

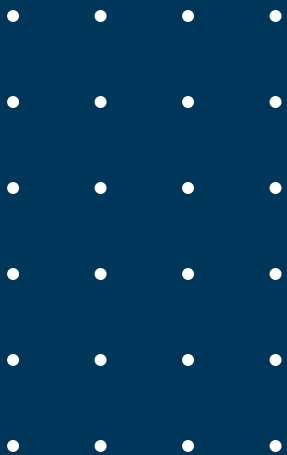


nesc

Taighde, Idirphlé, Comhairle
Research, Dialogue, Advice

RESEARCH

No.37 June 2026



Social Cohesion: Report of the Young Adult Workshop



Social Cohesion: Report of the Young Adult Workshop

Colette Bennett
Noel Cahill
Dr Gráinne Collins
Niamh Garvey

RESEARCH PAPER

No.37 June 2026

Contents

1. Purpose and Scope	1
2. Workshop Design	1
2.1 Co-design with representatives of youth organisations	1
2.2 Pre-workshop survey	1
2.3 Workshop format	2
3. What Is Social Cohesion?	3
4. The Left Behind	4
4.1 What is it?	4
4.2 What is the current state?	6
5. Intergenerational Fairness	8
5.1 What is it?	8
5.2 What is the current state?	9
6. Trust/Legitimacy	12
6.1 What is it?	12
6.2 What is the current state?	14
7. Rating of Experienced Social Cohesion	16
8. Workshop Recommendations	19
8.1 The Left Behind	19
8.2 Intergenerational Fairness	21
8.3 Trust/Legitimacy	22
8.4 Priority actions	24
9. 'Building' Social Cohesion	25
10. Conclusion	28

List of Figures

Figure 1: Participant Groups	2
Figure 2: What is Social Cohesion?	4
Figure 3: Participants discussing the Left Behind	8
Figure 4: Participants discussing Intergenerational Fairness	12
Figure 5: Participants discussing Trust/Legitimacy	16
Figure 6: Rating Social Cohesion – Round 1	17
Figure 7: Rating Social Cohesion – Round 2	18
Figure 8: 'Building' Social Cohesion	25

List of Tables

Table 1: Priority Actions on Social Cohesion	24
--	----

1. Purpose and Scope

This report compares outputs and themes from a participatory workshop with young adults aged 18-25 that explored social cohesion. It focuses on the ideas generated, the emphasis placed on different lenses, and the priorities that emerged through model-building and voting. This report represents the views of the participants of the workshop only, 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 Co-design with representatives of youth organisations

NESC previously held workshops in Dublin (February 2026) and Cavan (March 2026) on the theme of Social Cohesion. Following feedback from these workshops that more youth participation was needed, the Secretariat invited representatives from 28 organisations who regularly engage with young people, including the youth wing of political parties, organisations supporting young people in care, organisations supporting LGBTQI+ youth, students' unions, youth advocacy organisations and representatives of government Departments and State agencies to join us for a co-design meeting to shape the workshops to something that would be attractive for young people to participate in.

Following this meeting, the methodology of two sections were changed – the pre-workshop questionnaire and the social cohesion rating. Participants were asked to select the best location for a meeting (central Dublin, near public transport), and time (later morning). Invitations were circulated through the representatives to young people participating in their organisations.

The workshop took place on the 25 May 2026.

There are limitations to this work. The representatives do not comprise of a statistical representation of young adults aged 18 to 25.

2.2 Pre-workshop Survey

A short survey and explanatory video were circulated 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 alphabetical order and assigning alternating colours down the list. A facilitator and note taker were present at each of the three groupings to facilitate discussions and capture the outputs.

To support participant comfort, sensory toys were made available on the tables, and the availability of quiet spaces was pointed out at the beginning of the day.

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 poor to excellent by standing between two pictures on the wall representing these sentiments. Participants themselves chose to give their sense of social cohesion a number out of 10.

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).

Figure 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 Play¹ 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?

The group proposed a fluid, multidimensional definition of social cohesion that moved from the individual level to the community level, and to the national level.

At the **individual level** it includes subjective happiness and feelings of safety, being empowered, being supported by others, and a sense of belonging – **“we’re all in the same community, but we are our own person”**.

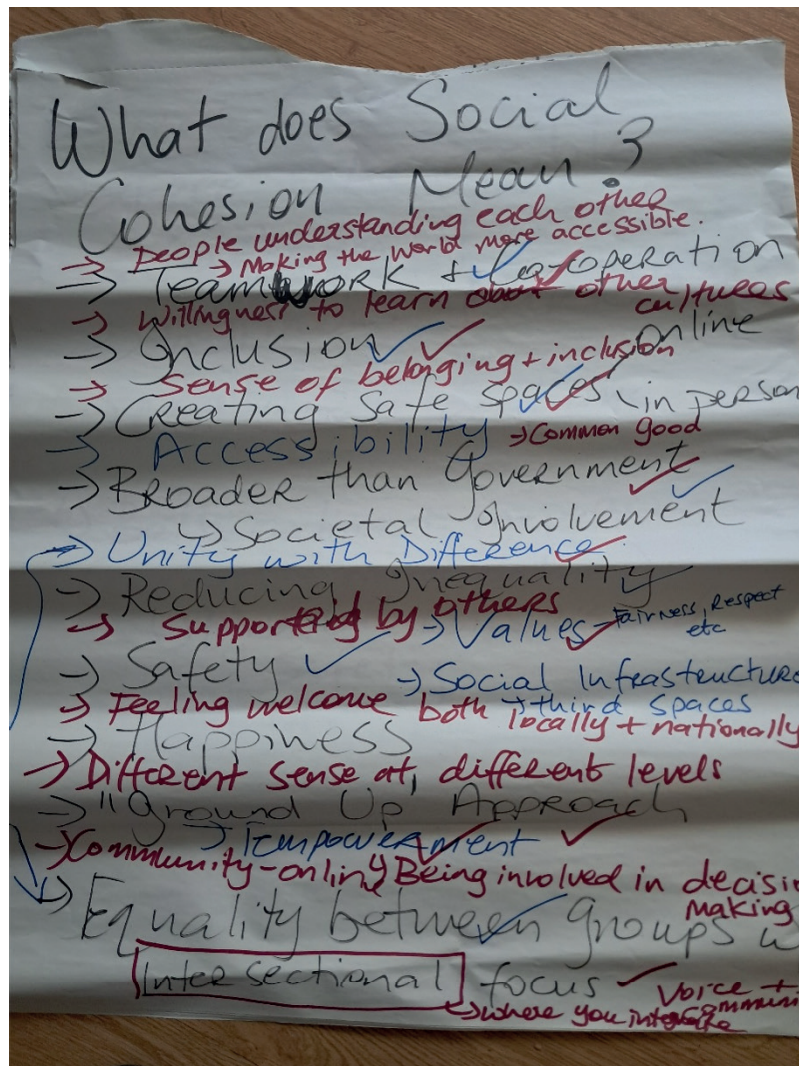
At **community and national levels** it involves teamwork, people understanding each other, reducing inequality – creating solidarity between people moving towards the common good. **Diversity**, and a willingness to learn about other cultures and listen to each other, to create unity with space for difference, and to support intersectionality. Distinct from an individual sense of belonging, the group saw inclusion and belonging being fostered by the creation of safe spaces, “third spaces” – free and accessible spaces where people can meet and gather, that is not work or their home, and where there are no barriers to participation, both online and in-person. The creation of a feeling of welcome both locally and nationally in the infrastructure of social cohesion.

Creating social cohesion was acknowledged as involving, but being broader than, government, that a **whole of society approach** was needed. Its fluid nature involves a different sense of cohesion at different levels – **“one may belong in one community but not another”**. Participants also felt that a “ground up” approach to support social cohesion would be beneficial, with young people being involved in decision-making, and having a voice.

Finally, in creating the conditions that foster social cohesion, the group felt that **values** were important, particularly fairness, empathy, and respect, and the capacity for **everyone to have what they need**.

1 For more information on the research and pedagogy underpinning this methodology: https://www.lego.com/cdn/cs/set/assets/blt8ec1d6ff766ddf4/LEGO_SERIOUS_PLAY_OpenSource_14mb.pdf (page 8).

Figure 2: What Is Social Cohesion?



4. The Left Behind

4.1 What is it?

Participants were asked to provide their understanding of what this term meant. Several concepts were identified. One participant said that **to be left behind is to be excluded or viewed as 'less than'**. This was felt to be the case for people with a disability, that may curtail opportunities in education and careers. The participant felt that a visible disability is better accommodated than hidden disabilities, where the symptoms of chronic illness, such as tiredness, can be misunderstood and criticised.

Another concept was that **to be left behind is the inverse of social cohesion**. To be left behind is to not feel a sense of belonging and lacking access to jobs and social settings. Being left behind can lead to isolation which leads to further problems.

Participants identified many groups of people who are left behind. The group most consistently identified was **people living in disadvantaged urban areas**, although rural areas were also mentioned with the **transport difficulties of those in rural areas** highlighted. Rural link transport services were acknowledged but it was noted that it takes a multiple of the time to travel a given journey this way compared to a car. One contributor identified **native Irish speakers** as left behind. **Young people** were considered by participants to be left behind in that **their circumstances are not addressed in terms of cost of living, housing etc.** Reference was made to the possibility of emigration as an unsatisfactory response to difficulties.

Other groups identified as being left behind were: people may be left behind on basis of age, race, sexual orientation, disability; people with addictions; unaccompanied minors; asylum seekers and refugees; homeless people; people in prison; longer term residents without the right to vote; people in low paid work; home care workers; precarious workers who don't know what their hours will be; those who can't afford a day off or an unexpected bill; some public service workers; Irish Travellers and Roma; the unemployed; those who with literacy difficulties, including those lacking digital literacy; and elderly people.

Intersectional groups were noted as being particularly left behind. These are people experiencing more than one disadvantage. For example, living in a disadvantaged area and experiencing drug addiction or having a family member in prison.

One group discussed the experience of being left behind as teenagers. One participant said she felt judged as a teenager. This was acknowledged by the group, but another said she didn't feel this personally. Another said he felt that as a teenager it was difficult to be accepted by other teenagers.

The breadth of the groups named by participants in the workshop demonstrated an empathy among participants with groups to which they may not personally belong, but with whom they share a sense of solidarity.

An interesting aspect of the left behind, articulated by this group, was in that of comparative advantage / disadvantage. One participant articulated how some people have stronger social capital from their family background or the family network giving them a head start over others. While they, in turn may have advantages over others (e.g. they may not be from a disadvantaged area or have a disability), they are comparatively left behind compared to others with more social capital or ability to bridge capitals to become upwardly socially mobile.

Conclusion

Overall, participants understood being "left behind" as a broad and relational experience of exclusion, disadvantage, and reduced belonging, shaped by barriers to participation in education, work, housing, transport, and community life. They identified a wide range of affected groups, from people with disabilities and those in disadvantaged urban or rural areas

to migrants, precarious workers, and young people facing housing and cost-of-living pressures, while also emphasising that overlapping forms of disadvantage and intersectionality can deepen exclusion.

The discussion highlighted both empathy and solidarity across different experiences of marginalisation, and pointed to the role of unequal social capital in creating comparative forms of disadvantage, where some people are left behind not only by deprivation itself but by unequal access to support, networks, and opportunity.

4.2 What is the current state?

The group identified a large number of groups who were left behind, including those who perceived that they were left behind in comparison to others. This was carried through to their reflections on the current state of play for the Left Behind.

Insufficient delivery

While the breadth of groups identified as left behind was quite extensive, the general sense was that the position was bad for the left behind collectively, due in part to an insufficient response to their situation, indicating a failure of systems and institutions to deliver across a range of areas. One participant referred to a “complacency” with policy and society not moving as quickly as it should. This “policy drag” was also identified by another participant as leading to the left behind feeling further behind.

Educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage was agreed to be a significant way in which people are left behind, and reference was made to how this is illustrated by national newspapers listing of schools’ results. This not only ranks schools but potentially adds to the stigma experienced by students in schools at “the bottom”. It also adds pressure to students at a critical time. One positive aspect of the education system was noted by one participant who pointed to DEIS plus as a positive response to students experiencing the most severe disadvantage.

Homelessness and housing precarity

Concern was expressed at the current homelessness and precarious housing position of many. Leaving direct provision was felt by participants to be the biggest driver of homelessness, and concern was expressed at asylum centres being located in remote, inaccessible locations.

Participants also linked homelessness to heavy drug use and addiction, with additional stigma attached to substance addiction.

Another aspect of current housing precarity identified by participants was the “sex for rent” problem, where predatory landlords use rent hikes and scarcity to extort sexual acts from tenants.

Healthcare

The insufficiency of public mental health services was discussed by several of the participants. Reference was made to the difficulty of accessing therapy and the long waiting lists for CAMHS. Participants felt that the youth mental health charity Jigsaw was overrun with demand for its services and also expressed for the staff in mental health services who risk burnout due to high demand.

Addiction and mental health were also discussed, with neurodivergent people being identified by the group as more at risk of drug addiction.

Gender affirming care was also raised in respect of trans people, with participants of the workshop referring to a ten-year waiting list for care leading some people to resort to using substances from unknown or unlicensed services.

Migrants and racism

It was noted that people who are not Irish now constitute a substantial share of the population but that it is difficult to get into a position of power if one comes from an ethnic minority, and those who enter public life, whether through politics or celebrity, experiencing specific attacks for their race. Reference was made to specific individuals – a minority candidate in a political election who was attacked on social media, and online criticism of another person of colour who was born and raised in Dublin.

Discrimination

One participant raised the ease with which non-disabled people will speak to and about the disability of others. This can be experienced as overly personal and intrusive, particularly when it involves relative strangers.

The group also identified safety concerns of specific “left behind” groups, e.g. LGBTQI+ people, African people, and Brazilian people, leading groups to “stick together” for safety and creating obvious difficulties for social cohesion more broadly.

Response to being left behind

In addition to the specific response of the groups identified above, that is, as “sticking together”, the group identified two general ways in which people may respond when they feel left behind: apathy (they give up, don’t vote etc.) and acting outside of the system (the recent fuel protests was raised as an example). **“People can either disengage or rebel.”**

Conclusion

Overall, participants described the current state of being “left behind” as one of widespread and deepening exclusion, driven by systems and institutions that are not responding adequately across key areas of life. Educational stigma, homelessness and housing precarity, overstretched mental health and healthcare services, racism, discrimination, and safety concerns were all seen as reinforcing marginalisation for different groups, while some issues, such as addiction,

disability, and barriers to gender-affirming care, highlighted how multiple disadvantages can intensify exclusion.

The discussion also suggested that when people feel persistently unheard or unsupported, the result can be disengagement, loss of trust, or resistance outside formal systems, with wider consequences for social cohesion.

Figure 3: Participants discussing the Left Behind



5. Intergenerational Fairness

5.1 What is it?

By its nature, intergenerational fairness refers to the relationships between groups. In providing their understanding of what this term meant, participants referred to **mutual respect, with each generation listening to each other** and learning, involving active listening and really being heard.

The group also included the concept of **tolerance** – tolerance of difference, where different generations may have different views (e.g. the perception that older people are more conservative while younger people are more free thinking).

The perception that the **“next generation should do better than their parents”** persists, with the group identifying this as an aspect of the definition of intergenerational fairness. With everyone having adequate resources, housing and employment.

The group further identified systems that would support their definition of intergenerational fairness, including **two-way education** where younger people teach older people and vice versa; **the availability of spaces to engage with each other**, and **pay rises which reflect the cost of living**.

Civic participation was also raised as an important aspect of intergenerational fairness, with the views of younger persons being taken into account in decision-making and policy-making spaces. A Department of Future Generations would ensure fairness for the generations to come, with long-term thinking e.g. in relation to climate crisis.

In terms of the mental modes required to deliver intergenerational fairness, the participants identified a need for a **mutual understanding of needs**, perspectives, and experiences of different generations, and empathy and communication between generations. Central to this was a strong call for open and ongoing communication between generations, enabling dialogue, empathy, and the building of trust. Through this, participants felt entrenched biases and stereotypes about young people would be challenged. In such a society, every generation would possess the skills, opportunities, and access to technology necessary to participate fully and confidently in modern life. This essential communication ideally should be both in person and online so people will need the skills, and access to technology, required to participate in a modern society.

Conclusion

Overall, participants understood intergenerational fairness as a relationship built on mutual respect, listening, and tolerance across age groups, where each generation is heard and supported to do at least as well as the one before it. They emphasised that this requires not only adequate resources, housing, employment, and cost-of-living supports, but also spaces and systems that enable meaningful exchange, two-way learning, and civic participation between generations.

The discussion also pointed to the importance of empathy, openness, and long-term thinking in policymaking, so that all generations have the skills, opportunities, and voice needed to participate fully in society.

5.2 What is the current state?

Stigma and discrimination

The group felt that ageism is very prevalent in Ireland, with young people not being valued enough, and older persons not getting access to communities. They referred to younger people’s views not always being taken seriously, that they did not feel heard and often felt stigmatised. They also referenced work culture, with younger generations being labelled as lazy,

but insufficient recognition that it is harder to get a job. Some policies were felt to perpetuate this, e.g. the sub-minimum wage rates for under-20s, lack of pension entitlements.

They also pointed to what was felt as a lack of understanding of older persons about the struggles of younger people, and negative references to spending money on “avocado toast” without the recognition that luxury items (the toast) are accessible to many, while the basics (e.g. housing) are becoming more expensive.

A positive note on this theme was the improvement in minority rights in Ireland. However, one participant did note the difficulties in accessing disability and jobseeker payments.

Generation gap

Participants referred to the position of previous generations who were able to get a home, have children, afford a pension, as being out of reach for current young generations. Specifically relating to housing, previously it was possible to own a house on one salary, and have a general level of affordability, participants felt it was not possible to do this now.

When it comes to contact with other generations, the participants felt that they don't often get the opportunity to do this outside of their own family unit. One person outlined that they had never talked to an old person outside of their family.

Cost and quality of living

The group felt that the increased cost of living was causing young people to be left behind older generations **“as if a ladder has been pulled up”**. Housing costs were particularly mentioned here in the context of a housing crisis and the **“guarding of resources by older generations”**. When asked about intergenerational transfers of wealth that would benefit young people, the group felt that this did not apply to everyone and inequalities still persisted and indeed were being exacerbated.

The participants did refer to the standard of living for younger people as being better than that of their parents, with better opportunities overall, including the ability to travel, see the world, experience other cultures etc.

However, it was also felt that the quality of services in Ireland is poor given the costs of those services. The participants referred to emigration from Ireland as allowing young people to experience a better quality of life elsewhere.

Lack of futures thinking in policy making

Participants felt that politicians only considered the next election cycle, and cited the recent postponement of the carbon tax as an example of a short-term policy intervention that ignored the longer term.

Technology and jobs

Participants did acknowledge that there had been positive developments, and that current young generations have better access to technology, although AI is replacing the work once available to graduates. This, it was felt, results in a loss of social mobility opportunities for young people. There is also the risk of bias in AI that was felt needed to be better understood.

Education

Participants referred to easier access to education and apprenticeships, although they did refer to the increased financialisation of third level education. They also expressed the view that increased educational attainment among the population no longer equates to the capacity to afford a reasonable standard of living on its own, and the increase in post-graduate students studying for Masters or PhDs to distinguish themselves from their peers creating a consequent delay into adulthood.

Healthcare

It was also acknowledged that there was better access to healthcare and medicine now. However, mental health supports are under-funded, and there was a perceived lack of understanding by older persons around mental health diagnoses in younger persons. Participants felt that what was needed was a better distribution of resources across generations, and less stigma surrounding mental health, allowing younger people to name it more easily.

Conclusion

Overall, participants described the current state of intergenerational fairness as marked by persistent imbalance, where younger people face stigma, reduced recognition, and weaker access to housing, insecure livelihoods, and less decision-making power compared with previous generations.

While participants acknowledged progress in areas such as rights, education, healthcare, and access to technology, these gains were seen as undermined by high living costs, poor public services, underfunded mental health supports, and policy choices that prioritise short-term pressures over long-term fairness. The discussion also highlighted a widening sense of distance between generations, shaped by limited opportunities for meaningful contact, unequal resource distribution, and concerns that current economic and political systems are making it harder for younger people to achieve stability, social mobility, and a comparable quality of life to that of older generations.

Figure 4: Participants discussing Intergenerational Fairness



6. Trust/Legitimacy

6.1 What is it?

Effective representation

The group focused on what effective representation looks like - where the views of everyone invited to participate are given equal weight, where lived experience is taken as evidence, where all geographic areas are represented and that decisions are not Dublin-centric.

The participants also felt that there should be transparency and accountability, with repercussions for bad policy decisions that had negative consequences, and a system that could safeguard against corruption.

Transparency was not only discussed in terms of process, but of values and intent. Where policymakers are seen to work to better the lives of all people, and can communicate that effectively across a range of communication channels.

Finally, that policymakers engaged in active listening, and fed back to participants who engaged in a dialogue.

People-centred

For policy to have legitimacy, the participants felt that it should be community or people centred. That there should be trust built into the process – generational trust which builds over time, trust in institutions, and inclusive dialogue. There would be a general understanding of the common good, and people could trust that government is working to deliver it.

Civic participation

Participants also referred to the role of civic participation, – with citizens “turning up” and people really engaging with the system. This would extend to all relevant sections of society coming together to build social cohesion. There was some discussion amongst participants on what constitutes legitimate engagement – some referred to the disruption caused by recent fuel protestors “parking trucks on O’Connell Street” as damaging social cohesion, while others felt that disruption can be a necessary part of the process if it means that things will change (an example was given where citizens engaged with an elected representative on a particular policy issue only to be told that the representative had not known about the issue and it was now too late to do anything). It was, however, agreed that engagement in protests is a healthy part of civic participation.

Community building

Communities are able to rely on and support each other, sharing a sense of being a “good neighbour”. This can extend beyond individuals and small groups to organisations and institutions – taking the example of organisations that are already excelling in this area.

Engaging with mistrust

Where there is mistrust of institutions by particular groups, or perceived exclusion of particular groups by institutions, those institutions would strive to ensure that the voices of those groups are heard.

Conclusion

Overall, participants understood trust and legitimacy as depending on inclusive, people-centred governance in which all voices are heard, lived experience is recognised as valid evidence, and decision-making is transparent, accountable, and responsive. They emphasised that legitimacy is strengthened when institutions actively listen, communicate clearly, and demonstrate a commitment to the common good, while also creating meaningful opportunities for civic participation, community building, and constructive challenge.

The discussion also highlighted that where mistrust or exclusion exists, trust can only be rebuilt if institutions make a sustained effort to hear those affected and ensure that engagement leads to visible recognition and response.

6.2 What is the current state?

Declining trust in institutions

Participants felt that trust in politics and public institutions is under strain. Participants spoke about frustration with political systems, a perception that those in power are not held accountable, and a sense that public confidence is gradually eroding.

Some described a broader weakening of the social contract, with mistrust intensified when people see recurring crises in areas such as health, education, housing, and public safety without clear consequences or visible improvement. This was seen as a direct risk to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy.

Need for meaningful engagement

Participants felt that where people feel decisions are made about them rather than with them, this weakens democratic legitimacy. Some participants expressed the view that view that policy commitments made at national level are often not experienced in practice at community level. This was felt to relate particularly to people from marginalised groups, with participants describing those with direct lived experience as not being listened to but being included as a token.

This gap between official narratives and lived reality was felt to contribute to cynicism and reduce confidence that institutions are responsive, fair, or genuinely inclusive.

Structural barriers

Participants felt that democratic participation is not equally accessible. Some identified practical barriers to voting, including transport difficulties, the absence of measures such as postal or early voting, confusion about registration and polling procedures, and uncertainty about where and how to vote. They also highlighted additional obstacles for particular groups, including disabled people, trans people, ethnic minorities, and people facing financial barriers to citizenship. These issues were seen not simply as administrative problems, but as factors that shape whether people feel represented and able to participate on equal terms.

Need for democratic literacy

Participants linked low trust and weak legitimacy to limited education about politics and democratic processes. Many felt that people are not sufficiently taught how political institutions work, how elections function, or even the practical steps involved in registering and voting. There was concern that learning about politics is too optional, too abstract, or introduced at the wrong stage in education. As a result, democratic participation can depend heavily on family background or personal initiative, which may deepen inequalities in political knowledge and confidence.

Impact of broader social climate

Participants pointed to the effects of hate speech, bullying, scapegoating during elections, racial abuse, and fears about public safety. Some participants felt that these conditions

discourage people from stepping forward into public life or engaging openly in political processes. A perception that harmful behaviour can occur without consequences was seen as further undermining trust in institutions and in fellow citizens. Personal safety and respect was seen as a factor in democratic trust.

Positive improvements

There was a sense that youth political participation is being discussed more seriously and a growing awareness of the need for younger voices in decision-making. Participants felt, however, that meaningful representation must go beyond just consultation - people need to see that their input has value, that it influences outcomes, and that pathways into politics are genuinely open. Greater visibility of diverse leadership and more youth-centred forms of engagement were seen as important steps toward rebuilding trust and strengthening democratic legitimacy, with young people having a seat at the decision-making table, rather than siloed.

Conclusion

Overall, participants felt that trust and democratic legitimacy are fragile and uneven. Participants described a political system that many people experience as distant, difficult to access, and insufficiently responsive to lived realities, especially for marginalised groups and younger people. At the same time, there are openings for improvement through better political education, more accessible participation, stronger accountability, and forms of representation that are visibly meaningful rather than symbolic.

The current state, therefore, is best understood as one of concern, but not without possibility for renewal.

Figure 5: Participants discussing Trust/Legitimacy



7. Rating of Experienced Social Cohesion

Participants were then asked to rate their current view of social cohesion in Ireland by standing between two pictures, one representing poor and the other representing excellent. The participants themselves chose to assign a numerical rating (1-10) to their view. Participants were advised that they would be asked to do this exercise again closer to the end of the day to see if anything had changed.

Round 1

The majority of participants in the first round, early in the workshop, chose somewhere between 3-4 on a 10-point scale (Figure 6).

The lowest rating (3) was based on a sense of a decline in community life, the loss of third spaces, for example local communities losing their cafes and pubs, or the difficulties associated with having a disability, such as access to education, care or employment. One participant also stated that, while Ireland is a great country, we are not *there* yet. There is a lack of social cohesion manifesting in risks to safety for some people.

The highest rating in the first round was 7 on the basis that while many people may disagree on solutions, there is at least broad agreement on the issues that need to be addressed and the relative resilience of our political system.

Some views from the those giving a middle ranking included that acknowledging problems is not enough, many groups are being neglected in different ways having regard to culture background, housing, health etc., scepticism that different demographics being heard or having their views taken on board, and a loss of hope that some long-term problems will be addressed (e.g. climate change).

Figure 6: Rating Social Cohesion – Round 1



Round 2

After the three rounds of questions, considering Social Cohesion through the lenses of the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust / Legitimacy, participants were again asked to rank their perception of Social Cohesion.

Compared to the original ranking earlier in the day, no participant moved up, but several moved down (Figure 7). When asked the reasons behind these moves, participants referred to the development in their understanding of the left behind from listening to other participants and the need to be asked throughout the workshops if they could think of something positive - **“if you need to be reminded to think of something positive, you know something is wrong”**.

When asked about their sense of optimism or pessimism, there was more of the latter. While a lot of positive change was acknowledged, the scale of the challenge was a cause for pessimism and overwhelm for some. While some participants did express optimism - **“change is possible, but we have to start listening to each other”**, optimism was more likely to be linked to trust - **“we move at the pace of trust”**. While others referred to a sense of realism – **“Not optimism or pessimism, it’s realism, if we don’t work for it then we won’t get it”**.

One participant raised a call to action to build a more positive future **“we should not wait for our turn. Everyone had positive ideas for the future. Bang on the table now.”**

Figure 7: Rating Social Cohesion – Round 2



8. 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?'**. Participants considered how to get from where we are now, to where we want to be. What follows are the recommendations made during the workshop 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 workshop 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.

8.1 The Left Behind

A number of proposals were made in respect of the groups identified as being left behind. These can be grouped into two categories: policy change and institutional change.

Policy change

Health

The issue of **drug addiction** was discussed. It was felt that it is currently treated as a criminal issue, rather than a healthcare one. Participants proposed a care-first approach where health supports were provided in the first instance.

Participants also referred to the 10-year waiting list for **gender affirming care** for transgender people, proposing that this medical intervention and wraparound supports should be made available locally.

Income and work

Income adequacy was seen as an issue, with agreement among participants that **everyone should have access to sufficient income**. Proposals to support this included the **introduction of a living wage, adequate social welfare payments, stronger employment regulation** where all workers have regular working hours, a prohibition on zero hours contracts, and mandatory recognition rights for trades unions.

Specific reference was made to **working conditions for nurses**, which participants felt should be improved to stem the flow of outward migration of this critical skill.

The discussion also extended to a tax policy which impacts work, the **VAT reduction** for hospitality. Participants criticised its universal application within this sector and proposed that it be **targeted at smaller businesses**.

Housing

Participants proposed the **strengthening of regulation in the private rented sector** to afford greater protections to tenants, the **extension of those regulations to the rent-a-room scheme** so that students could not be forced to leave their accommodation at weekends, and to **strengthen regulation of AirBnBs**.

The **role of student unions in providing accommodation** was discussed, with some participants proposing that contributions paid by students for amenities such as sports facilities could instead be used for the provision of accommodation.

One participant called for a **specific youth housing policy**, following the discussion of social housing. The group proposed that **social housing be standardised** across all Local Authorities, with choice-based lettings being widely available and **greater availability of youth social housing** than currently exists.

Education

Participants proposed **increasing investment in early years education**, and **meaningful engagement with those who are experiencing educational disadvantage** to allow them to shape education policy and for the system to benefit from their lived experience.

Governance

Participants called for **greater investment in local government**, an increase in its governing powers, and more support to empower local communities. This investment would include better salary and conditions for local Councillors to try to attract stronger candidates.

Spaces

Participants proposed an increase in the provision of community-led “third” spaces to support community engagement, provide safe spaces for marginalised groups such as members of the LGBTQI+ community, and provide opportunities for English-language classes for migrants.

Institutional change

Health

While the Women’s Health Action Plan was seen as positive, concern was expressed that **women’s medical conditions continue to be underdiagnosed** and that women are not listened to by doctors. Participants felt that this should be addressed at the institutional level.

Reference was also made to the number of children awaiting assessments of needs for ASD and other neurodivergence, and the cases being brought through the High Court at the moment so that parents and children can access the supports that they need. Participants felt that wait times should be accelerated given the impact of obtaining the right supports at the right time.

Education

One participant proposed having more guest speakers in schools to encourage tolerance of other cultures and experiences. Another participant identified a need to teach teachers about bullying, identifying an unrecognised issue with some teachers bullying their pupils.

8.2 Intergenerational Fairness

Income adequacy

Participants raised issues of income adequacy, with one referring to accessing to social welfare payments such as Disability Allowance and applying for the SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) grant, resulting in a loss of some or all of the social welfare payment. A proposal was made to broaden eligibility criteria beyond income thresholds alone to other metrics such as the Pobal index and measures of area-based deprivation.

Another area of income-based inequality between generations raised was in relation to the reduced rate of working age payments (Jobseekers' Benefit / Allowance) for young people living at home. Participants proposed equalising the payment irrespective of age.

Participants also raised a question for policymakers – **“We need to ask why, why does someone find themselves in the position they are?”**. If we understand the causes of income inadequacy, we may be better able to address it.

Economic policies

Participants were frustrated that Ireland's GDP is “healthy” and yet many don't feel wealthy, particularly when it comes to poor public services.

The group focused on economic policies that would lead to real measures to support intergenerational fairness. This would include having Government intervene in the housing system to curb current market-based policies which result in single-adult households being unable to buy their own home.

In terms of work, participants referred to retaining the current retirement age and maintaining existing levels of State-pension on retirement.

To generate additional revenue for the Exchequer, participants proposed additional taxes on the wealthy, e.g. the introduction of new tax brackets for earners above €400,000, an additional tax on multi-nationals, reform of local property tax, and the introduction of a land tax.

Spaces

Investment in more collective spaces was also proposed in respect of intergenerational fairness. **Spaces that support younger generations to interact more with older generations**, which is not often done outside the family unit; and intergenerational third spaces such as cafés and book clubs. These need to be accessible so as not to limit participation by people with reduced mobility.

Housing and Infrastructure

Proposals for housing concentrated on **affordability issues**, with participants calling for greater investment in affordable housing, more supports for tenants, the introduction of effective rent stabilisation measures, to keep housing costs down.

There were also calls for other infrastructure projects, such as electrifying the rail network and de-centralising infrastructure delivery outside of Dublin.

Education

Participants acknowledged the importance of the role of education, calling for **free and accessible education for all**, in addition to lifelong learning for those who did not have previous opportunities for further education.

Lifelong learning extended particularly to **media literacy** for all, especially older people to prevent them falling prey to scams.

Governance

The final set of proposals for intergenerational fairness centred on good governance. Participants called for an **increase in youth participation** in decision-making to bring more youth voices and experiences to bear on issues which affect young people. This might include targeted access for young people, such as a quote or reserved seat for younger people on decision-making bodies, quotas for 20- or 30-year-olds in the Dáil, mandatory retirement ages for holders of public office, and cognitive testing for public representatives who reach a certain age threshold.

Participants also valued **volunteering** as a form of civic engagement. It was proposed that this should include accessible, well-supported programmes that reduce financial and practical barriers to participation.

As a general comment, rather than proposal, participants felt that a **“floor of decency has to be maintained”** in political and civic life. Notably, while participants emphasised representation, communication, participation, and engagement with politics, they made few references to broader collective efforts, focusing instead on institutional reforms and individual opportunities for engagement.

8.3 Trust/Legitimacy

Civic education

Participants proposed clearer, more accessible civic education on politics, voting, and government processes. They emphasised the need for unbiased information in plain language, better provision in schools, supports through youth groups, and free local workshops to help young people understand how government works in practice, including how policy is developed and why change can be slow.

Local policy-making

Participants called for stronger local decision-making powers and greater trust in local institutions. Suggestions included giving Local Authorities more capacity to deliver community infrastructure, expand shared public spaces, and take a more active role in housing delivery, alongside measures to rebuild confidence in councillors and councils.

Good governance

Participants highlighted the importance of reducing undue influence in politics in order to strengthen public trust. Proposals included tighter restrictions on post-political employment (no consulting, no lobbying, no boards of directors with political influence), greater transparency around political funding – **“need to understand where political money comes from”**, and broader efforts to limit the role of money in political decision-making – taking **“money out of politics”**.

One participant also referred to the need for politicians to understand the position their constituents find themselves in, with a question as to whether earning a minimum wage might aid understanding.

Youth representation

Participants proposed creating **more meaningful opportunities for young adults to engage directly in political processes** and policymaking. Suggestions included dedicated youth forums or parliamentary mechanisms (such as the UK Youth Parliament) for those aged 18 to 23, structured opportunities to contribute to policy discussions, and measures to ensure that access to these opportunities is inclusive.

Some participants also raised quotas or other diversity measures as possible ways to strengthen representation.

Spaces

One participant referred to the need to **build interpersonal trust between people**, not just between people and institutions. Aiding this, participants proposed increased **investment in inclusive community spaces** where people can meet, connect, and participate in local life. Suggestions focused on expanding access to third spaces such as libraries and community centres, including longer opening hours – with libraries open until 10pm, wider geographic availability, and secure multi-annual funding to support welcoming and well-resourced, welcoming environments (e.g. the provision of tea/coffee making facilities).

Tackling hate speech and discrimination

Participants called for stronger action to address hate speech, discrimination, and harmful online content. Proposals included hate speech legislation, greater regulation of social media and digital platforms, scrutiny of how algorithms shape access to information, and stronger accountability for news platforms, political actors, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

8.4 Priority actions

The final exercise of the day was to give participants three (3) stickers and ask them 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 1: Priority Actions on Social Cohesion

<p>The Left Behind</p>	<p>Deliver more affordable, social, and youth housing and strengthen homelessness supports.</p> <p>Invest in community spaces and supports for marginalised groups.</p>
<p>Intergenerational Fairness</p>	<p>Increase youth participation in politics.</p> <p>Increase taxation of wealthy and high-earning individuals.</p>
<p>Trust/Legitimacy</p>	<p>Reduce corporate influence on politics.</p> <p>Education on political process and voting.</p>

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

9. '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.

Figure 8: 'Building' Social Cohesion

Figure 8.1 – The 'Republic of Social Cohesion' is a society where education is lifelong with a breadth of subjects from traditional education curricula, to life skills, finance, and kindness; where people are employed in meaningful jobs that they enjoy and which have safe conditions and a liveable wage; that has ample services such as public transport, free healthcare, free and clean public toilets, clean water, playgrounds and outdoor exercise equipment, swimming and recreation facilities; where a diverse population can come together in green and third spaces with facilities such as tea/coffee and snacks and can chat or learn about politics, intercultural classes, awareness and community; and where government is close to the community.



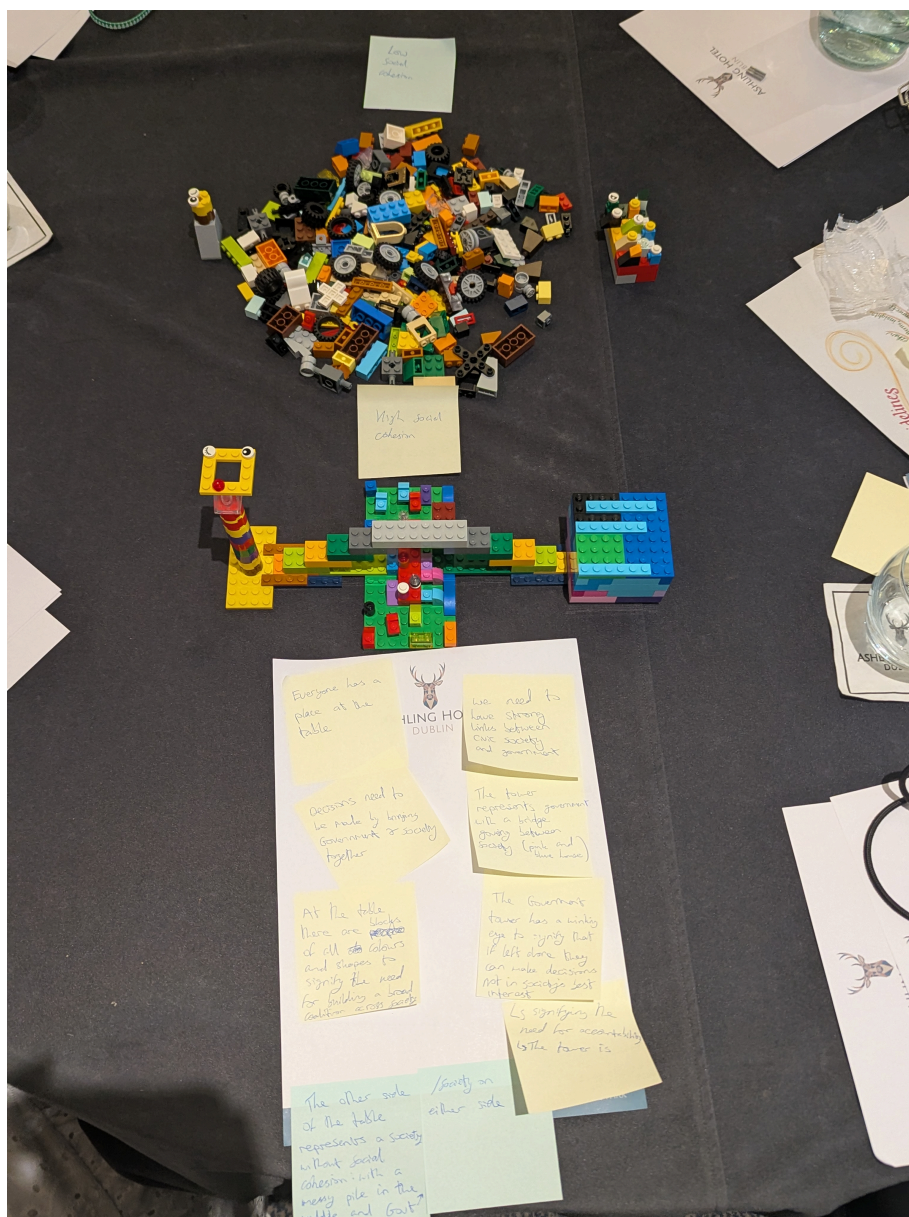
Figure 8.2 – A socially cohesive society is one which values diversity, as represented by the dove made up of different colours and carrying an olive branch. It involves all of society moving forward together with room for everyone. It involves bridging communities and getting to understand each other.



Figure 8.3 – This model shows two sides of society – a highly cohesive society and a society without social cohesion.

A socially cohesive society is one where everyone has a place at the table, with strong links between civil society and government and decisions are made by bringing society and government together. It involves the building of a broad coalition across society to work together. Government is accountable to citizens.

On “the other side of the bridge” where social cohesion is not present, Government and society are on opposite sides of an insurmountable mess.



Comparative analysis

The three models represent different aspects of social cohesion for the participants. **Figure 8.1** presents the most **institutional and material** vision of social cohesion. It emphasises the practical services, infrastructure and conditions that participants felt were needed to build a cohesive society - lifelong education, meaningful and fairly paid work, public services, healthcare, transport, recreation, and accessible shared spaces. Social cohesion here is grounded in the idea that people need the **shared infrastructure**, both physical and social, to flourish. Government is also imagined as being close to communities, both in proximity and understanding.

Figure 8.2 provides a more **symbolic and relational** understanding. Its focus more on **values** - diversity, inclusion, peace, understanding, and the bridging of communities. The dove and olive branch suggest peace and acceptance of diversity, while the emphasis on "room for everyone" and people "moving forward together" frames social cohesion as a shared movement involving mutual recognition. Compared with Figure 8.1, this figure is less concerned with physical structures and more with the **mental modes**, the social and cultural norms, that enable people to live together well.

Figure 8.3 introduces a more explicitly **political and contrasting** perspective. It seeks to represent both what social cohesion looks like, and what its absence looks like. On the cohesive side, the figure stresses participation, accountability, and collaboration between society and government, with "everyone having a place at the table." On the other side of the bridge, social breakdown is depicted as separation, dysfunction, and a mess. This figure therefore highlights the importance of **democratic legitimacy, collective problem-solving, and trust between institutions and society**, making it the most overtly governance-focused of the three models.

Taken together the models represent the various components of the definitions of social cohesion identified by participants at the beginning of the workshop – feelings of safety, and community, supported by community spaces and facilities; diversity and willingness to learn about other cultures and support intersectionality; and participation in decision-making and working together with institutions and governments.

10. Conclusion

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.

Across the discussions, participants consistently linked social cohesion to inclusion, fairness, trust, and the ability to participate meaningfully in society. While the three lenses explored different dimensions of the issue, they repeatedly converged on a common message: social cohesion is weakened when people feel excluded from housing, services, decision-making, community life, or opportunities to shape their futures. In this sense, the themes of the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust/Legitimacy were not separate concerns, but interconnected expressions of how young people experience belonging and exclusion in everyday life, as was evident in the overlapping proposals for change under each of the three themes.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of listening to young people not only as consultation invitees, but as participants with lived experience, practical insight, and clear views on what a more cohesive society would require. Their proposals placed strong emphasis on decent housing, accessible services, inclusive public spaces, democratic participation, and institutional accountability. Taken together, these outputs suggest that participants felt that building social cohesion requires both practical policy measures and sustained attention to the relationships, values, and processes that enable people to feel recognised, respected, and included.

Ultimately, the report points to a shared aspiration among participants for a society in which social cohesion is not assumed, but actively created through fairer systems, stronger communities, and more meaningful participation. These workshop findings provide a valuable contribution to the wider policy conversation and underline the importance of ensuring that young people's voices are heard.



National Economic & Social Council

Parnell Square, Dublin 1, D01 E7C1

+353 1 814 6300 info@nesc.ie

www.nesc.ie