

# Our Future

*Let's plan  
for it...*



Why the Irish Government must establish a



## **CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON IRISH UNITY**

Tionól na Saoránach ar Aontú na hÉireann



**#Time4Unity**  
**Am d'Aontacht**



# Introduction

Next year marks the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, an agreement that provides for referenda on Irish Unity, which we believe will happen this decade.

This is an important time in the shaping of Ireland's future. It is an exciting and positive time, full of potential. Irish Unity is about opportunity. The social and economic opportunities are immense.

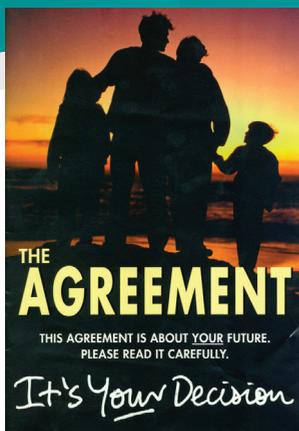
The people of Ireland are ready.

But we must prepare. The Irish government needs to take the lead in planning and managing this change. They need to engage with the British government and the international community about the future and they need to let the people have their say in what a United Ireland will look like.

The conversation on our constitutional future is underway but just as happened in other referenda we now need a formal space to debate, discuss and mould what that united Ireland will look like.

Now is the time for the Irish Government to establish Citizens' Assembly on Irish unity. This will provide a democratic and inclusive forum for the people of the island of Ireland to contribute their views, hopes and aspirations for the future.

This is the critical next step as we move towards the creation of a united and new Ireland.





## What is a Citizens' Assembly?

A Citizens' Assembly is an example of participation by citizens in the decision making process.

Typically, citizens are selected to participate from a broad cross section of the population.

These citizens are asked to consider an issue or a range of issues and they may receive presentations from experts to help them form opinions and make recommendations.

A submissions process enables those not directly involved in the Citizens' Assembly to make contributions.

The findings of the Citizens' Assembly are presented to the Houses of the Oireachtas in a report with recommendations. The government is obliged to respond to the recommendations.

## Have there been other Citizens' Assemblies?

Yes. In 2012 the Irish government established the Constitutional Convention. It was comprised of 66 citizens and 33 politicians. The political representatives included members of the Dáil, Seanad and the Stormont Assembly.

The Constitutional Convention discussed the Presidential term of office, lowering the voting age to 16 and enabling the Irish diaspora to vote in Presidential elections.

A Citizens' Assembly was held from 2016 to 2018. Its 99 members and chairperson discussed five issues; abortion reform, the ageing population, parliamentary reform, managing referenda and climate change.

In 2019 the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality was convened, it also comprised of 99 members and a chairperson.

In the north a Citizens' Assembly consisting of 80 members was convened in 2018 to consider the topic of adult social care.





## 2022 Citizens' Assemblies

Two Citizens' Assemblies were launched in 2022. They are considering biodiversity loss and a directly elected Mayor for Dublin.

The Irish government has said that it will establish Citizens' Assemblies on the future of education and on drug policy, in the future.

### Why a Citizens' Assembly?

The reunification of Ireland will be the biggest and most fundamental change for our country since partition was imposed over 100 years ago.

When the referendums on Irish unity are held people should have maximum information on what they are voting for. This was absent in the Brexit referendum and it has resulted in years of chaos which must be avoided.

The issue of Irish unity is bigger than any one political party or organisation and it will affect every person who calls this island home. It is appropriate that citizens are given the ability to inform the discussion.

The recent experiences of Citizens' Assemblies are very positive. They provide a democratic space for people from various backgrounds to come together, receive expert presentations, discuss and make recommendations on the issues involved.

*"I would have had a very uninformed opinion previously and a lot of assumptions. I think my opinions are much more informed and I have a better understanding of what leads to change and reform."* - Anonymous 2021 Gender Equality Citizens' Assembly participant

*"The Assembly has been a real eye opener on issues that I knew little about... listening to others helped educate me a bit better..."* - Anonymous 2021 Gender Equality Citizens' Assembly participant

### Who will be involved?

The Citizens' Assembly should be composed of a representative mix of citizens and be supplemented by a number of elected representatives from across the entire island.

Citizen members would be selected using census information and political representatives would be chosen proportionate to their political strength.

It would be gender and equality proofed and there would also be representation from the diaspora.



## Working together

Many unionists are deeply committed to the union. Political unionists in particular may feel that they should not engage in any discussions or planning for the future.

Yet all the main unionist parties have now committed themselves to the Good Friday Agreement and the vast majority of unionists want this agreement to work for everyone.

A number of factors, including the Brexit debacle, the out working of the Protocol, the behaviour of the British government and the huge societal changes that have taken place in the South have moved some unionists, especially those who are not politically committed to the main unionist parties, to consider how the future might be shaped.

The Citizens' Assembly should be a space which facilitates participation by all –those who advocate for Irish unity, those who support retention of the union and those who have not yet come to a fixed position.

Everyone is entitled to give their views to the Citizens' Assembly.

## Our diverse future

Ireland is a diverse and multicultural place. People from all over the world now live here. These people, who call Ireland home, come from a variety of backgrounds with a breadth of experiences and differing points of view on many issues. They have made a huge contribution to our society.

This diversity in our communities has also brought fresh thinking and energy to discussions on the future.

The Citizens' Assembly would provide a welcoming space for people from every culture, background and identity to have their say and help chart our shared future.

## How will it function?

The Citizens' Assembly would be formed by a resolution of the Oireachtas. This would set out its terms of reference and indicate the timeframe by which a report and recommendations should be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The resolution would also outline the procedure the government would follow to respond to the Citizens' Assembly's report and recommendations.



It would be funded, resourced and supported by the Irish government. In line with previous Citizens' Assemblies it would have its own secretariat which, along with the chairperson, would manage the schedule of meetings and the agenda for those meetings.

A submissions process would be developed to enable as wide a consultation as possible with individuals, groups and organisations who are not members of the Citizens' Assembly.

Expert witnesses could be called to make presentations to the Citizens' Assembly and the secretariat could commission any research that may be necessary to enable it to do its work.

Previous Citizens' Assemblies have held weekend meetings and used a voting system to determine what recommendations would be made to the Oireachtas.

Those held in recent years have held online sessions to enable the work of the Citizens' Assembly to continue through the Covid 19 pandemic.

## What topics will the Citizens' Assembly consider?

This Citizens' Assembly should centre its deliberations around the referendums on Irish unity and the fundamentals of the new, united Ireland.

It could consider:

- The electoral franchise
- The integration of public services - healthcare, education and social protection
- How to maximise the potential of the all island economy – business, infrastructure, agriculture, skills/research, renewable energy
- Matters of culture, rights and identity in a new Ireland
- Governance in the new Ireland, the role of the Good Friday Agreement and its institutions, the Constitution

There are many other aspects to be considered ahead of a unity referendum. It is the work of the Irish government to ensure that all of the requisite preparation has taken place before a vote, including planning within the public service and statutory agencies.





## **What happens after the Citizens' Assembly?**

At the conclusion of the Citizens' Assembly a report and recommendations will be submitted.

It is normal that a Joint Oireachtas Committee would be established to deal with the conclusions of the Citizens Assembly and assist government with implementing its recommendations.

Given the nature of the work being proposed to be undertaken by the Citizens Assembly a Special Oireachtas Committee should be instead established in order to allow for the political representatives of those citizens in the north to contribute to this important stage in the process.

Negotiations with the British government to set a date for the Referendum on Irish Unity should be ongoing throughout the planning process.

Discussion and negotiations with the British Government in advance of the referendums will be supplemented by discussion with the European Union, United States and other international actors.

Further preparation by government will be required. A coherent and all-encompassing plan must be developed addressing key issues such as; the referendum campaign, transitional arrangements, integration of public services and future constitutional arrangements post-unity.

A Sinn Féin led government will establish a Citizens' Assembly and publish a White Paper outlining the route map to Irish unity.



## What can I do to support the Citizens' Assembly campaign?

- Inform yourself on the Unity debate. Many articles, podcasts and other material can be found at [www.sinnfein.ie/irish-unity](http://www.sinnfein.ie/irish-unity)
- Produce a leaflet for local distribution
- Contact your local TD, MP, MLA and Councillor to encourage them to support the campaign
- Write to the leaders of the political parties asking them to support the proposition
- Write to the Irish government; to An Taoiseach and Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs; to other government Ministers
- Share material from the Citizens' Assembly campaign on social media
- Put up posters in your area
- Encourage community groups, trade unions, sports organisations, women's groups and others to hold public discussions on Irish Unity and the Citizens' Assembly





# Conclusion

The Irish Government should convene a Citizens' Assembly on Irish Unity as soon as possible. This would represent one very important part of the planning needed before referendums on Irish unity are held.

By convening a Citizens' Assembly on Irish unity the Dublin government would demonstrate its commitment to engaging with citizens in developing the best future for the people of Ireland.

This would not just be a better future for those who support unity it would be a better future for all, irrespective of political persuasion, religion, identity or background.

The new Ireland which would come in the wake of the successful referendum on Irish unity must have respect, inclusivity and citizens' rights at its core. The expression of all of the cultures making up our nation will be supported and a generous and open society will flourish.

The first step in this process is to let the voices of our citizens' be heard in an all-Ireland Citizens' Assembly.

There is an onus and obligation on the Irish government to establish this and to begin the process of planning for the future.

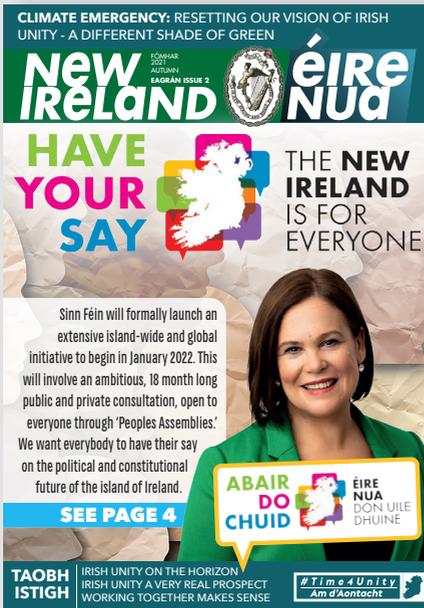
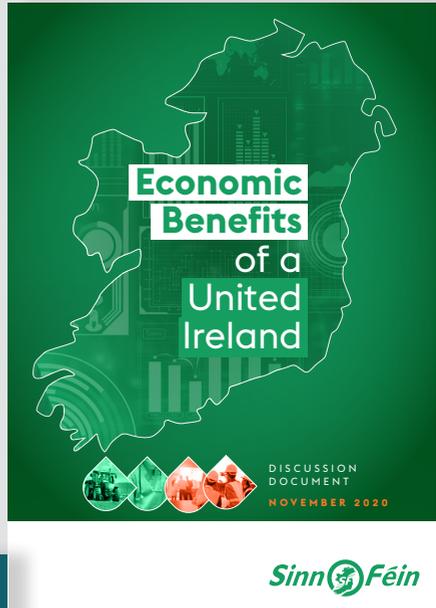




## Other Uniting Ireland discussion documents

Sinn Féin has produced the following discussion documents in its 'Uniting Ireland' series. These documents, and more, can be found at [www.sinnfein.ie/irish-unity](http://www.sinnfein.ie/irish-unity)

- ▶▶ The Economic Benefits of a United Ireland
- ▶▶ Inclusion and Reconciliation in the New Ireland
- ▶▶ Éire Nua – our quarterly magazine





## Appendix

### The Good Friday Agreement

#### CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

1. The participants endorse the commitment made by the British and Irish Governments that, in a new British-Irish Agreement replacing the AngloIrish Agreement, they will:
  - (i) recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland;
  - (ii) recognise that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland;
  - (iii) acknowledge that while a substantial section of the people in Northern Ireland share the legitimate wish of a majority of the people of the island of Ireland for a united Ireland, the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people;
  - (iv) affirm that if, in the future, the people of the island of Ireland exercise their right of self-determination on the basis set out in sections (i) and (ii) above to bring about a united Ireland, it will be a binding obligation on both Governments to introduce and support in their respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish;
  - (v) affirm that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities;
  - (vi) recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland.



# CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON IRISH UNITY

PLANNING  
FOR THE  
FUTURE

Tionól na Saoránach ar Aontú na hÉireann



#Time4Unity  
Am d'Aontacht