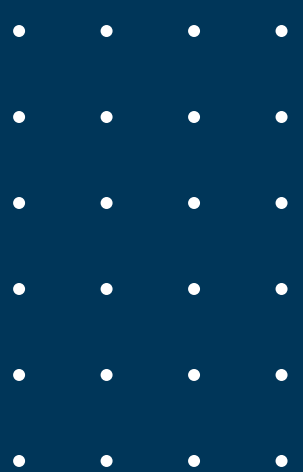




Social Cohesion: Report of the Children's Workshop



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1. Purpose and Scope

This report compares outputs and themes from a participatory workshop with adolescents 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, with particular thanks to Foróige for hosting this workshop and securing relevant consents and assents for participation.

2. Workshop Design

2.1 Participants

Having engaged with Foróige previously in the design of the Young Adult Workshop, we were delighted to accept their offer to host a workshop with under-18s to harness the perspective of children on Social Cohesion, now and into the future. The Workshop was held on Saturday, 18 July 2026 in the Foróige offices in Blanchardstown, Dublin 15. Nine (9) participants attended, all female, aged 14 to 17:

Age	Number
14	3
15	2
16	2
17	2

2.2 Tailored approach

The NESC Secretariat sought the views of teenagers on social cohesion using the three lenses used in other workshops held to with stakeholders in this area¹.

However, as teenagers engage best with experiential tasks, peer-led inquiry, and project-based tasks (Kolb, 1984), the format was tailored to include more of this type of engagement.

¹ See Bennett et al. (2026a) and Bennett et al. (2026b) available at www.nesc.ie.

2.3 Workshop format

The participants were split into three groups, seated three to a table. 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.

Social Cohesion Bingo

The day began with an introduction to the theme of social cohesion where the facilitator explained the concept in broad terms and provided some examples from the academic literature and previous workshops using age-appropriate language. Participants were each given a blank 3x3 grid and asked, individually, to list up to nine components of social cohesion. Once they were finished, they were then asked to 'match' one or more of their answers to those of the other participants. The first to match all of their answers got 'bingo!'. This methodology meant that each participant was thinking about what social cohesion meant to them, before broadening their perspective by comparison with others. The outputs were then harvested by the facilitator in plenary session.

The Left Behind and Building a Cohesive Society

Participants were then asked to think about who is left behind – what people or groups might fit within this category. Each response was put on a post-it note and placed on flipchart paper in the middle of the table. These outputs were harvested in plenary.

Participants then used Lego® Serious Play² to build and explain representations of what a socially cohesive society might look like based on both the 'bingo' exercise and being inclusive of those people and groups identified as left behind. The models could include tangible infrastructure, or intangible concepts such as trust, pride, or belonging. This approach aims to support equal participation, regardless of 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.

Intergenerational Budgeting

Each group was presented with pictures of Anya (15yo), Barry (40yo) and Carmel (75yo), with descriptors of each person and their household. Each group was given the same amount of matchsticks (20) representing the budget of the area in which they live and asked to distribute the budget in the fairest way possible. These outputs were harvested in plenary with each group justifying their priorities on the basis of fairness between generations.

The groups were then asked to think of concepts like 'standard of living' for people of the same ages as Anya, Barry and Carmel 50 years ago and 50 years into the future.

The Trust Ballot

Each participant was given a 'ballot paper' asking if they trust certain institutions (with categories taken from the CSO Trust Survey 2025 and Edelman Trust Barometer 2026) – answers were 0 'Not at all' to 10 'Trust completely'. Participants then discussed the patterns identified, what characteristics were shared by the 'trusted institutions' and what made an institution 'untrustworthy'.

Children's Voices

The final exercise involved providing each participant with a postcard to Government. Each participant was asked to finish the sentences:

- I feel I belong in my community when...
- I trust decision-makers when...
- A fair future for all generations looks like...

This exercise is intended to provide, in their own words, the wishes of children when it comes to social cohesion, their experience of what makes them feel a sense of belonging and safety, and how they see decision-makers and intergenerational fairness.

3. What Builds Social Cohesion?

The group proposed several components of social cohesion that moved from the individual level to the community level, to the more general level.

Individuality and Uniqueness

Participants felt that the ability to be an individual and to demonstrate one's uniqueness was an aspect of social cohesion as it led to being accepted for who you are.

Belonging and Connection

Participants also referred to building social cohesion as depending on a sense of belonging and connection with other people.

Local Amenities

When asked what helps to build these connections, the participants referred to the availability of local amenities, with most referencing the availability of Foróige and the supports they receive there, local shops, Gardaí, community centres and support staff. The importance of local employment was also seen as building a sense of community.

Leadership

Some participants referred to leadership as being important to social cohesion as people follow local leaders and try to be like them.

Freedom of Speech

Participants referred to freedom of speech, particularly for young people to be able to express themselves.

Values

Participants also raised values such as respect, loyalty and trust as being integral to building social cohesion.

Teamwork and Inclusivity

Being able to work together, having a network of family and friends, building inclusivity and creating a sense of comfort among people with similar interests was also raised by participants.

Security and Safety

Participants spoke of the importance of security and providing safe environments, with some referencing a need to eliminate substance abuse from their area to build social cohesion.

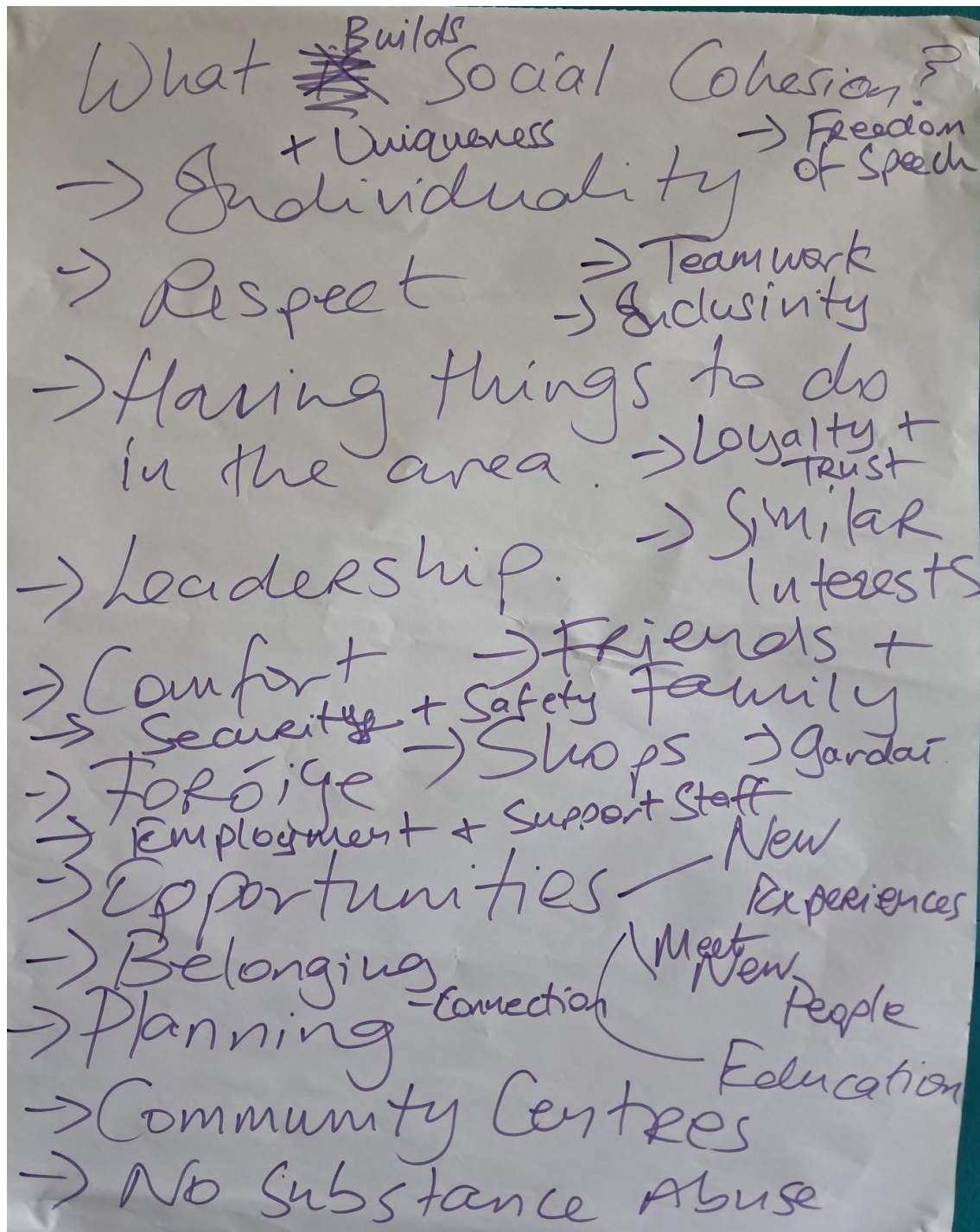
Opportunities

The creation of opportunities in the local area was raised by participants as helping to build social cohesion – opportunities to have new experiences, to meet new people, and educational opportunities.

Planning

Finally, planning was seen as key to building social cohesion by some participants, with the opportunity for all to have a say in their community.

Figure 1: What builds Social Cohesion?



4. The Left Behind

4.1 What is it?

The group identified a large number of groups and individuals who they felt were left behind or marginalised. These included people with disabilities; Travellers; people with mental health problems; and members of the LGBTQ+ community; older generations; immigrants; women; people with learning difficulties; youth (under 18s); different races; people in poverty or on the poverty line; unemployed people; and people who are depressed.

While this report does not seek to compare the outputs from this group with those of the other stakeholder workshops, participants identified some quite different left behind groups, some of which came from their direct personal observations or experiences:

People with no friends; cat ladies (12 cats); emo people and separately 'emo people/weirdos'; kids younger than ten; people who dress differently; weight differences; people who are ugly or not good looking; homosexuals; different races; height differences (dwarfism); physical differences; people with trust issues; people with communications issues; people with transport issues; people who get bullied a lot.

There was also a notable concentration on families being left behind which, coupled with the reference to "families and friends" as components of social cohesion, indicates the centrality and importance of the family unit to this group. References to families as being left behind include: families on low incomes; 'single mothers' / single moms or dads; people with family issues; people in foster care; mixed race families; and homeless people and families.

Overall, participants understood being "left behind" as those on the margins of society, who were socially excluded or seen as different.

4.2 Building a cohesive society

Having spent time discussing how social cohesion might be defined, and what helped to build social cohesion, participants in the workshops were asked to 'build' a cohesive society that included those on the margins and the components identified 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 2: 'Building' Social Cohesion

Figure 2.1 – A cohesive society includes sustainable, accessible transport; spaces to play and come together, accessible to the whole community; the ability to bridge between those who are left behind and those who are established in the community; and supports for those who are socially isolated and lonely.



Figure 2.2 – A socially cohesive society is one which has strong foundations and effective leadership; where trust is built between people and groups; where there are safe spaces for all people and active engagement to build inclusivity; where people feel secure, loved and respected; where there is enough affordable housing, public transport, and green spaces for people to come together.

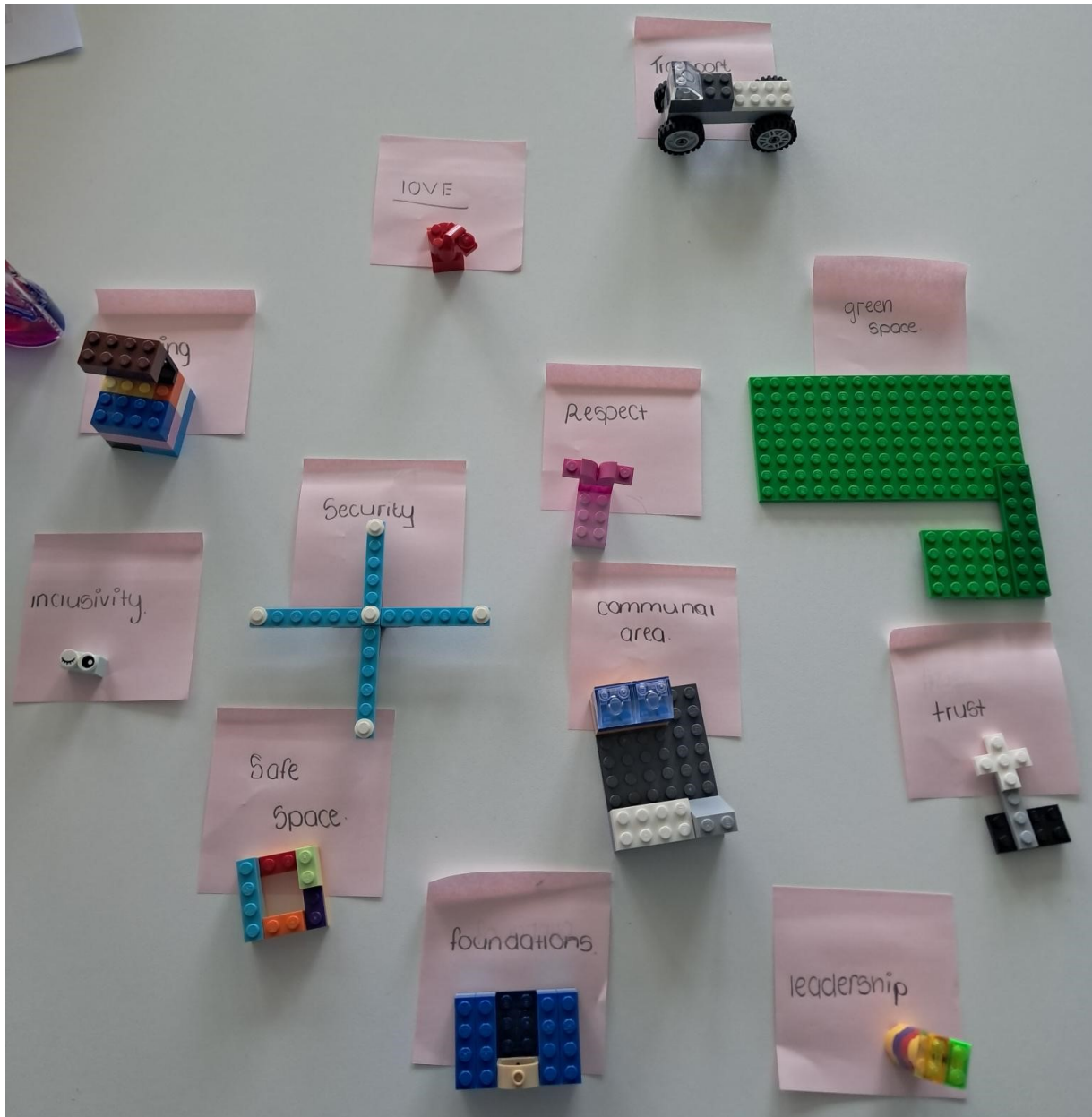


Figure 2.3 – A socially cohesive society is one that has sufficient housing, strong community ties and a sense of unity; that grows with its inhabitants; that has amenities such as healthcare for its people; that is stable and supportive; and where people come together to build community, foster integration, and welcome diversity.



Comparative analysis

Across the three models, participants shared a broadly similar understanding of a socially cohesive society: one that is inclusive, safe, connected, and supported by accessible services and infrastructure. All three models placed emphasis on the importance of community spaces, housing, safety, and opportunities for people to come together. They also reflected a strong concern with ensuring that those who are isolated, marginalised, or 'left behind' are actively included rather than treated as separate from the wider community.

Figure 2.1 focused strongly on connection and accessibility. Its emphasis on sustainable and accessible transport, play spaces, bridges between marginalised and established groups, and supports for socially isolated people suggests a practical understanding of cohesion as something built through physical access, shared space and deliberate inclusion. This model highlighted the barriers that prevent people from participating in community life and proposed mechanisms to overcome them.

Figure 2.2 placed greater emphasis on foundations, leadership, trust, safety and emotional security. While it also included practical needs such as housing, public transport and green spaces, it was distinct in including the intangible facets of a cohesive society: people feeling secure, loved, respected and included. This model suggests that social cohesion depends not only on infrastructure but also on relationships, norms and leadership that actively build trust between people and groups.

Figure 2.3 highlighted stability, unity, growth and diversity. Its focus on housing, healthcare, strong community ties, integration, and welcoming diversity presents cohesion as something sustained over time as communities change and develop. Compared with the other two models, it places particular emphasis on the concept of a community that grows with its inhabitants and adapts to their needs, while maintaining unity and support.

Taken together, the three models show that participants understood social cohesion as a combination of material conditions, such as housing, transport, healthcare and green spaces; relational conditions, such as trust, respect, family and community ties; and inclusive practices, such as actively bridging differences and supporting those who are isolated. The models therefore suggest that, for this group, a cohesive society is both structurally supported and emotionally meaningful: it provides the places, services and opportunities people need, while also fostering belonging, safety, recognition and mutual support.

5. Intergenerational Fairness

This portion of the workshop asked participants to imagine themselves as budget-holders for the town in which Anya, Barry, and Carmel (Box 1) were representative of the population, and to divide the budget based on the concept of fairness between the generations.

Box 1: Intergenerational Budgeting Scenarios

Anya is 15. She lives with her mam in a house in Ongar. She's in Transition Year in school and is hoping to go to college when she finishes. She likes running but doesn't like running in the park at night in the Winter, so doesn't train as often as she likes.

Barry is 40. He lives with his wife and three children (ages 13, 8 and 1) in a rented house in Tyrrelstown. He works in Accenture earning good money, but childcare is expensive and he wants to save for his own house.

Carmel is 75. She lives on her own in a house that is now too big for her since her family moved out. Her only income is the State Pension of €299.30 per week. She thinks the cost of electricity has gone very expensive, and she finds herself cutting back in the supermarket. She has a medical card, so a lot of her medical bills are free. She used to love going out, but she had a fall recently and now she's nervous.

All agreed that Barry was most in need of help as he has greater needs due to providing for his children. He is also renting and needs to buy a home as "renting is expensive over time". The participants also allocated more funding to Barry's generation because they wanted him and his family to have a comfortable standard of living judged by today's standards.

There were different views on whether Anya or Carmel was next most in need of help. Those who favoured giving Anya more cited the cost of her planned education including the costs associated with housing and transport. Some expressed concern that she wasn't safe. There was also the view that Carmel was less in need because she had lived her life.

Those who favoured giving Carmel more argued that Anya being so young didn't really need the money as she was living at home and she had time to save some money herself. They argued Carmel might need to move to a smaller house, and this will cost money. She might also need someone to take care of her and the cost of care would come out of the budget that was being allocated.

There was general discussion on money and the cost and standard of living 50 years ago. Those who lived in previous generations had a lower cost of living but participants acknowledged that there weren't as many occupations or opportunities.

When prompted, participants considered the needs of future generations (50 years ahead). They felt that the standard of living is expected to increase again, requiring more money to fund it. They also felt that this will require more electricity use, and greater need for homes, healthcare, jobs, and education.

Asked directly what was most important, they said health while one said house insurance.

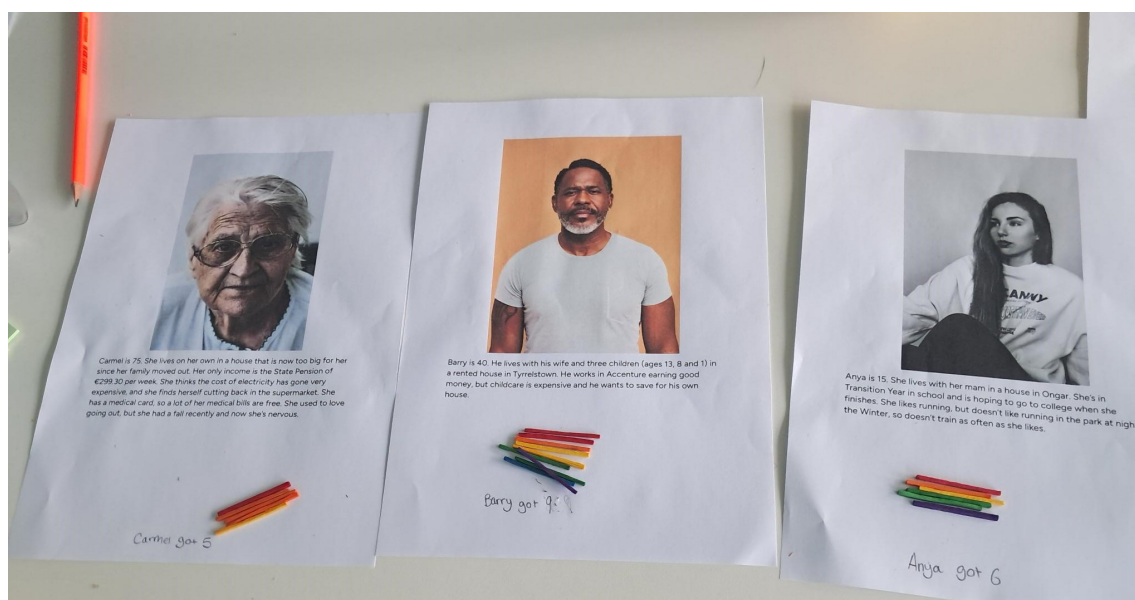
Conclusion

Overall, housing affordability and security were viewed by participants as particular priorities for each of the generations presented, along with health, education, and a reasonable standard of living. Participants were concerned with support for families and children, including recognition of childcare and household costs, and safety for young people, including safe access to local amenities.

When it came to the future, participants discussed the importance of future-proofing infrastructure and services, especially homes, healthcare, jobs, education and energy demand.

The balancing of resources between generations led to discussions of which of the current generations would need to be provided for – those of mid-age with care responsibilities, followed by younger people, and older generations last on the basis of their needs having been met throughout the course of their lives so far.

Figure 3: Example of intergenerational budgeting exercise



6. Trust/Legitimacy

The next exercise was **to vote on trust in groups and institutions**. The categories were taken from the CSO Trust Survey 2025 and the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026. Responses are categorised using the CSO categorisations. The result of the vote is set out in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Results of trust vote

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Most People	2	4	5	5	7	4	3	5	5
My family, neighbours and friends	5	8	8	6	10	6	8	7	10
Political parties	0	0	0	0	6	5	4	2	6
The Local Council	1	2	7	7	6	5	2	4	6
The National Government	0	0	9	9	8	2	7	2	7
The Gardaí	2	5	8	10	10	4	9	4	8
International Organisations	0	8	8	8	7	4	5	5	8
The News Media (newspapers, TV news or radio)	1	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	9
Social Media	3	0	2	3	2	5	0	3.5	7

Scale runs from 0 (Not at all) to 10 (Completely). Responses grouped as Don't trust (0-4), Neutral (5), or Trust (6-10)

The most trusted group or institution was 'my family, neighbours and friends', with only one participant scoring this group 'neutral' (albeit the highest score awarded by that participant). 'The National Government', 'The Gardaí', and 'International Organisations' came joint second in terms of trust – with 5 out of 9 participants scoring them within the trusted range. The lowest trust scores were awarded to 'Political parties', 'The News Media' and 'Social Media'.

In discussion, participants said that trust reflects experience and positive outcomes (more positive than negative). The high trust for family and friends reflects personal connections, family love and support. The Gardaí were viewed by participants as an institution that "protects you". One participant said that their score for trust in international organisations reflected that they saw these doing good work internationally in comparison to domestic organisations that may be less effective and 'possibly corrupt'. Other characteristics of trusted groups or organisations identified by participants was the experience of 'seeing them do what they say they will do' – this demonstrated trustworthiness.

Trust in social media scored the lowest among participants. The words the participants used to describe social media were 'fake, everyone's opinion, propaganda, not fact checked'. When asked what would make them trust it, most participants said 'Nothing'. However, when asked if they used social media, all participants referred to using it every day, with some stating 'all day every day'. Teasing this out a little, the reasons for use were entertainment, being an easier way to contact friends, and it giving an opportunity to interact with people you might not know personally but who have similar interests or world views.

7. Children's Voices

The final exercise of the day was to give participants postcards and inviting them to write to Government, with each participant asked to finish the sentences (Figure 5):

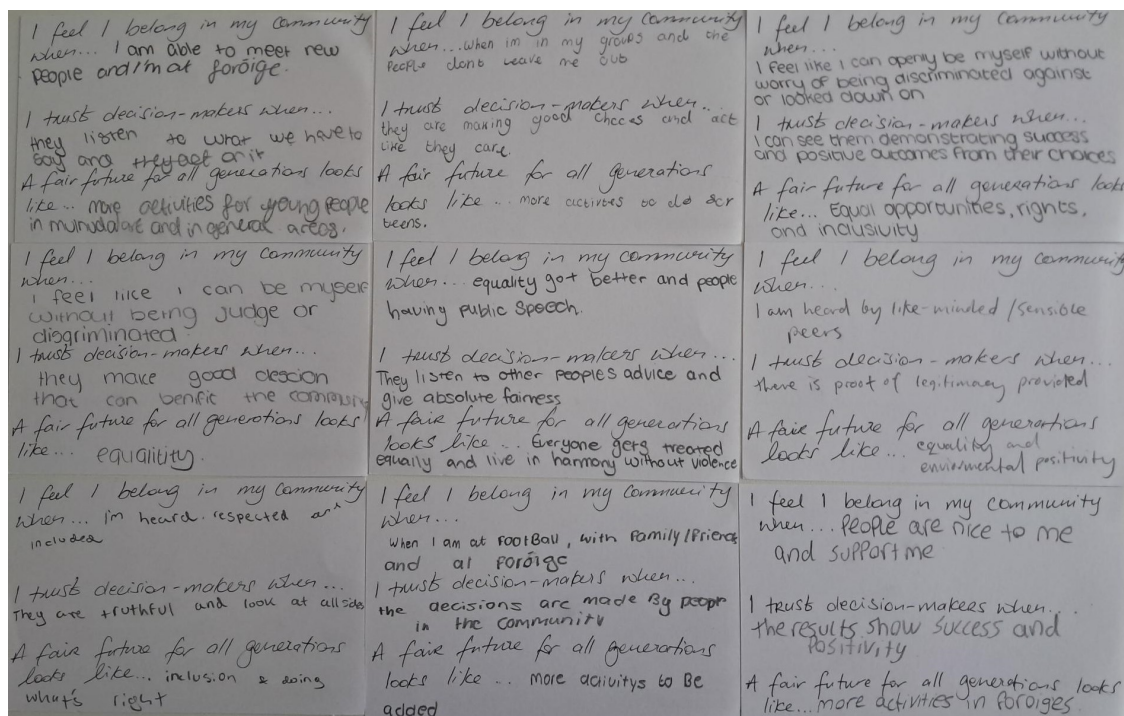
- I feel I belong in my community when...
- I trust decision-makers when...
- A fair future for all generations looks like...

Feelings of belonging centred around being included in social groups; being able to 'be myself' without discrimination; being supported, heard and respected.

Trusting decision-makers was dependent largely on demonstrated outcomes, with participants focusing on feeling listened to; having decision-makers make 'good choices' that have positive outcomes; and engaging with the community.

Looking to the future for all generations, participants focused on equality and inclusion for all, with a particular emphasis on activities for young people.

Figure 5: Postcards to Government



8. Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the workshops were not designed to be statistically representative of all children's views on social cohesion, however it is notable that there is significant cross-over between the outputs from this Workshop and previous stakeholder Workshops. Participants consistently described social cohesion as something built through relationships, local supports, safe and inclusive spaces, affordable and accessible services, and decision-making that is seen to listen, respond and deliver.

Participants described social cohesion in both relational and material terms, identifying housing, transport, healthcare, education, community spaces, local employment and safety as practical foundations of cohesion. At the same time, they emphasised respect, trust, family and friendship, freedom to be oneself, inclusion, leadership and opportunities to participate. This suggests that delivery for social cohesion cannot be confined to either service delivery or community-building alone. It requires both reliable systems that meet people's needs, and everyday opportunities for people to connect, feel recognised and participate in shaping their communities.

Participants understood those who are 'left behind' as people and groups experiencing exclusion, difference, isolation, poverty, family difficulty, discrimination, disability, mental health challenges, homelessness, insecure housing or limited access to transport and support. Their emphasis on families, children in care, people with no friends, people who are bullied, and people who feel different points to the importance of recognising forms of exclusion that may be social and emotional as well as economic or institutional.

Intergenerational fairness was understood by participants in practical terms: the fair allocation of resources should respond to need across the life course (acknowledging that the format of the workshop exercise may have been influential to this outcome). Housing affordability and security emerged as a major concern, particularly for families with children and for future generations. Participants also highlighted childcare and household costs, education and transport costs for young people, healthcare and care needs for older people, and the need to prepare for future demand for homes, jobs, energy, education and health services.

Trust was closely linked to experience, delivery and visible outcomes. Participants trusted those closest to them most, especially family, neighbours and friends. Trust in institutions depended on whether organisations were seen to protect people, act with integrity (no corruption), do what they said they would do, and produce positive outcomes. Low trust in social media, despite extensive daily use, also highlights the fact that young people are navigating an information environment they see as useful and entertaining, but unreliable.

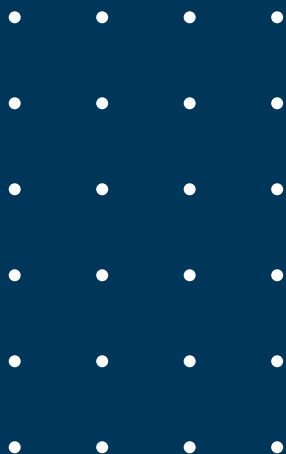
The 'postcards to Government' reinforced these findings. Participants said they feel they belong when they are included, supported, heard, respected and able to be themselves without discrimination. They trust decision-makers when they are listened to, when good choices lead to positive outcomes, and when decision-makers engage with communities. Their vision of a fair future centred on equality, inclusion and activities for young people.

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