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How Can the NI Executive Put the Public at the Heart of Its Programme for Government?

Consultation response to the Northern Ireland Executive's Draft PfG 2024-2027

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Rebekah McCabe
Head of Northern Ireland

ABOUT INVOLVE

Involve is an independent UK-based public participation charity. We have had a permanent office in Northern Ireland since 2018.

Since 2003, we have been working with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and members of the public to create, advocate for and deliver new forms of public participation that revitalise democracy, improve decision-making, and enable people to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

We understand the challenges faced by democracy, but are optimistic about how to overcome them. We are committed to ensuring our democracies are vibrant and fit for the future by putting people at the heart of decision-making.

Everything we do is driven by our values:

Collaboration – because change comes when broad coalitions of people work towards a common vision;

Equality – because everyone in society has an equal right to be listened to and participate in decisions that affect their lives. No one should be held back by societal divisions or prejudice;

Independence – because we are committed to the integrity and impartiality of participatory and deliberative processes;

Purpose – because participation must have an impact. We reject tokenistic or ineffectual engagement; and,

Quality – because effective participation requires time, attention and commitment.

How Can the NI Executive Put the Public at the Heart of Its Programme for Government?

Trust in government, confidence in democracy, and democratic wellbeing in Northern Ireland are at worryingly low levels. For the new Programme for Government to succeed, it must embed a strategic approach to participation and deliberation. This is essential to address Northern Ireland's democratic deficit and to build a government that is genuinely responsive and accountable to its citizens.

The challenges ahead are significant. Tackling them within a reduced mandate of three years will require bold, ambitious action and careful decision-making. Without meaningful public involvement, there is a high risk of missteps and backlash, which could delay or derail progress, especially if the public perceives that decisions do not reflect their needs or priorities.

Instead of proceeding with delivery of this programme of government in a top down manner, we strongly recommend that the government embrace a new approach and embed civic engagement and at least one citizens' assembly per year on crucial strategic policy areas. This would create a strong public mandate for ambitious leadership and foster a collaborative partnership with citizens to translate into actions on the ground.

Participatory and deliberative democracy are transformative approaches that value an active role for citizens, enabling ordinary people to have a meaningful say in decisions that affect their lives. These approaches build stronger, more resilient policies that incorporate diverse perspectives and reflect public priorities. Around the world, national and sub-national governments, including those in the UK and Ireland, have adopted these methods to achieve sustainable and publicly accepted outcomes, particularly on contentious issues like climate change, health and social care, transport, land use, environment, criminal justice, and public health.

As we outlined in our response to the Draft Outcomes Framework three years ago, meaningful participation is a cornerstone of healthy democracy and a vital component of societal [wellbeing](#). Well-structured public participation also provides significant [benefits](#) for decision-makers, including:

- **Improved Governance:** Strengthens democratic legitimacy by fostering closer connections with citizens, enhances public trust in institutions, and holds public bodies more accountable through better information sharing and dialogue.
- **Social Cohesion:** Brings diverse communities together, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups, building positive relationships across society and creating networks that bridge social divides, enhancing equality of access to decision-making.

- **Better Public Services and Policy Outcomes:** Grounds public service investments in real public needs, reduces long-term costs by encouraging local ownership, and helps make decisions faster and with less conflict.
- **Capacity Building and Civic Learning:** Enhances citizens' understanding of public institutions, builds their confidence to engage, and increases the skill levels of both public sector staff and participants.

Bridging Northern Ireland's Democratic Deficit

Northern Ireland is lagging behind its neighbours in the adoption of participatory and deliberative policymaking. Too often, policymakers default to public consultations that lack depth and fail to capture representative public input. Now is the time to change this trajectory. Here's how:

1. Build on Existing Commitments

We are not starting from scratch. The NI Executive's commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, its membership in the Open Government Partnership, and the consultative mechanisms outlined in the Good Friday Agreement provide strong foundations for participatory governance. Updating these frameworks to align with current best practices and implementing them fully will help restore public trust and confidence.

2. Secure Cross-Party Support for Participatory Governance

Establishing open, participatory, and deliberative approaches will require leadership from government Ministers and a clear signal of commitment to public engagement as a tool that strengthens the democratic mandate.

3. Create a Cross-Departmental Hub for Public Participation

Currently, public participation is fragmented across policy areas. A centralised hub would coordinate efforts, provide resources, and foster a supportive environment for civil servants, building a foundation for high-quality public engagement across the civil service.

4. Legislate for Public Engagement in Key Policy Areas

The government can embed participatory approaches by legislating for engagement strategies in critical areas like housing, climate, infrastructure, and health care. Such strategies would outline specific opportunities for citizens to participate in policy formation, implementation, and evaluation.

5. Convene a Citizens' Assembly in 2025

Following the 2020 commitment to annual Citizens' Assemblies, we urge the Executive to finally initiate this process in 2025. Assemblies are powerful tools for addressing complex and contentious issues, fostering common ground, and making informed recommendations on policy topics. Key areas like climate action and assisted dying are especially well-suited to this approach and would benefit from citizen-led deliberation.

At Involve, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and are prepared to provide further support or resources to help integrate participatory and deliberative practices into Northern Ireland's governance. Implementing these approaches will enable government to build democratic resilience, work with citizens directly to unlock solutions to policy problems, and create a lasting foundation of public trust and accountability.

For further information on embedding participation in government, read the Citizens' White Paper [here](#).