



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

COVID-19 Recovery:
Community Foundation Northern Ireland;
Community Places; Involve

9 June 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin

Witnesses:

Mr Paul Braithwaite	Community Foundation Northern Ireland
Dr Louise O'Kane	Community Places
Ms Rebekah McCabe	Involve

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We welcome Mr Paul Braithwaite, head of innovation and voice at the Community Foundation Northern Ireland; Rebekah McCabe, senior project officer with Involve; and Louise O'Kane, who is a planner with Community Places. You are very welcome to our Committee this afternoon. Thank you very much for coming along to give us an update on your perspective on COVID, COVID recovery, and what the Community Foundation can do in that regard. Paul, are we handing over to you to give us a presentation with your colleagues? We will move to questions and answers after that.

Mr Paul Braithwaite (Community Foundation Northern Ireland): Thank you very much, Chair. We are delighted to present to you today. You have introduced us already, so I will not go over that again. You have our evidence paper, and we look forward to hearing members' comments and questions on it. We plan to present for about 15 minutes, if that is all right. I will make a few overall remarks to get us started, and then I will hand over to Rebekah and Louise. Our topic for today is, as you said, COVID recovery, particularly public participation in decision-making on COVID recovery. We will talk about the longer term context of public participation in decision-making in Northern Ireland as well.

Our three organisations are all committed to greater public participation in decision-making across the board. We have been collaborating for a number of years on initiatives such as the 2018 citizens' assembly for Northern Ireland and the creation of the Participatory Budgeting Works network, which has supported the roll-out of participatory budgeting (PB) as an approach across Northern Ireland in recent years. My role in the Community Foundation involves work on the civic innovation programme, which is about stimulating and supporting creative new approaches to involving the public in decision-making.

In particular, we are here to talk about the role of public participation in the COVID recovery, but I will reflect for a moment on the bigger picture: the context of governance and devolution in Northern Ireland. In recent years, as members will be all too aware, there has been a picture of institutional fragility and, unfortunately, declining public trust in decision-making. The idea of devolution is to bring decision-making closer to people. In talking about public participation decision-making, we are very much looking to strengthen democracy and devolution in Northern Ireland. Elections and representation are the core of our democracy, but, on their own, they are not enough to ascertain the many complex and shifting viewpoints and priorities of people — individually and collectively — much less provide an opportunity to engage in detail with evidence or in deliberation with one another. That connects [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] the idea that we should involve people in decision-making, as much as possible, in between elections.

Not only do participative and deliberative processes lead to better outcomes on issues, but they can contribute to increased public trust, greater social cohesion and better individual well-being through giving people a greater sense of control over their lives. That can, and should, take many forms, but, today, we will focus on two approaches: citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting. We are focusing on those because, first, they represent a step change in the level of ambition that they bring to public participation, compared with what has been tried in Northern Ireland, or many other places, in previous years, and secondly, because they are tried-and-tested methods, with a strong evidence base, not only across the UK and Ireland, but internationally, and including some existing practice here in Northern Ireland. They are complementary approaches. Both aim to develop a more participatory and deliberative approach to decision-making [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] They are complementary and slightly different in their approach, in that citizens' assemblies tend to focus on representativeness, whereas participatory budgeting focuses on a more open and self-selecting approach to public participation.

We have been engaging with elected representatives on this for several years, and we have had many positive conversations and responses from across the political spectrum. In that context, it was pleasing to see the commitment in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement to a new era of structured civic engagement, including through the commissioning of at least one citizens' assembly a year. That was somewhat derailed by the pandemic, as were a lot of things. It was understandable that all the focus went on an emergency response in the initial months. Commitments in NDNA took a back seat. COVID-19 has further underlined and exacerbated many chronic underlying issues and inequalities, the resolution of which require greater public participation. On the positive side — we can say this, particularly — [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] The public and our communities are more than up to the task of collaborating, including through working in new and different ways, and taking action, with government, to respond to shared challenges.

With that in mind, from last summer onwards, we began a fresh process of engagement with government and elected representatives to encourage them to put the NDNA commitment to structured civic engagement front and centre of our COVID recovery plan. We reached out and, in the autumn, held seminars with MLAs from across parties, and with departmental officials. We have also engaged with TEO, in particular, and with the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance. We found that what we were saying chimed with priorities and programmes across all sections of government.

However, what is missing is a strong sense of political leadership, as encapsulated, of course, in the NDNA commitment. A strong signal from political representatives that those approaches are the way forward, and what should be used in reframing the way in which we make decisions and devise policy, would help the Civil Service and officials. [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] On foot of that, we met the junior Ministers in January, and then we were asked to submit the more detailed route maps, which we have included in your evidence pack today, on how a citizens' assembly and participatory budgeting could be delivered in Northern Ireland in the context of COVID recovery. Those were submitted in February, and we are waiting for a follow-up meeting with the junior Ministers to hear what action will be taken.

To summarise, the asks that we have of the Committee today are threefold. First, we encourage the Executive Office to act without further delay in delivering the NDNA commitment in the context of COVID recovery and then go further to ensure that both the Programme for Government currently being devised and also, of course, the one that will be coming up in the not too distant future include and further enshrine the NDNA commitment to structured civic engagement. The Programme for Government should recognise the role of methodologies such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting in both helping to deliver all the PFG outcomes but that they also deliver outcomes in their own right by making a direct contribution to individual and collective well-being. That links with

international frameworks on well-being used by the OECD and the Carnegie Trust, for example, which put democratic outcomes on an equal footing with economic, social and environmental outcomes.

Finally, the upcoming open government action plan that the Executive are devising is another opportunity for Northern Ireland to demonstrate its leadership on this issue. That is being coordinated by the Department of Finance, with key input from the Executive Office. We want to ensure that that contains an ambitious commitment on citizen participation, including greater use of those approaches.

I will hand over to Rebekah, who will focus on citizens' assemblies, and then Louise will speak about participatory budgeting.

Ms Rebekah McCabe (Involve): Thank you, Paul. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for having us. Before I start, I want to talk a little bit about Involve, which is the organisation that I represent. We are a charity that works to ensure that people are at the heart of decision-making. We do that in a number of ways, chiefly, by specialising in techniques that enable people to influence the decisions that shape their lives. We design and run those processes, so we are involved in that very practical way. We also do research to ensure that the processes are continually improving and innovating and that we understand their impacts and can share what we know with other people. We also work with partners and stakeholders to see how those techniques can fit with the existing political system and how they can work for decision makers as well as for the public. We see those practices as essential and normal parts of a healthy democracy and as core to good governance and to an efficient and effective public sector.

I am here to talk to you about one of those techniques, which is the citizens' assembly. First, a citizens' assembly is a randomly selected, representative group of people who are brought together to discuss an issue or issues and to reach a conclusion about what they think should be done. It is a technique to support decision-making on issues that are either complex, contentious, moral, constitutional, or all of those.

Citizens' assemblies have a number of very important key features. Possibly the most important feature is that its membership is selected at random. That is done usually through a technique called civic lottery, and I am happy to talk about that in more detail in the discussion, if people are curious. Basically, you bring together a sample of the population that reflects demographic diversity but, possibly, also diversity in attitudes and opinions towards the topic that they are looking at. You cannot lobby to be a member of a citizens' assembly: it is a lottery. No prior knowledge or even interest in the topic is a requirement to taking part.

Another key feature is that significant time is given to learning about the issues. The issues that are put to citizens' assemblies are often very complex, and there can be a lot of technical information to work through. Therefore a lot of time is spent in levelling the playing field and making sure that the big, diverse group of people are all on the same footing in relation to their understanding of the issues. Time is given to defining key terms and to understanding the scope of the issue and the context and so on.

There will also be impartial oversight. That can vary from process to process, and different commissioning bodies have done it in different ways. The existence of impartial oversight is a constant in the citizens' assembly model. That body exists independently of the commissioner and ensures that the information and evidence heard by members of the citizens' assembly is accurate and balanced. It makes sure that any technical evidence is peer-reviewed and up to date. It makes sure that any attitudinal or lived-experience evidence is unbiased and, if bias is detected, that the body can guide and correct it to make sure that it is as even as possible.

Finally, a lot of time is given to deliberation, as deliberation is a key feature of a citizens' assembly. That means that, after hearing about a topic, the members get a lot of time to think about it, discuss it, weigh up different viewpoints, think about the evidence that they have heard, and try to find common ground and a shared vision for the way forward. That tends to end with a process of collective decision-making, and the outcome will be a set of very detailed recommendations that are informed by evidence about the way forward for decision makers.

As Paul said, there are lots of benefits to those approaches. They can be important mechanisms for developing shared visions for society and can enrich what policy- and decision makers know about what the public wants because you get systematically thought-through information based on evidence. That results in informed public opinion, rather than off-the-cuff reactions to policy proposals or issues. Because there is such a diverse group of people in the room for an extended period, you get

recommendations that correspond closely to what people actually need. That can produce a lot of democratic legitimacy. Evidence is emerging that the attitude of the public to recommendations from processes such as citizens' assemblies is that they are at least as legitimate, and, in many cases, more legitimate, than decisions made by politicians alone. That can enhance people's understanding of policy outcomes and create greater understanding of the trade-offs and the difficult compromises that people make when they create policy and make decisions. It can create conditions in which entrenched positions can be dissolved, and, where issues are highly polarising, it can bring people together to find ways of moving forward.

I want to leave plenty of time for questions, so I will wrap it up shortly. However, I will talk about what we are asking of the Executive and pick up on some of Paul's points. We want to see delivery of the brilliant commitment of NDNA to one citizens' assembly a year and to structured civic engagement. A COVID response is the perfect way to start, and the essence of the Build Back Better campaign is that this is an opportunity to address issues that have gone unresolved for too long. Over the past 18 months, we have had experience of delivering those processes online. We do not see any reason to delay until we know that in-person processes are safe and possible.

We also want to see a long-term, sustainable and strategic view. We want to see those practices embedded in the work of government. We would love to see those built into a participation strategy that embeds best practice across government and creates a sense of common purpose across all Departments. It is important that there be a centre of excellence in the Civil Service that embeds the expertise and learning from those so that, if one is commissioned on COVID recovery, there is an opportunity to build capacity in the Civil Service. There is a lack of specialist skills on that currently. It is important that there be a structure with a well-resourced unit empowered and enabled to provide that service and to provide guidance on when to commission participatory processes. If that is done, you will see benefits in costs and efficiencies. Again, I will echo a point that Paul made. It is really important that we see strong political leadership. As well as resourcing a COVID response and creating the enabling structures, there needs to be a willingness to do things a bit differently and to make getting this right a really high priority for the Executive and the Assembly.

I will leave it there and let Louise talk about participatory budgeting. I am really looking forward to your questions.

Dr Louise O'Kane (Community Places): Thanks, Rebekah. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present to you today. I work with Community Places. We are a regional charity that specialises in three key areas: planning advice, community engagement and community planning. We coordinate the Participatory Budgeting Works network as well. As Rebekah said, I will talk to you about participatory budgeting.

As you know, PB is all about citizens having a direct say on the spending and priorities of part of a public Budget. There is a famous saying from Porto Alegre, where PB was developed, that if it feels as though we have decided, it is PB, but if it feels as though someone else has decided, it is not. That gets to the crux of what PB is all about. It is about connecting citizens to actual decision-making processes.

PB is recognised as an effective way of empowering and building resilient and stronger communities. It has been commended by UNESCO, the World Bank, the OECD and the UN. It is about adopting a rights-based approach to policymaking and budgeting and delivering a more equitable and effective allocation of existing resources and investment in our places and communities.

Across the region now, we have had over 20 PB grant-making processes. That is where money is spent by and in communities as directed by citizens. That has established really good working relationships with local authorities. Eight of the 11 have been involved in PB processes to date. Others are currently planning participatory grant-making processes, and they have involved numerous statutory partners, Departments and the community and voluntary sector in those processes. Most recent examples that have been delivered successfully during the pandemic include the Tak£500 PB process in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon and the YOUTH Making it Happen PB scheme co-designed by young people in Derry/Londonderry and Strabane.

Participatory grant-making approaches have been tried and tested. They have been very successful in reaching out to people. They have been effective in encouraging the participation of marginalised individuals and communities, in delivering real, tangible local change and in enhancing public trust in local democracy. To achieve the full potential of PB, however, it is important to go further through mainstreaming its use. That is where money is spent by public bodies as directed by citizens.

Mainstreaming PB therefore implies making public participation through PB a much more frequent experience and embedding it in service planning in order to make service delivery more responsive to local priorities.

Post-COVID is a critical moment to embed PB, to develop its scale, to deliver better outcomes and, importantly, to put citizens on an equal footing through genuine partnership, where communities have an equal stake in investment decisions in their places. We feel that PB now needs Executive support to elevate it. That would be a signal that it is an effective, accountable and transparent process that should be mainstreamed. The route map requested by the junior Ministers charts a way forward for the Executive in delivering on their NDNA commitments and structured civic engagement in the context of post-COVID recovery and renewal.

I will set out some of the asks in that. First, we would welcome cross-party support from Ministers to promote the use of PB in the distribution of COVID recovery funds. That would demonstrate a commitment to ensuring that society can participate in building stronger communities and shaping investment in post-COVID public-service transformation and that people and communities are actively involved in pandemic recovery and renewal.

Secondly, we would welcome an investment in a core programme to move PB from incubation to consolidation. We should be really ambitious and invest up to £1 million a year in a core programme to consolidate PB over the next four years. That would ensure that citizens can participate in decisions shaping their local community and society. That money could be allocated through two strands: 50% to incentivise Departments and local authorities directly to invest in PB, which would also stimulate match funding; and 50% to raise awareness of and promote PB, ensuring that there is a civic voice in the development of PB, building capacity, innovation and competencies.

Our third request is that there be cross-party support from Ministers for a longer-term commitment in the next and following Programmes for Government to an allocation of a percentage of departmental revenue through PB by 2027. PB should then become a key standard by which participatory democracy is delivered across the region, shaping responsive Budgets and programmes through innovation, which builds on the new ways of working and strengthens relationships that have emerged in response to COVID-19.

Finally, the Executive should support the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance to lead on the delivery of a demonstration project by establishing a region-wide strategic group. That would support the demonstration project but also develop concrete next steps towards mainstreaming participatory budgeting and that commitment to allocating a percentage of existing public resources via PB, delivered through this and following Programmes for Government.

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to us. We would really welcome your comments and questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Louise, thank you very much indeed for that. Paul and Rebekah, thanks for that [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] I met you previously to discuss this. There is definitely value in the work that is there to involve citizens so that they are able to articulate their thoughts and views. In some respects, given that we are still in a contested space in the political sphere, with competing priorities on the same level, being able to pass over to the citizens to get their views and thoughts on issues could provide a certain clarity that might not always be easy to seek from political worlds.

Do you feel that there could be community participation through a citizens' assembly or whatever and direct interaction with the Committees? How would a citizens' assembly and our Assembly interact? Do you think that it would be topic-driven? What would the interaction process between us be like?

Mr Braithwaite: I will say a quick word, and Rebekah may want to come in on that as well. I apologise: it feels as though my connection is a little bit jumpy, but I will press on.

Those initiatives can be used by any body or institution, be it governmental or parliamentary, so they absolutely could be used by Committees. A number of years ago, we had engagement with the Communities Committee on that and on whether Committees could use approaches such as citizens' assemblies and mini-publics to reach out when it is considering policy and legislation as part of their scrutiny role. Rebekah will probably have examples to draw from. They could also be used by Departments. Rebekah, I had best hand over to you, because you will be able to give some concrete examples.

Ms McCabe: Thanks, Paul. As Paul said, there is an existing relationship in other Parliaments between Committees and those processes. The two citizens' assemblies commissioned at Westminster were commissioned by Select Committees rather than by Departments or by the Government themselves. Citizens' assemblies are definitely part of their scrutiny role. The first one was on social care in England, and the second was the Climate Assembly UK. There is certainly an established role there. The best way in which to view that role is that it provides an input into policymaking, be that defined by a topic or some other question. There should be a clear sense of the difference that will be made by asking the public to weigh in in that kind of detailed and informed way. A citizens' assembly is very much advisory. It does not replace any of the existing parliamentary structures, but it can complement them and enrich the information that is feeding into any decisions that are being made.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That is interesting, and it leads on to the other thought that I had, which was about the wait that would occur between a decision that a citizens' assembly or some participatory process reached if elected representatives had a completely different view. At its core, does it just advise the elected representatives on the decisions that they take, or is there some compulsion that if you are engaging in a participatory process that you agree at the outset that you will take on board the decisions that that process will reach?

Ms McCabe: The scale of the projects, the investment that you are asking assembly members to make, the amount of evidence taken and the fact that these are very informed opinions mean that there is a presumption in favour of implementing the recommendations or, at the very least, making a very detailed response if that is not the case.

Whatever the topic that comes in front of a citizens' assembly, there needs to be an openness by politicians to listen to the response. It is perhaps not ideal when there is closed mindedness or an entrenched position on an issue. You need to get all parties to a position of saying, "Yes, we are open to this input and to having our position changed by it and by listening". That is where it has value.

A good opportunity to do that is in the context of COVID recovery, because a lot of the issues that we are talking about are not necessarily that polarised, as they cut across all communities in Northern Ireland. They are issues such as deprivation, education and even infrastructure. I know that you are hearing from the high street task force. Issues such as town centre regeneration and urban planning are often put to such forums and can get really good outcomes from bringing in the general public to weigh in on the issues. Generally speaking, yes, there needs to be a condition of openness to being influenced by the recommendations.

Mr Braithwaite: The OECD conducted research recently about the use of citizens' assemblies, and mini-publics in particular, amongst its member countries and found that, in over 70% of cases, more than half the recommendations of the citizens' assemblies were implemented. I think that, in a third of cases, Rebekah, all the recommendations were implemented. That is not because they set the citizens' assemblies up so that they were obliged to implement the recommendations. It is because, when the recommendations were produced, that was genuinely useful material for Governments. Whether that resulted in elected representatives changing their views or Governments taking a slightly different position, the citizens' assemblies fulfilled their role by being able to provide practical and useful ways forward.

The one that I have seen most recently in the news was in France, where a new rule about domestic air travel was brought in. That was one of the things that came from the French president's form of citizens' assembly looking at climate change, and one of its recommendations that were followed through on was to place less emphasis on domestic air travel and use public transport instead. Louise may wish to come in there.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Louise, do you have anything to add?

Dr O'Kane: No. That is fine.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): You can get put on the spot when you are in a virtual conversation. Do not feel that everybody needs to answer every question. Sometimes, that can make the sessions last longer than they need to.

Mr Stewart: Rebekah, Louise and Paul, thanks for the presentation. It is really interesting.

I suppose that all local representatives like to think that we are the citizens' assembly, because this is an Assembly and we are meant to represent the people. However, we are not naive enough to believe that we can conquer all issues. Collectively, we have been notoriously bad at times getting over the difficult issues. Citizens' assemblies can undoubtedly play a role there, and that is why the idea is very exciting.

I want to dive into some of the difficulties that others have faced. One of the issues that the Republic of Ireland, for example, faced was retention. Only 61 of the 99 lasted the 18 months. Young women in particular found it most difficult to stay on because of the lack of childcare facilities and other support for them. I fear that that will potentially lead to an imbalance on any citizens' assembly. How do you propose we overcome that to ensure that there is fair and equitable representation?

Ms McCabe: I can respond to that, John. The Irish Citizens' Assembly took an approach of not incentivising participation. There is a huge time commitment involved for people. We would take a different position. One of the standards that we call for in all citizens' assemblies is that attendance be incentivised with an honorarium, which is essentially a cash, or equivalent, payment to reward people for giving of their time. In addition, we would also cover any costs of somebody taking part, and we have done that in the processes that we have run. We would advise people to build their costs into this. If people have caring responsibilities — childcare or other caring responsibilities — that expense should be covered to enable them to take part, because you do see an effect on diversity. You can start with a very diverse sample, but that can fall away if you do not make sure that people are supported.

We therefore do incentivise participation financially. We also spend quite a lot of time, particularly with online processes, building up people's IT skills, making sure that they have the right equipment to take part and making sure that the materials are presented accessibly, in the context of visual impairments and different literacy levels. All of that is very much built into the design, and you have to be very careful with such things, because, as much as possible, you want to make it a level playing field. Differences will need to be identified and looked after.

Mr Stewart: Thanks, Rebekah. That is reassuring and good to hear. If we want a citizens' assembly that is fully reflective, no one should be impacted on by their inability to use tech equipment or by their financial considerations.

Some people may be working second jobs, some may be underemployed, and some may have families and time commitments. The Irish model was, I think, 10 weekends. It was quite a taxing period for people. Are you confident that this could be done in a way that ensures that anybody can participate and that no one will be priced out timewise or financially?

Ms McCabe: All that I can say is that our experience, after running many of these, especially over the past couple of years, is that the retention rate is excellent. The drop-off rate is about 1%. A lot of my role involves that direct interface with assembly members, so I can speak with some authority, even if it is anecdotal. Very often, the reasons are that people have got ill and had to miss a weekend and then have struggled to catch up, or their circumstances have changed, but people rarely say, "I cannot afford to take time off work". We hope to establish a relationship with people whereby they are able to say that and we are then able to provide support to make that not an issue.

Mr Stewart: OK. I have two final questions, Chair, if I may. It is a really interesting topic. A sum of £485,000 has been factored in. Is that a recurring [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] cost going forward, or does that cover set-up costs and reimbursing people? I am trying to get a feel for what the initial cost or running cost of a citizens' assembly might be.

Ms McCabe: I am not familiar with where that figure came from. Is it in the road map?

Mr Stewart: I believe so, yes. There is £1 million for participatory budgeting and then a figure of £485,000. Perhaps they are departmental costs. I am not sure.

Mr Braithwaite: We need to draw a distinction between the citizens' assembly and participatory budgeting. Louise and Rebekah might both want to say something. Rebekah, do you want to explain the costs behind citizens' assemblies? Louise, some of those figures might be drawn from your section.

Ms McCabe: Citizens' assemblies are expensive. For some of the reasons that we have set out, they cost a lot. The cost of random recruitment through the civic lottery process is reasonably expensive. If you are incentivising payment and giving, say, £100 to every participant for each weekend, that can add up if you are talking about 100 participants over four, five or six weekends. You have the facilitation costs. There is independent facilitation in reasonably small groups of five or six people to enable deliberation. You are therefore looking at paying 12, 13 or 14 professional facilitators for those weekends as well, and they can be very expensive. There are then the institutional costs. Moreover, costs vary widely depending on lots of factors, so it is very hard to put a direct cost against them. To break down where the money goes, a huge chunk of it goes on quality assurance and on making sure that there is good access for people from all kinds of backgrounds.

Dr O'Kane: May I come in about PB?

Mr Stewart: Yes. Go ahead.

Dr O'Kane: The £1 million figure probably comes from the route map for PB. That was really for an investment programme in PB to consolidate it, for stimulating match funding from Departments and local authorities, and for capacity building. It is an ambitious figure, but it draws on experience from Scotland, where £2 million annually is invested in PB. That equates to about 38p a resident a year. We were talking about an equivalent of around 52p a resident. Moreover, in Scotland, that money attracted match funding of something in the region of £2.3 million. The key point to make about participatory budgeting is that it can be the allocation of existing resources. I was referencing an additional investment programme, where a percentage spend of additional resources is used more creatively, perhaps via PB. For example, in Scotland, you have the commitment by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to 1% spend. In somewhere like Glasgow, that equates to £10 million, but COSLA has actually committed to 2% of their spend by the end of this year, so that is £20 million.

Mr Braithwaite: To wrap up, I want to say one thing quickly about the value for money of both kinds of processes. It is important to see them in the context of the entire policy cycle. *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): You are back with us, Paul. Go ahead.

Mr Braithwaite: Sorry. My connection is not great. I was saying that it is important to view the entire policy cycle when assessing the value for money of the approaches. We are repositioning some of the investment to the front or beginning of a policy cycle. Arguably, with a non-participative policy development process, you can end up with poorer decisions. Those decisions can also end up being challenged, and you then end up potentially spending a lot more money at other parts of the policy cycle. That is not to mention the kind of outcomes that the processes can deliver of themselves, such as the value that the participants derive from taking part and the gradual build-up of our culture of democracy and decision-making to which they can contribute.

Mr Stewart: OK. That is really useful to know. I have one final point. There is a strong argument that citizens' assemblies will not only overcome difficult issues but lead to a progression and furthering of our politics here, or anywhere else that they exist. That is because they take politicians out of their natural comfort zone and may let people see that the issues that have always been stuck on the ground are not that important to most people. Is there an argument that, through the assemblies, politicians may get to see what people really think?

Mr Braithwaite: None of us would want to argue that politicians do not engage regularly at constituency and grassroots level and that they do not have their feet on the ground, or anything like that. As Rebekah said, however, it is about what happens when you get that engagement with people after consideration of evidence and the opportunity to deliberate with one another. We are used to engaging with issues in a sort of snapshot-oriented and individual-oriented way. The value of those processes is that they allow people to have a collective deliberation in the presence of information and evidence, thus creating a level playing field regarding what they know about a topic. That is the real added value. It is very difficult for politicians to do that in their daily work. That is where a citizens' assembly can be complementary to what politicians already know about their communities and constituents.

Mr Stewart: Absolutely. Thanks for that, everyone. I appreciate it. Thank you for your time.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Four members want to ask questions. You should not feel that all three of you need to answer. If each member has two or three questions and you all answer all of them, we will run out of time. I do not want to cut us off, but we will need to finish at about 3.45 pm or 3.50 pm. We therefore have about 15 minutes left.

Ms Anderson: I find the whole topic fascinating. It addresses my core values. I have always felt that the differentiation between representative democracy [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] the unseen tension, whereby some people, who believe that, because we get elected to represent people, that is what we are charged with doing, as opposed to considering the value of participatory democracy.

For me, section 75 had that potential with the equality impact assessment (EQIA), but it has been diluted somewhat, with the effect that it has not been as effective a tool as section 75 designed it to be. It would not go as far as what has been presented here around participatory democracy or participatory budgeting. I think that it had an opportunity to be, but screening out has destroyed it.

There is a New Decade, New Approach commitment to structural civic engagement. I am conscious that you had a meeting with the junior Ministers about a citizens' assembly and the need for a participation strategy that cuts across Departments. Do you think that some of the work that has started around co-design — the anti-poverty strategy, for instance — is useful? The junior Ministers were very keen to hear about the lived experience of people on the ground to shape the anti-poverty strategy. Is that going in some way towards some of the concepts, even though it is not fully what you mean by a citizens' assembly? I will come back to you on that, but do you see something happening that is closer to your view of what needs to happen, which I concur with, in any democratic structure?

Ms McCabe: I would say yes. There are so many techniques for doing this, and there needs to be an element of judgement involved in deciding what is right for a particular situation. With poverty, hearing about people's lived experience is really important. In some cases, that is the information that you need to make a good decision. Opening it out to wider society is also very useful, because, very often, when it comes to creating policy or legislating on an issue, you need to bring the general public with you. To do that, in many cases, they need a deeper understanding of certain issues than they have of them at the start.

With a participation strategy, what we are arguing for is clear standards and a clear place where that knowledge resides that other people can draw on so that you do not find yourself doing things on an ad hoc basis and never really sharing best practice or what has worked well. Without something being embedded at that strategic level, there is a real danger that that will happen. That is why we make the case for doing that. That is not to say that nothing good is happening, but it is about finding a way in which to ensure that that learning is shared across all Departments.

Ms Anderson: I concur with that. Rebekah, you mentioned that you cannot just apply to join citizens' assemblies. They are a bit of a lottery. How do you ensure that the most marginalised communities and people who are the hardest to reach are represented on citizens' assemblies so that they are made up of not just — I do not like this expression — "the great and the good" but people who have lived experience and who need to be engaging with processes and shaping them?

Ms McCabe: We do that in a couple of different ways. One is that, through the civic lottery process, you can target a greater number of invitations at postcode areas that you know have higher levels of deprivation. The financial incentive can go some way to encouraging people. You might send out 20,000, 30,000 or 40,000 invitations across the population and get maybe a 5% or 6% response. On the basis of that response, you can build a sample that is representative and make sure that it is balanced to include people from more deprived areas, different occupational backgrounds, different educational attainment — those kinds of characteristics. You can also make sure that the evidence that is being heard by the citizens' assembly includes evidence from people who are marginalised from the conversation. So, as well as hearing from civil society leaders, academics — that kind of knowledge — you can bring in people who have expertise from experience and can speak directly to what the issues are like in a lived way. You can balance it out in that way. Those are the main ways of doing it.

Ms Anderson: Finally, can I ask you a question about the participatory budgeting? You mentioned that there were over 20 of those processes and said that eight of the 11 councils are involved in grant processes. Can you elaborate a bit more? You mentioned Derry City and Strabane District Council,

and I am keen to hear a bit more about which councils are involved, whether my council here in Derry and Strabane is engaging with it and what your sense is of where that is all going.

Ms McCabe: Yes, as I said, over the last three years, eight of the local authorities have participated in PB processes. Those are the participatory grant-making processes, which are really useful in producing tangible outcomes and reaching out to local communities, especially those that might be more marginalised. Quite a lot of that has been done through the community planning partnerships, so it has also enabled pooling of budgets and resources.

The one that I talked about in the Derry and Strabane area was YOUth Making it Happen, which was co-designed and led by a group of young people. It was right across the council area, and it happened during COVID. There were issues with schools closures and youth clubs, because we were obviously trying to engage with young people in that process. So there were some challenges, but the young people, the council and the strategic community planning partnership were extremely committed to the process. There were 33 bids from across the council area which identified priorities that the young people had put forward, and 842 young people from across the council area voted to support and identify where that resource should go. It was a small enough resource — £20,000 — but it was young people actually identifying ideas and projects to meet the issues and priorities that they felt were most important to give young people a voice across the council area.

As I said, eight of the councils have participated, but there are other local councils that are planning processes, so it is nearly across the board. It has been tried and tested now, and a number of the councils, including Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, have undertaken repeat PB processes. They have actually had a cycle of PB, and groups have been able to mature with the process and develop the priorities and ideas and have more deliberation in the process. That has been very welcome. The issue is that that is at a certain scale: for PB to have the most impact, it needs to start being mainstreamed into existing resources and have that wide reach. Participatory grant-making is really useful to making connections between communities, building trust and getting the tangible outcomes of people being part of decision-making, but it is still less sustainable and is still hand to mouth: it is not mainstream and linked to, for example, the community wealth-building agenda and giving communities a real stake in investment decisions in their area. So, while co-design is very much welcome, we need to see it right the way through the process so that there is delivery and implementation. The crucial thing with PB is that local citizens ultimately have a real say in the decision-making processes at the end. It is much more than engagement; it is a decision-making tool and putting people and communities on an equal footing.

Ms Anderson: Chair, we could ask the Executive Office about the NDNA commitment and get an update on where it is at. Thank you all for your engagement today, the papers that you have sent and the answers that you have given.

Mr Stalford: Thank you for your presentation thus far. From memory, going back to 2016, I was on the Communities Committee — I have a funny feeling that I actually — a lot of stuff that you are saying is familiar. I was under the iron chairmanship of Michelle Gildernew at the time. I remember hearing from you.

Just a few questions. In 1911, the Parliament Act established the supremacy of the House of Commons over the House of Lords and specified that the Lords would no longer have the power to veto a Bill. It also reduced the maximum parliamentary term from seven years to five years. In that spirit, where one assembly, if you want to call it that, was clearly established as superior to the other, having been on an equal footing prior to that, how does a citizens' assembly sit alongside an Assembly that is elected by all the citizens of Northern Ireland?

Mr Braithwaite: I can say something quick, and Rebecca might want to back me up. A citizens' assembly is fundamentally different. It is not a legislature. It is not an institution. It is a process. Any individual citizens' assembly has a specific topic or set of topics and a duration, after which it stands down. Its work is then complete and it produces a report. Its role is very much to advise elected representatives rather than to make alternative or separate decisions. It is to work in lockstep with the Assembly and is not, in any sense, a challenge to it. Rather, I see it as a useful tool for elected representatives to make use of. It is for them to set the agenda and select the topics that any given citizens' assembly will consider. Rebekah, do you want to add anything further?

Ms McCabe: As you said I would, I back you up and agree with you. I think that parliaments are influenced by all kinds of influencers: campaigners, lobbyists and other vested interests. This is another way of getting those inputs and also a very rich insight into what people think about certain issues that elected representatives do not often enough get to hear. When we have engaged with politicians around specific processes, they often come with the very understandable view that, "This is undermining me or my position". They actually then see that it is an opportunity to directly hear from voters in ways that can *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Stalford: How many people are in the average citizens' assembly? Roughly how many members does it have?

Ms McCabe: We tend to advise between 80 and about 120, or sometimes upward to 150. For all kinds of operational reasons, it becomes harder to design for a bigger group. At an NI-wide scale, you would probably be aiming for about 100.

Mr Stalford: Out of a country of 1.8 million people?

Ms McCabe: Yes. There were 100 members of the Climate Assembly UK, which is representative of a much bigger population. The idea is not to be statistically representative; it is to try to get 100 people in the room so that it looks more or less demographically like the population that it represents.

Mr Stalford: Looking at past experience in the Republic of Ireland — to be fair, I do not think that this criticism applies to any party represented on this Committee — do you accept that it may be valid to suggest that the reason why a citizens' assembly was formed in relation to the issue of the eighth amendment was basically that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did not have the guts to take a position on the issue?

Ms McCabe: Citizens' assemblies can be used to expedite very difficult, thorny issues; that is for sure. I think that we have become fixated in this part of the world on very divisive issues being put to citizens' assemblies. For constitutional reasons in the Republic, those were the issues that ended up there. If you look at the recent OECD report, you will see that the majority of citizens' assemblies in the EU and in OECD member countries have been on the much more prosaic issues of strategic planning, urban planning — urban planning is actually the most frequent topic — and healthcare reform, so less compelling policy issues. This is actually a really useful tool for finding a way forward on those. We have plenty of those in Northern Ireland that maybe have not been progressed sufficiently.

Mr Stalford: If a citizens' assembly is reflective of society, society in any democracy will be often be gridlocked on a particular issue. Obviously, there are thorny issues. I cited the example of the Republic, where, to be honest, I think that the two bigger parties did lack courage because they were afraid of losing a significant number of supporters who were pro-life. Clearly, as the referendum subsequently evidenced, there was a comfortable majority in the Republic of Ireland who wanted the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution gone, but I think that, for political party management reasons, the two bigger parties, who both had significant numbers of pro-life supporters and members, were afraid to grasp that particular nettle. If a citizens' assembly is reflective of society and an elected Assembly is reflective of society, why do the gridlocks that you sometimes get in a democratically elected Assembly not emerge in a citizens' assembly? It is because they do not have to run for office, maybe.

Ms McCabe: Yes, maybe. It is a lovely question, actually. I think that the fundamental difference is that the discussion in parliamentary processes is one of debate. It is one of countering and of having an opponent and a win/lose structure, whereas the essence of a citizens' assembly is deliberation. You are not seeking to defeat somebody, and you are not seeking to make anyone look as silly as possible to progress your own view. You are actually trying to find things on which you can agree and move forward. It is very different. Of course, you have the famous quote, "You can know the right thing to do, but you don't know how to get elected after it". Citizen's assembly members do not have to worry about that. As Paul said, it is dissolved and they go on their way and go back to being ordinary members of the public.

There are conditions. As I said, one of the conditions is that it allows people to move out of entrenched positions if they want to. Very often, we see that. We track how attitudes change *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* there is a shift out of their existing positions into more moderate ones. People do tend to change their minds, and it is a space where that is possible. There are not that many spaces

left in society where it is possible to publicly change your mind, but that is one of them. That is why it is so productive.

Mr Stalford: To be fair to the citizens' assembly in the Republic, I think that it produced eight recommendations that were reflective of the different opinions that there were. Ultimately, it fell to the Oireachtas to take those issues forward in terms of what would happen post referendum. Thank you very much. That is very interesting. Thank you for your presentation and your answers.

Mr Lunn: Thanks, all of you, for your presentations. It has been very interesting. I think that I read in your papers that 60% of MLAs approve of citizens' assemblies, which is slightly surprising but very heartening. I am one of the 60%. Christopher mentioned the citizens' assembly down South on the eighth amendment. Rebekah, has the Republic had any other major issues where it has used the apparatus of the citizens' assembly? Can you give us any examples from elsewhere where major constitutional matters have been discussed in that kind of forum?

Ms McCabe: There are lots, and I am sure that I will miss some. Paul can step in if he remembers any. In the South, they have used the citizens' assembly to look at same-sex marriage. Actually, that was a constitutional convention, so it was a slightly different model. They have recently looked at the place of women in the home, which is written into the Irish constitution. It is quite a controversial clause. The most recent iteration of the citizen's assembly has looked at that, and its report has just gone before the Oireachtas.

A little bit further away, a citizens' assembly in the Canadian province of British Columbia looked at changing their electoral system. I am sure that I am forgetting some really high-profile examples — please step in, Paul. Yes, assemblies have been used to discuss constitutional issues, but more commonly they are used on policy issues.

Mr Braithwaite: There have been three citizens' assemblies in the South, each of which have looked at multiple issues. The first was the constitutional convention, which was a hybrid model of members of the public together with elected representatives. That was the one that resulted in the marriage equality referendum in the South, which was another constitutional change. That was the very first one, actually. The one that looked at the eighth amendment also looked at seven or nine other topics. The eighth amendment tends to get more publicity, but there were a whole host of other topics. In fact, I attended some of the sessions, along with some MLAs, of the one that looked at the manner in which referenda are held. To some minds, that was a bit more of a dull topic, but an important one nonetheless.

Mr Lunn: OK, thanks for that. The major constitutional issue of the day up here, eventually, is going to be the future of Ireland as a whole. There is quite a body of opinion about at the moment that suggests that a citizens' assembly on a North/South basis could have a very useful input into that discussion; not to make decisions about whether it is desirable or feasible but to look at the pros and cons of the argument. I know that the Dáil Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has recently passed an amendment to say that the Dáil would support a citizens' assembly on a North/South basis. It may be that the same question is going to be asked of the Northern Ireland Assembly very shortly. Is it feasible to have a citizens' assembly on a North/South basis with two jurisdictions involved? Let us put it this way: is there any particular reason why it should not happen?

Ms McCabe: It would definitely be very tricky to do. Having a citizens' assembly on any topic where there is a partisan split in support for a citizens' assembly looking at that topic would call its legitimacy into question on that basis. People from unionist communities wanting to take up the invitation to be part of that would be an issue, so achieving that balance of representation would also be a challenge. The academic literature talks about a deliberative system, so bringing more deliberation into politics generally and not just focusing on singular mechanisms in isolation but looking at how deliberation can exist at all levels. To go back to my response to Mr Stalford's questions, the idea of replacing some aspects of debate with more careful deliberation and weighing up is really helpful. I think that deliberation has a role to play in talking about those constitutional questions, but possibly not at the scale of a citizens' assembly right away. They can be scaled up or scaled down, so more distributed deliberative dialogues at town, community or electoral ward level or whatever might be a more productive way to start. Looking at those other policy issues that cross communities and which are of common concern and not divisive in the same way is, maybe, the way to go, at least initially.

Mr Lunn: Yes. I am really thinking of an assembly that could look at the specific issues without taking a view on the overall question. Surely a citizens' assembly could look at questions to do with policing,

education, the health service or the vexed question of how much money would have to be spent. That is where I see a useful deliberation and discourse. Is there any particular reason why, given the mechanics of an assembly on a North/South basis, it should not be able to be organised, post COVID and post Zoom and all the rest of it?

Mr Braithwaite: While Rebekah is thinking, I will say that, in principle, there is probably not, but a citizens' assembly needs to be commissioned by an institution. What body would commission it, and what body would it report to? Citizens' assemblies and deliberative process tend to work better in situations where you have an issue for which there are a range of choices and it is not a binary decision. The constitutional issues are not inherently binary, but they tend to be perceived that way. As you suggest, breaking it down into its constituent parts and different topics could be a way. Undoubtedly, we need to build up a deliberative culture around those questions. The concern is that putting all of that pressure on one process is more than a single citizens' assembly could take or reasonably be expected to deliver against.

There is potential in looking at separate issues. Involvement has done work around Brexit, for example, in which, rather than taking the issue at face value, it looked at issues around immigration and trade separately. It asked people what they thought about those separate issues and then what that meant as an overall package. Those kinds of approaches could be used, but I think [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] Sorry, I think my connection has gone again, which is probably useful. Putting it all into one citizens' assembly on a question could risk being seen as binary and could lack legitimacy, especially if one part of the political equation refuses to support it and it is difficult to get members. Apart from anything else, undertaking any of these initiatives requires cross-party political support, otherwise they will not be useful in helping to resolve an impasse.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough. Thank you, Paul, Rebekah and Louise. Thank you for letting me go on with that, Chair. I appreciate it.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That is grand. Thank you very much for that, Trevor.

We have completed our questions, Paul, Louise and Rebekah. Thank you very much for taking the time to come to us today. That was a great update for members and has given some food for thought about what needs to happen next. Thank you very much for taking the time to join us today.

Mr Braithwaite: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone.

Dr O'Kane: Thank you.

Ms McCabe: Thanks.