



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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Paper 63/21

October 2021

NIAR 216-2021

# Participatory policy-making

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## 1 Introduction

This briefing paper has been prepared for the Committee for the Executive Office. The committee asked for information on the following:

- research on models of participatory policy-making, with examples from elsewhere, compared and contrasted with the Northern Ireland Civic Forum.

The paper looks at examples of deliberative forums, or mini-publics, in other jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland, Scotland along with several international examples.

There has been growing academic interest in the concept of deliberative democracy, which has coincided with a “crisis in elected institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

However, direct comparisons with the Northern Ireland Civic Forum are difficult to find. The concept of ‘deliberative mini-publics’, which encompass models such as citizens’ juries, planning cells, deliberative polls and citizens’ assemblies, differ from the Civic Forum as their membership comprises or also includes ordinary citizens, rather than particular sectors or interest groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Eoin Carolan, *Ireland’s Constitutional Convention: Behind the hype about citizen-led constitutional change*, International Journal of Constitutional Law, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2015, Pages 733–748

## 2 The Northern Ireland context

### The Northern Ireland Civic Forum

The Civic Forum emerged from the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement as part of the institutions established under Strand One of the Agreement. It was legislated for in section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.<sup>2</sup> The Forum comprised 60 representatives from the business, trade union, voluntary sectors etc. and was to act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues.

The advent of the Forum was not universally welcomed by elected representatives. There was a view among some Members of the Assembly that its membership did not adequately represent the views of those in society who had voted against the Agreement and that it was an unnecessary additional layer of bureaucracy, whose funding could be better used elsewhere. Supporters of the Forum argued that it was a valuable mechanism for obtaining the views of wider civic society and bridging the gap between political institutions and the public.

In February 1999, the Assembly approved a report presented by the First Minister (Designate) and deputy First Minister (Designate) which set out the proposed structure of the Forum. It was to comprise a chairman and 60 members representing ten sectors:

- Voluntary/Community (18 representatives)
- Business (7 representatives)
- Trade Union (7 representatives)
- Churches (5 representatives)
- Arts & Sports (4 representatives)
- Culture (4 representatives)
- Agriculture & Fisheries (3 representatives)
- Community Relations (2 representatives)
- Education (2 representatives)
- Victims (2 representatives)

The FM and dFM were also to be responsible for three personal nominations. A report from the FM and dFM designate made clear that all nominations to the Forum from all sectors should adhere to the following guidelines:

- a gender balance;

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<sup>2</sup> Section 56 of the Northern Ireland 1998: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/56>

- a community background balance;
- a geographic spread across Northern Ireland; and
- a balanced age profile to include young people and older people.

The Forum met in plenary format 12 times between 9 October 2000 and 14 October 2002 when devolution was suspended. Various standing committees and working groups were established to take forward the bulk of its work. For example, the membership was divided into groups that would address specific social issues – the Anti-Poverty group (later changed to the Social Inclusion Group), the Life Long Learning group, the Sustainability group and the Towards a Plural Society group.

During its operation, the Forum produced a number of reports on issues such as Human Rights, Lifelong Learning, and Sustainable Development along with submissions on the Programme for Government. There were differing opinions among members of the Forum as to the effectiveness of the Forum, with some positive about the ability of the Forum to influence change, while others questioned the willingness of the Assembly and Executive to take account of its views.

The Civic Forum was originally supposed to be reviewed in 2002. Although a review of the Forum was commissioned, it was never completed due to suspension of the political institutions from 2002-2007. During subsequent discussions in the Committee on the Preparation for Government (Transitional Assembly), it was clear that there was no consensus on the need for the Forum to re-established. Members did agree however that there should be a review of the mechanism for civil society to promote its views. Following the restoration of devolved government in 2007, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a fresh review of the Forum, taking account of changes in civic society since the Forum's inception. That review did not appear to produce any definitive outcome regarding the future of the Forum.

### **Civic Advisory Panel**

The Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015 included a commitment to establish “a compact civic advisory panel which would meet regularly to consider key social, cultural and economic issues and to advise the NI Executive”<sup>3</sup>, with a Chair appointed by the First and deputy First Minister.

As part of the process the Fresh Start Agreement set out the next steps for the panel:

*A panel of six people will be established by the Executive. It will be tasked by the Executive to consider specific strategic issues relevant to the Programme for Government and report to the Executive. It may also propose subjects that it wishes to consider and seek Executive agreement to do so. The Panel will*

<sup>3</sup> A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan, November 2015:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/479116/A\\_Fresh\\_Start\\_-\\_The\\_Stormont\\_Agreement\\_and\\_Implementation\\_Plan\\_-\\_Final\\_Version\\_20\\_Nov\\_2015\\_for\\_PDF.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/479116/A_Fresh_Start_-_The_Stormont_Agreement_and_Implementation_Plan_-_Final_Version_20_Nov_2015_for_PDF.pdf)

*seek the views of a wide range of representatives and stakeholders from civic society. Panel members, including the Chair will be identified and appointed by OFMDFM.*<sup>4</sup>

The Panel would look at issues suggested by the Executive or by the Panel itself with the agreement of the Executive. It would use research and proactive engagement with a range of stakeholders who would have expertise in a particular area. It was envisaged that the Panel would submit a report to the Executive for its consideration.

The Panel was established but it only held four meetings before the political institutions ceased to function in January 2017.<sup>5</sup>

The New Decade, New Approach agreement provided the basis for the return of devolved government in Northern Ireland in January 2020. It proposed the re-establishment of the Panel and that the political parties had agreed that:

*...about 1-2 issues will be commissioned per year for civic engagement. The Panel will be invited to propose the most appropriate model of engagement for specific issues, including one Citizens' Assembly a year. The issues will be identified by the Executive. Following consideration of the assigned issues recommendations will be made to the Executive by the Panel.*<sup>6</sup>

In response to an Assembly Question asked in November 2020, the First and Deputy First Minister advised that they remained committed to the re-establishment of the Advisory Panel and at least one Citizens' Assembly per year, but that the impact of Covid had delayed this work.<sup>7</sup>

### **Citizens' Assembly on the social care system**

The Citizens' Assembly met over two weekends in October and November 2018 to explore the issue of social care reform. The Assembly was led and funded by a number of groups and had no links to the political institutions. Eighty participants were selected through an independent research group.

Following the completion of the deliberations of the Citizens' Assembly, a survey of MLAs was conducted to gauge their views on this type of deliberative forum. Thirty-six members from across six parties responded (covering all community designations). Key findings included:

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<sup>4</sup> *A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan*, November 2015

<sup>5</sup> The Irish News, *Stormont's Civic Society Panel paid £3,600 for four meetings*, 21 August 2017:

<https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/08/21/news/stormont-s-civic-society-panel-paid-3-600-for-four-meetings-1115898/>

<sup>6</sup> *New Decade, New Approach*, January 2020:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/856998/2020-01-08\\_a\\_new\\_decade\\_a\\_new\\_approach.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> NI Assembly question, AQW 11193/17-22:

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/writtensearchresults.aspx?&qf=0&qfv=1&ref=AQW%2011193/17-22>

- a high level of support for greater citizen involvement in policy-making, with 61% agreeing (compared with 13% disagreeing) with the statement: “there should be more opportunities for citizens to be involved in policy-making in Northern Ireland”;
- A majority of MLAs also felt that citizens’ assemblies could offer useful insight into public views, with 56% agreeing (compared with 21% disagreeing) with the statement: “Citizens’ assemblies could provide decision-makers with useful insight into public preferences on complex issues”.
- Only 36% agreed (compared with 40% who disagreed) with the statement “Citizens’ assemblies are not appropriate for use in Northern Ireland”;
- MLA opinion was more negative on the role of citizens’ assemblies in tackling contested issues, with only 27% agreeing (compared with 46% disagreeing) with the statement: “Citizens’ assemblies should be used in Northern Ireland to help break the deadlock on other contested issues”.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Comparative models in other jurisdictions

Research published in 2017 by the Constitution Unit examined the possibility of a Constitutional Convention for the UK.<sup>9</sup> As part of the research it looked at examples of participatory policy making in other jurisdictions. Table 1 reproduces a table from that report with some additional information added for the purposes of this paper.

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<sup>8</sup> Report of the Citizens’ Assembly for Northern Ireland, November 2019: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gpR-hvdxo6SvwheCBs2VGo\\_ZYB6vRdk/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gpR-hvdxo6SvwheCBs2VGo_ZYB6vRdk/view)

<sup>9</sup> University College London, *Blueprint for a UK Constitutional Convention*, June 2017: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/ccblueprint-2.pdf>

**Table 1: Examples of deliberative democracy**

Forum	Dates	Membership	Subject
Northern Ireland Civic Forum	2000-02	60 members drawn from 10 sectors plus Chairperson	Range of social, economic and cultural issues (the work of the Forum was subject to a review but this work was not completed)
Scottish Constitutional Convention	1989-95	143 elected politicians/party reps + 16 civil society reps	Scottish devolution
Scottish Civic Forum	1999-05	Civic organisations but also individuals	Wide range of issues
British Columbia Citizens' Assembly	2004	160 randomly selected citizens + appointed Chair	Electoral reform
Dutch Civic Forum	2006	140 randomly selected citizens + appointed Chair	Electoral reform
Ontario Citizens' Assembly	2006-07	104 randomly selected citizens + appointed Chair	Electoral reform
Icelandic Constitutional Council	2011	25 non-politicians elected in nationwide vote	General constitutional review
Irish Constitutional Convention	2012-14	66 randomly selected citizens + 33 politicians + appointed Chair	Specified list of constitutional reform proposals
Assembly North (England)	2015	32 randomly selected citizens + appointed Chair	English devolution
Assembly South (England)	2015	23 randomly selected citizens + 6 politicians + appointed Chair	English devolution
Irish Citizens' Assembly	2016-18	99 randomly selected citizens + appointed Chair	Abortion law and other constitutional reform proposals
Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies (German speaking region, Belgium)	2019-	Council: 24 members who each serve 18 months, will set the agenda.  Citizens' Assemblies: at most 50 people who will meet for three weekends over three months. These panels will be allowed to invite experts to help them learn about the topic and draft independent policy proposals.	Any topic within the remit of the Parliament of the German speaking region
Citizens' Assembly Scotland	2019-20	120 citizens randomly selected by an independent research group. Potential members were selected in proportion to the adult populations in each of the 8 Scottish Parliamentary regions	Broadly, what type of country should Scotland become in the context of Brexit?

One key difference between the Civic Forum and the other deliberative democracy models is that the Civic Forum was not necessarily supposed to be time limited in its remit. In theory, it could have continued to operate alongside the other institutions, whereas the models in other jurisdictions were time-bound to complete their work.

## Irish Constitutional Convention

The origin of the Irish Constitutional Convention lies in the 2008 economic crisis. During the 2011 election campaign political parties were keen to put forward political reform as a priority. There were also a:

*series of high-profile calls for citizens to be involved in the reform process. These calls were led by a small group of academics, who were heavily involved in advocating a citizens' assembly via an online political reform forum, 29 opinion pieces in leading Irish newspapers, and by organizing a pilot assembly to demonstrate the potential of the process.*<sup>10</sup>

The Convention was established in 2012 by resolution of Dáil Eireann and was tasked with reporting on the following: reducing the Presidential term of office to five years and aligning it with the local and European elections; reducing the voting age to 17; review of the Dáil electoral system; giving citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in Presidential elections at Irish embassies, or otherwise; provision for same-sex marriage; amending the clause on the role of women in the home and encouraging greater participation of women in public life; increasing the participation of women in politics; removal of the offence of blasphemy from the Constitution; and following completion of the above reports, such other relevant constitutional amendments that may be recommended by it.<sup>11</sup>

When the Convention was eventually established, it did not meet initial expectations. Previous research found that:

*...it differed in several significant ways from the models promoted by academics and which had originally been promised by the political parties in their various manifestos. Whereas one government party had promised a citizen-led overhaul of Ireland's constitution as a whole, the final terms of reference were considerably less ambitious in their content and in their scope. Similarly, the composition of the assembly differed from that originally advocated by the academics and the manifestos of the government parties. Ultimately, the decision was taken to combine the involvement of ordinary citizens with representation from the political establishment.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eoin Carolan, *Ireland's Constitutional Convention: Behind the hype about citizen-led constitutional change*, International Journal of Constitutional Law, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2015, Pages 733–748

<sup>11</sup> Terms of Reference for the Constitutional Convention:  
[http://www.constitutionalconvention.ie/Documents/Terms\\_of\\_Reference.pdf](http://www.constitutionalconvention.ie/Documents/Terms_of_Reference.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Eoin Carolan, *Ireland's Constitutional Convention: Behind the hype about citizen-led constitutional change*, International Journal of Constitutional Law, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2015, Pages 733–748



The Convention comprised 66 ordinary citizens selected by an opinion poll company ensuring a fair mix of sex, geography and socio-economic sectors. In addition, there were also 33 elected politicians and one independent Chair. However, criticism of the selection process emerged when it became apparent that some of the participants were known to each other and, in one case, married to each other. In another instance two members were next-door neighbours.<sup>13</sup>

The format of the Convention was as follows:

*The ICC met over a 14-month period, meeting roughly one weekend a month. The members were ranged around tables of eight (mixing citizen and politician members), with trained facilitators ensuring that all members had equal opportunity to contribute (Experts prepared briefing documents that were circulated a week in advance of each meeting; the same experts then made presentations at the start of the meeting and were available to answer questions of fact). Each weekend ended with a secret ballot on the ICC's recommendations.*<sup>14</sup>

The ICC is often cited as a success, but there are caveats to this. Only two of its 18 recommendations were put to referendum – provision for same-sex marriage and removal of reference to blasphemy from the Constitution – but other criticisms centred on the inclusion of elected representatives and a perceived lack of adequate resources from the Government, with funding of 900,000EUR.

A counter-argument to those who criticised the involvement of elected representatives is that their inclusion affords the forum political legitimacy.

## **Irish Citizens' Assembly**

Establishment of the Citizens' Assembly 2016-18 was approved by Resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas in July 2016.

The Resolution set out to consider the following matters and to make such recommendations as it saw fit to the Houses of the Oireachtas:

- The Eighth amendment of the Constitution;
- How we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an aging population;
- Fixed term parliaments;

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<sup>13</sup> Eoin Carolan, *Ireland's Constitutional Convention: Behind the hype about citizen-led constitutional change*, International Journal of Constitutional Law, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2015, Pages 733–748

<sup>14</sup> Democratic Audit UK, *The Irish Constitutional Convention offers a potential route-map for renewing UK democracy*, October 2014: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/63414/1/democraticaudit.com-The%20Irish%20Constitutional%20Convention%20offers%20a%20potential%20route-map%20for%20renewing%20UK%20democracy.pdf>



- The manner in which referenda are held; and
- How the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change.

Unlike the Constitutional Convention, there was no political representation in the Assembly. Comparing other differences between the Convention and the Assembly, previous research noted the reduction in the number of discussion topics, but with an increased sense of importance.

Abortion was allocated four weekends of debate and a secret ballot of participants resulted in 64% support for legalising abortion. The report from the Assembly was considered by a parliamentary committee and then put to a referendum. Subsequently the eight amendment was repealed in May 2018 and abortion legalised.

### Scottish Civic Forum

The Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament was established in November 1997 by the Secretary of State for Scotland. Its remit was to explore and report on the operational requirements and working methods of a new Scottish Parliament.

During its consultation process, it was persuaded of the potential benefits that a civic forum would provide operating alongside the new Parliament:

*It is important that our proposals for a more open political process are paralleled by the development of appropriate institutions at different levels in Scottish society, to ensure meaningful dialogue between the Parliament and civic society. In this respect, we welcome proposals which were presented to us for a Civic Forum, which would be facilitative, recognise the plurality of voices and groups and take an active role in ensuring the effective involvement of groups traditionally excluded from the decision-making process. We endorse the proposals for a Civic Forum and encourage the proponents of such a Forum to develop the details of the role and funding arrangements for the Forum. We recommend that the Parliament should encourage Scottish civic society through the establishment and work of a Civic Forum and through other imaginative social partnership ventures.<sup>15</sup>*

A Scottish Civic Assembly had in fact existed since 1995, but the establishment of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999 provided an opportunity for the Assembly to be rebranded as the Scottish Civic Forum. The Forum sought to facilitate the move to a more participative democracy by enhancing civil society's ability to influence decisions made by the Parliament and Executive. Part of its role was to inform its members of public consultation exercises undertaken "by the Parliament and Executive; disseminate briefing papers on upcoming legislation; provide the means through which

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<sup>15</sup> Report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, *Shaping Scotland's Parliament*, December 1998: [https://archive2021.parliament.scot/PublicInformationDocuments/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Consultative\\_Steering\\_Group.pdf](https://archive2021.parliament.scot/PublicInformationDocuments/Report_of_the_Consultative_Steering_Group.pdf)

members could articulate and develop their views; and ‘map’ these views before communicating them to the appropriate body”.<sup>23</sup> Unlike its Northern Ireland counterpart, the Scottish Civic Forum had no statutory basis.

The Forum was initially well-received by the Scottish Parliament and Executive and a 2001 concordat between the Forum and Executive recognised the ‘significant role’ played by the Forum in strengthening the relationship between the public and the new political institutions.

The Scottish Government provided the bulk of the funding for the Forum, rising from £40,000 in 1999-00 to £200,000 in the Forum’s final year of 2004-05. In addition, the Scottish Executive provided a further and final grant of £100,000 in 2005.<sup>16</sup>

However, the fact that the Forum was funded by the Executive led to questions around its independence and whether such financial support would continue in the longer-term. This question was resolved in 2005 when the Executive withdrew funding on the basis that it compromised the impartiality of the Forum. It was then suggested in a parliamentary debate that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body should provide funding. It declined.

Not all of the feedback on the Forum was positive, with previous research noting:

*Certainly, the more established interest groups did not rate it as an avenue for influence. Most groups either suggested that the forum was a ‘talking shop’ or that they did not want their influence diluted as part of a wider body, since every voice was deemed to be equal within that forum. Therefore, approximately 40 per cent of the membership used the forum minimally, since they had more direct avenues of influence through organisations such as the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organizations (SCVO) and the Convention for Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) or the ability to engage with the Scottish Government directly.*

*The remaining 60 per cent was made up of professions which struggle for access within their own organizations (for example, local branches of larger organisations), community groups and interested individuals (who tended to be retired from work). This is not surprising since the forum was in part set up to provide a venue for less well-established but active populations. Yet, there are also signs that participation was not particularly high among these groups. An interview with the [Forum’s] director in 2004 confirms this picture, suggesting that even though regional coordinators were making local meetings better, it was, ‘difficult to get 50 people in a room’. Indeed, to achieve around 15 in a regional meeting required a lot of effort from regional coordinators, calling likely participants to remind them of meetings and often transporting people to meetings. Therefore, even by taking to extreme these*

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<sup>16</sup> Scottish Parliament Information Service briefing on a public petition on the Scottish Civic Forum, December 2015: <http://www.holyrood-parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Petitions%20briefings%20S4/PB15-1587.pdf>

*practical measures to reduce the barriers to participation, the SCF did not succeed in increasing public participation significantly.*<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, “Its influence on policy was difficult to see and feedback from participants who traditionally felt politically excluded was difficult to gather.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Citizens’ Assembly Scotland**

The Citizens’ Assembly in Scotland was established against the backdrop of Brexit and the debate about a second independence referendum. The Assembly remit and terms of reference set out the main requirements of the Assembly and how it should operate. These were determined by the Scottish Government and published on the 27 August 2019.

The Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats expressed concerns that the Assembly would be biased towards justification for independence. The Liberal Democrats did not engage with the Assembly.

The Secretariat was staffed by a mixed team of civil servants and people with direct experience in running citizens’ assemblies. The Convenor was appointed by the Scottish Government. In addition, the structure of the Assembly included:

- **Stewarding Group:** a group of independent experts and advisers who were mainly tasked with providing advice and guidance to the Convenor;
- **Members Reference Group:** drawn from the membership of the Assembly and attended by a core group of Assembly members, the group contributed to the delivery of the Assembly; and
- **Politicians Panel:** All of the political parties represented in the parliament, with the exception of the Liberal Democrats, provided a representative to participate in a panel. The panel members attended the 3rd meeting of the Assembly during which they engaged in discussion about political priorities and how politics is conducted in Scotland.

The Assembly was asked to consider:

- what kind of country we are seeking to build;
- how best we can overcome the challenges Scotland and the world face in the 21st century, including those arising from Brexit, and

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<sup>17</sup> Neil McGarvey and Paul Cairney, *Scottish Politics: An Introduction*, Palgrave and Macmillan, 2008

<sup>18</sup> As above

- what further work should be carried out to give us the information we need to make informed choices about the future of the country.<sup>19</sup>

Membership comprised 120 citizens randomly selected by an independent research group. Potential members were selected in proportion to the adult populations in each of the 8 Scottish Parliamentary regions.<sup>20</sup>

The Assembly met eight times between Autumn 2019 and December 2020. Initially six meetings were scheduled but the final two meetings were postponed due to Covid. Four shorter online meetings subsequently took place.

The final report of the Assembly contained over 60 recommendations, the vast majority of which had the support of over 75% of Assembly members. Several of these recommendations related to the further use of mini-publics, including:

- making further use of citizens' assemblies to gather people's views and ideas on issues of national importance;
- the Scottish Government and Parliament should make decisions jointly with mini assemblies, including under-represented groups. These should be called at the start of each parliamentary session to examine specific issues. Their recommendations must be debated in parliament before the assemblies are disbanded.<sup>21</sup>

The total cost of the Assembly was £1.36m.

### **British Columbia Citizens' Assembly**

The Citizens' Assembly in British Columbia was the first of its kind and was prompted by concern about the electoral system in the region. It was created by the government of British Columbia and responsible for investigating and recommending changes to improve the electoral system. According to the report of the Constitution Unit:

*The BC Citizens' Assembly comprised a Chair appointed by the government and 160 citizens: a man and a woman from each district plus two Aboriginal members. Besides the Chair, all members were chosen randomly... They met over twelve plenary weekends to learn about and deliberate upon electoral reform options. Members also took part in consultative meetings across the province.*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Remit and Terms of Reference for the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland:

<https://www.citizensassembly.scot/sites/default/files/inline-files/Remit%20and%20terms%20of%20reference%20as%20amended%203%20November%202020.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Recruitment for the Citizens' Assembly for Scotland: [https://www.citizensassembly.scot/sites/default/files/inline-files/Recruitment\\_paper\\_final2\\_1.pdf](https://www.citizensassembly.scot/sites/default/files/inline-files/Recruitment_paper_final2_1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Report of the Citizens' Assembly for Scotland, February 2021: <https://citizensassembly.theapsgroup.scot/report/10/>

<sup>22</sup> University College London, *Blueprint for a UK Constitutional Convention*, June 2017

The Assembly was funded with \$5.5m Canadian dollars and met in three phases between January and November 2004 to debate the electoral system and recommend proposals for change. The Assembly was staffed with an “Executive Assistant to the Chair, a Chief research officer, an Associate research officer, a Chief operations officer, a Project coordinator and member liaison, an Office manager, a Director of communication, and an Associate director of communication. The budget also provided for facilitators for small group sessions.”<sup>23</sup>

Its final report and recommendation was submitted to the public and the final decision was put to a referendum. The Assembly recommend replacing the province’s first past the post system with a single transferable vote. It did not receive the majority required to be enacted.

### Dutch Civic Forum

The Electoral System Civic Forum which met between March and November 2006 was tasked with making recommendations for reform of the Lower House (Second Chamber). According to previous research, “Participants were selected randomly using quotas based on gender, geographical distribution and age.”<sup>24</sup> The Forum devoted “three weekends, for the learning phase, three for consultation, and four for deliberation and decision.”<sup>25</sup>

Members were “randomly selected with some stratification”<sup>26</sup> and eventually proposed only minor changes which were not enacted.

### Icelandic Constitutional Council

The Icelandic Constitutional Council arose out of the financial collapse of the country’s three major privately owned banks in 2008 which caused a string of protests. The governing parties decided that the Constitution should be reviewed with a view to rebuilding trust in political and financial actors. Subsequently:

*In June 2010 an Act on a Constitutional Assembly...[was] adopted by the Althing (Parliament). The purpose of the Assembly was to review the Constitution of the Republic No. 33 of 17 June 1944 by also consulting a report prepared by a Constitutional Committee appointed by Parliament on the basis of the same act. The chairman of the Constitutional Committee was a neurobiologist.*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Case Study on British Columbia, Canada, Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform [https://democracy2017.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2011/10/653\\_303\\_Case\\_Study\\_British\\_Columbia.pdf](https://democracy2017.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2011/10/653_303_Case_Study_British_Columbia.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Democratic Innovations: *Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*, Graham Smith, 2009

<sup>25</sup> University College London, *Blueprint for a UK Constitutional Convention*, June 2017

<sup>26</sup> As above

<sup>27</sup> European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), *The Icelandic Constitutional Experiment*, September 2015: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI\(2015\)020-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI(2015)020-e)

The 25 delegates were elected in November 2010, with elected politicians excluded from standing. The election attracted over 500 candidates from all socio-economic backgrounds, including a farmer, lawyers, artists, a nurse and a disability rights campaigner.<sup>2829</sup>

The remit of the Council, as set out in a Parliamentary resolution, was to propose amendments to the Constitution on the following:

- The foundation of the Icelandic Constitution and its basic concepts;
- The organization of the legislative and executive powers and their limits;
- The role and position of the President of the Republic
- The independence of the courts and their supervision of other holders of state authority
- Provisions about elections and the constituency system

### **Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies, Belgium (German speaking Community)**

The Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies in the Ostbelgien, the German speaking Community in East Belgium, was established in 2019. Its origins are in the G1000 organisation, which promotes democratic innovations in Belgium.

It differs from other examples of deliberative democracy in that the Citizens' Council is a permanent body, setting the agenda for the temporary Citizens' Assemblies to consider. The Ostbelgien Parliament adopted a law in February 2019 establishing a permanent model of citizen deliberation. Its structure is as follows:

*It consists in a permanent Citizens' Council drawn by lot, which can initiate Citizens' Assemblies, also drawn by lot, whose mission is to deliberate and formulate recommendations on the subject that the Citizens' Council had submitted to them. At the end of the deliberations, the recommendations are discussed in a joint committee between the members of the Citizens' Assembly, elected representatives and the minister in charge. The latter two then need to indicate whether and how the recommendations will be implemented by parliamentary or governmental measures—with rejections requiring specific justification.<sup>30</sup>*

Previous research has identified three factors that are important to understand the nature of citizen participation in the region:

<sup>28</sup> University College London, *Blueprint for a UK Constitutional Convention*, June 2017

<sup>29</sup> Although it did not ultimately impede the work of the Council, the Supreme Court invalidated the results of the election in January 2011 due to irregularities with the ballot. Those who had been elected were then appointed to the Council via Parliamentary resolution.

<sup>30</sup> Niessen, C., & Reuchamps, Institutionalising Citizen Deliberation in Parliament: The Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in the German-speaking Community of Belgium. Parliamentary Affairs, 2020

- its small size (846km<sup>2</sup>) and small population (approximately 77,000);
- local nature of politics; and
- many elected representatives have other jobs, allowing for greater interaction with non-elected citizens.

The Citizens' Council comprises 24 members, a third of whom are replaced every 18 months. Members are drawn by lot from membership of previous Citizens' Assemblies.

The Council decides the number of Citizens' Assemblies that take place each year – at least one and at most three. In doing so, it takes into account the annual budget given by the Parliament, which is approximately 90,000EUR and the complexity of each topic and time needed for its consideration.

### Scotland's Futures Forum

Although it sits outside the model of citizens' assemblies, Scotland's Futures Forum is a useful comparator for the Northern Ireland Civic Forum. The Forum is:

*the Scottish Parliament's futures think-tank. It works on a non-party basis to promote research and to stimulate debate on the long-term challenges and opportunities that Scotland faces. [It] aim(s) to inform MSPs and those who work with them, enabling them to consider the effects of decisions taken today on Scotland's long-term future.*

*Looking beyond the five-year electoral cycle and away from party politics, the Futures Forum seeks to bring fresh perspectives, ideas and creativity on how we might prepare now for the future. [It] host(s) discussions and seminars and present ideas to engage Scotland's parliamentarians and challenge their thinking.<sup>31</sup>*

The Forum was established in 2005 and is a company wholly owned by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Its work is overseen by a Board of Directors which is chaired by the Parliament's Presiding Officer. Four other MSPs sit on the Board. Non-MSP directors bring experience of different aspects of civic Scotland, including academia, the third sector, the arts and industry.

The Forum works with partners to deliver projects and reports. Current partners include:

- **Scottish Universities Insight Institute:** The Scottish Universities Insight Institute supports programmes of knowledge exchange which address and provide insight on substantial issues that face Scotland and the wider world.

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<sup>31</sup> Scotland's Futures Forum: <https://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/about/>



- **Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE):** The RSE is Scotland's National Academy. Operating on a wholly independent and non-party-political basis, it contributes to the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of Scotland through the advancement of learning and useful knowledge.
- **David Hume Institute:** The David Hume Institute is an independent, non-partisan, evidence-based policy institute that has been operating at the heart of Scottish policy debate for over 30 years.
- **Goodison Group in Scotland:** The Goodison Group in Scotland is a charity solely dedicated to issues of learning through life.
- **Nesta:** Nesta is an innovation foundation that works to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.
- **Reform Scotland:** Reform Scotland is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity and more effective public services based on the principles of limited government, diversity and personal responsibility.
- **IPPR Scotland:** IPPR Scotland is a cross-party, progressive think-tank that aims to support and improve public policy in Scotland, working to achieve a progressive Scotland.
- **Nordic Horizons:** Nordic Horizons is an informal group of Scottish professionals who want to raise the standard of knowledge and debate about life and policy in the Nordic nations.
- **RSA Scotland:** The mission of the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) is to enrich society through ideas and action.<sup>32</sup>

The Forum has recently completed a major project entitled *Scotland 2030*, which examined a range of topics, for example climate change, technological change and demographic change.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Scotland Future's Forum, Who We Work With: <https://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/about/who-we-work-with/>

<sup>33</sup> Scotland's Futures Forum, 2030 Work Programme: <https://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/scotland-2030-programme/>

