the NICI should be encouraged by engaging with journalists and news outlets. They felt that this would put more pressure on politicians to engage with recommendations.

> *"[Hopefully this will] put a glaring spotlight on the issue and keep the spotlight on it. And that causes politicians to be forced to address the issue. Because, 'Hey, everyone's talking about it. Why aren't you doing anything?" **Forum participant***

Participants felt that being able to demonstrate impact on policy would, in turn, encourage more enthusiasm from the public about future deliberative democracy initiatives on other issues, such as healthcare.

6.4 Improving implementation

Stakeholders recommended that future delivery of NICI or a similar initiative could improve on the implementation approach. These included

- Greater integration between advisory committees and the oversight committee, perhaps having advisory committees as a subcommittee rather than separate from the oversight committee
- Ensuring institutional buy-in at the outset to give the initiative weight and legitimacy and ensure that its recommendations connect with a decision-making process.
- More resourcing, including resourcing for a longer lead-in time and a larger project team, to reduce pressure on project staff.
- More prominent role for deliberation experts, including allocating resources to ensure input from partners with expertise in delivering deliberative democracy.

6.5 Improving delivery

Participants felt that there were several points that the experience of delivering the NICI drew on to improve future delivery. These included

- More time for deliberative sessions, to avoid rushing the process or overloading participants
- Enhanced transparency around the process, including better communication with forum participants on how recommendations are developed.
- Better organisation of logistical aspects such as catering and scheduling, perhaps involving professionals with skills in delivering large, one-off events.

Appendix A
Northern Ireland Civic Initiative
Focus Group Topic Guide

Overarching research objective

The Think Tank for Action for Social Change (TASC) is an independent, not-for-profit think-tank whose mission is to address inequality and sustain democracy by translating analysis into action. We have been funded to carry out an evaluation of the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative (NICI), which concluded in November 2024.

Through this evaluation, NICI are hoping to gain a better understanding of how delivery and implementation of the initiative went and the extent to which it achieved its intended outcomes. In order to find this out, we will be conducting research with stakeholders who have been involved in implementing and delivering the initiative and those who have taken part. This includes the initiative lead, contributors to oversight committees and participants in the final stage of the fora held by the initiative.

This guide is for contributors to the initiative's two oversight committees, to understand individuals' understanding and view of the rationale for the initiative, motivation for taking part, as well as exploring barriers, perceived impacts and recommendations for future implementation and delivery.

The topic guide

Topic guides ensure consistency in data collection by outlining key issues to explore with each participant. While they shape the interview content, they should be used flexibly and responsively. The order of topics and time spent on each will vary between interviews or focus groups. Qualitative research allows interviewers to delve into unexpected but relevant themes that arise during discussions.

Preparing topic guides as short phrases rather than questions encourages interviewers to formulate responsive questions and use terms tailored to the participant. Researchers will decide what and how to follow up based on their knowledge of the research objectives. Text in square brackets and/or italics represents notes for researchers.

Introduction

- Introduce self and TASC
- Brief introduction to study:
  - TASC is an independent, not-for-profit think-tank. We have been funded to carry out an evaluation of the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative.
  - As you may be aware, the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative staged a series of events across 2023 and 2024, intended to act as a platform for community engagement and dialogue in Northern Ireland and border counties.
  - Workshops and fora staged as part of this discussed various issues.
  - We want to speak to you today about your views and experiences of the implementation and delivery of the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative.
- This research will explore:
  - A little bit about you
  - Your understanding of the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative and your motivation for taking part.
  - Enablers and barriers to taking part in the initiative
  - Recommendations for implementing and delivering a similar initiative in future.
- The focus group should last around 60 minutes.
- Taking part in interviews is voluntary. You are free to skip any questions or bring the conversation to a close at any time.
- With permission, interviews/focus groups will be audio recorded. Audio recordings and interview transcripts will be stored securely, and only members of the research team will have access to the data.
- Information from interviews and transcripts will be analysed into themes and summarised by TASC into a report shared with the Northern Ireland Civic Initiative, which may include some quotes from those who take part, but no identifying information (including, for example, names of individuals or places) will be included.
  Any personal or identifiable data will be removed, and the report will only include research findings. It may be possible that individual views could be identified by others familiar with your views. Though individuals will not be named, a high-level descriptor of participant roles will be included, e.g. Senior Stakeholder or Forum Participant.
- At the end of the interview/focus group, participants will have the opportunity to redact any information they do not wish to include as part of the report.
- Any questions?

[Start recording]

- Are you happy to take part and be recorded?

Background and context

Aim: To understand the participant's role and involvement in NICI

About you

- A bit about participants
- Participant views on the importance of participatory democracy
- Previous experience of participatory democracy

Role as part of NICI

- *[If applicable]* Role as part of NICI

Understanding of NICI Pilot

Aim: to understand participants' understanding of the NICI and its objectives

Key features of the NICI

- Main objectives of the NICI
- *[If applicable]* Role of differing stakeholders in delivering NICI

Views on the general need for NICI

- Views on the rationale/need for the NICI as a whole

Enablers and barriers

Aim: To understand the main challenges around the implementation and delivery of the initiative

Key enablers and barriers

- Reflection on the main barriers for
  - Implementing the initiative
  - Delivering the initiative
  - Taking part
- What has worked well / less well in overcoming challenges

Impacts

Aim: To understand perceived impacts of the NICI from participants' perspectives

Participants' views of the impacts of the NICI

- Reflections on the impacts of the initiative for participants/their local area/Northern Ireland, and border counties/other impacts.
  - Any unintended outcomes (positive or negative)
  - What has been most important
- Any factors (positive or negative) that have impacted the NICI's effectiveness

Recommendations

Aim: to explore key learning from the NICI pilot

Recommendations for future delivery

- Lessons for implementing and delivering NICI
- Things that need to happen/be in place for similar initiatives to be successful
  - What is most important
- Any suggestions for improvement?

Next steps and close

Final closing comments – anything else to add?

- Ask participant if they are happy with the content of the interview/group discussion (or if they would like to redact anything)
- Reaffirm confidentiality.
- Any questions?
- Thank the participant

[End recording]

Appendix B: Civic Initiative Regional Demographics

Age	14-17	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
	8%	14%	13%	17%	19%	16%	12.5%
Gender	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Other			
	57%	36%	5%	2%			
Religion	No religion	Catholic	Presbyterian	Methodist	Prefer not to say	Church of Ireland	Other
	21%	35%	15%	4%	3%	9%	13%
Religion brought up in	No religion	Catholic	Presbyterian	Methodist	Prefer not to say	Church of Ireland	Other
	6%	40%	17%	4%	13%	11%	9%
Income range	Low income	Middle Income	High Income	Don't know/Did not disclose			
	30%	51%	1%	17%			
Disability/health condition	Yes, a little	Yes, a lot	No	Other			
	21%	5%	70%	4%			
Ethnicity	White	Traveler	Indian	African	Mixed ethnicity	Other	
	81%	2%	2%	6%	1%	8%	
School attended	State run	Catholic	Integrated	Prefer not to say/Other			
	35%	38%	10%	17%			
Sexual Orientation	Straight	Lesbian/Gay	Bisexual	Other	Prefer not to say		
	87%	4%	2%	2%	5%		

Additional information:

518 participants took part in stage 1 regionals

61 per cent of participants stated that they have not taken part in a similar workshop before

Appendix C: Results of pre- and post-discussion surveys

GENERAL

On a scale of 1-10, how 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]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6	7	14	19	13	14	6	5		
7%	8%	16%	23%	16%	17%	7%	6%		

Average: 4.4

Day 3 (67 responses)

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

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		1		2	5	18	18	11	12
		1%		2%	7%	27%	27%	16%	20%

Average: 7.9

On a scale of 1-10, how important do you consider the issue of housing at the moment?

Day 1

[1 = Not at all important]   [10 = Extremely important]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		1	1	1		6	13	13	47
		1%	1%	1%		7%	16%	16%	58%

Day 3

[1 = Not at all important]   [10 = Extremely important]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1		1	9	9	47
				1%		1%	13%	13%	72%

HOUSING

Day 1

	Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
a. Everyone should have access to housing.	68	10	3	1	1
	82%	12%	4%	1%	1%
b. Existing provision of housing meets the needs of those who depend on it.	4	5	11	31	32
	5%	6%	14%	37%	38%
c. Having a home is the most important thing for most people.	61	18	3	1	
	73%	22%	4%	1%	
d. Most people know very little about how the housing system works.	41	30	7	3	2
	49%	36%	8%	4%	3%

Day 3

	Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
a. Housing is a right that everyone should be able to access	58	6	1	2	
	87%	10%	1%	2%	
b. Existing provision of Housing meets the needs of those who need it.	4	4	3	25	31
	6%	6%	5%	37%	46%
c. Having a home is the most important thing for most people.	46	17	3	1	
	68%	26%	5%	1%	
d. Most people know very little about how the housing system works.	27	25	10	4	1
	40%	37%	15%	7%	1%

PRESENTATIONS

Day 2 (80 responses)

The presentations were useful.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
49	28	2	1	
61%	35%	3%	1%	

The presentations covered a wide range of perspectives.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
52	25	1	2	
65%	31%	1%	3%	

DISCUSSION

Overall experience Day 3 (67 responses)

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
30	31	4	1	1
45%	47%	6%	1%	1%

At my table some members tended to dominate the discussions.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
1	13	21	16	16
1%	19%	30%	25%	25%

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
38	24	5		
57%	36%	7%		

The table facilitators made sure that opposing arguments were considered.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
41	19	7		
61%	28%	11%		

The table facilitators sometimes tried to influence the group with their own ideas.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
2	5	8	17	35
3%	7%	12%	26%	52%

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
42	18	6	1	
64%	27%	8%	1%	

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
1	8	22	28	8
1%	12%	33%	42%	12%

I didn't always feel free to raise my views and ideas for fear of others' reactions.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
1	5	10	15	36
1%	7%	15%	22%	55%

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
5	19	23	15	5
7%	28%	36%	22%	7%

During the discussions, many people just stated their positions without justifying them.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
1	6	17	34	9
1%	8%	25%	53%	13%

Many people genuinely cared about the common good rather than their personal situation or interests.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
27	30	7	3	
40%	45%	10%	5%	

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
5	39	20	3	
7%	58%	30%	5%	

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.

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
50	10	3	2	2
75%	14%	5%	3%	3%

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

Completely agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree
52	9	3	2	1
78%	13%	5%	3%	1%

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]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4	1	5	8	10	12	11	18	3	11
5%	1%	6%	10%	12%	14%	13%	22%	4%	13%

Average: 6.4

Day 3

[1 = Not at all interested]   [10 = Extremely interested]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3		3	4	5	6	9	13	12	12
5%		5%	6%	7%	8%	14%	19%	18%	18%

Average: 7.2

Did you vote in the last election?

Yes	56		No	26
	67%			33%

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

Yes	My level of political interest has not changed	No
36	28	3
54%	41%	5%

EXPERIENCE

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

[1 = Very poor]   [10 = Very good]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
			1	1		3	10	20	32
			1%	1%		5%	15%	30%	48%

Average: 9.1

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