



# Citizens' Assembly

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

## Summary of Participant Evaluations

JAMIE POW & JOHN GARRY  
MARCH 2019



people at the heart  
of decision-making

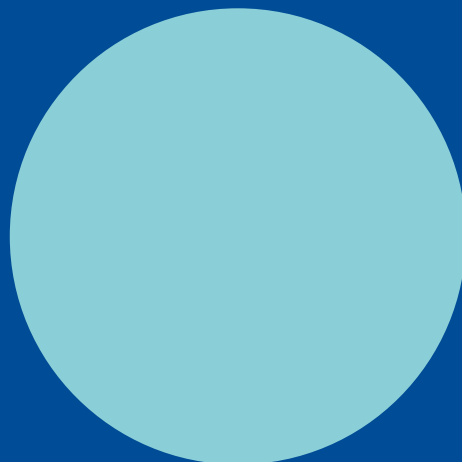
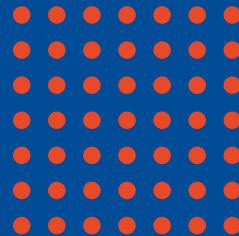


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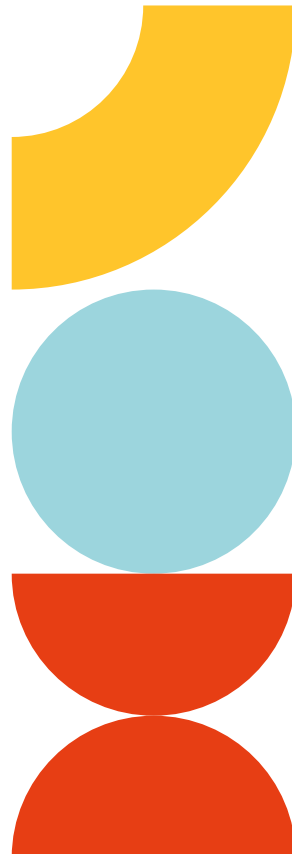


# OVERVIEW

The first Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland consisted of 75 citizens, selected to be broadly representative of Northern Ireland's population. It met over two weekends in Autumn 2018. The Citizens' Assembly considered what the public's aspirations are for a social care system fit for the future. Its terms of reference gave particular consideration to the respective roles played by the health service, communities and individuals.

Similar initiatives have been used elsewhere in the UK and in other countries, including Canada, the Netherlands and Ireland. This is the first time that a citizens' assembly has been held in Northern Ireland. These democratic innovations give members of the public the time and opportunity to learn about and discuss a topic, before reaching collective decisions.

This briefing summarises the evaluations from the citizens who took part in the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland. It is based on participants' closed-ended and open-ended responses to a survey conducted at the beginning and end of each of the two weekends. The survey was produced and analysed by researchers at Queen's University Belfast in partnership with Involve. This short briefing is intended to supplement the forthcoming main report, which will set out the process and decisions of the Citizens' Assembly.



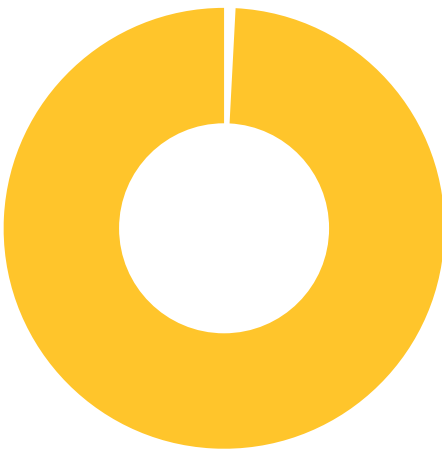
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[The Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland](#) was developed, designed and delivered by Involve, overseen and supported by an advisory group. Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity, on a mission to put people at the heart of decision-making. Find out more about the Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland at: [www.citizensassemblyni.org](http://www.citizensassemblyni.org)

## 1. OPINIONS ABOUT THE ISSUE

- Citizens became much more knowledgeable about the issue of social care, particularly over the first weekend;
- The issue was perceived to be very important before, during and after the process, despite a widespread perception that political parties are not giving it enough attention;
- There was a high degree of stability in participants' attitudes to general aspects of social care throughout both weekends, suggesting that presentations and small-group discussions reinforced, rather than changed, existing views on key principles.



**99% OF PARTICIPANTS SAID THEY FELT ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN FUTURE INITIATIVES LIKE THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY**

## 2. OPINIONS ABOUT THE PROCESS

- Nearly all participants agreed that the presentations were useful and that they covered a wide range of perspectives;
- The quality of the discussion was perceived to be high, but some members were perceived to dominate the discussions;
- Across both weekends, all members agreed that they were given plenty of opportunities to speak;
- Facilitation was overwhelmingly perceived to be fair and impartial;
- Discussions were marked by a sense of mutual respect, a sense that participants were willing to change their minds (and many did), a sense that participants justified their positions, and a sense that fellow members genuinely cared about the common good;
- After the final weekend, 99% of participants said they felt encouraged to participate in future initiatives like the Citizens' Assembly, while 97% agreed that they should be used more often to inform politicians in decision-making.

Despite the novelty of this kind of process in Northern Ireland, participants' evaluations were extremely positive overall. These findings illustrate that citizens' assemblies can work well from the perspective of the participants themselves, and that there is strong demand for this kind of citizen-centred decision-making in Northern Ireland.

**97% AGREED THAT CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES SHOULD BE USED MORE OFTEN TO INFORM POLITICIANS IN DECISION-MAKING**



# OPINIONS ABOUT THE ISSUE

Participants were asked for their views about the *issue* of social care for the elderly at the start and end of each weekend.

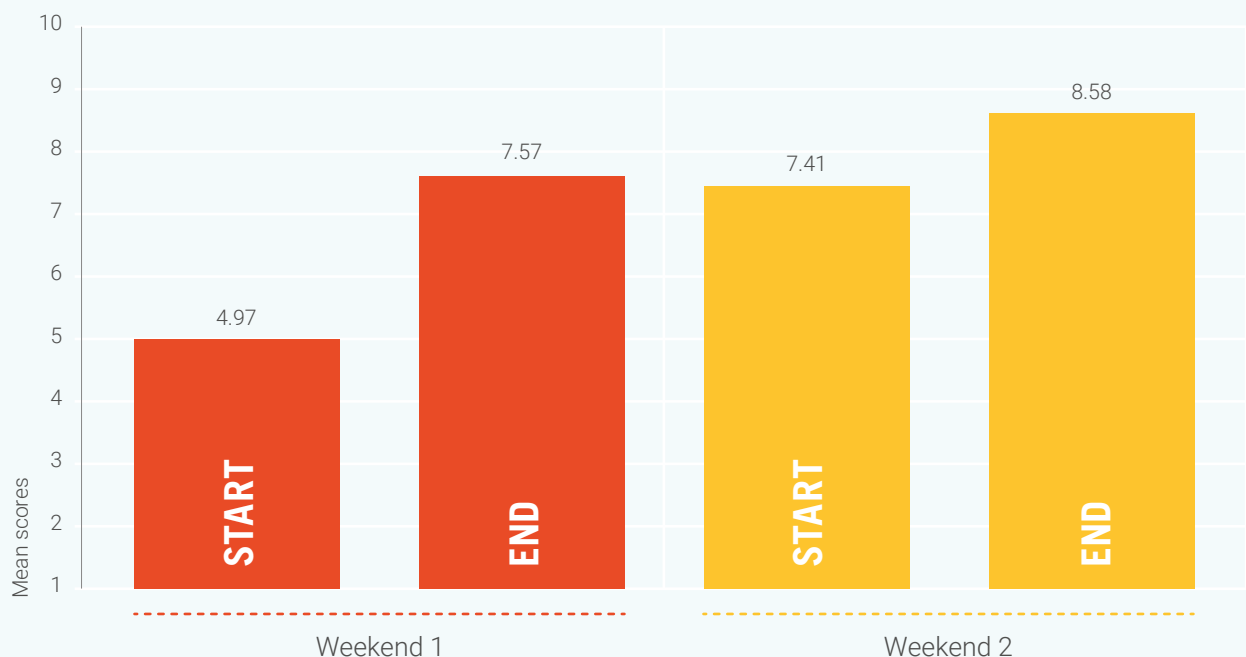
## 1. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE ISSUE

Most people entered the first weekend without a great deal of knowledge of the social care system in Northern Ireland. On average, they rated their own knowledge level as 5 out of a possible score of 10. After the first weekend, average levels of self-reported knowledge increased significantly (up to an average score of 7.6 out of 10). A further, albeit smaller, increase occurred during the course of the second weekend, so that by the end of the second weekend the average self-rated knowledge score

was 3.6 points higher than at the very start. This appears to strongly suggest that citizens engaging in this deliberative process became much more knowledgeable about the issue of social care, and the vast bulk of this knowledge increase occurred over the duration of the first weekend. In open-ended responses, one participant singled out "learning all about the health and social care system" as a positive part of the first weekend, adding: "I knew nothing beforehand."

**FIGURE 1: SELF-REPORTED KNOWLEDGE**

Question wording: "On a scale of 1–10, much would you say you feel you know about the social care system in Northern Ireland?"  
(1 = Know nothing at all; 10 = Know a great deal)





## 2. IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE

Reforming the social care system was seen as a very important issue for participants on arrival, with an average assessment of 8.5 out of 10 on the 1–10 importance scale. The perceived importance of the issue increased over the course of the first weekend (up to 9.4 out of 10) and remained high throughout the remainder of the second weekend.

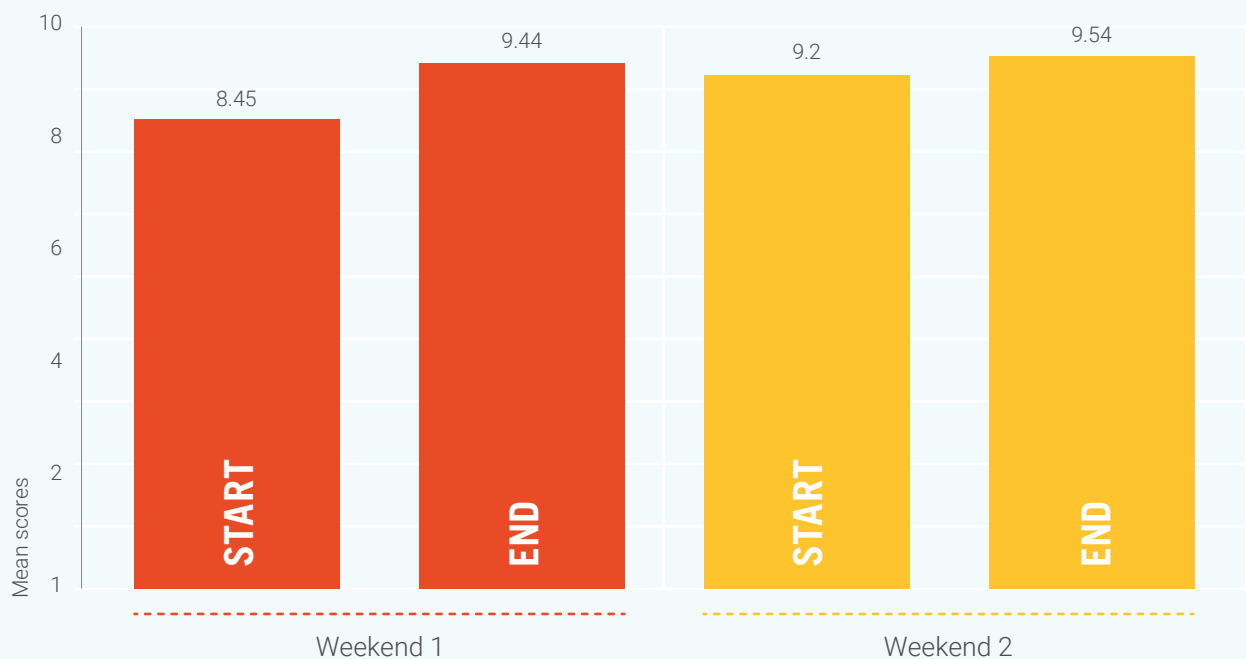


**IT HAS RAISED  
MY HOPES  
FOR A BETTER  
NORTHERN  
IRELAND**

**PARTICIPANT**

**FIGURE 2: PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE**

Question wording: "On a scale of 1–10, how important do you consider the issue of reforming the social care system at the moment?" (1 = Not at all important; 10 = Extremely important)





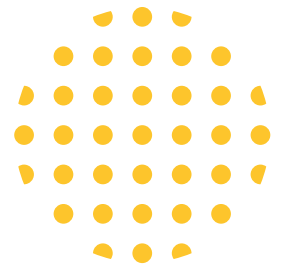
### 3. POLITICIANS' HANDLING OF THE ISSUE

There was an overwhelming view that political parties are not giving the issue of social care reform enough attention. Over 93% of participants consistently expressed this opinion – at the start of the deliberation and over the course of the two weekends of the Citizens' Assembly process. One participant wrote: "When I say politicians don't give the issue enough attention, the attention they give is negative and unconstructive."



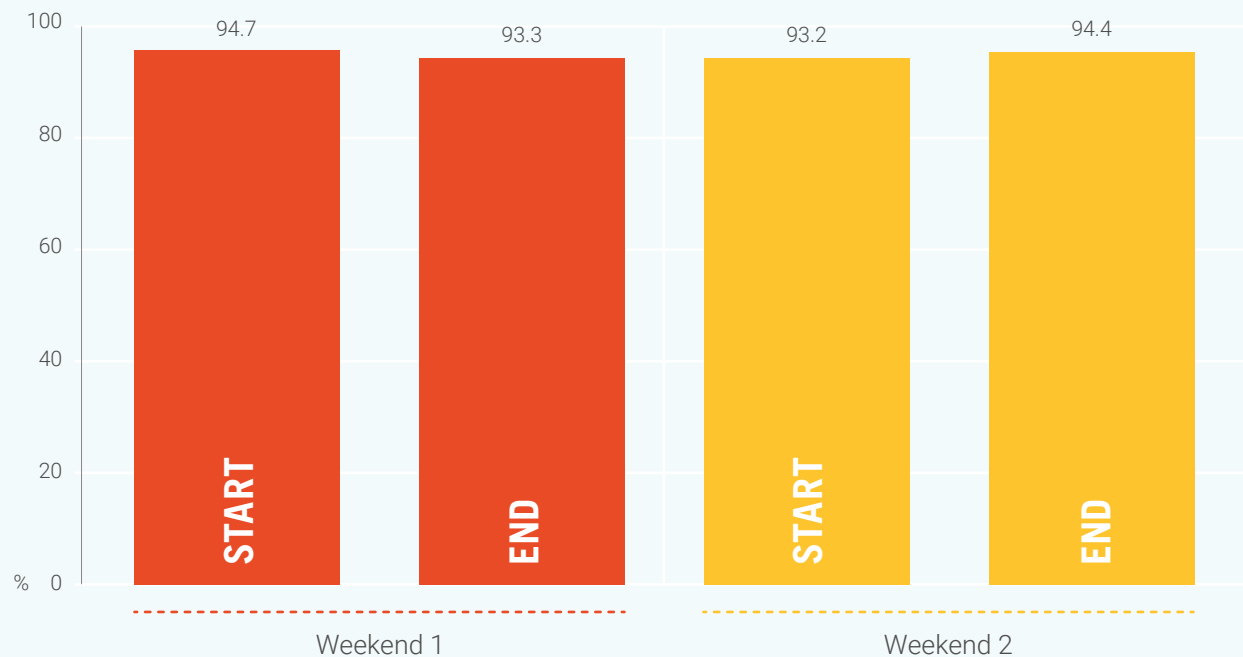
I FELT I WAS ACTUALLY CONTRIBUTING TO NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY-MAKING AND DEMOCRACY

PARTICIPANT



**FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO THINK POLITICAL PARTIES ARE NOT GIVING THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL CARE REFORM ENOUGH ATTENTION**

Question wording: "In your opinion, do you think that political parties are giving the issue of social care reform enough attention?" (Too much/right amount/not enough)



### 4. ATTITUDES TO ASPECTS OF SOCIAL CARE

There was a high degree of stability in participants' attitudes to general aspects of social care throughout both weekends, albeit with some evidence of fluctuation and modest shifts in opinion (see Figures 4.1–4.4). It seems that the presentations and small-group discussions reinforced, rather than altered, their existing views. Most participants consistently agreed that it is the responsibility of individuals and their families to fund social care when they get older and that more public funding is required (either by raising taxes or diverting funding). Over 80% consistently disagreed that existing social care provision meets the needs of those who depend on it. Although there are some differences across the time points these are minor and more likely to be trendless fluctuations than meaningful opinion change.



I FEEL I HAVE MADE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO FUTURE SOCIAL CARE IF IT IS TAKEN ONBOARD BY RELEVANT PEOPLE

PARTICIPANT



FIGURE 4.1

"It is the responsibility of individuals and their families to fund social care when they get older." (% of participants who agree/disagree)

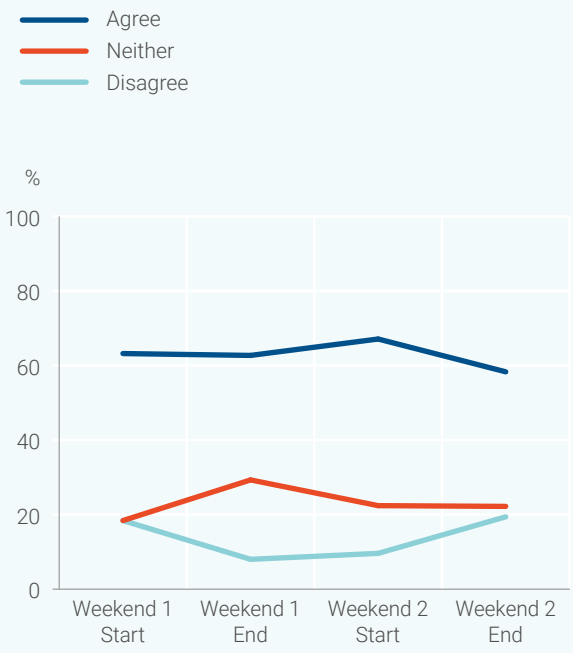
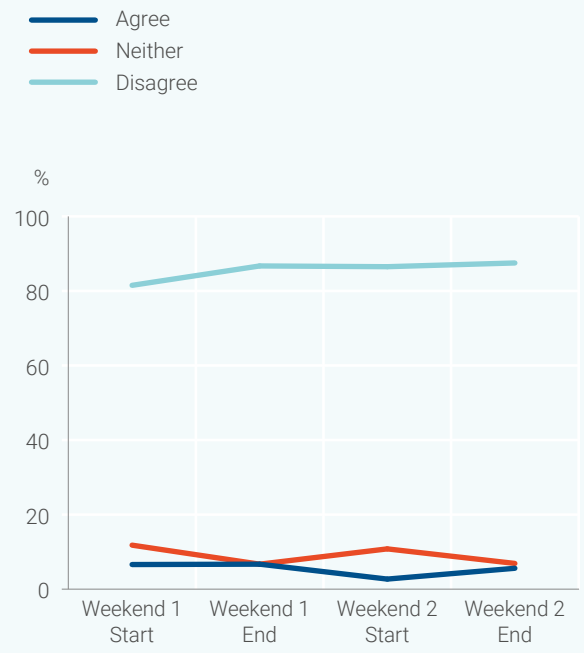


FIGURE 4.2

"Existing provision of social care meets the needs of those who depend on it." (% of participants who agree/disagree)

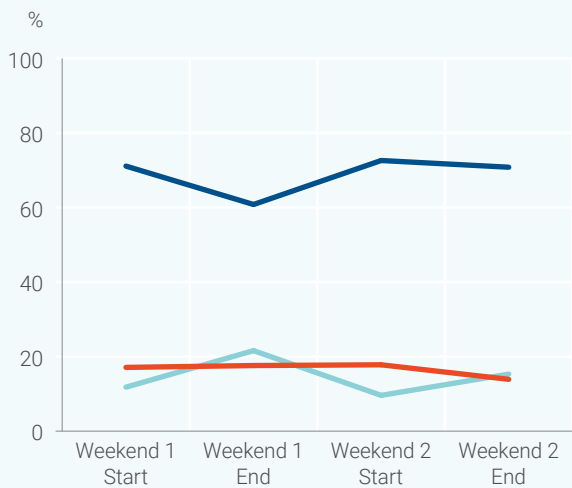




**FIGURE 4.3**

“As a society we need to spend more public money on social care, even if this means raising taxes.” (% of participants who agree/disagree)

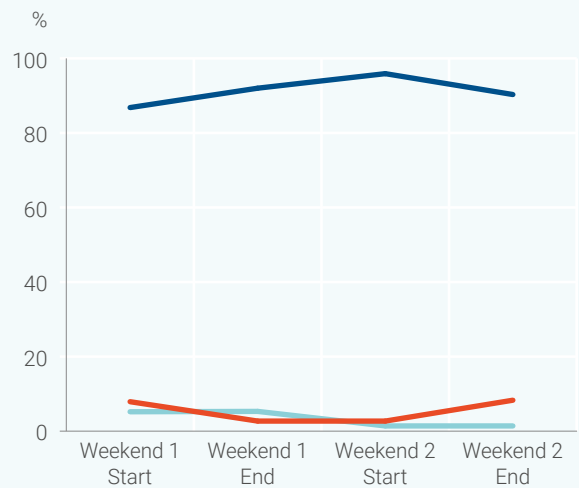
— Agree  
— Neither  
— Disagree



**FIGURE 4.4**

“We can adequately fund social care without raising taxes by diverting funding from other areas of spending.” (% of participants who agree/disagree)

— Agree  
— Neither  
— Disagree



# OPINIONS ABOUT THE PROCESS

Participants were asked for their views about the *process*, including the extent to which they thought different aspects of the Citizens' Assembly were well executed. These evaluations were conducted at the end of each weekend.

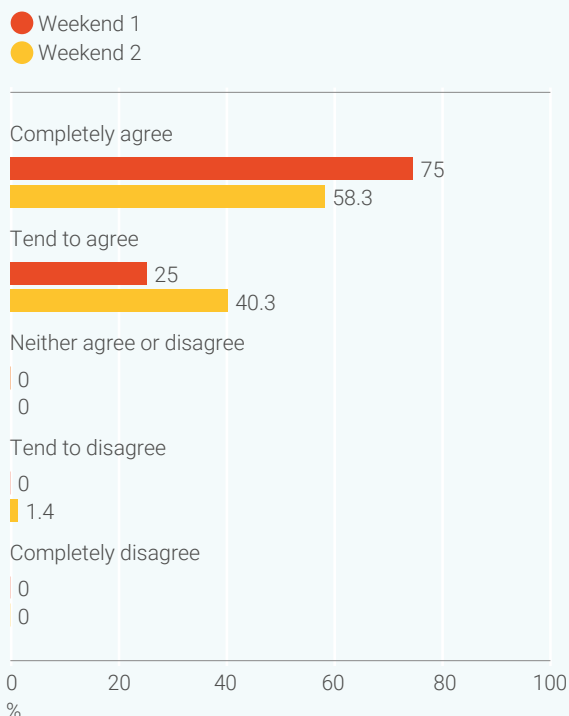
## 5. QUALITY OF PRESENTATIONS

Across both weekends, nearly all participants agreed that the presentations were 'useful'. On balance, the presentations of the first weekend seemed to be more useful to participants compared to those of the second weekend (75% completely agreed they were useful in the first weekend and 58% did so at the second weekend). This likely reflected the steeper learning curve of the first weekend.

As one participant put it, they found the "input from research-based, factual speakers" to be a positive feature of the first weekend. In addition, the vast majority of participants agreed that the presentations 'covered a wide range of perspectives' across both weekends. This is an important finding, as the consideration of a diverse range of views is a prerequisite for high quality deliberation.

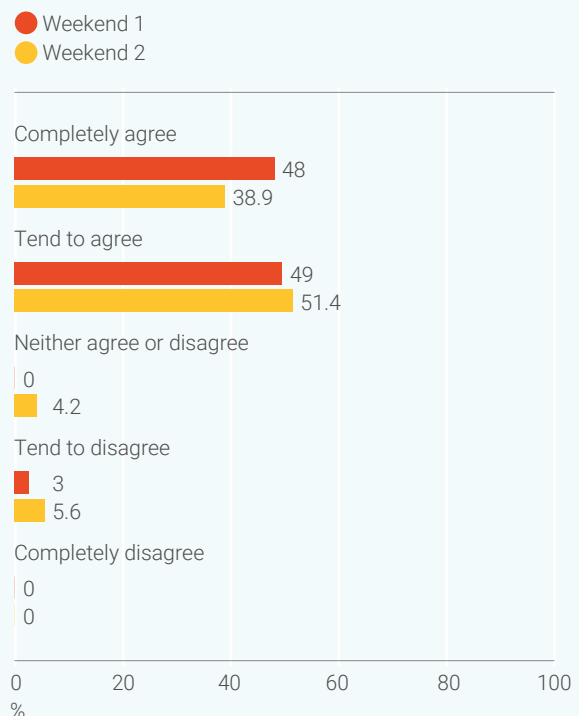
**FIGURE 5.1**

"The presentations were useful." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



**FIGURE 5.2**

"The presentations covered a wide range of perspectives." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



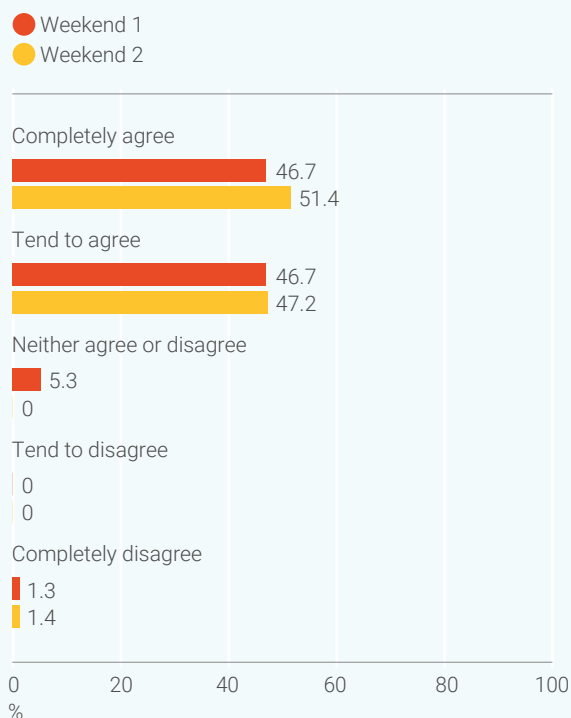
## 6. QUALITY OF DISCUSSION

Almost all participants agreed that “good arguments were brought to the discussion,” with an even split between those tending to agree and completely agreeing that this was the case across both weekends. However, a significant proportion of participants felt that some Citizens’ Assembly members tended to dominate the discussions at their table: 40% the first weekend, and 44% the second weekend. “Not everyone practised ‘step forward, step back’ and some didn’t think it applied to them,” wrote one participant, referring to one of guidelines for group discussion in which shy members were encouraged to speak up and more vocal participants were encouraged to show restraint.

Of those who agreed that some people tended to dominate the discussions, it is important to note that relatively few *completely* agreed that this was the case. This suggests that while some participants may have spoken noticeably more than others, it was not widely perceived to be an overly problematic issue. This is still an important finding to reflect upon with respect to the consideration of possible changes for the design of future Citizens’ Assemblies in order to reduce discussion domination. These recommendations could include amending instructions for the table facilitators to more robustly intervene to ensure an appropriate sharing of discussion time among the citizen participants.

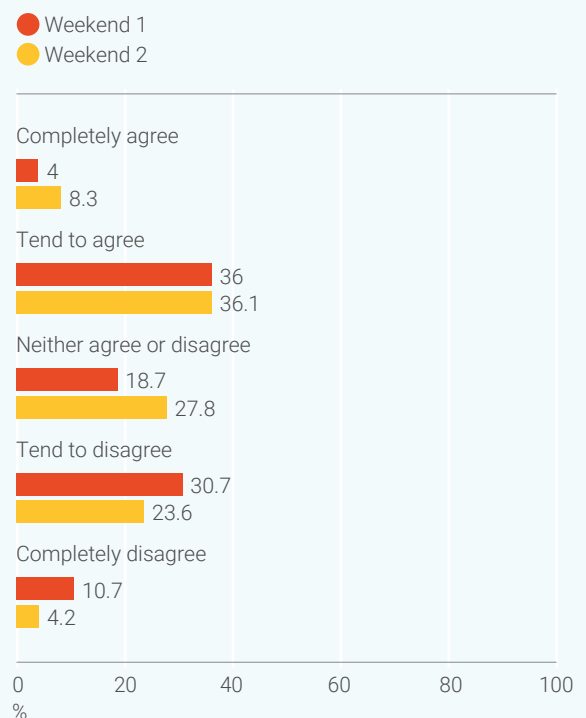
**FIGURE 6.1**

“Overall, I believe that good arguments were brought to the discussion.” (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



**FIGURE 6.2**

“At my table some members tended to dominate the discussions.” (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



## 7. OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE

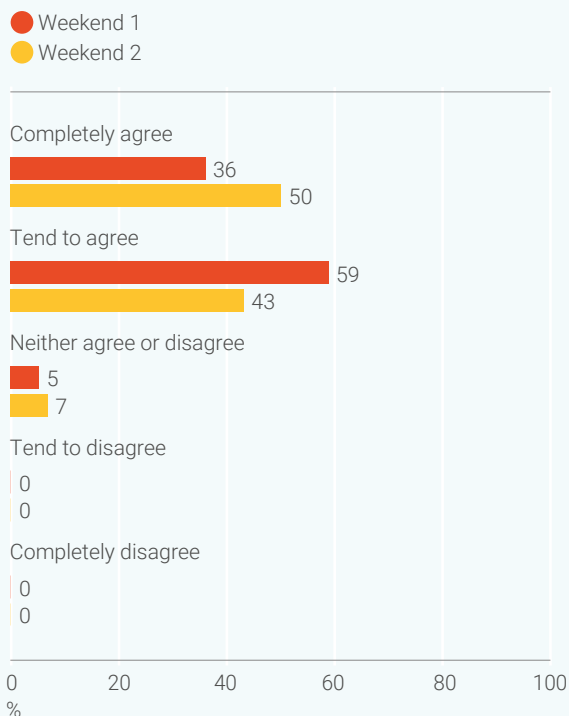
There is compelling evidence to suggest that participants felt able to meaningfully contribute to group discussions. Across both weekends, almost all Citizens' Assembly members agreed that they were given plenty of speaking opportunities. After the second weekend, half of all participants *completely* agreed that this was the case. No participant disagreed. As one shy participant put it, "I didn't really know what to expect. I wouldn't be particularly forward in general but my opinions and views were facilitated." This finding is particularly important in the context of Figure 6.2: despite the fact that some members were perceived to dominate group discussions, individual participants still felt very able to express their own views. Perhaps the lesson to draw from Figures 7 and 6.2 in combination is that all participants felt able to contribute but some felt more able than others. A desired outcome is speaking opportunities that are both plentiful and relatively equally availed of.

## 8. QUALITY OF FACILITATION

Table facilitators received resoundingly positive evaluations from Citizens' Assembly members. Open-ended responses indicate that facilitators helped to create a supportive environment for participants. For instance, as one described: "I didn't feel out of my depth. The pacing and facilitators were excellent." Many others expressed similar views in their written feedback. Most participants agreed that the facilitators ensured that opposing arguments were considered. The proportion completely agreeing increased by the end of the second weekend to more than half.

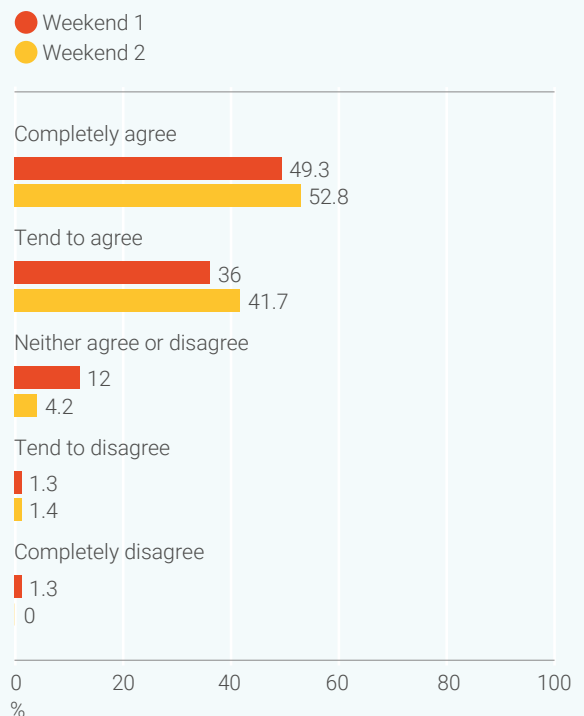
**FIGURE 7**

"I was given plenty of speaking opportunities during the table discussions." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



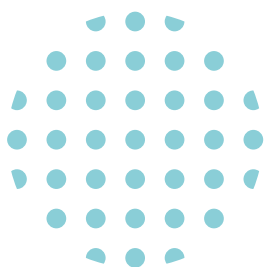
**FIGURE 8.1**

"The table facilitators made sure that opposing arguments were considered." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)





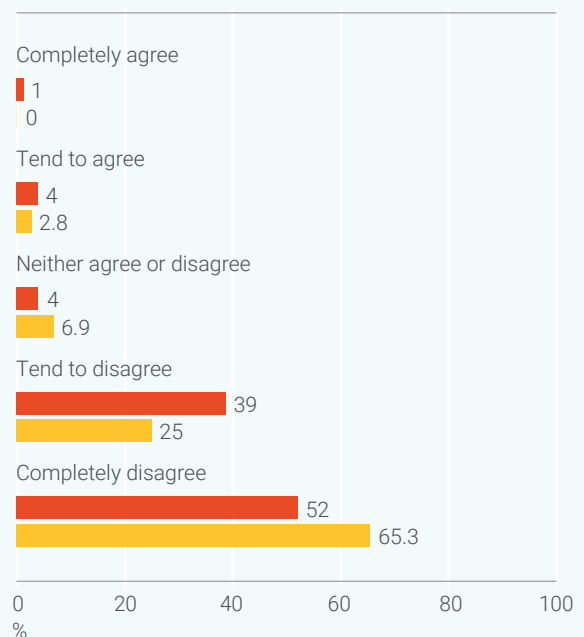
In addition, the vast majority of participants disagreed with the suggestion that table facilitators sometimes tried to influence the table with their own ideas. By the end of the second weekend, 90% of Citizens' Assembly members disagreed, including 65% who completely disagreed. "Having a neutral facilitator has been vital and they have allowed for as much discussion as possible with each session," wrote one participant. Taken together with Figure 8.1, these findings reflect a broad perception that table facilitators were impartial intercessors who promoted genuine and inclusive deliberation among participants.



**FIGURE 8.2**

"The table facilitators sometimes tried to influence the group with their own ideas."  
 (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)

● Weekend 1  
 ● Weekend 2



## 9. QUALITY, NATURE AND IMPACT OF ARGUMENTATION

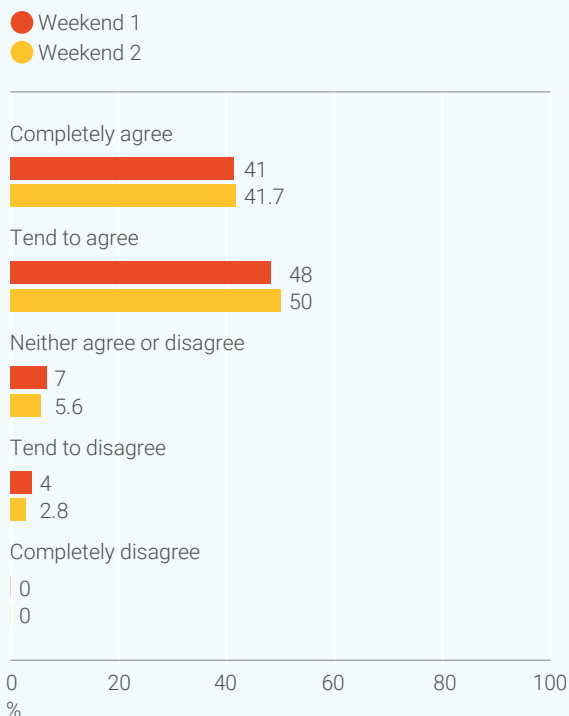
Members of the Citizens' Assembly overwhelmingly perceived that the tone of fellow participants was respectful during interactive discussions. By the end of the second weekend, 92% of participants agreed that their fellow table members respected what they had to say, even when their opinions differed. This was almost identical to the pattern of perceptions at the end of the first weekend. Only a handful tended to disagree, signaling a very high level of perceived interpersonal respect. In written feedback, one participant highlighted the "respectful discussion throughout, which was refreshing." Another wrote: "People from all backgrounds were able to sit down and have a civilised discussion about the issues."

By the end of the second weekend, only 13% of participants agreed that most people had already made up their minds and were not influenced by the group discussion. In contrast, 70% disagreed,

demonstrating that most Citizens' Assembly members perceived each other to be broadly receptive to new arguments and open to other points of view. Similarly, as Figure 9.3 illustrates, a decisive majority of participants agreed that fellow members appeared to be willing to change their minds as a result of the deliberative process. The percentage of participants holding this view increased, rising from 52% to 63% over the course of the two weekends. This points to a broad perception among Citizens' Assembly members that fellow participants were approaching the deliberative process with open minds. This seemed to surprise some of the participants themselves. "People were more open-minded than I expected," wrote one member. Similarly, another commented that they "expected entrenched views from many participants," but instead found that "most were open to discussion and change."

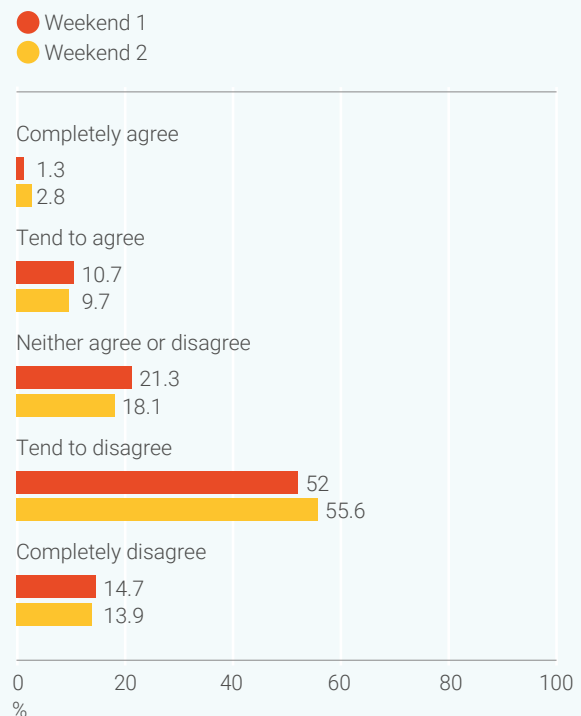
**FIGURE 9.1**

"My fellow table members respected what I had to say, even when they didn't agree."  
(% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)

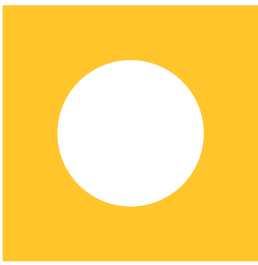


**FIGURE 9.2**

"Most people had made up their minds and the discussion had little effect on them."  
(% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)







## PEOPLE FROM ALL BACKGROUNDS WERE ABLE TO SIT DOWN AND HAVE A CIVILISED DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ISSUES

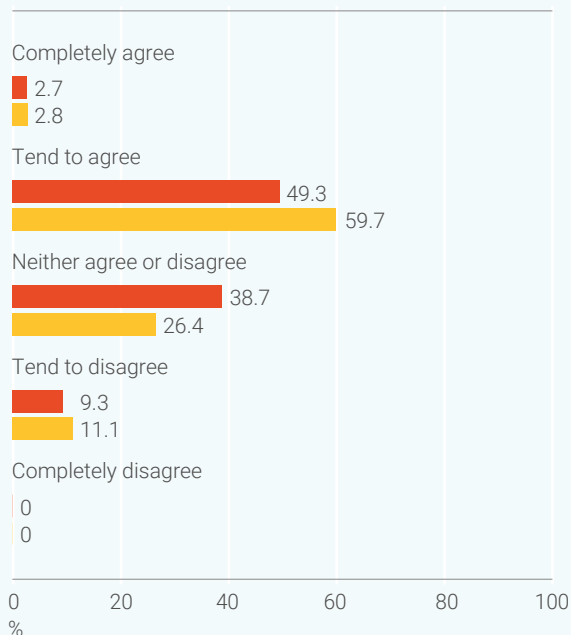
PARTICIPANT

A key indicator of meaningful deliberation is that participants *justify* their positions, such as by connecting them to evidence or underlying values, rather than simply asserting their views without offering any corresponding reasons. Figure 9.4 suggests that most Citizens' Assembly members perceived this requirement to have been met. After each weekend only 15% of participants agreed that many people just stated their positions without justifying them; over 70 percent disagreed. Written feedback suggests that members were making a conscious effort to explain the logic behind their positions: "Both weekends provided challenging opportunities to listen to others and clarify the reasons why I hold my views," wrote one participant.

**FIGURE 9.3**

"Most people appeared willing to change their minds during the discussion."  
(% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)

● Weekend 1  
● Weekend 2



**FIGURE 9.4**

"During the discussions, many people just stated their positions without justifying them."  
(% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)

● Weekend 1  
● Weekend 2

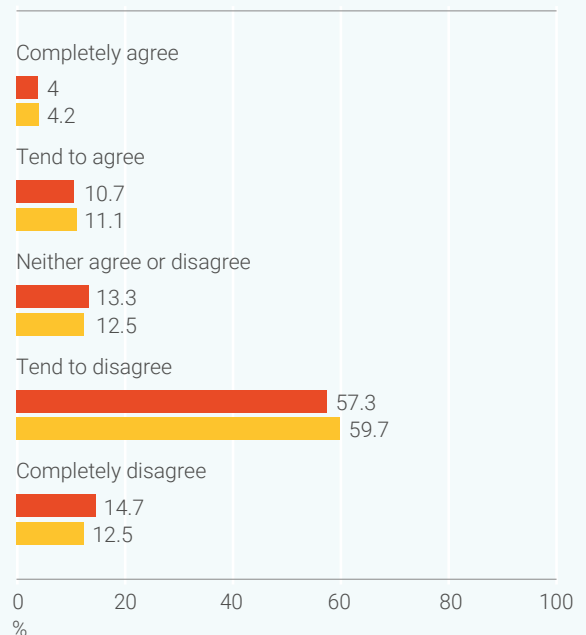
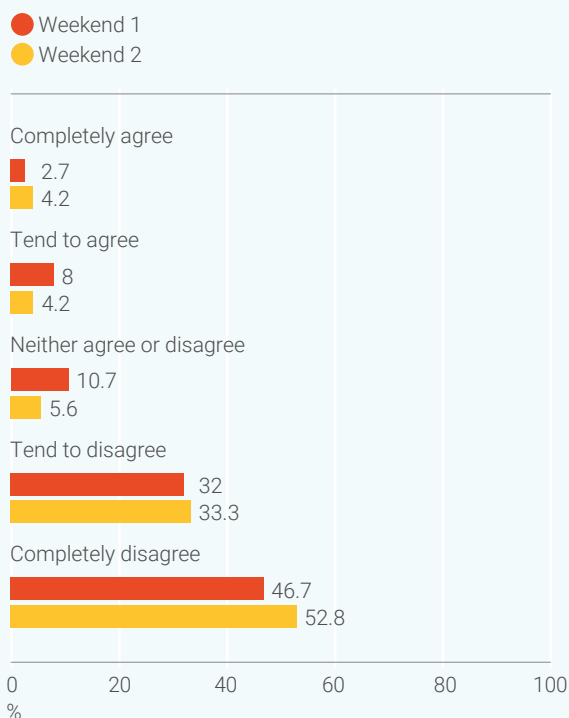


Figure 9.5 provides further encouragement that the Citizens' Assembly successfully created an atmosphere conducive to genuine deliberation by establishing a broad degree of trust among participants. By the end of the second weekend, 8% of members agreed that they did not always feel free to express their views for fear of others' reactions, while 86% disagreed. The percentage of participants disagreeing increased by seven points between the first and second weekends, suggesting that participants felt even more comfortable expressing their views in front of strangers as the process unfolded. It seems that facilitators played an important role, with one participant commenting: "I wouldn't be particularly forward in general but my opinions and views were facilitated."

Most participants said they changed their views as a result of the table discussions. The proportion increased significantly over the course of the Citizens' Assembly: 41% agreed that their views changed after the first weekend, compared to 61% by the end of the second weekend. While Figures 4.1–4.4 demonstrated a high degree of attitudinal stability with respect to some of the general aspects of social care, the contrasting picture presented in Figure 9.6 captures self-reported attitudinal change. The statement presented to respondents did not measure the precise ways in which participants' views changed, whether in relation to broad outlook or the particular issue areas. Instead, in answering this question they were facilitated in reflecting broadly on whether or not the table discussions had an effect on their opinions.

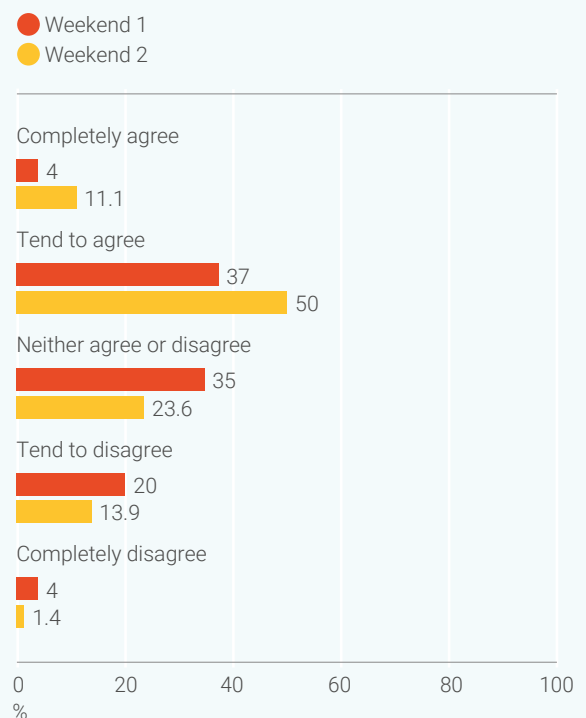
**FIGURE 9.5**

"I didn't always feel free to raise my views and ideas for fear of others' reactions." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



**FIGURE 9.6**

"I changed my views as a result of the table discussions." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



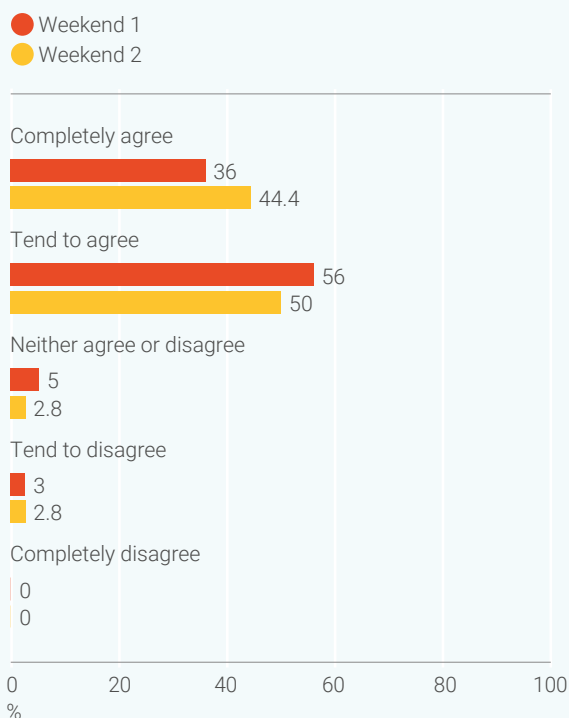


### 10. INTEREST MOTIVATION

By the end of the second weekend, 94% of participants agreed that fellow members genuinely cared about the common good rather than self-interest. This offers another indication that Citizens' Assembly members embraced deliberative principles, which emphasise the reaching of collectively beneficial recommendations rather than conclusions that benefit certain specific groups or individuals. Reflecting on the process of voting for resolutions and recommendations, one participant observed: "It felt genuinely creative reaching what were often compromises." Another wrote that, "People were working together with no political gains for the common good of all in our society." This is a noteworthy observation in the context of Northern Ireland's political climate. "The fact that we were able to get together to discuss an issue without the usual orange, green issue," was highlighted as a positive aspect of the experience by a Citizens' Assembly member in written feedback.

**FIGURE 10**

"Many people genuinely cared about the common good rather than their personal situation or interests." (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)

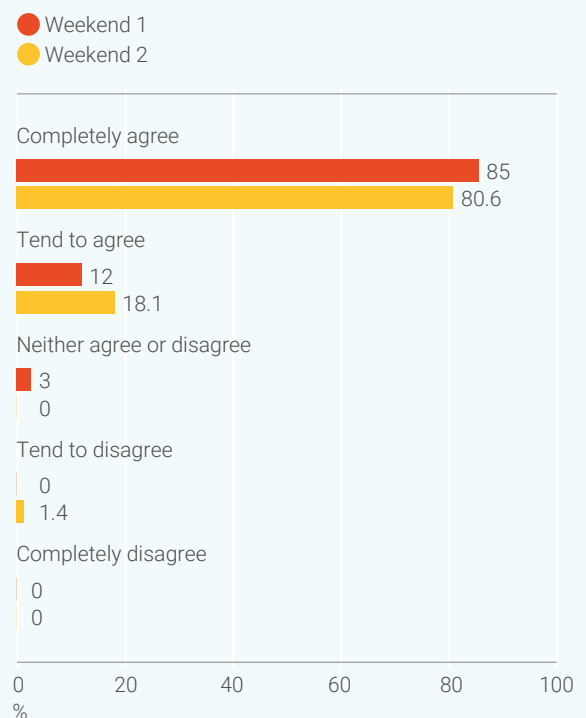


### 11. USEFULNESS OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

After the first weekend, the vast majority of participants (97%) said they felt encouraged to continue as a Citizens' Assembly member. The extremely high level of enthusiasm is noteworthy: 85% *completely* agreed with the statement. After the second weekend, 99% said they felt encouraged to participate in future initiatives like the Citizens' Assembly. Only one member took a contrary view. In open-ended responses, participants expressed their firm hope that the outcomes of the Citizens' Assembly would have an impact. As one member put it, "I feel I have made a positive contribution to future social care if it is taken onboard by relevant people." Another wrote: "I felt I was actually contributing to Northern Ireland policy-making and democracy."

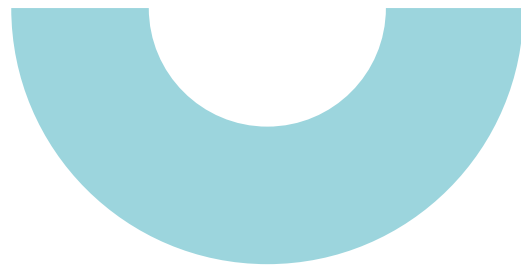
**FIGURE 11.1**

"From participating this weekend I feel encouraged to continue as a Citizens' Assembly member" (W1) / "From participating this weekend I would feel encouraged to participate in future initiatives like the Citizens' Assembly" (W2). (% of participants who agree/disagree each weekend)



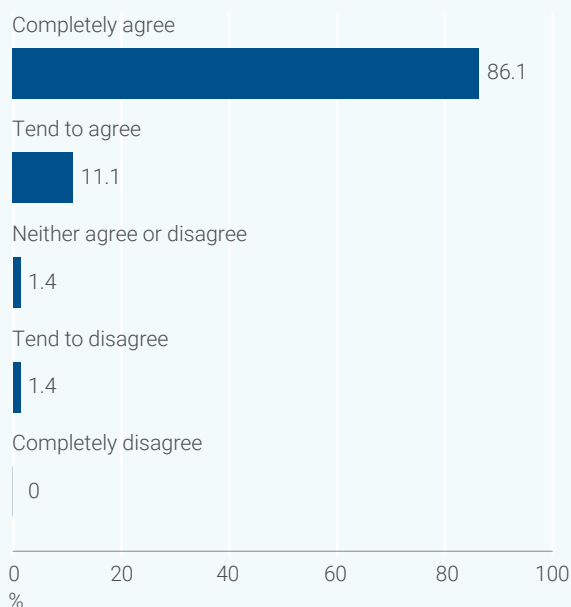
Meanwhile, by the end of the second weekend, almost every participant (97% of them) agreed that citizens' assemblies should be used more often to inform politicians in decision-making. Again, the level of enthusiasm is noteworthy: 86% of members *completely* agreed. The vast majority of members appeared to walk away with a sense that citizens' assemblies can make a constructive contribution to political decision-making: "It has been very positive to be part of such a large group who feel so passionately about the issue," reflected one participant, adding: "It restores my faith in Northern Ireland being able to take things forward positively." Another wrote: "More of this sort of thing! Anything to give the regular person on the street an opportunity to express their views – but government needs to listen. The anger in the room at the lack of political leadership was evident."

Finally, at the end of the second weekend, participants were asked to give the Citizens' Assembly an overall rating on a scale of 1–10, ranging from 'very poor' to 'very good'. The mean score was 9.2. Three members (4%) gave the Citizens' Assembly an overall score lower than 8; the remaining 96% gave it a score of 8 or higher. The most common score was 10, awarded by 47% of the members. "It has raised my hopes for a better Northern Ireland," reflected one participant.



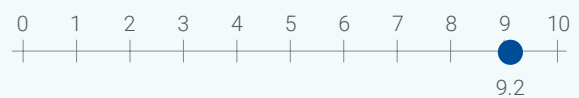
**FIGURE 11.2**

"Citizens' Assemblies like this should be used more often to inform government and parliament decision-making." (% of participants who agree/disagree; question only asked at end of W2)



**FIGURE 11.3: OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY**

Question wording: "Overall, on a scale of 1–10, how would you rate the Citizens' Assembly? (1 = Very poor; 10 = Very good) (mean scores)



Taken together, these results suggest that the vast majority of members of Northern Ireland's inaugural Citizens' Assembly had a highly positive experience, and that they see considerable potential for this kind of decision-making model to be applied to future questions of public policy.

# TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Table 1 provides a demographic breakdown of the participants of each survey. Out of the 75 participants who attended the first weekend, the vast majority completed the first questionnaire. There was a slightly lower response rate across the subsequent three time points – a common feature of this kind of research – but response rates were

still consistently high across both weekends. This survey research received approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen's University Belfast. Please contact Jamie Pow ([jpow01@qub.ac.uk](mailto:jpow01@qub.ac.uk)) or Rebekah McKabe ([rebekah@involve.org.uk](mailto:rebekah@involve.org.uk)) if you would like further information.

**TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS (RAW FREQUENCIES)**

		WEEKEND 1		WEEKEND 2	
		START	END	START	END
<b>GENDER</b>	Female	38	38	36	36
	Male	37	35	38	35
<b>AGE</b>	18–24 years	6	6	5	6
	25–34 years	9	9	9	9
	35–44 years	8	7	8	6
	45–54 years	25	23	24	22
	55–64 years	12	14	13	13
	65+ years	15	14	15	15
<b>COMMUNITY BACKGROUND</b>	Catholic	35	31	33	34
	Protestant	34	35	35	30
	Other/None	6	7	6	7
<b>HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>	Vocational qualifications	5	5	5	5
	GCSE/equivalent	0	0	1	0
	A Level/equivalent	8	5	4	4
	Bachelor degree/equivalent	34	30	30	29
	Masters/PhD/equivalent	22	29	24	22
	No formal qualifications	1	1	1	1
	Still studying	3	3	5	5
	Other	2	0	4	5
<b>ALL</b>		75	73	74	71





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