

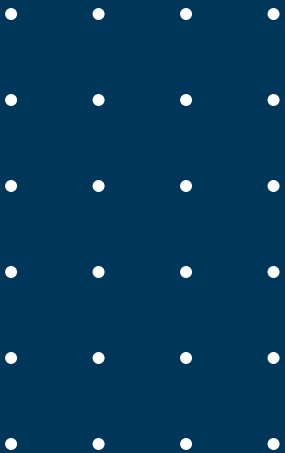


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Social Cohesion: Report of Workshops Held in Dublin and Cavan



Social Cohesion: Report of Workshops Held in Dublin and Cavan

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1. Purpose and Scope

This report compares outputs and themes from two participatory workshops that explored social cohesion using the same process: a Dublin workshop with 38 participants and a Cavan workshop with 24 participants. It focuses on the ideas generated, the emphasis placed on different lenses, and the priorities that emerged through model-building and voting. It does not attempt to treat the workshops as statistically representative samples, nor does it evaluate facilitation performance.

The NESC Secretariat wish to extend our thanks everyone who gave of their time, expertise and experience to join us in our workshops.

2. Workshop Design

2.1 Stakeholder and Location Selection

The National Economic and Social Council consists of representatives of business and employer's organisations, trade unions, agricultural and farming organisations, community and voluntary organisations, environmental organisations, Government, and independent experts. The stakeholder selection for the workshops sought to replicate this cross-sectoral model, while additionally seeking representation from stakeholders from across subsectors of society who may have diverse lived experiences of social cohesion and its fractures, such as ethnic and racial minorities, people living with disabilities, young people, older people, LGBTQI+ people, people engaged in community development in economically disadvantaged communities, local government representatives and Elected Representatives from across the political spectrum. A total of 93 representatives were invited to the Dublin workshop, and 77 representatives were invited to Cavan. Of this, 38 representatives attended the Dublin workshop and 24 representatives attended the workshop in Cavan, an acceptance rate of 41 per cent and 31 per cent respectively.

The locations of Dublin and Cavan were selected as Dublin is the location of a large variety of representative organisations across the sectors listed above, who could take both a national and local perspective, and is classified by Velthuis et al (2025) as an area experiencing 'long-term economic prosperity'. Meanwhile Cavan consists of town and rural communities, shares a border with Northern Ireland, experienced significant economic disruption following the collapse of the Quinn Group, a large employer in the area, is situated in the NUTS III Region 'Border', and is classified by Velthuis et al (2025) as a 'left behind region' experiencing 'Economic decline and deindustrialisation'. These two areas, therefore, provide an interesting comparative perspective. Despite these differences both sets of attendees expressed common positions with very many common themes across and within workshops. Where there were slight differences these will be highlighted below.

The Dublin workshop took place on the 26 February 2026. The Cavan workshop took place on the 12 March 2026.

There are limitations to this work. The representatives do not comprise of a statistical representation of the national or County-level population. While efforts were made to select a diverse range of representatives, it was not possible to attain the level of diversity desired.

2.2 Pre-workshop Survey

A short survey was circulated to registered attendees in advance of the workshops to aid attendees in their thinking on the overall theme of social cohesion and the three lenses through which it was being considered. This also provided facilitators with a general overview of participant sentiment.

2.3 Workshop Format

In advance of the workshops, participants were divided into three groups – Blue, Red, and Yellow. Each group was selected by sorting the registered attendee list by stakeholder grouping (business, trade union, community and voluntary and so on) and assigning alternating colours down the list to get as even a spread of stakeholder groups per participant group as possible. A facilitator and note taker were present at each of the three groupings to facilitate discussions and capture the outputs.

The day began with an introduction to the theme of social cohesion. Participants were asked to discuss amongst themselves what ‘social cohesion’ meant to them. In plenary session, participants were asked to provide some descriptions of what makes a cohesive society.

Participants were then asked to rate their personal perspective of social cohesion from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent) using large building blocks.¹ Once each person had their rating built, each table was asked to put their towers in ascending order of height, thus providing an immediate visual of the differences or similarities in perspectives at the table. The facilitator then asked for a selection of rationales for the rating given.

The workshops then moved into World Café-style breakouts to explore social cohesion through three lenses: the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust/Democracy. For each lens, groups considered three questions: what they understood each term to mean, the current state of social cohesion in this area, and what could improve social cohesion. The colours assigned to participants on registration was the colour of the first table at which they sat. After discussing one lens (30 minutes), participants would move in groups (tables) to the next lens, until all three lenses had been discussed by all participants (see Figure 1).

1 The rating is based on the height of the tower. As the blocks came in two different sizes, two smaller blocks measured the same as one larger block. This was explained to participants.

Table 1: Participant Groups

	Plenary and Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Trust and Legitimacy	Blue	Red	Yellow
The Left Behind	Yellow	Blue	Red
Intergenerational Fairness	Red	Yellow	Blue

Participants then used Lego® Serious Play² to build and explain representations of what a socially cohesive society might look like. This could include tangible infrastructure, or intangible concepts such as trust, pride, or belonging. This approach aims to support equal participation, regardless of organisational position, status, or use of English as a first language, by giving each person a concrete way to contribute. It can support surfacing tacit assumptions that can remain hidden in discussion, and helps translate abstract concepts such as social cohesion into tangible, discussable proposals that can be compared and prioritised.

While participants were working on their models, the proposals made by the participants in the third round of the World Café exercise were grouped and put on display. Finally, each participant received three stickers to vote for the proposals they most wanted to see prioritised. All three stickers could be used on the same proposal or spread across up to three areas.

3. What is Social Cohesion?

Across both workshops, social cohesion was understood as the relationships, values, and conditions that enable people to live well together in a fair, inclusive, and connected society. There were several shared themes such that social cohesion is grounded in values, respect, and inclusion across differences (culture, age, nationality) and that social cohesion requires shared spaces and opportunities for people to meet, connect, and collaborate. Both workshops emphasised that without a minimum acceptable standard of living (including access to housing) that social cohesion struggles. In addition, both groups emphasised the importance of community, participation, and a sense of belonging for social cohesion generally but also for individual wellbeing.

² For more information on the research and pedagogy underpinning this methodology: https://www.lego.com/cdn/cs/set/as sets/blt8ec1d6ff766ddfd4/LEGO_SERIOUS_PLAY_OpenSource_14mb.pdf (page 8).

3.1 Dublin Workshop

Some participants of the Dublin workshop suggested that social cohesion referred to **'the ties that bind'**, and a sense of **trust and belonging**. A **social contract** that includes housing, meaningful work, healthcare, income adequacy, which everyone has bought into without all having to agree with each other on all things. A contract that builds a framework for **greater equality and solidarity** so that **all are provided for**.

A society where people are **not constrained by time or money pressures**, and can be **committed to their communities**, both **spatial and virtual**.

It refers to a society where **rules are respected**, and those who break the rules are held **accountable**.

A society where there is **confidence in the system and the State**, and in the **trustworthiness** of those institutions. Where people are **part of the decision-making process**, can **critique economic and social policy** models, and where there is balance between the role of the State to keep people safe **without excessive interventionism**.

Values and respect for differences were key issues at the Dublin workshop, together with **safety** in the very nature of being, **supported by spaces** to get to know each other and share ideas and experiences.

3.2 Cavan Workshop

In the Cavan workshop, participants referred to social cohesion as **'the glue that holds society together'**.

A socially cohesive society is a place with **joined-up service provision**, of **'meitheal'** to provide **facilities that are required across the life span**.

A place where there is a **level playing field** with **'intergenerationality'**, where the **same rights are afforded to all people** irrespective of age or circumstances.

Social cohesion is about **values, collaboration and community** across culture and age. It's about **coming together and being inclusive** of all nationalities, and providing **spaces to gather**, build connection, and work together.

Policies for social cohesion are **human-centred and evidence-informed**.

Across both workshops, participants framed social cohesion as a set of relationships and conditions that enable people to live well together, but the language and emphasis differed.

Figure 1: What is Social Cohesion? - Dublin Workshop

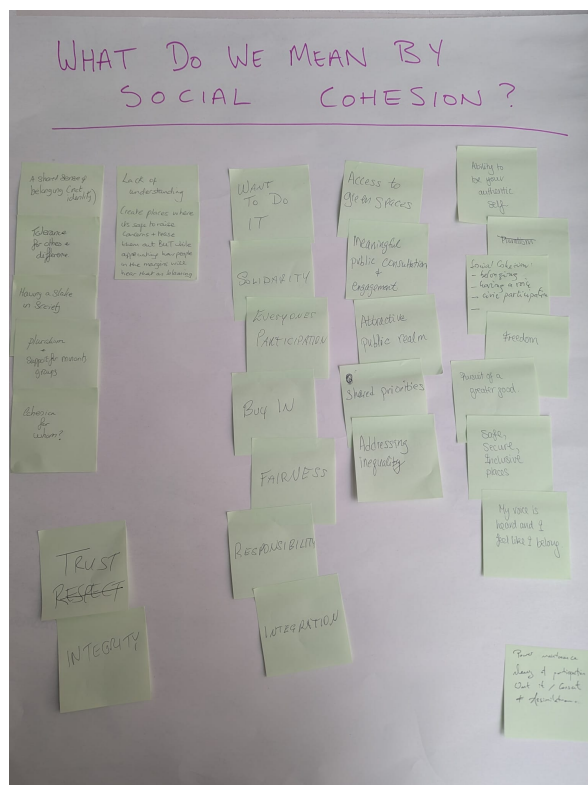
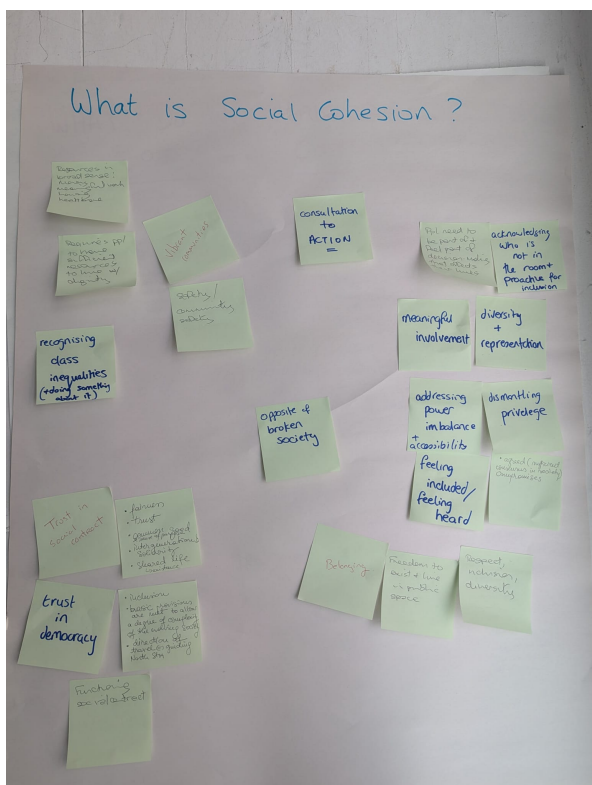
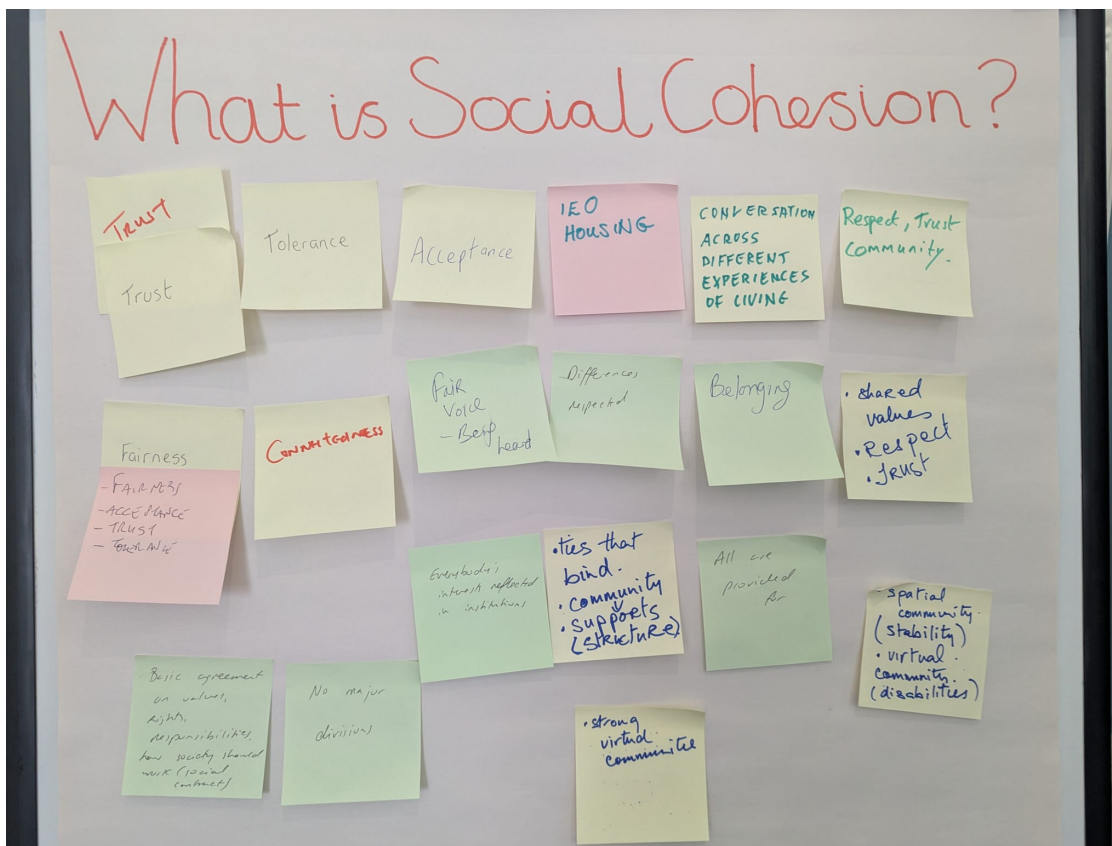
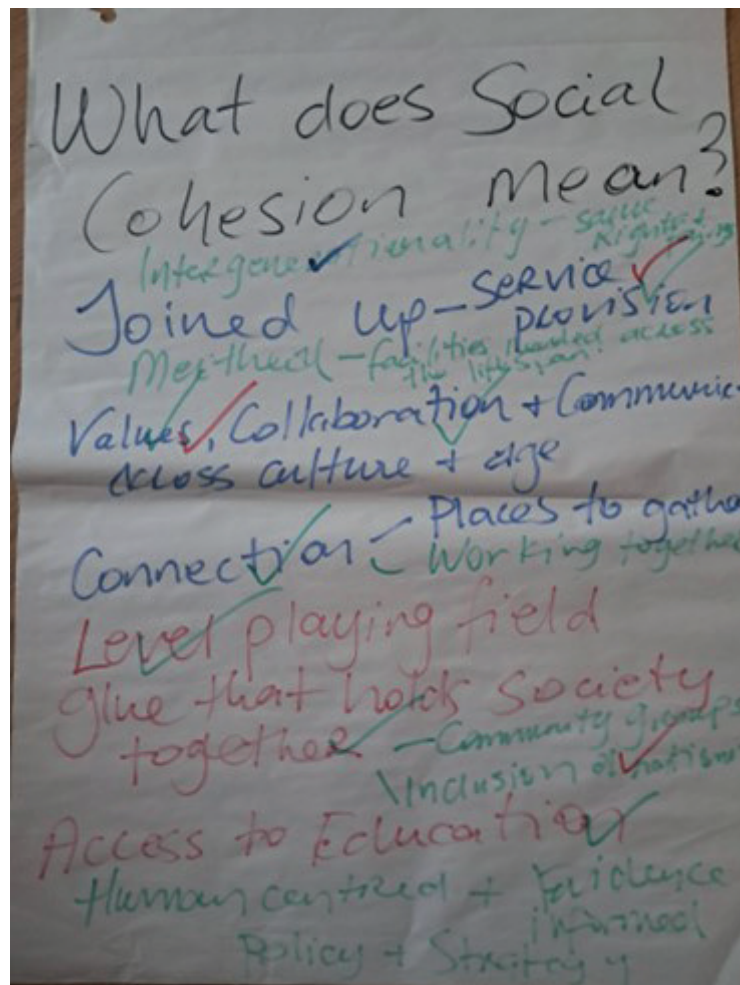


Figure 2: What is Social Cohesion? - Cavan Workshop



Across both workshops, participants framed social cohesion as a set of relationships and conditions that enable people to live well together, but the language and emphasis differed.

Dublin participants tended to frame social cohesion in terms of **system-level trust, belonging, and a shared social contract** - including confidence in public institutions, accountability when rules are broken, and the extent to which people can participate in decision-making. Cavan participants expressed a more community-infrastructure framing, describing cohesion as the **'glue'** that holds society together and emphasising **joined-up services** and practical supports across the life course (captured through the idea of **'meitheal'**).

There were also clear areas of overlap. Both groups highlighted **values, respect, inclusion** and the need for **spaces** where people can meet, build connection and collaborate across differences (including across culture, age, and nationality). While both workshops highlighted a minimum standard of living, Dublin participants more explicitly linked weakened cohesion to **time and money pressures** that constrain participation, and to tensions in how the State keeps people safe without becoming overly interventionist. By contrast, Cavan participants

more directly connected cohesion to **fairness across generations** ('a level playing field') and to **human-centred, evidence-informed policy** that translates shared values into accessible services and facilities.

3.3 Rating of Experienced Social Cohesion (1-10)

When asked how to rate social cohesion participants stayed in three (3) groups in each workshop. Each person individually built a tower of between 1 and 10 blocks high and were then asked to place their towers in ascending order in the centre of the table. This allowed the facilitator to see at a glance how aligned the participants at each table were in their experience of social cohesion.

There was a range of experiences of social cohesion within each of the three groups in Dublin. The Blue group ranged from 1 (poor) to six (good); the Red group ranged from 2 (poor) to seven (very good); and the Yellow group ranged from three to eight (very good). See Figure 4.

In the Dublin workshop, participants who gave lower social-cohesion ratings explained that, in their view, people are not 'all starting from the same equal basis': inequality and hate are already present, and mis- and disinformation are growing. They expressed frustration with what they saw as repeated discussion of social cohesion without action, and argued that cohesion cannot be captured by a single number because it varies at local and national levels and between different groups, even if 'the majority are by and large ticking along nicely'. Some participants also said that Ireland lacks the capacity to step back and critique the prevailing economic and social model, pointing to an orthodoxy that they felt has taken hold since the 1980s, and noting that while Ireland compares well internationally on social cohesion, there remain key problems.

At the higher end, participants felt that trust is comparatively high in Ireland; Irish people are good at working together, that the 'far right' is small in Ireland; most people are 'mostly good most of the time'; there is ethnic diversity in their local area; integration is working locally; and DEIS schools are supportive of both class and ethnic diversity. Participants in the Dublin workshop also described their own positive experience of social cohesion, including through work with children, and emphasised that, even with significant challenges, there remains a strong base to build on. They pointed to comparatively high trust in Ireland and to everyday cooperation, suggesting that most people are 'mostly good most of the time' and that the far right is relatively small.

Alongside these more optimistic accounts, other Dublin participants (including those giving mid-range ratings) noted that a person's score is a snapshot shaped by how they feel on the day, and stressed the importance of 'ontological security'- a sense of self and stability that provides the time and bandwidth needed for community engagement. They also distinguished between research evidence and anecdotal experience, observing that cohesion can feel stronger at local level while being more difficult at larger scales, and suggested that anger is often rooted in fear and that addressing insecurity could support greater social cohesion.

Participants in the Dublin workshop also raised the difference between **'local' or 'national' social cohesion**, with one participant highlighting that there is 'no one number' for social cohesion, and the importance of distinguishing not only between **different levels of cohesion at National and Local**, but also among **different groups**. The point was made that social cohesion seems to be stronger at local level and more challenging nationally.

Figure 3: Rating Social Cohesion - Dublin Workshop



Most of the participants in the Cavan workshop were aligned in their rating of social cohesion. Both the Blue and Yellow group ratings ranged from four (fair) to six (good). Participants in the Blue group did distinguish between local and national social cohesion, rating national cohesion lower as a starting point (2 – poor). The Yellow group was an outlier in that the range of experience of social cohesion was broader, from 2 (poor) to seven (very good). See figure 5.

Reasons for these ratings were, on the lower end – the unearned worth attributed to social influencers, lack of affordability in housing and poor housing policies, lack of multicultural representation, sense of a greater divide between policy makers and people, everything being less affordable now, more fractures in society with policy being disconnected from lived experience, uneven wealth distribution, media concentration on negative stories and ignoring the positive, and increased emigration. At the higher end, participants cited strong community links, particularly since Covid, a sense of solidarity in emergency responses, and people wanting to come together.

Figure 4: Rating Social Cohesion - Cavan Workshop



These ratings suggest that **Cavan participants had more similar experiences of social cohesion** than Dublin participants, with most ratings falling in the mid-range (4–6) and only one group showing a wider spread (2–7), whereas in Dublin, ratings varied more widely within each group (including very low scores), implying **greater divergence in lived experience or expectations** among Dublin participants. Participants of the Cavan workshop also discussed the difference between **'local' versus 'national' cohesion**, with at least one group rating national cohesion notably lower.

In explaining lower scores, Cavan participants emphasised **economic affordability pressures (especially housing), perceived disconnect between policymakers and lived experience, and narrative/media factors**, alongside concerns about recognition of young people and representation—whereas the Dublin participants placed greater emphasis on **trust trajectories, diversity and inclusion tensions, and place-based experiences (e.g. disadvantage, community-specific impacts)**. The Dublin participants identified sources of anger to be based in fear, the role of mis- and dis-information, and emphasised the importance of a sense of security in fostering social cohesion.

At the higher end, Cavan's rationale foregrounds community, solidarity, and practical support, particularly in emergencies. This wasn't as strong in the responses from the Dublin participants. This suggests that, in Cavan, social cohesion is experienced most strongly through **localised collective action**, even while confidence in broader societal and policy systems may be perceived as weaker. While in Dublin, the concentration is on **broader national action**, addressing the **sources of insecurity** for people that fuel fear, and finding ways to build on Ireland's (comparative) strengths in social cohesion – creating practical **options for people to know how to contribute to building a more cohesive society**.

4. The Left Behind

4.1 What is it?

Participants were asked to provide their understanding of what this term meant. Some participants in Dublin had **reservations about the term itself**, with one objection being that it **implied we all were at the same starting point**, which was not felt to be true. An alternative view expressed was that those who question the term are not those who themselves are left behind. The **people left behind are aware of it and appreciate this being recognised**.

Overarching multi-dimensional concept

It was clear from the discussion among the Dublin participants that the term is **multi-dimensional**: being left behind can mean being left behind **economically, educationally, culturally, geographically, or digitally**. These issues may overlap, but not necessarily for the same people each time. The left behind may also refer to people who are **well-off economically but culturally disjointed**. While being **left behind across a number of areas can pose severe problems**, for example, being homeless and gay.

A comprehensive definition posited in Dublin was those who do not have the means to live life with dignity. These means include **sufficient income, meaningful work, appropriate accommodation, relevant education, essential healthcare, cultural respect, and real participation in society**. If you lack any of the seven, you are left behind under this definition.

Other definitions from the Dublin participants included: **those we have failed; those whose basic needs are not being met**; people who **don't feel part of society and don't want to collaborate and become opposed** as they feel their **capacity is limited**; the **Irish language community** in the Gaeltacht; and **anyone who may be seen as difficult or feel unseen**. Reference was also made to a crisis of the middle-classes. It was suggested that for each definition one could seek to quantify how many were left behind. For the comprehensive definition above, it was felt this could include as many as 2 million people.

In Cavan, much of the above was echoed in addition participants defined the Left Behind to mean **those on the margins of society**; people who are **homeless**; people who **lack opportunities**; those who are **being ignored or not valued**; or those in **poverty**. In terms of health, people with **mental health difficulties**; and people with **disabilities who cannot access adequate services** to meet their needs – with **children** being mentioned specifically in this context, were also felt to be left behind.

Place-based

In both workshops participants mentioned the importance of a **geographic dimension**. In Dublin, it was noted by some participants that, for some people, **their world is very small**, for example, from Sherrif Street, Howth may be seen as very far away. Some **urban communities** in Dublin **feel abandoned**, for example the Amiens Street area where **'the left behind are people who don't move'**. Cavan participants' definition, also included **communities which remained stagnant or have deteriorated** but they added **loneliness, frustration, despondency, and isolation**, both in terms of the lack of physical infrastructure and online spaces.

Perceived Deprivation

Relating being left behind with social cohesion, some participants in both workshops felt that it is those **who don't have enough who feel threatened if they perceive migrants or others jumping the queue**, or that the really marginalised **don't have voice so that they may not threaten social cohesion**.

Hierarchy of Need

Some Dublin participants saw a hierarchy among those left behind, with an argument being made that the priority should be those who are **furthest left behind**, e.g. being homeless is a case of being left behind in a fundamental way.

Skills deficits

The Cavan participants also linked leftbehindness with skills needs – for example, **immigrants with limited employment opportunities** due to barriers such as language, permits, or qualification equivalency; **older people and others who may have difficulties with digital literacy**; and those with **financial literacy issues**.

Civic participation

Voicelessness was also raised by Cavan participants in terms of civic engagement, with people not feeling heard.

Conclusion

Dublin and Cavan participants both treated ‘the Left Behind’ as describing people and places experiencing disadvantage, but they defined it in slightly different ways. **Dublin participants offered a more conceptual and contested definition**, first questioning the label itself (e.g., that it can wrongly imply a shared starting point) and then expanding it into a **multi-dimensional category** that can be economic, educational, cultural, geographic, or digital, and even include people who are ‘well-off economically but culturally disjointed.’

Participants in Dublin also introduced **threshold and prioritisation ideas** (a ‘hierarchy’ where those ‘furthest left behind,’ such as people who are homeless, should take precedence) and proposed an umbrella, capabilities-style definition: lacking the means to live with dignity, across **income, work, housing, education, healthcare, cultural respect, and participation**.

Cavan participants defined the Left Behind in **more concrete, service availability and opportunity terms**, focusing on **marginalised groups** (people in poverty, homeless people, those not valued/ignored), **health and disability needs** (including children unable to access adequate services), and **barriers that block participation** such as language/permit/qualification issues for immigrants, low digital literacy, and financial literacy gaps. While the accounts of participants in Dublin foregrounds framing debates and a broad diagnostic lens, the definitions used by participants in Cavan emphasise **practical exclusion, place-based stagnation, and lived impacts**, including loneliness, isolation, and ‘voicelessness’ in civic engagement.

4.2 What is the current state?

The participants were then asked to think about trends for the Left Behind – are things improving or getting worse? The picture as discussed in both Dublin and Cavan is a mixed one, with progress in some areas and negative changes in others and differences in how various groups are doing. Negatives featured more prominently in the discussion.

Living standards, poverty and deprivation

The Dublin participants cited the **10 per cent of the population who are still in poverty**, our repeated missing of poverty reduction targets, and a lack of meaningful improvement of the position of **Travellers** in society. Participants also referred to growing economic disparities, where the situation for at-risk communities is felt to be disimproving while, for the upper-middle-class, it's improving or stable. Participants also felt that the middle class is divided, for some their circumstances are improving, while for others they are getting worse. 'People have a middle-class salary but not the lifestyle, home ownership etc. **The left behind group is growing**'.

Income adequacy was also raised as an issue for older people in Cavan, particularly those living alone and whose only source of income is the State pension, in light of the increases in cost of living expenses. 'This is creating a **heating or eating crisis** among older people'.

Deficits in the youth and community development sector

The Dublin participants also highlighted negative developments in **youth work**, which was felt to suffer from **under-resourcing**. This was felt to extend more broadly to the **community sector**, which some participants said is being **left behind with insecure or no funding**.

Policy deficits

Both sets of workshop participants highlighted a policy disconnect between the **political system and the local sector**. In Dublin this was between the centre and community sector and the **work of the PPNs seen as being obstructed by civil servants**. The local Cumann of political parties used to be significant but that is no longer the case. Some participants also referred to the **Just Transition funding in the Midlands not being accessible to community groups because the application process was too complex**, notwithstanding the stated objectives of the fund as including community groups. In Cavan the criticism of the centre was sharper and it was strongly expressed that the centre didn't see how things worked on the ground, **the civil service being faceless, hidden people, that the permanent government has too much power and no accountability**. Other policy disconnects referred to changes in apartment standards.

Exploitation

Some participants at the Dublin workshop felt that **people are being exploited** by 'bad actors'. This sparked some debate as to whether peoples' perceptions may be exploited but it was also felt to be the case that people who are genuinely left behind are being taken advantage of by bad actors, with a sense that **'If you are left behind, it is easier to point to others as the problem'**.

Skills trends

When it comes to the left behind and skills, some Dublin participants pointed to Ireland doing **well overall on the literacy PISA score**, but people in **marginalised areas are doing worse**. The Haase Index shows **the position of those on the margins is disimproving**. While Ireland is better off than it was 50 years, we now have people in **food poverty**. The pace of growth in living standards may have improved overall, but it has grown unevenly across the population.

A **loss of skills and job quality** was also raised as a current trend by participants in Cavan – schools are promoting university attendance over apprenticeships, and trades such as plumbing, welding, carpentry, stone masonry, and crafts such as boat building and musical instrument making, are dying out. The lack of lifelong learning opportunities is keeping people ‘behind’.

Place-based disadvantage

Dublin participants felt that the **biggest problems are in inner cities**, with the implications of being left behind being greater in urban areas because it is **more likely to generate anti-social behaviour** than in rural areas. The further west part of Dublin was cited as being left behind along with north and south inner cities. However some pointed to the **small holders in the rural areas** as also being left behind and the problems of **living in an area without public transport**. Farming has changed from being a more collective enterprise to an individual one, small towns all over Ireland are falling apart, and **rural poverty** is an issue. This led to a discussion about the **impact of demographic change and rural population decline**. In Cavan the need for housing came up and it was felt that **housing and facilities people need are too far apart** and that **Government has diminished the local services such as the post office**.

Both workshops mentioned the **degradation of the natural environment** with the loss of forestry particularly highlighted in Cavan.

Service barriers

Participants in Cavan referred to **service barriers** – a lack of public transport, finance, mental health and addiction services, education, housing, and the digital divide, in addition to an increase in **societal issues** such as family breakdowns and **reduced social connectedness** following Covid. The **privatisation** of services and infrastructure such as housing created two-tiered systems. Young people are felt to have fewer opportunities for home ownership and are experiencing increased loneliness and isolation. The cases of two working parents being on the road all day to make ends meet.

Loneliness and isolation

The issue of **loneliness being exploited** by extremists was also raised by participants in Cavan, with isolation among young people making them particularly vulnerable to ‘falling in with criminal elements’ and becoming victims of crime.

The Cavan participants also pointed to **older people experiencing increased loneliness** due to a lack of community facilities and an increased wariness of others since Covid.

Positive trends

The Dublin participants acknowledged that there have been **long term increases in living standards** so what we are better-off, we now have better **social welfare**, and **progress has been made on issues such as LGBTQI+**, as well as some **positive Local Authority initiatives**.

The Cavan participants also raised some **positive trends** – **increased immigration into rural areas revitalised these areas**, brought a new workforce for the areas’ businesses, and new cultural inputs. While this was not without challenges in integration, it was seen as a net positive.

Young people were also seen to be more accepting of differences in their peers and in others – **‘being different doesn’t mean left behind’**.

Conclusion

Participants in both workshops presented a **mixed picture but with negatives more prominent**, and both point to structural pressures (housing, services, inequality) that are leaving particular groups behind even amid overall national progress.

Dublin participants place stronger emphasis on a **high-level account** of uneven gains: they acknowledge long-run improvements in living standards, welfare, and LGBTQI+ progress, but argue that disadvantage is deepening through under-resourcing of youth work and the wider community sector, persistent poverty and missed poverty targets, and a lack of meaningful improvement for Travellers. Their critique also leans heavily into **governance and political economy**: ‘policy disconnect’ between the political system and the community sector (including obstacles faced by PPNs and inaccessible Just Transition funding), growing disparities with a ‘hollowing’ or ‘squeezed’ middle class, and concerns about ‘bad actors’ exploiting those who feel left behind. Dublin also had a distinctly **urban framing** that locates the most acute impacts in inner-city areas and links urban exclusion to higher risks of anti-social behaviour (while still acknowledging rural poverty and demographic decline).

Cavan participants put more emphasis on the worsening **everyday service access and community conditions**: lack of transport and key services (mental health/addiction supports, education, housing, digital access, childcare), privatisation producing two-tier systems, fewer opportunities for young people (home ownership, connection), and loneliness/isolation across age groups, culminating in the ‘heating or eating’ pressure for older people reliant solely on the State pension. They also add a place-specific dimension around **skills and job quality**, highlighting the decline of trades and limited lifelong learning as mechanisms that keep people ‘behind,’ and they raise a sharper risk narrative about isolation being exploited by extremists and drawing young people into criminality.

Finally, Cavan offers more explicitly **positive counter-trends** than Dublin, particularly the revitalising effects of immigration in rural areas and an observed increase in young people’s acceptance of difference, whereas Dublin’s positives are more systemic/sectoral (welfare gains, human rights progress, some local authority initiatives) and sit alongside a more sustained critique of political and funding systems.

Figure 5: Participants discussing the Left Behind - Dublin Workshop



Figure 6: Participants discussing the Left Behind - Cavan Workshop



5. Intergenerational Fairness

5.1 What is it?

Some participants in Dublin began by questioning how Intergenerational Fairness (IGF) could be about justice, which is concerned with right and wrong, while others queried if there could ever be IGF given people's different age-related needs.

Equality

IGF was defined by some participants as **society working for all current and future generations**. About the **ability to thrive**. For some, it was felt to be '**essential, it's the key to the legitimacy of the total system**'.

Participants felt it was important to acknowledge that intergenerational fairness goes two ways – we often think in terms of younger people, but older people deserve fairness and dignity too.

Equality was a major theme of intergenerational fairness, with **equal opportunities**, regardless of age, and **equality of access to services based on needs of cohorts**, young and old, where age is not a factor to access, and where information was readily available at the stage at which it was required. This creates a '**level playing field of financial security, health, wellness and supports for all ages, with all ages assured a decent standard of living**'. For some Cavan participants, this was also linked to the idea of **sufficiency**, rather than striving for more materialism.

Trust

While both sets of participants referred to intergenerational fairness as **trust between generations**, where the experience of older people is acknowledged and valued and younger people are trusted to make good decisions this was particularly highlighted in Cavan. This trust would be **facilitated through the existence of spaces and opportunities for all ages to come together** and to learn from each other. This supports the **retention of traditional skills** that can be passed on from older to younger generations, while younger people can teach older people **new skills**, such as digital literacy.

Future generations

Future generations were also identified as an aspect of intergenerational fairness, with a recognition that '**decisions made today should be fair not only to people living now, but also to future generations**', with future vision guided by 'heart-led' leadership to create the vision of understanding and togetherness.

Finally, the participants referred to the protection of **natural resources** for the future, and to the planning of **future-oriented infrastructure**.

Conclusion

Having first queried the concept, the participants in Dublin defined intergenerational fairness in terms of a society that works for all, current and future, generations. Affording all generations the ability to thrive. This concept of equality for all was strongly evident in the inputs from the Cavan participants, but with more emphasis on the particulars involved in terms of access to services, infrastructure needs, financial security, and health and wellness.

Trust was seen as an important aspect of intergenerational fairness in Cavan, particularly in respect of trust in the capacity of each generation to contribute something to the other.

While the Dublin participants included reference to future generations in their overarching definition, the Cavan participants expanded on this to refer specifically to leadership for the future, the protection of natural resources, and future-oriented infrastructure.

5.2 What is the current state?

Fragmented intergenerational relationships

In both workshops participants referred to a **fragmented intergenerational relationship**. Intergenerational households are no longer the norm, with a sense that generations no longer caring for each other. Overall, there are tensions and trends that can't be ignored. Cavan participants felt that it was **difficult for different generations to come together**, due to a **lack of neighbourhood awareness** of new people coming to the community, a **fear of engaging** with the community post-Covid, **misunderstandings** between generations, feelings of **being marginalised** – both young and old, a **loss of the tradition** of 'popping in' to see your neighbour, and a **lack of spaces to meet**. The need for spaces to engage was also mentioned by the Dublin participants.

Related to this, the Cavan participants also referred to **young people being time poor**, between working, commuting, and structured activities and play dates for children. Young people were also felt to be losing communication skills due to more time online.

Harmful narratives

Some Dublin participants started with the narrative of 'boomers' and the concept of a **golden age of the welfare state** in the 1960s with universal education and where people could be socially mobile, however others countered that these golden ages were always **governed by class**. Not everyone accepted the concept of a past 'golden age', with reference to the lower standard of living conditions of previous generations. Another aspect of this narrative raised by the group was that young people are being disenfranchised, and the impact on **young people's mental health of increased internet use**.

Some Dublin participants referred to the narrative that this is the first generation who will have done worse than the previous generation, however others pointed out that, in a longer historical context, constant progress was not the norm.

Other narratives specifically referenced older people – such as ‘bed-blockers’ and ‘pensions time bomb’ – and were felt to be potentially polarising.

Housing

Participants in both Dublin and Cavan referenced **housing security and affordability** as an issue for younger people. Private rent was viewed by some Dublin participants as a ‘**massive intergenerational wealth transfer**’ from younger renters to older landlords. Some Dublin participants questioned whether we were measuring against the right metrics for progress – **why is home ownership the benchmark?**

Housing was also a concern amongst the Cavan participants, where some participants referred to **a return of the ‘landlord classes’**. This was seen to not just be an intergenerational fairness issue, but one of **class creep** – where the middle classes are now paying high rents and cannot afford to buy.

Lack of affordability was felt to be **particularly difficult for young people**, according to the Cavan participants, as many struggle to access home ownership. This leads to fractures in social cohesion between generations as young people may feel that they have worked and contributed to the economy, just as older people have, but still cannot afford a home of their own.

Some participants in Dublin referred to children being **completely invisible in housing policy**. ‘We are building housing units not homes’, and references to children not being able to play instruments, play outdoors, and a lack of consideration of what housing is meant to be for. Some participants also felt that we’re not building with children in mind, when families have access to larger homes and green spaces, they’re more likely to have larger numbers of children. There was no universal agreement on this point, with some Dublin participants feeling that the financialisation of housing has resulted in more ‘family homes’ being built for a traditional nuclear family and a lack of acknowledgement that this is not what is required in the long-term as demographic shifts mean smaller households, requiring smaller homes, will feature more in future.

Housing issues as a feature for older people was also raised in both workshops. Some Dublin participants referred to **housing policy as being based on having no or low housing costs post-retirement**, however more older people are ageing into the private rental sector or have continuing loan payments.

Participants in both workshops referred to the **difficulty for older tenants** to rent properties in the future, with participants in Cavan also referred to the unfairness of older people having **contributed 40 years of tax and social insurance yet not have access to social housing**.

Some Dublin participants also pointed to older people who own their property, having **housing to fund their retirement** but younger generations don’t have that, creating an intergenerational disparity.

The Dublin participants highlighted that some older people feel pressurised to help younger people buy a house and thus are getting into financial trouble.

Healthcare

In Dublin, participants referred to older people with illnesses, frailty or disabilities, having difficulty accessing **home-based care and community supports** such as meals-on-wheels, leaving older people **isolated or institutionalised**. Healthcare for older people, particularly the **privatisation of nursing home care**, was felt to have been decided without any democratic process, with dire consequences for some vulnerable older people.

Healthcare was not specifically mentioned in Cavan, rather there was reference to the suite of public service needs of people at different stages of the life cycle, and the **difficulty in accessing the type and range of public services needed** but the Cavan participants also reinforced the isolation of older members of the community.

Financial issues

Some Dublin participants felt that there is an expectation that people's incomes will increase over time, however participants pointed to the **intergenerational transmission of poverty**. Issues such as **fuel poverty**, particularly, impact both young and old, with both older people and renters most impacted.

Financial literacy among younger people was also a concern among some Dublin participants. Some participants felt that young people don't understand how pensions work, and older people have put the risk onto them and the markets for future pensions. 'We need to empower young people to ask informed questions or risk much higher levels of emigration' – referring to the risk that if we do not empower young people to use their voice, they will leave.

Participants in Dublin also felt that there was an issue with how we speak about older people's finances, that the discussion focuses on inheritance, but not the right to spend one's own money when we're older. This inheritance was also identified as creating **greater wealth divides**, with some younger people inheriting and others not. Participants referred to many financial services moving online, creating a **digital and financial divide** between digital natives and those with less digital literacy.

This was linked, by participants in Dublin, to increasing dependency ratios meaning there are more pensioners to workers, putting pressure on the State's capacity to finance services.

Participants in Cavan referred to some groups benefitting from income disparities, and these transferring from parents to children as **intergenerational disadvantage**. There was also reference to the unfairness of **mandatory retirement** in some workplaces.

Ecological disaster and biodiversity loss

Participants in Dublin also referred to the **failure by older generations to provide for future generations**, particularly when it comes to missing climate targets and biodiversity loss, creating climate anxiety among younger people.

In Cavan, participants raised the question of what legacy was being left for future generations, with a concern that current generations are leaving behind a world that is worse from the perspective of climate change, with some referring to **the 'ticking time-bomb' of ecological disaster**.

Family unification

In Dublin, some participants related intergenerational fairness with international protection, citing policy which was felt to be creating **intergenerational unfairness as family unification is delayed**.

Loss of cultural heritage

In Dublin, **loss of cultural heritage** was seen to be impacting young people's use of Irish as a first language, leading to loss of communication with older relatives. In Cavan cultural heritage was also seen to be under threat but was not so tightly linked the use of Irish.

Changes in civic participation

Both sets of workshop participants highlighted that young people are less likely to volunteer than previous generations. In Cavan, people aged **18-30 not getting involved anymore in the community – local parishes, Macra [na Feirme]**. Some participants in Dublin also referred to **declining normative civic participation among younger people**, as the system provides options than meet the expectations of the median voters, but which do not energise younger voters.

Impact of policy

Participants in both workshops felt that past policy failures are impacting current and future generations. Participants referred to previously, **one income would sustain a household, now two-income households are struggling to make ends meet**. Privatisation of public services was felt to reduce the quality and access, creating a service divide.

Questions of progress

Some participants in Dublin referred to **progress in IGF** when considering historic convictions for being gay being overturned. However, it was felt that this **progress can also drive divisions**. Participants referred to previously, a much larger proportion of the population were living at risk of poverty and, while reductions in the poverty rate were a good thing, these reductions have not been universal, leaving some people further behind and leading to **widening disparities and a reduced sense of solidarity across generations**.

Other participants referred to increased wealth not being a precursor to greater social cohesion, as one can be poor and cohesive or wealthy and not cohesive. **'People who are wealthy can shoulder risks that others can't. This also impacts who has a voice and can engage in civic participation'**.

Conclusion

Both workshops highlight that intergenerational fairness is being strained by a combination of weakening connection, polarising narratives, and structural pressures across housing, health, public services, work and the environment.

In both Dublin and Cavan, participants referred to fragmenting intergenerational relationships, and the undermining of trust. Participants in Dublin emphasised the challenges associated with high-cost and marketisation in housing policy, how children are being ignored, and the shift towards privatised nursing home care. They also raised questions of inclusion linked to culture, support for family in the international protection process, and civic participation.

In Cavan, participants were more focussed on the practical obstacles to building/re-building human connection. This included reduced neighbourhood connection, a fear of engagement and the impact of Covid, time use – such as commuting and structured activities, and perceived unfairness of mandatory retirement ages and difficulties accessing services at different stages of the life cycle.

Figure 7: Participants discussing Intergenerational Fairness - Dublin Workshop



Figure 8: Participants discussing Intergenerational Fairness - Cavan Workshop



6. Trust/Legitimacy

6.1 What is it?

Trust for social cohesion

Participants at the Dublin workshop identified a number of different types of trust as important for social cohesion in particular: trust in institutions, trust in media, and trust in 'people in general'. They also considered trust from the perspective of trustworthiness, finding that to be trustworthy is to be competent, reliable and honest. Questions were raised as to how we think about our institutions, do we have competent policy-makers, are they reliable, and are they honest? Overall, participants felt that **'trustworthy institutions support social cohesion'**.

In Cavan, participants distinguished between **two types of trust** needed for social cohesion – trust in people and trust in institutions, stating that **'trust is earned, not an entitlement'**.

Trust and legitimacy

As the question related to trust and legitimacy, participants of the Dublin workshop differentiated between the two concepts, finding that they are *not the same thing*, that is, you can trust something that isn't legitimate. Legitimacy was felt to be **more about institutions** (does the institution reflect people's lives, views etc.?), whereas **trust is broader** (e.g. can I trust that when get a bus I will get where I am going?). 'By destroying trust in the legitimate actor in democracy, we give more trust to the **non-legitimate actors**'. Some participants indicated that some corporations now have influence bigger than nation states and that there is a **merging of financial power with political power**.

In the Cavan workshop, participants referred to legitimacy as being **trust that policymakers will do the right thing**. With **accountability as being key** to trust and social cohesion, and **transparency in decision-making**, particularly financial decisions involving public money.

Trust and proximity to an election candidate were also felt to be linked - trust was felt to be **greater at a local level**, where one might know the candidate, but there was a distance between **national** politicians and voters, and so **party priorities are given precedence**.

The social contract

The social contract, referenced in the discussion on the definition of social cohesion, also featured in the discussion on trust/legitimacy in Dublin and Cavan.

Dublin participants felt that trust and legitimacy increase **when government delivers** for people. Participants felt that if citizens could not trust their own institutions (government, civil servants, political system), then the whole thing becomes delegitimised. Participants felt that it was important to consider it in terms of **'what are the state doing to gain people's trust?'**, as for people to trust they **need to see action**, to feel change, which creates a feedback loop of increasing trust. **Trust in the social contract** was felt to be a particular issue for people – people were sold (as students) the idea to 'do well in school, work hard, will get a job, have a

house’ – but that social contract is broken – people are coming out of college and can’t afford accommodation, or don’t get good jobs. There was a sense among many participants that **the social contract is broken**. While participants acknowledge that they live in a parliamentary democracy, **politicians get elected on a manifesto**, but many people don’t seem to think that these promises translate into the policy process as priorities change, and that **reduces trust in politicians** and government.

Participants in Cavan referred to people **contributing to society** as part of a social contract, and were more specific on the type of services anticipated by the social contract – **disability services, services for older people, services for children with additional needs, Travellers’ services, as well as housing, healthcare, and addiction supports**.

Policy and process

The ‘direction’ of government was also felt to be important. When it comes to **the common good**, participants in the Dublin workshop felt that it was important to trust that decision makers have the common good at heart, but when people look at decisions, they don’t believe that the common good is what has shaped the decision-making (e.g. some referred to deprivation rates remaining unchanged since the 1990s). There is a sense that there is **not a shared idea of what the public good is** (particularly between citizens and the state). Participants felt that there is a lack of a **shared vision** or a **direction of travel** for us as a society. This is needed so that there is understanding or agreement on the **compromises** that will be necessary **for us all to gain** – building legitimacy even for difficult decisions. Finally on this point, participants felt that an institution may be regarded as ‘competent, reliable and honest’ (see ‘trustworthiness’ above), but unless there is a sense that institutions are **‘aiming at the right things’**, or are **‘going in the right direction’**, they may not be considered as legitimate. This was felt to be particularly the case in the aftermath of the financial crisis when **‘civil society was dismantled’**.

The **importance of the policy process** was a key feature to building trust and legitimacy for participants in Cavan, and that policymakers were **seen to do the right thing**. Creating opportunities to engage, transparency in policy processes, and clear procedures aid in the development of trust.

Who feels trust

The Dublin workshop also considered the importance of who felt trust. The **disenfranchised** feel they have been forgotten, and feel they are more and more disconnected, and as a result don’t see any legitimacy in the state. This will become more disruptive as the gap gets bigger. Trust might mean that there is a sense that **‘institutions are generally representing most people’**, and that **‘no one group is significantly overrepresented’**. However there is an overlap between here and the Left Behind as who the left behind trust as their voice can become smaller and more narrow.

In Cavan, attention was drawn to the people who are **unable to vote**, whether due to the presence of legal or structural barriers. This **raised questions of how democratic our elections are**, if they are not open to all and not all are permitted to engage.

Some participants in Cavan also felt that, in order to have trust, one needed to **accept what is 'the norm'** in the community.

Agency and advocacy

Agency was considered to be an important aspect of trust/legitimacy in the Dublin workshop. Participants felt that it was not necessarily about the state 'doing everything for me', but about **people having a sense of agency** in their own lives – and people's sense of trust or sense of the state being legitimate reflects the degree to which people feel their agency is fostered or inhibited by the state.

While in Cavan, **giving voice to people** through local and community advocacy groups was felt to an important element of trust.

Fragility of trust

Finally, participants discussed the fragile nature of trust. It is **hard to build trust and easy to lose it**, it can break anytime. Building trust **takes time**, there is a need to build relationships, to build community. Trust and legitimacy are **shaped by history** and previous experiences: organisations who **'take responsibility for past mistakes'** (e.g. austerity) will be more trustworthy than those who don't acknowledge the past mistakes.

Conclusion

Participants in both Dublin and Cavan agreed that trust was a foundational element to social cohesion. How this trust manifests, and on what it is based, meant that it was fragile and needed to be protected. Participants of both workshops linked trust to perceived trustworthiness, particularly of policymakers and institutions, and emphasised that it can take time to build, but can be lost quickly, and is shaped by choices and whether people can feel that their needs are being met.

In Dublin, however, participants separated out trust from legitimacy, describing trust as a broader concept, while legitimacy related to institutions and policymakers. They also made the point that eroding trust in legitimate actors may drive people towards illegitimate ones. The participants in Dublin also stressed the need for an agreed 'direction of travel' and a shared vision for the common good. They noted that institutions may be administratively capable, but not be seen as legitimate if they are aiming at the 'wrong things'.

The participants in Cavan were more concerned with transparency and accountability, and the in the procedural integrity of the decision-making process. This, it was felt, grew confidence in the legitimacy of policymakers, noting 'trust is earned, not assumed'.

While both groups referred to the social contract, there were differences in how this was seen. In Dublin, participants referred to expectations over time, while in Cavan, participants referred to more concrete examples of what should be delivered in exchange for contributions to society.

Both groups also highlighted the uneven distribution of trust, particularly among those who are left behind or forgotten, with Cavan highlighting structural barriers to inclusion in democratic processes, and the role of advocacy groups in giving people a voice.

Overall, trust and legitimacy was felt to require both process and outcome delivery, particularly in the areas which shape everyday life, and decision-making that is transparent and accountable.

6.2 What is the current state?

Declining trust in institutions

Participants in the Dublin workshop felt that trust was declining overall. While Ireland scores **higher on levels of trust** than other countries, it is **going down, and distrust is growing**. There is a whole decline of trust in the **political process**, in elected politicians. The participants referred to the data as 'being mixed': some data shows that **social trust has actually increased**, having declined during the financial crash, it has since recovered **except for** one demographic group (**people with no third level education**) – this group has not recovered levels of trust.

Participants also pointed to Ireland being in a '**bit of a bubble**' – our current levels of high employment and high tax intake from the multinationals are **protecting us**, but when they go there will be a real disintegration of the trust. They referred to the 'frustration bubble' growing, and that 'it will pop'. Participants suggested that a rising number of people now say they believe that **violence is a legitimate way** of addressing grievances, and government are failing to take robust action on this – there seems to be a paralysis in government.

Again, there was a link between trust/legitimacy and the left behind in discussion on the trends in this area – when people don't feel their needs are met it is much easier to **turn them against other people**. Most people **trust the people** representing the state that they **engage with directly**, e.g. they generally 'trust their kids teacher, or their local guard, or other local figures' – these places where the state interacts with people's lives have relationships of trust, but questioned whether it is the 'next layer up', where trust breaks down. There is a sense that **the profile of who feels like a 'vulnerable group'** is changing, for example the middle class are now feeling challenged for housing for example, so there is a **shift in who is feeling in crisis/let down – whose trust has been broken**.

Participants in Dublin felt that there is **still a lot of trust at community level**, people are actively seeking connection and action, but they are **taking action in ways that aren't helpful for social cohesion** (e.g. putting up flags, spoiling vote).

In Cavan, participants referenced the proportion of the low percentage of the population who vote (referenced as 45 per cent), which undermines **legitimacy of government and government decisions**.

Some Cavan participants referred to mistrust not just being about government, but also **State institutions, national organisations** with presence in the area, and **the church**. Past scandals have eroded present trust, and **inquiries take too long and cost too much**. Some participants mused that perhaps Ireland has gone from one extreme to another – **‘from unthinking trust to not trusting at all’**, citing a need for greater accountability.

In terms of why this mistrust may come about, some Cavan participants also referred to it being **‘hard to trust when you are not being listened to’**, made specifically in relation to farming communities being perceived as undervalued.

Lack of meaningful citizen participation

The Dublin participants also referred to a **lack of meaningful citizen participation** eroding trust, referring to the European Social Survey which shows that Ireland is one of the countries where people believe that their **voice doesn’t count** in the political process. Some referred to the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) as a good initiative which **hit a barrier** because local officials were felt to be reluctant to share their power.

Some felt that **social dialogue** processes were **inadequate**, with an inherent **weakness in civil society** which is **‘naturally fragmented’**, leading to weak representation of particular groups. Structurally, there is an **uneven spread** of the types of **civil society institutions/infrastructures that give communities voice** (and that act as community-builders): e.g. in disadvantaged communities there is a need for government funding for the groups that bring people together, compared to more prosperous communities where groups such as Tidy Towns or other community groups that bring people together are more self-reliant. Others referred to the disproportionate **impacts of the financial crisis on funding for community civil society groups** in poorer communities.

In Cavan, participants referred to a **‘dismissiveness of people’s genuine concerns’** on issues such as demographic change and migration. Groups engaged in advocacy feel that their funding will be impacted if they didn’t ‘hold the line’, e.g. in recent referenda.

Failure to deliver on core needs

The Dublin participants also pointed to a failure of government to deliver core services and infrastructure as eroding trust – **‘No-one believes that the housing situation will be fixed’**. And felt that ‘these failures are **making a wider group of people feel vulnerable**’ (e.g. impacting the middle classes), which further drives increases in distrust. Lack of opportunity for different groups to come together can lead to the perception that the system is prioritising the needs of others, leading to mis-trust between groups, and a sense of lack of legitimacy of institutions who have facilitated this perceived disparity.

Participants in Dublin also referred to pressure on the social contract, including relatively high levels of **‘overqualification’** in Ireland relative to EU, which also has a big class element in terms of outcomes in the **labour market**. [This issue came up for Cavan participants when they referred to IGF.] Going to university was incentivised and rates ballooned after 2008, but this **hasn’t translated into secure jobs** for people. This also has a gender dimension, there are

greater numbers of women with third level qualifications, but this has **not translated into workplace equality**. The **financialisation of universities** has played into that – universities need more students regardless of the labour market demand for them.

This was also an issue for participants in the Cavan workshop who felt that **rural Ireland had lost a lot of core services**, such as banks, post offices and local shops. Government refers to having a budget for a particular service, but it is not seen at a local level, for example in healthcare.

There was felt to be a **'top down' approach to policy which keeps people at arm's length** and creates mistrust due a perceived lack of transparency in the decision-making process. Some participants in Cavan felt that politicians looked for 'scape goats' for problems, particularly pointing to some vulnerable groups, and to 'gaslight' communities by assuring them something will be done. Instead, Government was felt to **let problems fester rather than provide solutions**. This raised questions as to the quality and capacity of political leaders, and a lack of trust in the system.

On the topic of infrastructure delivery, the Cavan participants felt that there is **not the infrastructure to deliver the services for a growing population**. Specifically in relation to housing, participants referred to the proportion of TDs who are landlords which raises **questions of the political will to change the system**. There was also felt to be a lack of people to actually build the housing needed. They also referred to the planning system, with some pointing to a perceived risk averse approach to planning – **'it's not a housing crisis if it's as planned'**, mismanagement, and the rise in **'serial objectors'** causing delays. Reactive measures were seen to have a negative impact, going from non-compliance to too much compliance.

Cavan participants also referred to **disparities in funding and supports for particular groups**, with money for Traveller integration not being availed of, while other groups went without funding.

Attacks on legitimacy

Participants in Dublin referred to **targeted efforts to break trust in institutions**, e.g. attacks on the planning system and court procedures, aim to **delegitimise their role in protecting the common good**. Participants also referred to the **move towards deregulation** as 'very risky' and potentially leading to health and safety risks, which undermine future trust, in a negative feedback loop.

Related to this is the increase in misinformation which was felt by the Dublin participants to be growing faster and wider. This leads to a growing **mistrust in media sources**; and differences between traditional media (more editorial control, safety) and social media were highlighted. The impact of misinformation is shaped by people's critical thinking capacity and susceptibility to misinformation (e.g. mistrust of 'mainstream' media). As a small English-speaking country, sandwiched between two enormous English-speaking countries where there is huge polarisation and lack of trust, the Dublin participants felt that Irish media and social **media landscape is very influenced by the debates and polarisation from those countries**.

There is also felt to be more **fragmentation/disintegration** across the idea of the 'news': in the past there was 'the' news that was the touchstone for everyone (e.g. RTE news, main papers), but 'the news' is now fragmented (so people are not all in the same information space – almost **living in different versions of reality**).

Cavan participants echoed this and felt that the **role of the media was as a source of truth**. However theories shared on **social media** could be 'off the wall', yet still people believe them, **having a real-life impact on people**.

Disintegrating public discourse

The media were felt to have a role too as they focus on the soundbites of **negative stories**. There are pockets of good things happening, but the media doesn't amplify those good news stories. The participants in Dublin suggested that this is super-fuelled by proximity to the polarisation of UK and US discourse.

Media outlets were not the only sources of information felt by both participants of both workshops to be susceptible to creating divisions among their audience, some Dublin participants referred to **government communication campaigns/slogans** like 'welfare cheats cheat us all' which have had **negative impacts on social cohesion**, e.g. resulting in lower levels of trust across groups – trusting welfare recipients less. Participants felt that sometimes stigma arises unintentionally, but sometimes there is a **deliberate effort to create stigma**. As a result of this kind of public discourse there can be a **distortion of the reality that drives mistrust** (e.g. we have a more heightened idea of corruption than the actual levels). Another example is the backlash we are seeing against LGBTQI+ people at the moment - there is a **perception that 'the state is putting all this money into changing pronouns while you aren't getting your basic needs met'**, it creates a tension between groups with blame focused on a minority group. This is similar for migration, even though the figures are clear on the positive economic contribution of immigration, the narrative is of people in disadvantaged communities (who are not getting their needs met) being in competition – with resources going towards migration instead of 'meeting domestic needs'. In Cavan, some participants referred to the **parsing of Government narratives by mainstream media**, undermining trust.

Misinformation was linked by the participants in Dublin to inequality and AI, where it was felt that the elite have recently stopped pretending that they are working for everyone. **'Potentially now they don't need trust anymore'**. Participants also felt that inequality decreases trust so in the past there was (at least lip-service) commitment to addressing inequality, increasing trust etc. The 'huge' fracture of (accelerating) inequality together with the potential ways that AI can enforce a police state, displace labour etc. potentially creates a **risk that those in positions of power think 'we don't need wide societal buy-in'** in the future.

Capacity to engage with complexity

There was a sense among the participants that **society used to be simpler**, there were certain **people in positions of trust** (e.g. local politician, priest), but society is more complicated now, and there are **less definitive ideas of who you can trust**. Reliance on, and exposure to, social media for advice makes people vulnerable. People's **capacity for detail/literacy/critical thinking** also seems to be reducing, people now have strong opinions and less capacity for engaging with the detail. This may reflect levels of frustration (e.g. if you are annoyed about housing and are looking for a scapegoat you don't want to hear lots of detail or nuance).

Participants referred to AI as possibly reducing critical thinking and people's capacity to engage with the details. AI can do lots of good things, but it can also hallucinate, and it can also be used for nefarious purposes. What AI requires of us is to 'question more' and to 'test what we trust' to probe, to consider, to ask better questions.

Interpersonal trust

Finally, Cavan participants referred to **declining levels of interpersonal trust** and safety concerns in society in general. People don't know each other like they did, and don't 'step up' like previous generations. Some participants referred to a lack of trust in, or fear of, authority figures such as Gardaí, among younger people, leading to more anti-social behaviour.

Conclusion

Overall, participants in both Dublin and Cavan described an erosion of trust and legitimacy, but they located its drivers slightly differently. Dublin discussions emphasised a broader, systemic decline in confidence in politics and institutions—shaped by weak avenues for meaningful participation, failure to deliver core services (especially housing), and a rapidly fragmenting information environment influenced by wider UK/US polarisation, while still recognising relatively strong, if sometimes misdirected, community-level trust.

In Cavan, participants more often grounded mistrust in lived local experience - low electoral participation as a challenge to legitimacy, the impact of historic scandals across state and church, feeling unheard (specifically in farming communities), and the visible loss of rural services and infrastructure, alongside concern about the real-world impact of unfounded social media claims and a perceived decline in interpersonal trust and safety.

Taken together, the two workshops suggest a shared sense of fracturing trust, with Dublin highlighting high-level reasons and lack of democratic connection, and Cavan focusing more on place-based exclusion and the practical consequences of decisions that feel distant or dismissive.

Figure 9: Participants discussing Trust/Legitimacy - Dublin Workshop



Figure 10: Participants discussing Trust/Legitimacy - Cavan Workshop



7. Workshop Recommendations

The third question for the World Café to consider was **‘What policies/proposals/solutions might support building or preserving Social Cohesion in this area?’** – where participants considered how to get from where we are now, to where we want to be. What follows are the recommendations made during the workshops under each of the three lenses of the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust/Legitimacy.

These recommendations represent the views of the participants of the workshops and are not the recommendations of the National Economic and Social Council. The Council’s recommendations will be set out in a forthcoming Council report.

7.1 The Left Behind

A vision for Ireland

Participants in Cavan proposed the preparation of a vision for Ireland setting out our values and aspirations for all people.

Participatory structures

Participants in Dublin proposed more participatory structures to give voice to the left behind. There are many ways that this may be done, with the pros and cons of citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies, funding oversight mechanisms, and social partnership being discussed. Participants felt it was important that, whatever mechanism was used, engagement with citizens and civil society was meaningful, capable of holding policymakers to account and placed civil society at the heart of government. The scope of local initiatives, such as PPNs, should be expanded.

Participants in Cavan called for public participation, particularly among those who are unable or reluctant to participate, to be nurtured, with barriers such as loss of pay, or childcare provision, addressed for greater engagement.

A new social contract

Some participants referred to the current social contract as being ‘broken’ and called for a new social contract between citizens and the State.

Transparency, accountability and governance

Participants in both Dublin and Cavan called for greater transparency, accountability and governance in the public sector, particularly in respect of public funds.

In Dublin, proposals were made that the Revenue Commissioners could provide everyone with a statement showing how tax money is spent, covering all revenue, not just income tax, and the development of a public register showing all public expenditure. An example of this was the ‘Payments and Purchase Order Tracker’ launched last year by TD Albert Dolan.³

3 See: <https://www.fiannafail.ie/news/deputy-albert-dolan-launches-payments-and-purchase-order-tracker> (Accessed: 14/04/26)

Beyond public funds, participants in Dublin called for greater transparency in consultation outcomes. Currently, only the decision is presented, participants called for an accessible explanation of what was considered and on what basis the decision was selected.

Accountability was also extended by the Cavan participants to governance across the civil service which, it was felt, should be performance based with demonstrated policy coherence. Service provision should be guided by improved evidence gathering on what people need and where, with financial consequences for politicians who fail to deliver on their promises.

In Cavan, calls to strengthen accountability were extended to the private sector.

Secure funding for community groups

Participants in Dublin favoured enhanced and more secure funding of community groups, and adequate, annual funding for the implementation of co-designed policies and proposals on social cohesion. The Roadmap for Social Inclusion was given as an example of a good policy that was not fully implemented.

Provision of 'safe' spaces

Both workshops described cohesion as requiring places and opportunities for people to meet, build connection, collaborate across difference, and feel safe and included. References ranged from 'spaces to gather' and 'safe spaces' in left-behind areas, to shared spaces that support intergenerational contact, to community spaces, libraries, arts and culture spaces, and outdoor green spaces that enable everyday interaction and belonging. Participants also noted that a lack of physical infrastructure and online spaces can amplify loneliness, isolation, and disconnection.

Specific references were made to more social mixing via schools. Early education was seen as key to this, with a proposal that everyone should have two years' of free early years education, and more State childcare.

Empowering local government

Participants in both workshops also proposed increasing funding and powers for local government, and to decentralise power from central government. One participant in Dublin proposed that the next Programme for Government contain a commitment to increase local government funding to the EU average.

Income adequacy

Participants in both workshops also called for adequate social welfare supports to lift people out of poverty, with a specific proposal from participants in Cavan to increase taxation on the rich, or exempt the first two hours of overtime from income tax. It should be noted that there was disagreement among the groups on these proposals, with some Cavan participants calling for consideration of whether social welfare payments are a disincentive to work.

Provision of core services

The participants in Cavan made specific proposals in respect of the core services which require investment and support from the State.

– Housing and homelessness

Some participants called for a return to earlier successful housing policies. This was a reference to local authorities building both social and affordable housing. Where necessary, one participant felt that Local Authorities should sequester land through CPO to ensure adequate provision for housing and ancillary services.

Some participants felt that, where people are living in accommodation that is too large or too small, government should facilitate right-sizing of housing.

With regard to homelessness policies specifically, participants in Cavan called for the removal of tourists from houses and homeless people from hotels, and the enforcement of minimum standards in accommodation centres.

– Health

Participants in Cavan called for the provision of universal public healthcare, increase primary care, and deliver a 7-day healthcare system.

– Education

Participants in Cavan called for the reform of the current examination system, making it less focused on memorising information and less time-pressured. Others called for the abolition of the points system.

– Other

The participants in Cavan also had some other suggestions to strengthen inclusion and build social cohesion, e.g. requiring the provision of sensory rooms in shops and other public venues; providing support for people to access digital services who can't do so themselves; and protecting State ownership of forestry for the benefit of future generations.

Migration policy

A participant in Cavan proposed that national and local politicians should provide guidance to communities on how to welcome migrants and support integration, while one contributor suggested easing skills gaps by making it easier to have migrants' qualifications recognised.

Conclusion

The proposals made at the Dublin and Cavan workshops both reference the need to rebuild trust through stronger transparency, accountability, and governance, and through decentralisation of governance, handing more powers to Local Authorities.

Both also refer to the need to create 'safe spaces' for people to come together to engage on issues, to learn from each other, to share experiences, and to build community and belonging; and to provide for income adequacy as a way to addressing inequalities and the Left Behind.

Similar to how discussions have evolved earlier in the workshops, the proposals made by participants in Dublin focused more on system-level democratic change, the expansion of participatory mechanisms, increasing transparency in how Exchequer funds are used, and strengthening the role of citizens in decision-making; while in Cavan, participants focused on more practical proposals for change, particularly in the delivery of core services.

The two sets of recommendations work together to provide a rounded framework for improving the lives of the Left Behind, with both institutional reform and service-delivery, to build a new social contract.

7.2 Intergenerational Fairness

Citizen participation

The Dublin participants identified the need to have greater citizen engagement in decision-making, particularly with those who are most impacted by those decisions or who will have the most to lose from the impact of those decisions. **'We need to stop government being the source of all ideas'**. Some participants referred to the need for more social dialogue with all sectors of society, at both national and local levels. This would aim to ensure that policymakers take IGF into account in their decisions.

In discussing the role of civil servants, there was some discussion of suitability and qualification in certain areas. One participant referred to Ireland being the 'only country which doesn't allow civil servants to be political', as meaning we lose important dialogue.

Encouraging citizen engagement, particularly of younger people, was also proposed by some Cavan participants.

Evidence-based policy

In Cavan, participants called for better data to support decision making, including the use of more qualitative data, not just quantitative.

Accountability

Legislative scrutiny and implementation scorecards were proposed by some participants in Dublin to maintain accountability by policymakers, as there is a sense that there is a lack of seriousness about change. Ireland has policies and strategies that would enhance social cohesion, and we report on some of these to the UN to say that there are in place, but this is not felt on the ground.

Another feature affecting accountability is the amount of mobility across the civil servants, meaning that both expertise and accountability are gone.

Local government

Some participants in Cavan referred to national policies as not being fit for purpose for every area, and the need to have more devolved powers for local government to support generations within a localised context.

Sustainability of community groups

Participants in Cavan proposed multi-annual, sustainable funding mechanisms for community groups, and a move away from project funding once the project has proven successful.

Provision of core services

Participants in both workshops were concerned about the impact of under-provision of public services was having on IGF.

– Housing

Some participants in Dublin referred to older renters being unable to continue living in the private rented sector as they age and their incomes decrease. It was proposed that the State would need to increasingly step in to provide affordable, sustainable accommodation in the longer term.

In discussing mixed tenure developments, some participants called for 'pepper-potting' (a housing mix of affordable and social housing) to promote community diversity, and a need for a change to housing funding models to accommodate this.

Some participants called for a reduction in safety standards, with the example of the mandate to have a sprinkler systems in every housing block making apartments too expensive. However, there was disagreement on this point, with other participants calling for more universal design to allow for wheelchair access, buggies etc. Universal design was also proposed in Cavan to ensure that everyone had the access they need across the lifecourse to live independently.

The need for change to housing policy was summed up by one participant who referred to it potentially leading to the delivery of housing that was not suitable for the population, thereby creating further mistrust in the system.

– Childcare

Many participants in Dublin and Cavan called for investment in childcare to be seen as an investment that will pay off in the future, with calls for the State to subsidise childcare and early years education.

– *Nursing home care*

Some participants in Dublin referred to the need to fulfil existing legislation when it comes to services such as nursing home care. There currently exists legislation which dates back to 2011 that has not been enacted, with no accountability from any politician.

– *Lifelong learning*

Participants also referred to the need for more lifelong learning, particularly pre-retirement courses which were seen as not fit for purpose as they don't currently cover the full breadth of retiring people's potential or interests, or the issues one needs to be aware of as we age.

Climate action

Participants in the Dublin workshop referred to the need to implement existing climate legislation, rather than developing new proposals. One participant did, however, suggest a voucher scheme to limit people's overseas travel to an environmentally sustainable.

In Cavan, proposals were made to enhance the bioeconomy, deal with waste locally, and provide more care for the environment for future generations.

Shared spaces

The Dublin participants called for more shared spaces for people to come together, particularly young people who have aged out of playgrounds, but are too young/don't have the money to go to pubs or cafés. The provision of shared spaces was also a key proposal for the Cavan participants, where people could share experiences, learn from each other, and build connections. Giving children time to play, rather than fully-structured activities, was felt to be important to human development.

In the interest of promoting IGF, spaces for all generations to come together to mix was also proposed. This referred to both indoor spaces for activities and civic engagement, and outdoor 'green' spaces for people to come together and experience nature.

A Cavan participant referred to how large gates excluded casual social contact – reinforcing that good architecture is not just about public shared spaces but also private spaces that invite people in.

Income adequacy and inequality

Participants in Cavan referred to the need for interventions to combat disadvantage to be sustainably funded at a national level, rather than having local authorities having to be reactive and 'bridge gaps'.

Some participants in Dublin specifically referred to the need for a universal basic income to improve wellbeing for everyone, irrespective of need. This could lead to an increase in the expectations of people on basic income, possibly unlocking their potential to contribute more to society. Other participants referred to the need to introduce a living wage, which was also supported by participants in Cavan. **'Addressing poverty is key to unlocking Intergenerational Fairness'**.

In Cavan, participants proposed a participation income, with payment for contributing to the community in some way, such as volunteering, helping those who need it, keeping the place tidy and so on.

Other proposals for addressing inequality to support IGF involved ensuring that policies were equality proofed at a national level, facilitating community-level responses to emergent equality issues, changing the pension system to allow pensioners to work with younger people to share skills, without impacting their pension entitlements, and the development of a Roadmap for Intergenerational Fairness so that young people can aspire to equal treatment irrespective of their socio-economic starting point.

Civic Education

A Dublin participant proposed a French model of civic education to empower youth participation, in the absence of an increase in youth work, this could help young people find their voice and feel that they have a say in the decisions made in running the country. We also need a living wage.

In Cavan, participants suggested learning about IGF, volunteerism, and intergenerational engagement should form part of the Transition Year programme at second-level.

Conclusion

Accountability and transparency also feature prominently in the proposals of both workshops on how to build IGF. Both workshops made proposals to strengthen civic participation, with stronger accountability, better-resourced local government, and the need for shared spaces to come together and connect across generations.

Dublin participants continued to make proposals at a system level, while Cavan concentrated on practical enablers of IGF through supporting community groups and local responsiveness, and evidence-based policymaking that included qualitative analysis.

7.3 Trust/Legitimacy

Building on what's there

The Dublin participants felt it important to explicitly recognise the value of social cohesion, and not taking it for granted, and to protect where trust is already there and at risk of being eroded. An example of this is the integrity of our elections, where the results are upheld. It was felt to be important to actively protect **free, fair and open elections**.

Participants also pointed to the need for greater confidence and belief within government that **innovation is possible in Ireland** - rather than 'looking for it already to work elsewhere in other countries', there is so much scope for us to lead from our own experiences here in Ireland.

Start delivering on needs to build trust

Both Dublin and Cavan participants also felt that, to address social cohesion, we need to **improve on delivering for core needs** – education, transport, healthcare, as if they don't work people lose faith. In Cavan, participants suggested devolving responsibility for the delivery of these services to Local Authorities who 'know what's needed'.

In building trust, policymakers should ask what is needed **to earn trust**, rather than turning to how a message should be communicated. By '**turning up and taking accountability**', policymakers demonstrate that they are accountable and trustworthy.

Part of building trust, identified by the Dublin participants, was the need to **recognise and admit to the structural challenges**, such as racism, and to build **confidence in the structures of regulation and enforcement**. Instead of emerging narrative that 'all regulation is bad', which is very risky, Government should have the **confidence to champion the common good – and hold the line on the need for regulation** in the face of pressures to deregulate.

Citizen participation

Participants in both Dublin and Cavan workshops referred to **education on civics for school children**, including both in formal education (civics lessons) and in practical learning opportunities for young people, particularly in Transition Year where practical civics projects can be developed.

Participants in Dublin saw a need for **better processes of social dialogue** involving all aspects of society, and proposed the development of a viable **social dialogue** process at **both local and at national level**. The **main function** of that dialogue process should be the **development of a new social contract** related to a new vision for Ireland.

At a local level **citizens juries**, could play an important role in increasing engagement, and legitimacy, bringing people from all different backgrounds together to pool their experiences and to start a conversation rooted in the reality of people's lived experience, with 'citizen' in this context meaning 'denizen'.

Participants of both workshops referred to proposals to enhance engagement which moved beyond consultation, for example **citizen budgeting** at local levels (Dublin) and local social dialogue structures (Cavan). Acknowledging the difficulties in recruiting for these structures, participants in both Dublin and Cavan felt that they could be a really important way to positively **address the concerns of marginalised people, and** to create **spaces need that** traditionally excluded people **feel that they belong**. Addressing barriers such as people having the time to engage in these local democratic institutions is therefore important, as well as avoiding the ‘squeaky wheel’ effect – where it is those who shout the loudest are listened to.

There was some discussion in relation to the use of structures such as social panels/citizen juries locally, while also **improving existing structures** (such as the PPNS) and empowering Local Authorities to make decisions as part of a decentralised government.

Planning for social cohesion

The Dublin participants proposed that social cohesion be designed into developments in towns and cities, for example urban design that looks at how places can support social cohesion (e.g. transport that supports cohesion). **Government needs the confidence to apply a vision for this** (and of course this means **developing a vision** first). Leadership would involve **designing social cohesion into every level and institution**.

It was felt that this design could also extend to business, with greater development of **social enterprises**.

Tackling misinformation and disinformation, and the role of media

Participants in both Dublin and Cavan felt that there was a need for more *transparency in governance*, with mechanisms to present not just the underlying data, but also the trustworthiness of that data. Government should align on key messaging, rather than having Government Departments, and Ministers, giving speaking points that are not evidence-based (e.g. migration and homelessness).

Dublin participants also proposed programmes to tackle growing mistrust in media sources and enhance **critical thinking capacity**. Participants of both workshops agreed that there is a need to **build all types of literacy capacity** and critical thinking skills, in particular in the face of AI, including being built into all levels of education from the earliest level up, with participants in Cavan specifying that these programmes need to be **delivered to all groups irrespective of class**.

Participants in Dublin called for the **legislative framework on AI** to have strong rules governing both traditional media compared to social media. The State can also act as ‘a neutral arbiter’ to fact-check and **tackle groups actively engaged in disinformation**.

Conclusion

Participants in both workshops referred to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy depending less on messaging and more on accountability and the reliable delivery of core needs.

Comparing the proposals from the two workshops, while there was much overlap evident, the Dublin participants emphasised the protection of existing trust (including the integrity of free and fair elections), strengthening regulation in the common good, and using structured social dialogue to help develop a new social contract. They also proposed making social cohesion a core part of planning for infrastructure and institutions, including through urban design and social enterprise. Participants in Cavan, by comparison, placed greater emphasis on decentralisation and practical delivery through Local Authorities, and called for literacy and critical-thinking programmes to reach all groups regardless of class.

7.4 Priority Actions

Following the World Café, participants were given three (3) stickers and asked to 'vote' for the actions which they felt would deliver social cohesion. Participants could use all three 'votes' on the same priority, or spread them across up to three priority actions. The priority actions are set out in Table 1.

Table 2: Priority Actions on Social Cohesion

	Dublin	Cavan
The Left Behind	<p>Deliver more affordable housing.</p> <p>Deliver affordable, high-quality childcare.</p> <p>Deliver universal, accessible public services.</p>	<p>Deliver more affordable housing.</p>
Intergenerational Fairness	<p>Deliver affordable, high-quality childcare.</p> <p>Create shared intergenerational spaces.</p>	<p>Decentralise power to Local Authorities and Communities.</p> <p>Address inequalities.</p>
Trust/Legitimacy	<p>Resource viable social dialogue at national and local level.</p> <p>Invest in autonomous community development.</p>	<p>More localised governance with place-based planning and funding.</p> <p>More openness and accountability from government.</p>

Note: The above is the authors' synopsis of the grouped priorities selected by workshop participants.

8. 'Building' Social Cohesion

Having spent time discussing how social cohesion might be defined, and the state of social cohesion through the three lenses of the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust/Legitimacy, participants in the workshops were asked to 'build' social cohesion using Lego® bricks. The bricks could symbolise tangible structures, such as housing, transport, or green spaces; or could be used to represent intangible concepts such as trust and solidarity. What follows are photographs of the models made by each group, with explanations of the components that make up their representations of social cohesion.

Across both workshops, the models present a picture of social cohesion that is a combination of **tangible infrastructure and relational conditions** - places to meet, systems that enable mobility, and institutions that people can rely on. The Dublin models (Figures 12.1 - 12.6) repeatedly depict cohesion as something that must be *built into systems*, through transparent decision-making, accessible services, and interconnected networks; whereas the Cavan models (Figures 13.1 - 13.3) more explicitly refer to community, and a *people-centred* and *values-based* foundation (welcome, respect for diversity, optimism) as the starting point.

A clear point of contrast is how governance and leadership are represented. Several Dublin models make **decision-making architecture** a visible part of cohesion - transparency appears explicitly in Figures 12.1 and 12.3, while Figure 12.5 adds decentralisation, strong local government, and citizen juries as key features of a cohesive society. In the Cavan models, governance is also central but framed more through **leadership and shared direction**. Figure 13.2 emphasises strong leadership 'at all levels', a collective vision for the future, and trust as the foundation for progress. Figure 13.3 aligns with Dublin's emphasis on transparency, but places it alongside a broader set of needs and lifecourse supports, suggesting that legitimacy is closely tied to whether institutions meet everyday requirements in an open and accountable way.

Both workshops' models include an emphasis on infrastructure, particularly **housing, transport, and sustainable energy**, but Dublin's models present a denser landscape. For example, Figures 12.2 and 12.3 combine housing with quality jobs, education and training, childcare, healthcare, sustainable transport, and environmental protection, while Figure 12.5 expands further into mixed-tenure housing developments and a wide range of local services and amenities (libraries, schools, sports infrastructure, banks and credit unions). The Cavan models also include sustainable energy and public transport (Figure 13.3), and similarly reference affordable, mixed-tenure development, but they place greater emphasis on meeting needs 'throughout the lifecourse' (including future generations). This gives the Cavan set a more explicitly **lifecourse** framing, while the Dublin set leans toward a **multi-service ecosystem** framing in which cohesion arises from the combined functioning of many interdependent systems.

Shared spaces were held to be key elements of cohesion in both workshops, facilitating **bridging and bonding** between groups. Dublin models repeatedly highlight community spaces and institutions that facilitate interaction, for example, neighbours supporting each other (Figure 12.1), places for arts and culture (Figure 12.2), community-building and support for the left behind (Figure 12.3), and libraries and green spaces as focal points (Figures 12.5 and 12.6). The Dublin models also frequently represent connection as the linking of different parts of a system, 'different journeys and ways of getting there' (Figure 12.4) and 'gaps are bridged' (Figure 12.6). The Cavan models express similar aims through more direct language of **welcome, respect, and community facilitation** (Figures 13.1 and 13.2), with Figure 13.3 reinforcing the need for **space to come together** as part of meeting needs fairly and transparently, and the community bus in Figure 13.1 illustrating how public transport can both facilitate people's movement to access other services, as well as being **space where diverse members of community** can meet.

Overall, the models show **social cohesion as the result of multiple connected subsystems** - governance, services, mobility, social safety nets, and environmental sustainability - often making the underpinning mechanisms (transparency, decentralised democracy, connectivity) part of the model itself. The Cavan models also added **community, shared values and collective direction**, with people at the centre, everyone welcome, diversity being respected, leadership, trust, and optimism, as a precursor to the functioning of the models of social cohesion.

Overall, the models suggest a common understanding that **social cohesion requires both relationships and resources**, while differing in whether the primary emphasis is on system design (Dublin) or people-centred foundations and lifecourse needs (Cavan).

Figure 11: 'Building' Social Cohesion - Dublin Workshop

Figure 11.1 – A socially cohesive society is one where neighbours come together and support each other; where social mobility is facilitated; where there is transparency in decision-making; where there is mobility and choice in the movement of people; and where there is sustainable energy infrastructure.

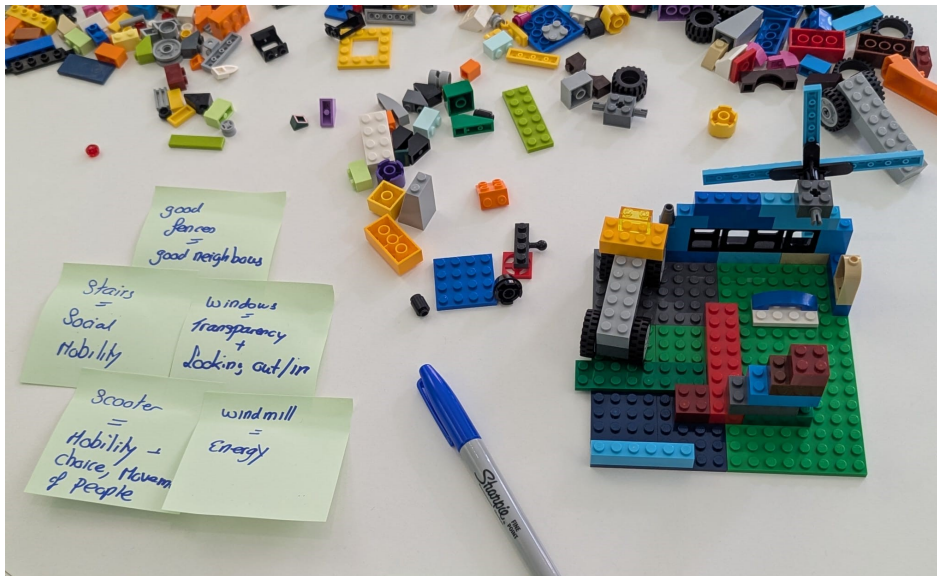


Figure 11.2 – A socially cohesive society is one where people can come together; spaces for arts and culture; affordable nutritious food that is sustainably produced; a supermarket; accessible quality jobs; creates a sense of belonging; creates access to education and training; has quality housing; and sustainable transport.



Figure 11.3 – A socially cohesive society is one that is accessible; encourages mobility; has good quality healthcare; provides quality childcare; protects the environment; has transparent decision-making; builds community; and supports the left behind.

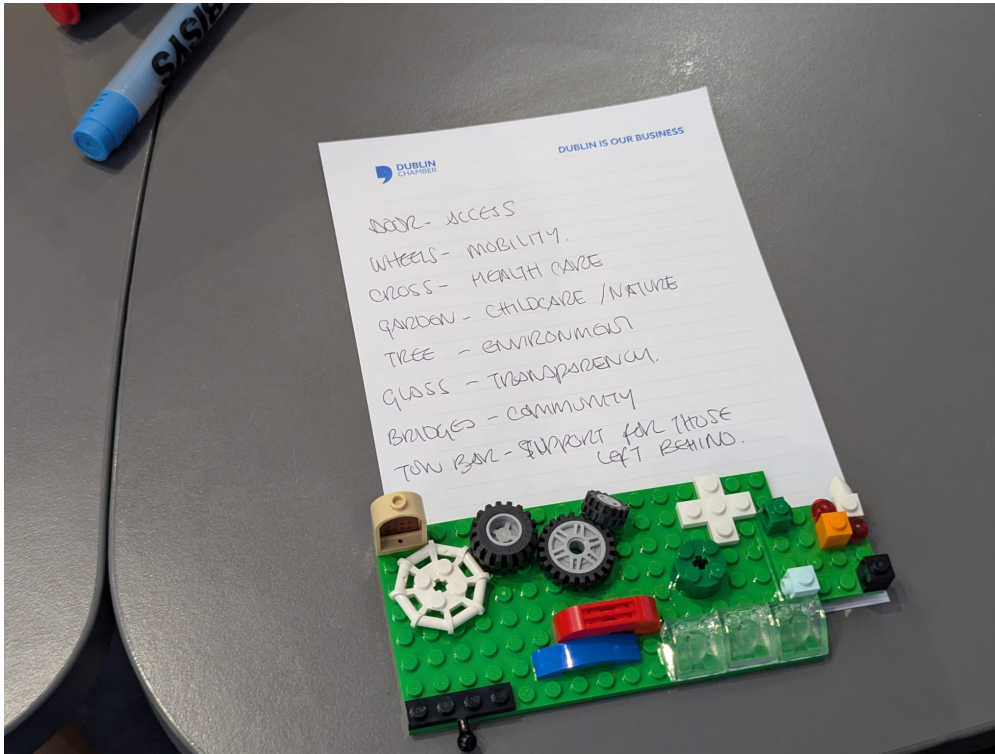


Figure 11.4 – A socially cohesive society is one that provides a social safety net (represented by the white paper on which everything else is built), that is inclusive; accessible; supports innovation; supports transparent decision-making; facilitates different journeys and ways of getting there; recognises that we are all equally interconnected as part of the same system, and all are needed to function.

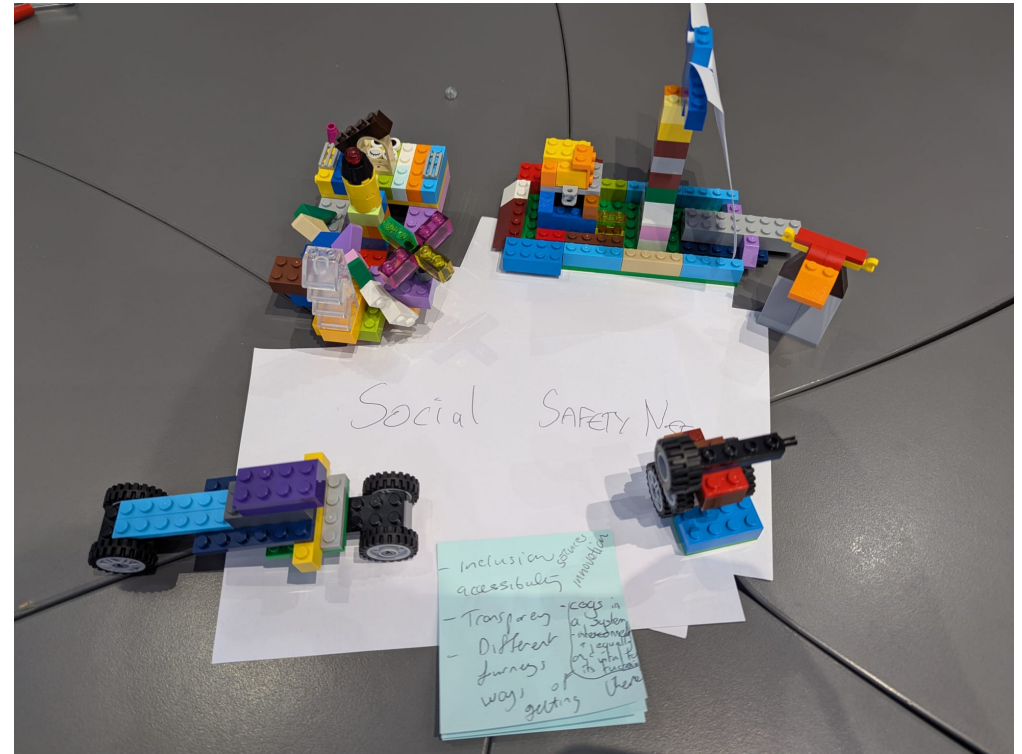


Figure 11.5 – A socially cohesive society is one where there are community spaces and libraries for people to come together; where democracy is decentralised, with a strong local government and citizen juries; where housing developments have mixed tenure, size and use, with community spaces for people to come together; where children have access to schools with a diverse social mix, and sports infrastructure; with sustainable energy systems, water infrastructure, transport infrastructure, and green spaces throughout; and where there are local businesses, banks and credit unions.



Figure 11.6 – A socially cohesive society is one where gaps are bridged; community is built; is environmentally friendly; has libraries and green spaces; is carbon neutral. The model was deliberately positioned over the gaps in the table to illustrate the 'bridge' construction of their vision of social cohesion.



Figure 12: 'Building' Social Cohesion - Cavan Workshop

Figure 12.1 – A socially cohesive society is one that puts people at the centre and everyone is welcome; where the diversity of community is respected. A community bus, that carried a diversity of people inside it, was used to illustrate the importance of infrastructure (such as public transport) that can create shared spaces for people to meet (as well as travel to other services). Everyone was on the bus: no one was left behind.



Figure 12.2 – A socially cohesive society is one where there is strong leadership at all levels; where there is a vision for the future; that is built on a foundation of trust; where everyone feels a sense of optimism for the future 'we're going places'; where everyone is included and community is facilitated.



9. Conclusion

The outputs from the workshops show a strong shared sense of what underpins social cohesion - relationships of trust and belonging, with the practical resources and services that allow people to participate fully in social and economic life. In both Dublin and Cavan, participants repeatedly returned to the importance of fairness, inclusion, and safe shared spaces, as well as the central role of credible institutions that can deliver on everyday needs and enable denizens to have a meaningful voice in decision-making.

Comparing the two workshops indicates that place and lived experience shape how cohesion is understood and where priorities are located. Dublin participants more often framed cohesion through high-level trust, legitimacy, and the workings of the social contract. They were concerned with institutional performance, participation, and the effects of inequality and mis- and disinformation on democratic legitimacy. Cavan participants more frequently framed social cohesion in community infrastructure and lifecourse supports, with locally-available services, local leadership and governance, intergenerational connection, and the removal of practical barriers relating to transport, housing affordability, and access to health and disability services. These differences point to the **value of considering national-level institutional reform with locally responsive, place-based delivery, so that a renewed social contract is felt not only in policy intent but in everyday experience.**

As stated at the outset, the workshops were not designed to be statistically representative, and the outputs should be read as a structured account of perspectives generated through a common participatory process in two different settings. Nonetheless, the consistency of several themes across both locations, and of the contrasts where they arise, provide useful direction for the development of policy thinking on social cohesion. The insights and priorities captured here will feed into the National Economic and Social Council's forthcoming work on social cohesion and the Council's own recommendations.

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