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# Public Attitudes to Institutional Reform in Northern Ireland

Evidence from a  
Deliberative Forum

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### About this report

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Appendices to this report will be made available at: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/research-themes/transforming-conflict/>

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# Executive summary

The Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool, in cooperation with Queen's University Belfast, commissioned Ipsos to conduct a programme of deliberative research exploring citizens' views on reforming the system of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Forty-six citizens, broadly representative of the Northern Ireland population, convened on Saturday 5th March 2022 to participate in a three-hour deliberative forum, involving expert presentations and group discussion.

The deliberative forum explored:

**1.**

What citizens in Northern Ireland expect from their devolved government.

**2.**

Views on the current model of power-sharing, commonly known as 'mandatory coalition'.

**3.**

Views on possible alternatives to the current model.

**4.**

Views on how institutional reform, if desirable, should come about.

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# 1.

## What people want from devolved government

Participants equate 'good' devolved government with stability, delivery in terms of public policy commitments, inclusivity, and with an Executive which governs cohesively and with common purpose. With the exception of inclusivity in the Executive, there was consensus across the discussion groups that the current model of devolved government has disappointed in these areas.

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**In terms of the institutions, there was strong support for the principle of power-sharing. However, aspects of the current institutional framework were widely deemed problematic, such as the ability of one political party to collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive.**

# 2.

## Views on the current system

Asked about the advantages of the current model of government, participants frequently cited two significant and interrelated benefits: that it has presided over a sustained period of relative peace in Northern Ireland, and that it is representative and inclusive of the region's different political traditions. Beyond it sustaining relative peace and ensuring inclusivity, participants generally struggled to cite any further benefits of the current model.

Participants found it easier to cite the weaknesses of the current model of government. Broadly speaking, these can be summarised into three main frustrations: Executive instability and collapse, a lack of cohesion and cooperation within the Executive, and a perceived dominance of communal identities and associated disputes. These problems were attributed to both institutional and behavioural factors.

In terms of the institutions, there was strong support for the principle of power-sharing. However, aspects of the current institutional framework were widely deemed problematic, such as the ability of one political party to collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive. There was also some ambivalence towards the idea of community designation in the Assembly. Some participants argued that the precedence afforded to securing agreement between nationalists and unionists undervalues the views of those who do not identify as nationalist or unionist.

On the behavioural side, there was much criticism of parties' focus on 'orange and green' issues at the expense of more pressing policy concerns, as well as the tendency for some to walk away from the institutions when it suited their political purposes.

# 3.

## Views on possible alternatives to the current system

Participants were presented with two basic alternative models: simple voluntary coalition and qualified voluntary coalition (both of which are explained further in Section 3). An important caveat to considering views on alternatives to the current system of government is that the subject of institutional reform was new and unfamiliar to most participants. The level of interest shown in alternatives to the current system would, however, suggest the time is ripe for a more extensive and informed public conversation about institutional reform.

The prospect of Northern Ireland adopting a *simple voluntary coalition* model raised concerns. Whilst some participants recognised the possible benefits of this model, such as more cohesive coalitions and a more substantial opposition within the Assembly, the potential for an Executive forming in which only one political community was represented was deemed potentially destabilising — at least for the time being. Indeed, some participants worried that the formation of an exclusively unionist Executive or an exclusively nationalist Executive could trigger unrest in Northern Ireland. These concerns were shared by participants from all backgrounds (nationalist, unionist, and ‘other’).

Participants tended to be more open to the concept of *qualified voluntary coalition* (QVC). QVC would provide parties with some scope to negotiate as to who forms the Executive after an election, but the model would prohibit the formation of a government in which only one political community was represented. The cross-community safeguard of QVC meant that participants felt more comfortable in exploring what benefits this model of government might offer. These included a more cohesive Executive (given that parties would need to strike a coalition agreement before taking office) and enhanced scrutiny of government, facilitated by the emergence of a more substantial opposition in the Assembly.

At the same time, it was acknowledged that a QVC model of government would have drawbacks. Participants raised the potential for lengthy post-election negotiations, particularly given the track record of Northern Ireland’s political parties vis-à-vis protracted negotiations. Some also noted that a QVC which excluded one of Northern Ireland’s major political parties could be regarded as illegitimate by sections of the public. Others noted the difficulty in establishing workable and acceptable criteria as to what exactly would constitute ‘cross-community’ government in a QVC scenario.

There was clear consensus that changes of some sort are necessary to improve devolved government. Upon conclusion of the deliberative forum, a majority of participants (70%) — including a majority of unionist, nationalist and other participants — agreed that the Good Friday Agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland, but that it needs ‘to undergo some changes to work better’.

However, there was no consensus for replacing the current system outright. For example, identical levels of support were expressed for QVC and for maintaining mandatory coalition in the post-event survey, thus a clear favourite in terms of a preferred model of government did not emerge after participants had deliberated over each model’s strengths and weaknesses. Some participants took the view that more information is required — for example, on how alternatives might work in practice, on what other options for reform exist, and about how power-sharing governments work elsewhere — to fully consider this issue.

Attachment to the status quo, despite its weaknesses, was explained by some participants in terms of ‘fear of the unknown’. Even those with some attachment to mandatory coalition were supportive of reforming it, for example by removing the veto which enables one party to collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive.

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# 4.

## How any reform should come about

Participants were strongly of the view that the public should be widely consulted on whether Northern Ireland should retain, reform, or replace its current system of power-sharing. In this regard, there was strong support for the idea of holding a referendum on the matter. Some participants acknowledged that there could be practical difficulties with a referendum and that voters would need accessible, trustworthy information in advance. Citizens' assemblies, for example, were recognised as a potential vehicle for the public to both learn about and have a voice in any institutional reform process.

It was also recognised as important that a majority of unionist, nationalist, and 'other' MLAs supported any substantial reforms to the institutions. Participants acknowledged a role for the British and Irish governments in any reform process, but there was a general view that the two governments should only facilitate rather than impose any reform(s).

What emerges most clearly from the deliberative forum is that citizens require further information on the subject of institutional reform and, indeed, there is broad appetite for a debate on potential reform. Crucially, the public would feel both aggrieved and cynical about substantial changes to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement institutions were they to occur without extensive and inclusive public consultation.

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**The public would feel both aggrieved and cynical about substantial changes to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement institutions were they to occur without extensive and inclusive public consultation.**

# Introduction

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement instituted a power-sharing system of devolved government for Northern Ireland in 1998. The model of power-sharing used in Northern Ireland, commonly described as ‘mandatory coalition’, takes a maximally inclusive approach to government formation. Most positions in the cabinet (known as ‘the Executive’) are divided amongst the region’s political parties in proportion to the number of seats they have in the legislature (‘the Assembly’), using the d’Hondt method of sequential portfolio allocation. Hence, the system is ‘mandatory’ in the sense that Executive seats correspond to parties’ electoral mandates.<sup>1</sup> The Executive is jointly led by, and can only meet with the approval of, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Representative of different political communities, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are co-equal in power and can only govern in partnership. Additional mechanisms, such as a minority veto, exist in the Assembly to protect each community’s vital interests and to ensure important matters are decided on a cross-community basis.

Although the political violence associated with the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ significantly declined after 1998, the region’s experience of devolution since then has been characterised by instability, with extended periods during which the Assembly and Executive have been unable to function. Indeed, the power-sharing Assembly has only twice served a full term without some form of institutional collapse (from 2007 to 2011 and then from 2011 to 2016). Following a three-year hiatus in devolved government from 2017 to 2020, precipitated by the resignation of Northern Ireland’s deputy First Minister, an institutional reform package was included in the agreement reached in January 2020 to resurrect the devolved institutions.<sup>2</sup> On 11th January 2020, a five-party Executive took office amidst hopes of more stable devolved government.

Hopes of stable government, however, proved short-lived. The collapse of the Executive Office in February 2022, this time triggered by the resignation of the First Minister, and the lack of devolved government since the Assembly election in May, have reignited debate about whether the devolved institutions are fit for purpose. Some political parties in Northern Ireland have called for a fundamental rethink of the devolved power-sharing model, and it has been suggested that it may be time to replace so-called ‘mandatory coalition’ with an alternative model of government. This view, however, is not universally shared.

Broadly speaking, there are two potential alternatives to the current model of devolved government in Northern Ireland:

- Simple voluntary coalition; and,
- Qualified voluntary coalition.

With simple voluntary coalition, seats in the Northern Ireland Executive would not automatically be divided between the political parties using the d’Hondt formula, as happens with the current system. Instead, after an election, the decision as to which parties form the Executive would rest with the political parties themselves. As is the case in other coalition settings, for example in the Republic of Ireland, parties would participate in post-election negotiations to secure a coalition agreement. Parties signing up to the coalition agreement would form the Executive, and those parties not signing up to the coalition agreement would form the opposition. Although parties may wish to ensure cross-community representation in the Executive, a simple voluntary coalition model would not enforce this. The model is ‘simple’ in that the Executive would not need to meet any special criteria in order to take office. In theory, any arrangement of parties would be able to govern Northern Ireland. Seeing as parties would have complete freedom to decide who forms the government, potential would exist for an Executive to form in which only one political community is represented, for example an exclusively unionist Executive or an exclusively nationalist Executive.

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<sup>1</sup> Parties eligible to join the Executive under the d’Hondt formula are not forced to take up their seats.

<sup>2</sup> S. Haughey (2020) ‘Back to Stormont: The New Decade, New Approach Agreement and What it Means for Northern Ireland’, *The Political Quarterly*, 91: 138–139.



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Qualified voluntary coalition (QVC) is similar to simple voluntary coalition in that the composition of the Executive would be decided through a process of inter-party negotiations after an election, rather than through the automatic process of d'Hondt used in mandatory coalition. However, unlike simple voluntary coalition, QVC would not give parties complete freedom to decide on the composition of an Executive. Instead, only an Executive which could demonstrate some form of cross-community support would qualify for office in a QVC scenario.<sup>3</sup> It would not be possible, for example, to form an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive within a QVC system. This could be achieved by a quota system in the Executive, stipulating a certain number of ministers to be drawn from each community, or through a more flexible arrangement. QVC would therefore permit parties a degree of choice in terms of who forms the Executive but would ensure some degree of power-sharing continuity within the Executive. Parties signing up to a QVC agreement would sit in government and those parties not signing up to the QVC agreement would form the opposition.

All three models of government — mandatory coalition, simple voluntary coalition, and QVC —inevitably possess strengths as well as weaknesses. Whilst several political parties have expressed a view on whether Northern Ireland should consider a new model of devolved government, little is known about what citizens in the region think about this and related issues. This report represents an important first step in engaging citizens on the issue of institutional reform in Northern Ireland.

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**The Executive is jointly led by, and can only meet with the approval of, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Representative of different political communities, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are co-equal in power and can only govern in partnership.**

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of 'cross-community' representation and/or 'cross-community' support in the context of QVC was left open to participants' interpretation. The traditional understanding of cross-community support in Northern Ireland conceptualises it primarily in terms of unionist and nationalist support, however the prospect of institutional reform provides an opportunity to reconsider this. In light of the growing number of citizens in Northern Ireland who identify as neither nationalist nor unionist, a tripartite understanding of cross-community support — incorporating unionists, nationalists, and others — might elicit broader public support.

## Research aims

The University of Liverpool and Queen's University Belfast commissioned Ipsos to deliver a programme of deliberative research which considered the views of a broadly representative sample of the Northern Ireland population on issues to do with devolved government and institutional reform. In particular, the research sought to explore:

- What citizens expect of 'good' government;
- Attitudes towards the current system of devolved government;
- Views on mandatory coalition and its effectiveness;
- Views on whether Northern Ireland should transition to an alternative model of government;
- Views on Northern Ireland adopting a simple voluntary coalition model of government;
- Views on Northern Ireland adopting a qualified voluntary coalition model of government;
- Views on how institutional reform, if desirable, should come about.

Before providing a detailed analysis of citizens' views on each of the above, information on the project's methodology, sample characteristics, and the structure of the deliberative forum held on 5th March 2022 is provided below.

## The deliberative methodology

Deliberative methods bring together members of the public and support them in developing informed opinions about a topic through a process of learning, discussion, and public reasoning. Deliberative engagement can successfully help to shape public policy due to its ability to provide informed and considered public opinion. Indeed, in recent years, a range of deliberative methods of public engagement have been used extensively to inform and influence policymaking and strategy in the UK and Ireland.

Participants are informed by experts and supporting stimulus about the topic/s in question and then invited to explore any trade-offs associated with it. This method creates an opportunity for decision-makers to understand public views that are carefully considered and rooted in real-life context, thus leading to more trusted and supported policy in the longer-term.<sup>4</sup>

Deliberative engagement is particularly useful when seeking answers about complex topics, or where awareness is low, which makes it an appropriate method to use to understand public opinion on power-sharing arrangements and coalition government in Northern Ireland. A deliberative approach facilitates the development of informed opinions, illuminates what underpins people's views, and demonstrates how views may change when people are given new information and have the opportunity to discuss the topic with one another. Cumulatively, these benefits serve to provide a much deeper level of insight into the views and behaviours of the public. This makes a deliberative forum a particularly useful tool for getting to grips with public perceptions of power-sharing, which have so far only been explored in a limited way through public opinion surveys.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> London Covid-19 Deliberation Commissioned by NHS England and Improvement (London Region). Delivered by Imperial College Health Partners and Ipsos (2020), available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-10/nhs-london-covid-19-deliberation.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> S. Haughey and T. Loughran (2021) 'Bringing the Public Back in: Public Opinion and Power-sharing in Northern Ireland', Report by the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, available at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/Bringing-The-Public-Back-In.pdf>.



## Deliberative engagement can successfully help to shape public policy due to its ability to provide informed and considered public opinion.

Online deliberative methods have become more widely utilised in recent years, particularly throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, when bringing members of the public together in one place was not possible due to various lockdown restrictions. Many public deliberation events have successfully transitioned to online formats over the past two years, such as The UK Climate Assembly as well as deliberative engagement designed and facilitated by Ipsos on climate change and Irish Constitutional Futures.<sup>6</sup>

Forty-six participants from across Northern Ireland were brought together virtually, via Zoom, on Saturday 5th March to learn about and discuss possible institutional reform in Northern Ireland. The online workshop lasted three hours and consisted of a combination of plenary presentations, where all participants were presented with the same information, and subsequent breakout discussions of approximately seven participants per group.

Each breakout session was facilitated by an experienced Ipsos moderator. Expert presentations were delivered by Dr Sean Haughey (Lecturer in Politics, University of Liverpool), Dr Joanne McEvoy (Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Aberdeen) and Professor Jon Tonge (Professor of Politics, University of Liverpool). The expert witnesses did not advocate for or against institutional reform. Presentations considered the rationale, history, and performance of power-sharing in Northern Ireland, and explored potential strengths and weaknesses of alternative models of government.

Typically, sessions which use deliberative engagement are longer than a traditional focus group, to give sufficient time and space for participants to gain new information and evaluate it in relation to their existing values, attitudes and experiences.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <https://new.brighton-hove.gov.uk/climate-change/brighton-hove-climate-assembly>.

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**Careful consideration was given to the demographic composition of each individual breakout group to ensure balanced discussion and so that ‘echo chambers’ were avoided. As far as possible, each group was configured to include a spread of ages, genders, socio-economic groups, community backgrounds and political designations.**

## Sampling

Although a qualitative sample does not seek to be statistically representative of a population, participants were recruited to ensure that those who attended the event were broadly reflective of the demographic composition of Northern Ireland. In order to achieve this, quotas were applied to several demographic variables, including gender, age, socio-economic group (SEG), and region.

In addition to these criteria, quotas were also applied to community background and political designation. Care was taken to include adequate representation of those who do not identify with either the Catholic or Protestant community, in addition to those who do not see themselves as nationalist or unionist, to reflect the growth of this section of the community in Northern Ireland.

As it was important to gauge the views of ordinary citizens, as opposed to those who regularly project their views through a variety of channels, individuals with any kind of position or role in public life were screened out during recruitment using a standard socio-political activism question.

Some additional questions around voting behaviour were asked during the recruitment screening stage, to further aid analysis and to understand how political preferences may have changed over time. Participants were asked if they voted in the last Northern Ireland Assembly Election in 2017, which parties they gave their first, second and third preference votes to in 2017, and which parties they would give their first, second, and third preference vote to ‘if there were an assembly election tomorrow’.

The table below provides a detailed breakdown of the composition of the participants who attended the deliberative forum.

**Table 1** Sample composition

Demographic Variable		Proportion in Population	Target no. of Participants	Achieved no. of Participants
<b>Gender</b>	Male	48%	24	20
	Female	52%	26	26
<b>Age</b>	18–34	25%	13	14
	35–44	26%	13	10
	45–59	24%	12	14
	60+	25%	12	11
<b>Socio-Economic Group</b>	ABC1	44%	22	22
	C2DE	56%	28	24
<b>Location</b>	Belfast City	16%	8	7
	Greater Belfast	22%	11	11
	County Down	16%	8	8
	County Armagh	8%	4	4
	Counties Tyrone & Fermanagh	13%	6	4
	County L'Derry	13%	6	7
	County Antrim	11%	6	5
<b>Community Background</b>	Catholic	45%	22	22
	Protestant	48%	24	19
	Neither	7%	4	5
<b>Political Designation</b>	Nationalist	19%	10	14
	Unionist	35%	18	15
	Neither	42%	21	17
	Other/Don't know	4%	1	–

## Structure of the event

The online deliberative forum was designed to allow participants to digest information from the expert witnesses in the form of animations and PowerPoint presentations. The event was carefully designed to ensure maximum participant engagement, while minimising online fatigue. This was achieved through the mix of plenary discussion, animations, presentations, and two smaller breakout group discussions. Additionally, two question and answer sessions allowed an opportunity for participants to have any queries addressed by the expert witnesses.

After each breakout discussion, the workshop moderators provided feedback from their individual group discussions, which served to provide participants with information on how other groups had approached conversations around the topics at hand.

Opening and closing remarks were given by Fiona Rooney, Managing Director of Ipsos Northern Ireland, and Dr Sean Haughey, Lecturer at the Institute of Irish studies, University of Liverpool.

An outline of the event timeline is included below.

**Table 2** Event timeline

Timing	Activity
2.00–2.10	Welcome and Introductions
2.10–2.15	Animation 1: How are governments currently formed in Northern Ireland?
2.15–2.35	Presentation 1: Why do we have power-sharing in Northern Ireland?
2.35–3.05	Facilitated small-group discussion
3.05–3.15	Feedback from discussions
3.15–3.25	Break
3.25–3.35	Responses to questions — Expert Witnesses
3.35–3.40	Animation 2: How else could governments be formed in Northern Ireland?
3.40–3.55	Presentation 2: What are the pros and cons of changing to an alternative model of government?
3.55–4.30	Facilitated small-group discussion
4.30–4.40	Feedback from discussions
4.40–4.50	Responses to questions — Expert Witnesses
4.50–5.00	Final summary and post-event survey

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## Discussion guide and stimulus material

Participants were provided with a discussion guide which included information on all main lines of enquiry. The discussion guide included instruction on each element of the event timeline, including information on the plenary presentations, feedback sessions and Q&A sessions, as well as full questions and probes associated with each breakout discussion. The main sections of the breakout discussions as included in the discussion guide are outlined below.

1. Views on Presentation 1
2. Views on what makes a good government
3. General views on current power-sharing arrangements
4. Views on specific aspects of power-sharing
5. Views on Presentation 2
6. Views on simple voluntary coalition model
7. Views on qualified voluntary coalition model
8. Views on the conditions for reform
9. Summary and final thoughts

Video animations were developed by the University of Liverpool to introduce how the current system works at present and to explore how alternative models of government might work. The expert witnesses each pre-recorded a presentation covering the history of power-sharing in Northern Ireland, and areas to be considered if changes were to be made to the current model of devolved government.

Participants were sent a stimulus pack in the post, which arrived a few days in advance of the event. Their packs included the PowerPoint slides which accompanied each video presentation (this allowed participants to refer to the stimulus material to aid the breakout discussions), a glossary of terms, and instructions on how to complete a pre- and post-event questionnaire.

## Pre- and post-event surveys

In order to take a baseline measure of participants' views on the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland and to understand, how, if at all, these views changed through the process of deliberation, participants were asked to complete a pre- and post-event survey. The survey covered the most salient issues under discussion during the event, including general views on power-sharing, the current system of government in Northern Ireland, the possible option for a simple voluntary coalition model, the possible option for a qualified voluntary coalition model, as well as views on democracy and the Good Friday Agreement. The full pre- and post-questionnaires are available in the online appendix.

In the analysis that follows, we draw on both the anonymised transcripts from each group discussion and participants' pre- and post-event survey responses. Supplementary material relating to the event can be found in the online appendix.

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**The discussion guide included instruction on each element of the event timeline, including information on the plenary presentations, feedback sessions and Q&A sessions, as well as full questions and probes associated with each breakout discussion.**

# What do people want from devolved government?

Before inviting participants to reflect on the current model of devolved government in Northern Ireland, they were first asked to share their views on what makes for good government in general. In multiple group discussions, a number of participants initially used the current system as a point of reference. In these cases, the participants used their observations of devolved government at Stormont to contrast with their expectations for good government more broadly. Summarised in Box 1, these perspectives indicate a sense of frustration with a lack of cohesion within government, which is perceived to have a negative consequence on political stability.

**In these cases, the participants used their observations of devolved government at Stormont to contrast with their expectations for good government more broadly.**

## Box 1 'Good' government in contrast to 'bad' government

*'We don't know because we don't have one. [...] Well, obviously going on the government we have at the minute, we'd like them to be more cohesive. I suppose they are always falling out with each other. Being more understanding and trying to work together.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'Any government other than the one that is running here. It is so one side says something and the other side says the total opposite just to make it hard. I'm not talking about one side in particular. Both are as bad as each other.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither

*'I was going to say stability. It's this tit-for-tat nonsense. The parties carve up things between them, 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.' The most important thing is stability.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'At the moment, it's all no, no, no. Nobody has got a say. It goes back to the other government there recently where there was a budget about to start. There was no budget for the health service, and I don't think power-sharing is working at the moment.'*

Male, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

When participants framed their responses in positive terms — that is, when they expressed the principles they think form the basis for *good* government — three broad themes emerged. The first was *delivery*: multiple participants want to see their government deliver on its public policy promises (see Box 2). The second theme was *representation*: participants from different backgrounds said it was important that decision-making should be inclusive, with some acknowledgement that this can involve compromise in practice (see Box 3).

The final main theme emerging was a link between good government and a *common purpose*: an expectation that political parties should work together for the good of everyone in Northern Ireland (see Box 4). There is clearly some degree of overlap between these dominant themes.



## Box 2 Principles of good government: Delivery

*'People who deliver what they say they're going to.'*

Female, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither

*'I think a good government is a decisive government. One that doesn't resort to finger pointing as the main show but can actually move forward and be effective.'*

Female, 25–34, C2DE, Christian, Neither

*'A good government is rated on the decisions they make for the good of the people. The standard of living and that type of thing. We can't seem to get that up and running.'*

Male, 60+, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*'When they go around your doors and promise you the world and then when they get in the government, they don't do anything. More or less what they promise on the doorstep is what I'd like to see once they get into government.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'It needs to work for everyone and help everyone and focus on the daily things like health service and education.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

## Box 3 Principles of good government: Representation

*'I feel the people that have been elected have to be there for the people, representative of people's views. If you've elected Joe Bloggs then he has to have the people's views at heart and those of the constituents.'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'They need to represent the community in general.'*

Female, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Neither

*'There has to be equality. You've got to compromise, you've got to ensure that the decisions are negotiated and agreed, that they're thought through. That they represent everybody and there's representation across the board and nobody is left out.'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'You've got to make sure the minorities are represented, and I think they try to do a good job with that. But the problem in Northern Ireland is that the main parties are diametrically opposed.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'Another important factor is fairness or, at least, perceived fairness. That it seems that everyone is considered, and everyone thinks that their viewpoints are taken into account. Then there will be a lot of support and buy-in.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

**Box 4** Principles of good government: Common purpose

*'I think people getting along. We all just have to get along and we all just have to live. COVID brought everyone together. We all just stood up and agreed. We all just got along. I don't know a lot about the troubles, but everything was so divided. Whenever you watch the Executive on TV there's usually a problem with someone. When it was COVID, everyone agreed, and everyone made it happen.'*

Female, 35–44, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist\*

*'There has to be agreement and working together. I'm for coalition. You need different opinions to come to solutions. I think to respect everyone's opinion and how it fits into their agenda.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'Why does it have to be a government with parties in opposition to one another? Why can't it just be one party working for the good of the country? Why do they have to fight over stupid stuff?'*

Female, 35–44, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist\*

\*These were separate participants in different discussion groups.

A number of other principles of good government were identified by the participants. These include stability, accountability, using evidence to inform decision-making, and a sense of respect between citizens and elected politicians (see Box 5). One participant explicitly recognises that there can be trade-offs between different principles; he uses the example that there can be a tension between efficiency and inclusion in decision-making.

**Box 5** Other principles of good government

*'There has to be a stable government, and accountable for their actions too, again, to the normal community, not just because you're such-and-such a party. It's a bottom-up approach, is what I've always talked about. No point just doing things just because you're a certain party.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'Listen to the facts and make decisions based on the facts.'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'You have to respect the politicians. They should be respectful. They shouldn't be in it for themselves. They have to be at a high level, too.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

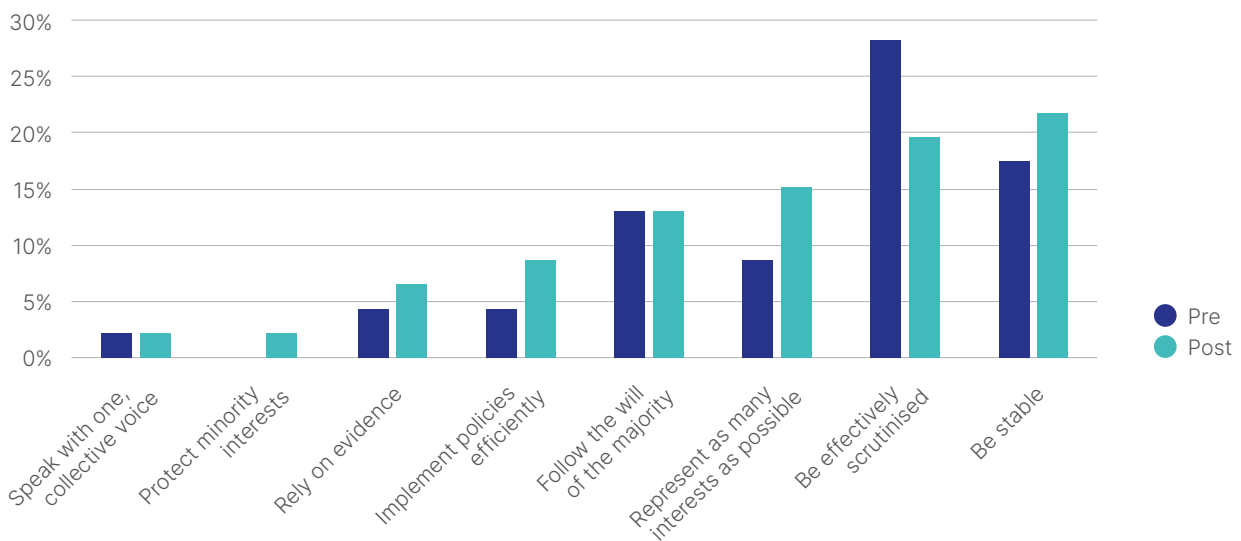
*'That's the million-dollar question. I don't know. There needs to be a balance between efficiency and legislation and there should be due consideration in terms of representation.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

As well as discussing features of good government, we also asked participants to consider the kinds of features that are important in a democratic system of government. Very similar themes emerged. Representation, delivering on policy commitments, and working together towards a common purpose, were principles that were identified organically by multiple participants in the group discussions. There was also mention of stability, the protection of minorities, and elections providing voters with a clear choice, as being important features of a democratic system of government.

To get a better sense of the relative importance participants attach to a range of different democratic principles, in the surveys completed by the participants individually before and after the event, we asked them to rank eight principles from the one they considered to be most important to the one they considered to be the least important. This allows us to compare participants' initial views with their views after learning about and discussing the issue of power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.

**Figure 1** Most important principle for a democratic government



Before the event, the principle seen as the most important by the highest number of participants (28%) was that 'a government should be effectively scrutinised and held to account'. This was followed by 'a government should be stable' (17%) and 'a government should follow the will of the majority' (13%). Over the course of the event, there was some movement in participants' views. By the end of the event, there was an increase in the number of participants who thought that it was important that

'a government should be stable' (22%), which now emerged as the most popular top ranked principle. There was a decrease in the number of participants who thought that it was important that 'a government should be effectively scrutinised and held to account' (20%), now in second place. A belief that 'a government should represent as many interests as possible' emerged in third place (up from fourth); it was ranked as the most important principle by 15% of participants in the post-event survey.

By the end of the event, there was an increase in the number of participants who thought that it was important that 'a government should be stable'.

Figure 2 Most important principles for a democratic government (ranked in top three)

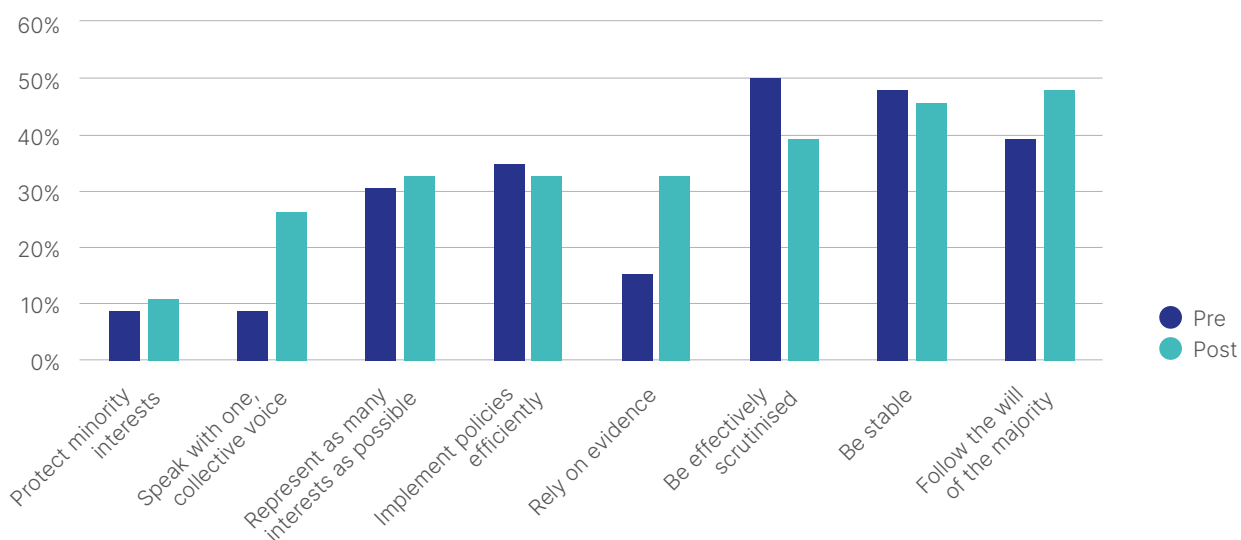


Figure 2 shows the number of participants who ranked each statement as one of their top three most important principles. As in Figure 1, 'a government should be effectively scrutinised and held to account' initially attracted the highest level of support: 50% placed it in their top three. This was followed by 'a government should be stable' (48%) and 'a government should follow the will of the majority' (39%). By the end of the event, these three

statements remained the three with the highest scores of all eight statements, but the order of the scores changed. Based on the post-event survey responses, almost all statements are ranked as one of the three most important principles by at least 10 participants. The only exception concerns the statement that 'a government should protect minority interests'; five participants (11%) ranked it as one of their top three most important principles.

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## Knowledge of power-sharing

Participants generally felt well-informed about how power-sharing works in advance of the workshops, with 60% perceiving themselves to be ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ well-informed in the pre-event survey. Subsequent discussions did, however, reveal a few knowledge gaps. Some participants, for example, did not know about the d’Hondt formula or how it works in allocating seats in the Executive. Others did not fully understand the joint nature of the Executive Office, querying why a First or deputy First Minister must resign when their counterpart resigns.

Other participants expressed an interest in wanting to know more about how the process of Executive formation works after an election. Generally speaking, older participants were more knowledgeable about the mechanics and practicalities of power-sharing, however there were some exceptions (Box 6).

### Box 6 Knowledge of power-sharing

*‘This is all new to me.’*

Female, 18–24, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*‘If the First Minister resigns, the deputy First Minister has to resign. Why?’*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*‘Some of that I didn’t know. I thought it was really good.’*

Female, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*‘I have lived here for 35 years and I didn’t know...I just know all the troubles of living here.’*

Female, 60+, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*‘I didn’t really know how it was formed before. That was all brand new for me.’*

Female, 25–34, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

The workshops had a noticeable impact on participants’ perceived knowledge of power-sharing, with the percentage of those describing themselves as ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ well-informed increasing from 60% before the event to 89% thereafter. Moreover, despite some initial reservations that the topic of power-sharing was ‘academic’ and probably ‘over people’s heads’, participants frequently noted that they had found the content of the presentations interesting. Participants remarked that presentations were ‘done well’, provided ‘a good refresher’ of power-sharing, and helped to clarify terms and concepts often heard on the news but perhaps not fully understood.

These findings suggest that some aspects of power-sharing are better understood than others amongst the general public. Importantly, this is not to say that there is a lack of interest in power-sharing. Even amongst those who did not identify as especially interested in politics or devolution, curiosity was expressed in how power-sharing operates in practice. For the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, therefore, there is a potentially receptive audience for public engagement initiatives aimed at enhancing public understanding of the devolved institutions and how they function.

# Views on the current system

## Benefits of the current system

There was widespread agreement across the discussion groups that there have been two interlinked benefits of power-sharing:

1. It has presided over a sustained period of relative peace in Northern Ireland,
2. It is inclusive and representative of the region's different political traditions.

The decline in political violence was often cited as the most significant outcome to emerge from the introduction of power-sharing in 1998. Although some younger participants associated power-sharing with

peace, participants who had lived through the violence of the 'Troubles' (1968–1998) tended to emphasise this the most. Relatedly, participants credit power-sharing for facilitating cross-community representation and for enabling political parties of various persuasions to have a role in governing Northern Ireland. The representation of different communities in positions of power, it was argued, ensures 'buy-in' and support from said communities, and allows for equal participation in the system. Participants from all backgrounds — nationalist, unionist, and neither — recognised these features as positive (Box 7) and, as noted above, associate them with 'good' government.

**Box 7** The benefits of power-sharing

*'I think it has brought people together. I'm at an age to remember going back to the '60s and I think it's great now.'*  
Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'Nobody can be excluded from it.'*  
Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist\*

*'The main pro is peace. That's why we accept the political stalemate. We are still happy to have peace.'*  
Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'Inclusivity. The smaller parties are represented and in government.'*  
Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist\*

*'Everything's a lot more peaceful...it's stopped the violence.'*  
Female, 25–34, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'I definitely see how something can be flawed but still working and valued.'*  
Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

\*These were separate participants in different discussion groups.

Beyond sustaining peace and facilitating cross-community representation, participants generally struggled to cite any further advantages of the current model of power-sharing. Although it was clear these two interrelated benefits were regarded as significant and not to be taken for granted, there was a noticeable sense of disappointment in some group discussions that devolution had not delivered more. This was especially true of some of the younger

participants who expressed sentiments such as 'the only real pro to power-sharing is peace' and 'it's better than nothing'. On the whole, therefore, assessments of power-sharing in its current form were not particularly upbeat, and there was a sense across the groups that, though inclusivity and the absence of political violence are to be welcomed, citizens now have higher (and hitherto unfulfilled) expectations of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

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## Weaknesses of the current system

Participants generally found it easier to identify weaknesses in the current model of power-sharing. These weaknesses, which relate to both institutional and behavioural issues, can be grouped together into three broad frustrations with the status quo:

1. Executive instability and collapse,
2. an absence of cooperation and cohesion within the Executive, and
3. a perceived dominance of communal identities and associated disputes.

### 1. Executive instability and collapse

The frequency with which the devolved institutions have collapsed, or have appeared close to collapse, featured prominently in discussions about the weaknesses of the current system. This was framed as both a behavioural and an institutional problem. There was widespread criticism of the perceived willingness of some parties to walk away from the institutions when it suited their political purposes. This type of behaviour was invariably described as immature and short-sighted. However, participants were also critical of the institutional structures which facilitate this type of behaviour.

In particular, participants expressed frustration that one political party can collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive (Box 8). Others explained that the devolved institutions keep collapsing 'because of the way the system was built' and identified the ease with which one party can collapse the Executive as one of the system's biggest disadvantages. Several participants argued that steps should be taken to combat the instability which arises from Executive Office resignations.

#### Box 8 Executive instability

*'When one party pulls out, they all fall down...clearly this is not working.'*

Female, 35-44, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'It's sad when one party can walk out...and [it] collapses. I think that needs to be changed in some way.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'We need to make it so they can't walk out...There needs to be sanctions.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

## 2. An absence of cooperation and cohesion within the Executive

The relationships between governing parties was a frequent subject of criticism across the discussion groups (Box 9). Participants were generally of the view that the level of cooperation between the parties has been poor and that there has been an absence of genuine power-sharing, or a sense of partnership, within the Executive. Multiparty coalitions in Northern Ireland were described as a ‘carve-up’ in which, at best, the governing parties were prepared to ‘tolerate each other’. Others characterised the current system of power-sharing as having stagnated.

**Participants were generally of the view that the level of cooperation between the parties has been poor and that there has been an absence of genuine power-sharing, or a sense of partnership, within the Executive.**

### Box 9 Poor cooperation within the Executive

*‘I think we’ve reached a point where we’re not sharing...we’re treading water. We’re not going anywhere with it.’*

Female, 25–34, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*‘On a day-to-day basis they are still having their squabbles.’*

Male, 60+, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*‘Going on the government we have at the minute, we’d like them to be more cohesive...they are always falling out with each other.’*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*‘If you can’t get people sitting around a table and compromising with each other...and that’s when we all get penalised. You have to wait longer for legislation, for decisions on health and education. It just doesn’t work.’*

Female, 35–44, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

Participants also commented on how a lack of cooperation between the governing parties was affecting day-to-day government in Northern Ireland, namely that the Executive has not been able to govern in a cohesive fashion. Some related this lack of cohesion in the Executive to the number of governing parties, arguing that the size of multiparty coalitions made them unwieldy and that there did not need to be as many parties in the Executive. Others commented on the fortunes of the smaller parties in the Executive, noting that despite being members of the government they often ‘don’t get heard’.

A more general complaint related to dynamics within the Executive was that having to secure multiparty agreement, or having to secure cross-community consent (see below), often means that decision-making is slow. Some participants reflected on how slow Executive decision-making had affected them personally or in their place of work.



### 3. A perceived dominance of communal identities and associated disputes

The perception that ethnonational ('orange and green') issues dominate the political agenda, at the expense of more pressing issues, was evident across the discussion groups. Some participants cited flags policy and the Irish language as particularly prominent examples in this regard. Others argued that the parties generally place too much emphasis on Northern Ireland's past and do not focus sufficiently on contemporary problems. For some participants, the prominence of 'orange and green' issues is an inherently political problem, stemming from the behaviour and choices of the region's political parties.

It was also clear, however, that some participants attribute the salience of ethnonational divisions to the institutional design of the Assembly and Executive. Comments such as 'it's automatically divided from the

very top' reflected a sense that the current model of power-sharing has institutionalised communal differences. The requirement that MLAs must officially register a communal designation was regarded as polarising, with one participant arguing that it has made it harder for 'neutrals to stick'. Others were critical of the manner in which cross-community consent is conceptualised and measured in the Assembly. For example, it was argued that the focus on securing agreement between unionists and nationalists has perpetrated the idea of there being only two communities in Northern Ireland, whereas, in reality, this is not the case. Similar sentiments were echoed elsewhere, with participants commenting that neutral or non-designating voices struggle to be heard because of the precedence afforded to nationalism and unionism within the institutions (Box 10).

#### Box 10 Salience of communal identities and divisions

*'Cross-community power-sharing is not the be-all and end-all. If you're making decisions based on far-left and far-right, you're missing out the massive section in the middle, which I feel I belong to. What if you're not a part of the nationalist or loyalist groups? What if you see yourself as just bang in the middle...? People who don't align themselves, their voice is less heard. The focus is more on, "Can we get the nationalists and unionists to agree?"'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'[It] perpetuates the Orange/Green divide.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'They're arguing over things like the Irish language and flags, which does not impact my life. It's education, infrastructure, healthcare. My life won't change on how many flags there are or what the language is. They're...things that break down the conversations.'*

Female, 25–34, C2DE, Neither, Neither

*'It annoys me that it's always orange and green.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

Some participants were also critical of the design of the Executive Office. In one discussion group it was argued that the existence of a 'First Minister' and 'deputy First Minister' gives rise to controversy because the impression conveyed by the different titles is one of power imbalance or hierarchy, whereas in reality the positions are co-equal.

This, it was argued, has led to unnecessary disputes and acrimony over which party and political tradition holds the first ministership. Participants elsewhere expressed similar sentiments, noting that having differentiated titles for the First and deputy First Minister is not in keeping with the joint nature of the Executive Office.

## Public awareness of institutional reform options

Although political parties in Northern Ireland have become increasingly focused on the issue of institutional reform, evidence from the discussion groups would suggest that everyday citizens are not sufficiently informed about this issue. Overwhelmingly, participants were not aware of the potential for Northern Ireland to change its system of devolved government, for example by departing from the model of mandatory coalition.

Participants were also surprised to learn that Northern Ireland is not the only region of the world with a power-sharing system of government. Upon learning this, participants were curious about how other societies institutionalise power-sharing, asking whether Northern Ireland could learn lessons from power-sharing systems elsewhere, and whether any similar systems had been effectively reformed (Box 11).

### Box 11 Public awareness of alternatives to the current system

*'I had no idea that there were these options available or that they were a potential option... is it actually a potential for Northern Ireland?'*

Female, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Neither

*'Is there anything that Northern Ireland can learn from power-sharing in other countries or governments that could help us? What's working well elsewhere? What can we use to help us?'*


Female, 25–34, C2DE, Neither, Neither

*'I wasn't aware that other potential power-sharing was available.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

The levels of interest and curiosity shown in alternative models of government suggest the time is ripe for a much more extensive public conversation about institutional reform in Northern Ireland. It is not the case that citizens are disinterested in the topic of institutional reform, it is more that a lack of information and consultation on the subject has inhibited informed conversations.

**The levels of interest and curiosity shown in alternative models of government suggest the time is ripe for a much more extensive public conversation about institutional reform in Northern Ireland.**



Few participants voiced support for Northern Ireland adopting a simple voluntary coalition model of government, primarily because such a model could endanger cross-community representation in the Executive.

# Views on reforming the current system

Despite consensus emerging in the first round of discussions that change of some sort is necessary to improve devolved government, the second round of discussions gave rise to differences of opinion as to what such change should look like. Few participants voiced support for Northern Ireland adopting a simple voluntary coalition model of government, primarily because such a model could endanger cross-community representation in the Executive. Participants were, however, generally more open to the concept of a qualified voluntary coalition model entailing some form of cross-community safeguard. At the same time, others were not convinced that a new model of government would solve problems and instead emphasised the need for behavioural change or for more modest reform of aspects of the current system.

## Simple Voluntary Coalition

The expert presentations explained that a simple voluntary coalition system would not use the d'Hondt formula to automatically divide seats in the Executive amongst the political parties based on their electoral mandates, rather, that it would be left to the parties to decide amongst themselves who forms the government after an election. Those parties who could find common ground with one another would form an Executive, leaving those parties who were unwilling or unable to join the coalition in opposition. This would mean that, in theory, any configuration of parties could form an Executive. Participants recognised two important benefits of a simple voluntary coalition system: that government would likely be more cohesive because parties will have secured a coalition agreement before taking office, and that parliamentary scrutiny would be enhanced by the near-guaranteed existence of a more substantial opposition (Box 12).

### Box 12 Benefits of simple voluntary coalition

*'It forces different parties to discuss political direction and policies before getting into government... [creating] effective opposition and a visible alternative government-in-waiting.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'possibility of parties with common policies coming together to form a perhaps more efficient government.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'With the voluntary, hopefully they would have a plan from the start and a bit of continuity.'*

Female, 35–44, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

Despite participants recognising some benefits in simple voluntary coalition, concerns about the potential loss of cross-community government tended to take precedence in discussions about this model. The potential for a voluntary coalition emerging in which only one political tradition was represented, for example in an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive, was widely regarded as problematic.

It was argued that the exclusion of one political tradition from government would be destabilising for Northern Ireland, with some participants going as far to suggest that it could trigger unrest. Anxiety about the loss of cross-community government was particularly prominent among nationalist participants, although it is notable that their concerns were shared by participants from other backgrounds (Box 13).

### Box 13 Concerns about simple voluntary coalition

*'It sounds scary. Younger people would be more open to it but the older age group have the fear of not being represented. I always find it difficult because I don't class myself — I would be classed by my religion as nationalist — but I don't think I'm nationalist. I don't know how they would work it out. You have this fear of not being represented if it was voluntary.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'I would worry if my community was not represented. I don't want to offend anyone but if one side was making the decision for my community, would I like that? We need to think more openly.'*

Female, 35–44, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'I think there would be an uproar if certain parts of the community weren't represented.'*

Female, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'This agreement was built on peace, if nobody's representing this side of the community, they might think, "what are we getting from this? Wasn't it better when we got on with what we were doing?"'*

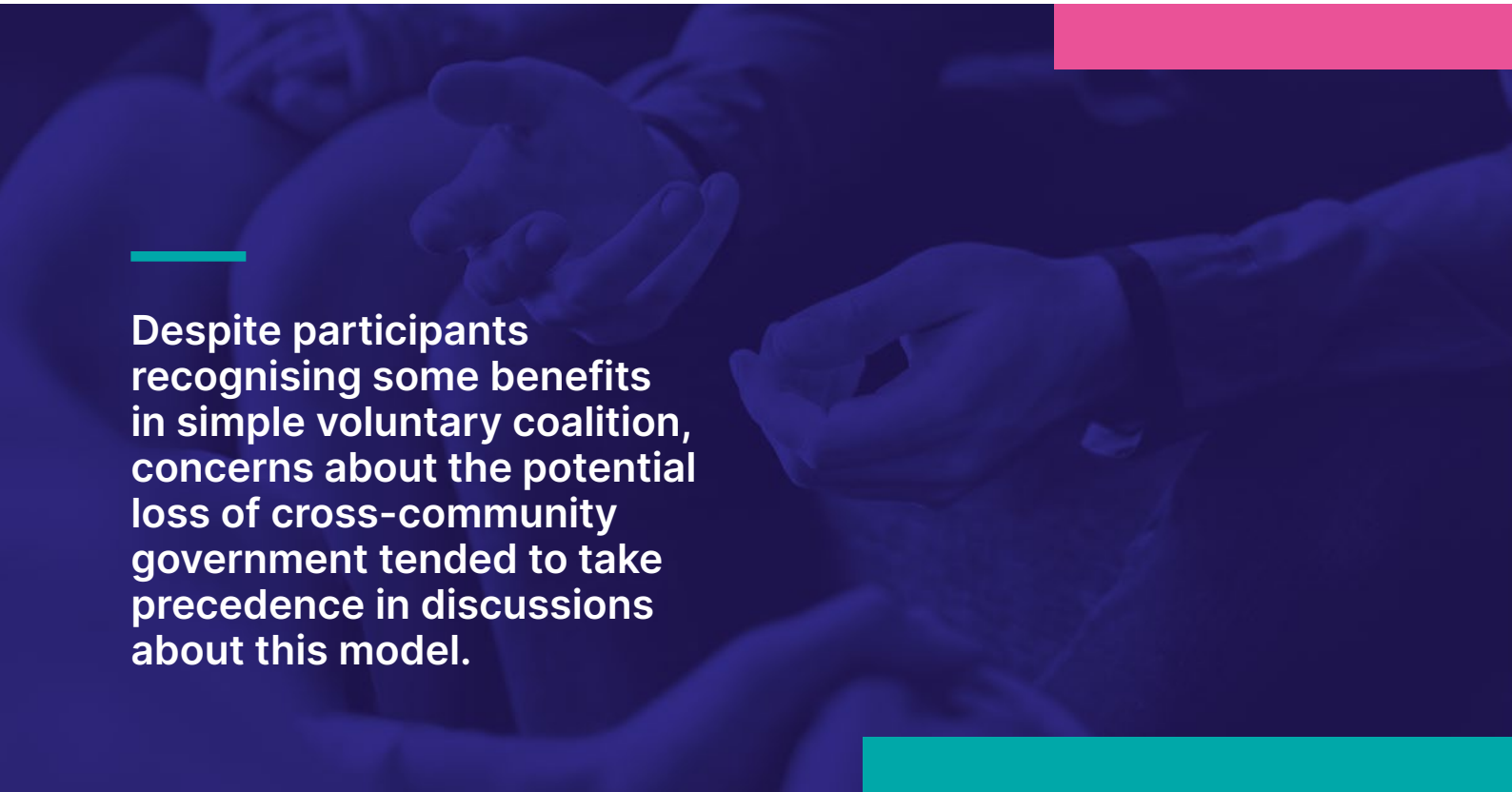
Female, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*'In a less politically charged society, this would make sense. But realistically, if you were to see what happened here, as soon as there is any whisper of the community not being represented, the extremists will take it to the street.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

*'Is it a generation issue? Do we need to wait until we're further away from the conflicts that have happened, when people aren't as close to it?'*

Female, 25–34, C2DE, Christian, Neither



**Despite participants recognising some benefits in simple voluntary coalition, concerns about the potential loss of cross-community government tended to take precedence in discussions about this model.**

## Qualified Voluntary Coalition

Qualified Voluntary Coalition (QVC) was described in the expert presentations as similar to simple voluntary coalition in that seats in the Executive would not be divided amongst the political parties using the d'Hondt formula. Instead, after an election, political parties would have some scope to negotiate with one another to decide who forms the next Executive. Importantly, however, with QVC parties would be required to negotiate within certain parameters, namely that it would not be possible to form a government in which only one political tradition is represented. Thus, for example, an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive would not be permitted under the rules of QVC. As such, QVC would give parties some degree of say in terms of who joins the government (and who sits in opposition) but would include a safeguard to protect cross-community representation in the Executive. The expert presentations did not specify the exact nature of such a safeguard (it could be achieved by a quota system, for example); suffice to say that it would eliminate the potential for single-community government by guaranteeing some form of cross-community representation in the Executive.<sup>7</sup>

Within their discussion groups, participants were generally more open to the idea of Northern Ireland adopting a QVC system of government. This was primarily due to QVC's cross-community safeguard, which assuaged the concerns participants raised about simple voluntary coalition and the potential for one particular community being excluded from government. With a degree of cross-community representation in government assured, some participants felt comfortable exploring what benefits a QVC model might offer, such as a clearer system of government and opposition, enhanced parliamentary scrutiny, and a more cohesive Executive. Others framed QVC as 'the way forward' for Northern Ireland, offering the 'best of both worlds' in that it could create a more 'standard' or 'normal' system of government and opposition whilst maintaining some form of cross-community government (Box 14). Participants from unionist and centre-ground ('neither') backgrounds tended to be more vocal about the benefits of QVC, whereas some nationalist participants acknowledged the model's advantages but queried whether Northern Ireland was ready for such a change.

### Box 14 Benefits of qualified voluntary coalition

*'The benefits of the arrangement would be greater because you still get the opposition and the increased scrutiny, but you don't get the potential fall out of an under-represented community.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Nationalist

*'Qualified Voluntary Coalition seems to be a stepping stone, a bit of a safety net. I would feel worried if we went straight to Voluntary Coalition where one side would be dominating the other and not taking them into consideration. The Qualified Voluntary Coalition has extra. It is a bit more representative, and it seems to be more fair.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1 Protestant, Unionist

*'[The] qualified voluntary coalition model is the one that appeals to me most as it seems to be a normal model of government and it would bring us into line with the other devolved administrations.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

*'The second option [QVC] is more valid. We have talked about fear and the past, and this removes a certain element of the fear. There is no fear that there will not be a representation. Personally, I am more inclined towards that.'*

Male, 45–49, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

*'I think a qualified voluntary model is the way forward.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'If there is opposition, then there would be more scrutiny so the Executive would make better decisions. It seems like it would lead to better decisions and a better quality of life.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'The pros do outweigh the cons on the qualified voluntary power sharing regime, [it] will take a while for this to ever be possible in NI.'*

Male, 18–24, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

\*These were separate participants in different discussion groups.

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of 'cross-community' representation and/or 'cross-community' support in the context of QVC was left open to participants' interpretation. The traditional understanding of cross-community support in Northern Ireland conceptualises it primarily in terms of unionist and nationalist support, however the prospect of institutional reform provides an opportunity to reconsider this. In light of the growing number of citizens in Northern Ireland who identify as neither nationalist nor unionist, a tripartite understanding of cross-community support — incorporating unionists, nationalists, and others — might elicit broader public support.

Participants acknowledged that QVC would not come without drawbacks. Concerns were expressed about the potential for lengthy post-election negotiations, especially given the track record of Northern Ireland's political parties in terms of reaching agreements. It was pointed out, for example, that nationalist and unionist parties have little in common and some questioned their ability to reach and sustain a coalition agreement on a voluntary basis. Interestingly, some participants were critical of QVC because it could potentially lead to a major political party, such as the Democratic Unionist Party or Sinn Féin, being excluded from government. Whilst it is not unusual for

major parties to form the opposition in other coalition contexts, some participants seemed to suggest this would be problematic in Northern Ireland. The potential for a QVC system to be complicated or convoluted was also raised, with some noting it could prove difficult to establish workable criteria as to what exactly would constitute a 'cross-community' government under QVC rules. Others raised issues typical of coalition governments in general, for example about the electoral risks of a smaller party propping up a larger party with whom it does not ideologically align, or about the potential for coalition infighting (Box 15).

**Box 15** Drawbacks of qualified voluntary coalition

*'The risk of it taking more time...everything may take a bit longer than people would like. In terms of forming the government, which reduces the amount of time where legislation could be formed as well.'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'Say the DUP wanted to get in power, they'd have to get together with the SDLP. What are they going to agree on? It'd be the same with Sinn Féin and the UUP.'*

Male, 18–24, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'I'm looking at the qualified model, are you risking major parties being excluded? I wouldn't like that. These major parties are representing the major areas within a community. You wouldn't want a major part of the community to be excluded.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'Determining exactly what "qualified" means could be difficult and open to corruption.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'If a major political party is excluded, that is going to cause so many problems. Somebody is going to throw their toys out of the pram.'*

Female, 45–51, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'As a voter, you might vote for a smaller party, and they could go into coalition with a party you don't agree with at all. It might not align with your own beliefs, and you might feel that you've wasted your vote.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'I'm looking at the UK that has the coalition agreement, like the Lib Dems and the Tories. They got on and then they fell out. Forming a coalition, say you had Sinn Féin forming with the Alliance, 6 months down the line, the Alliance would disagree with Sinn Féin, and it would all collapse.'*

Male, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

## To reform or not?

Participants were asked in a post-event survey about how far they would support or oppose the three models of government discussed during the deliberative event. The simple voluntary coalition model was the least supported option, with the level of support for this model averaging at 4.16 (where 1 = strongly opposed and 7 = strongly in favour). Identical levels of support were expressed for qualified voluntary coalition and for the status quo of mandatory coalition, with support for these options averaging at 4.26 in both cases. In other words, overall, participants neither strongly supported nor strongly opposed any of these three options after learning about and discussing them.

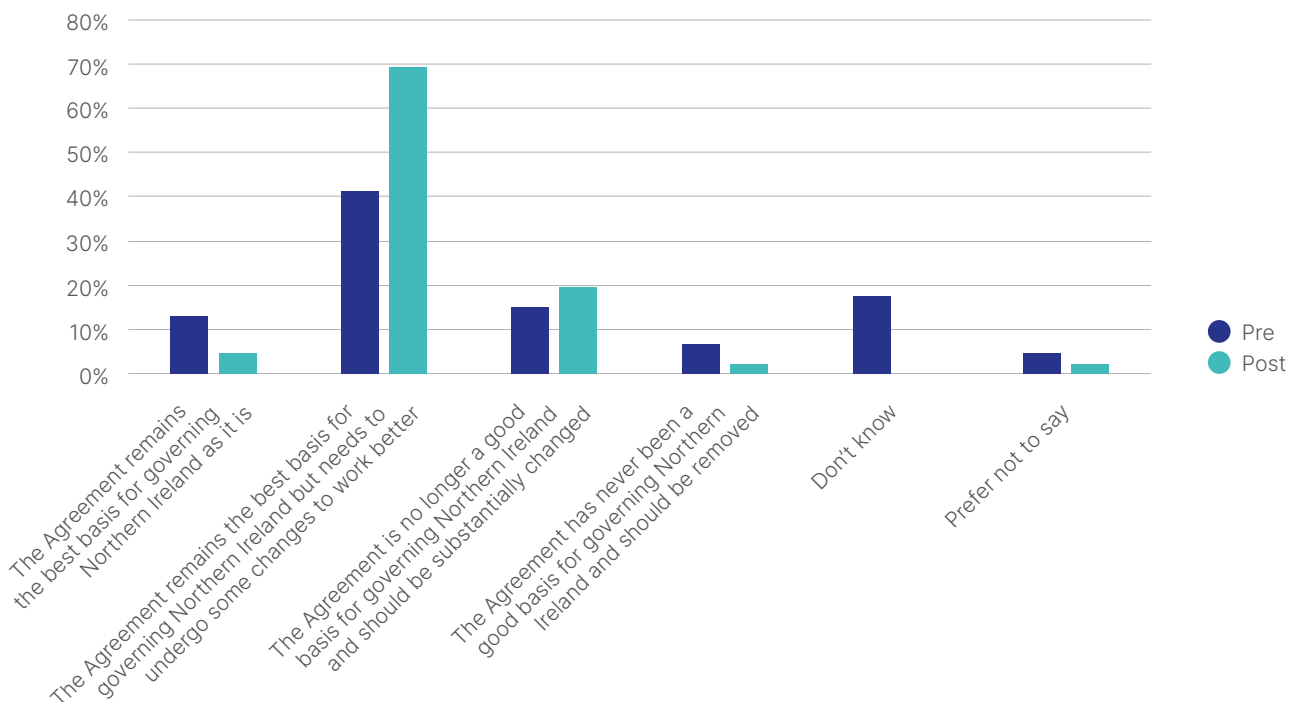
These scores should be interpreted in conjunction with the qualitative evidence from the discussion groups. We suggest that they broadly reflect participants' perceptions of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each option, as well as a degree of nuance in participants' preferences. For example, while participants expressed concern in the discussion groups about the potential loss of cross-community government under a simple voluntary coalition scenario, some participants also expressed support for simple voluntary coalition as a long-term destination for Northern Ireland — even if they perceive it to be an unsuitable model at present. Moreover, while the group discussions seemed to suggest that participants were open to reforming the current system towards a QVC

model, the identical levels of support for these two options in their survey responses may be explained by a general perception that the current system of power-sharing could be reformed from within to work better.

### The extent of reform

Although the deliberative sessions did not result in participants identifying one clear favourite as to a preferred model of government, a majority view did emerge in terms of how substantively the governance structures of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) need to be changed. Before and after the event, participants were presented with a series of statements on the governance structures of the GFA and asked to select the statement which best reflects their view. As Figure 3 shows, the perception that the GFA structures require no change was a minority view before the event (13%) and fewer participants took this view after the discussion groups concluded (4%). On the other hand, the statement that the GFA structures need 'to undergo some changes to work better' was the plurality view before the event (42%) and emerged as the clear majority view (70%) after the event. The view that the GFA was no longer a good basis for governing Northern Ireland and needed to be 'substantively changed' reflected the position of 16% of participants before the event and 20% of participants after the event. Support for removing the GFA structures entirely was minimal before (7%) and after (2%) the event.

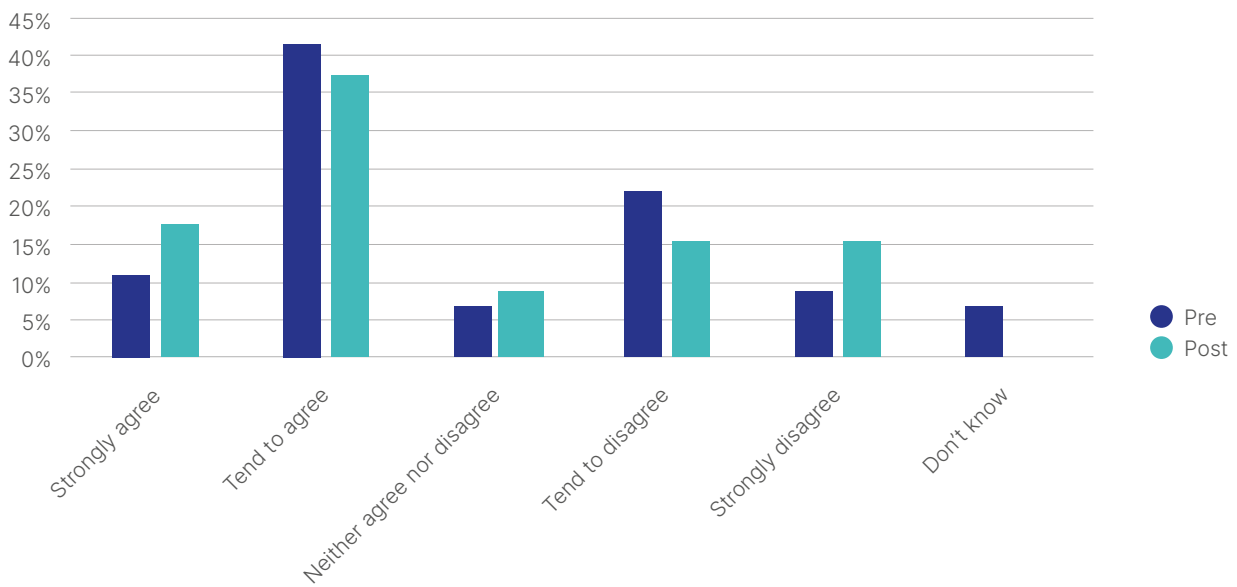
**Figure 3** Perspectives on reforming the governance structures of the GFA



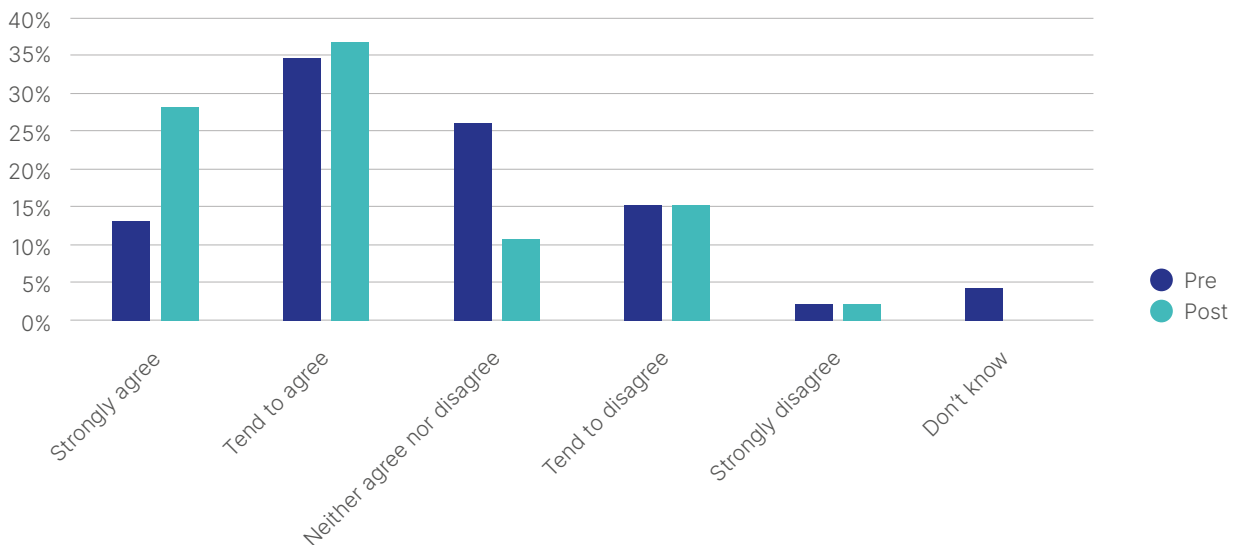
Separate from the issue of what precise reforms might look like, it is important to note that a majority of participants regarded the principle of power-sharing in positive terms before and after the event (Figure 4). By the end of the event, 65% of participants said that power-sharing has, overall, been good for Northern Ireland (Figure 5). However, when it comes how power-sharing works in practice, we see more mixed attitudes. When asked to consider whether it is

working better now than in the past, participants were evenly split, and those perceptions remained largely unchanged by the end of the event (Figure 6). Instead, we see a much bigger shift of opinion regarding the question of reform. When asked whether they thought power-sharing could be improved with further reforms, a clear majority agreed before the event (70%). By the end of the event, this rose to 84% — including 50% who strongly agreed (Figure 7).

**Figure 4** Attitudes towards the statement: ‘Power-sharing devolution is the most appropriate form of government for Northern Ireland’

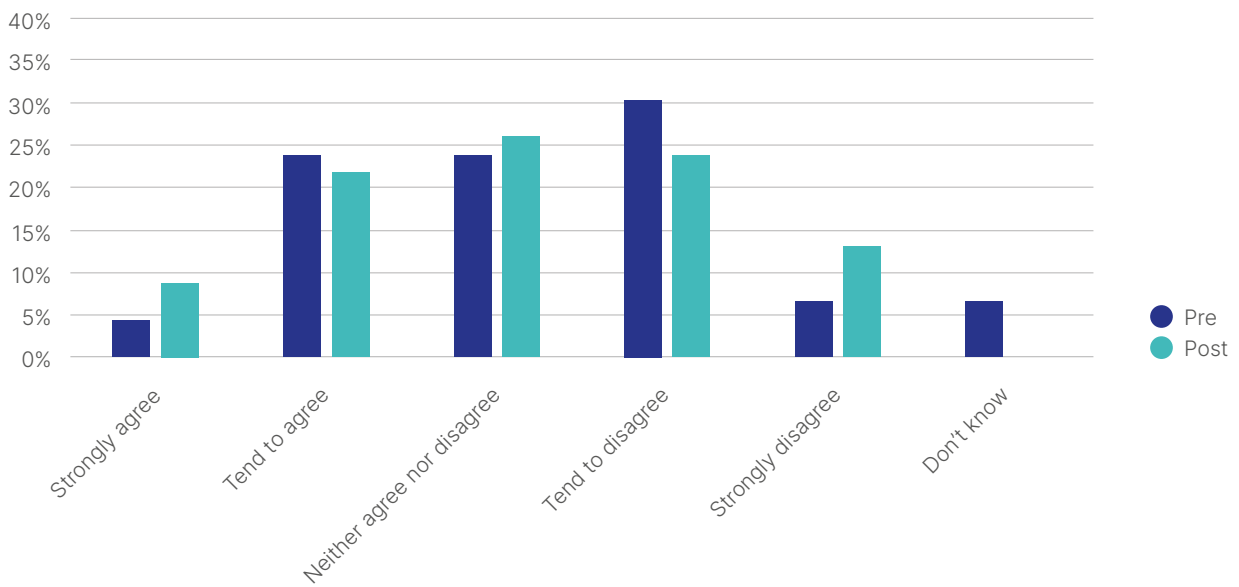


**Figure 5** Attitudes towards the statement: ‘Overall, power-sharing has been good for Northern Ireland’

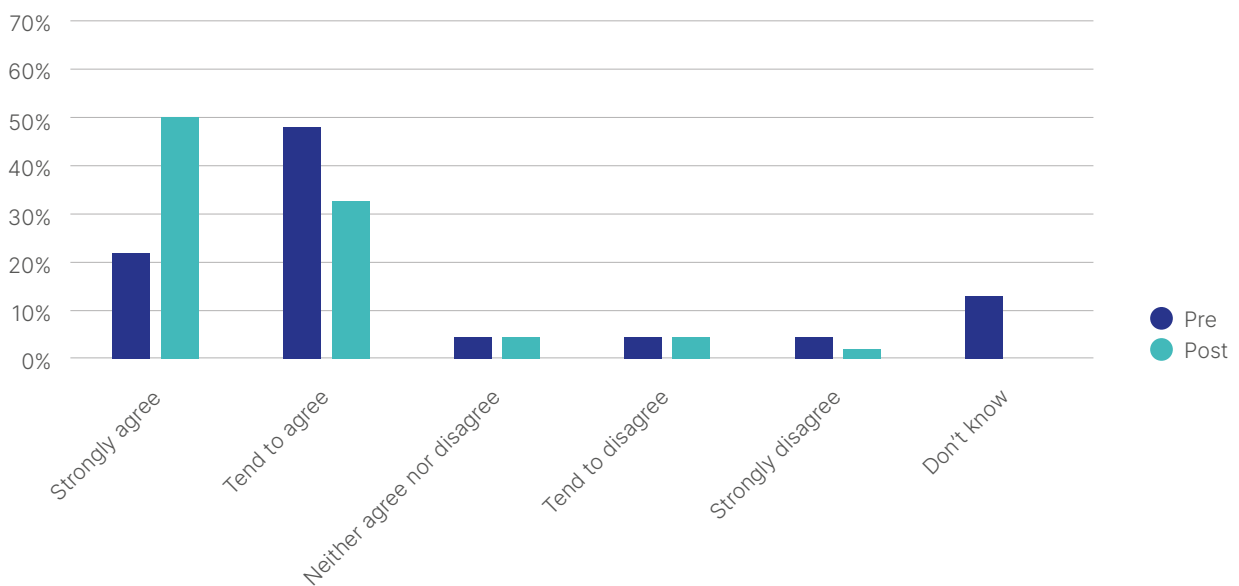




**Figure 6** Attitudes towards the statement: 'Power-sharing works better now than it did in the past'



**Figure 7** Attitudes towards the statement: 'Power-sharing could be improved with further reforms'

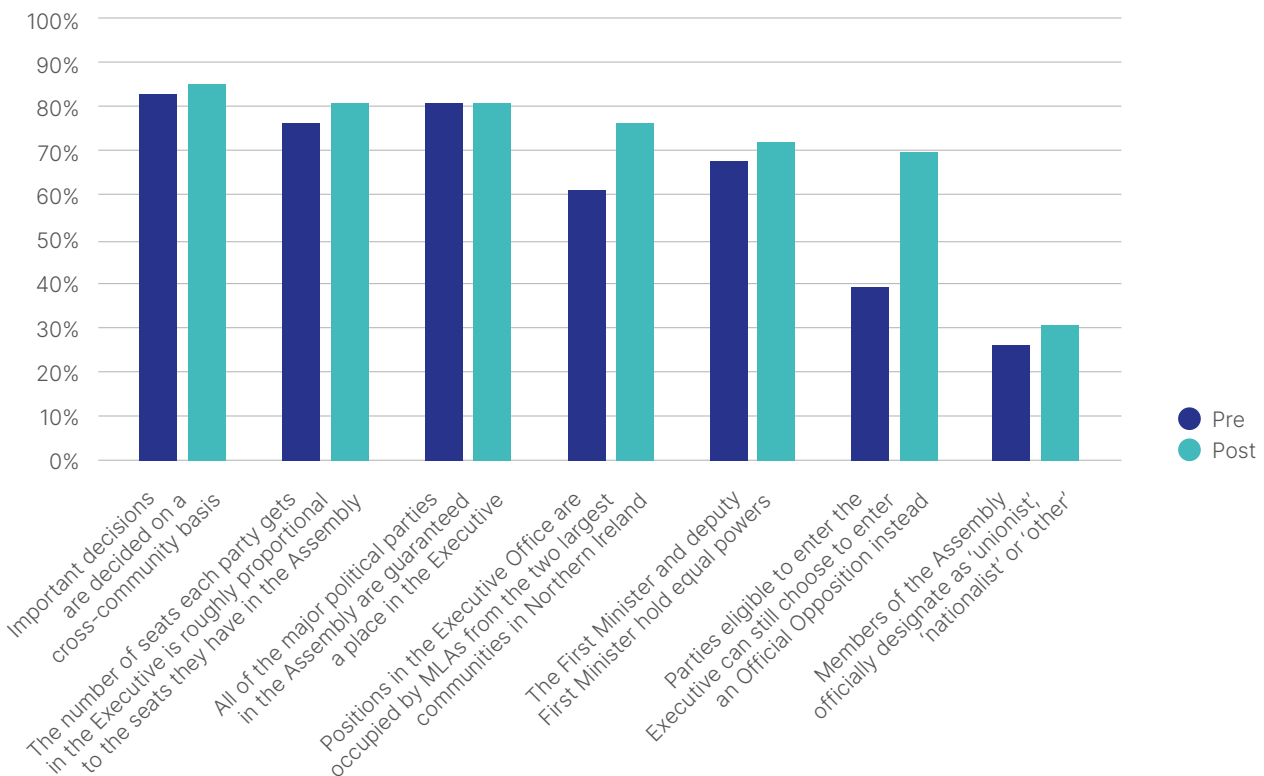


In the surveys, we also asked participants what they thought about some of the specific aspects of the current power-sharing system. By the end of the event, at least 80% of participants said that it was important that key decisions are decided on a cross-community basis, that the number of seats each party gets in the Executive is roughly proportional to the seats they have in the Assembly, and that all major parties in the Assembly are entitled to a place in government. However, while many participants continued to see cross-community decision-making as important, only 30% said that it is important that MLAs designate as ‘unionist’, ‘nationalist’ or ‘other’. This indicates that there may be some appetite for cross-community consent to be measured through another mechanism. In addition, it is notable that many participants also seem keen to explore the full potential of official opposition within

the current system. Indeed, while the current system is often described as ‘mandatory coalition’, political parties are not forced to enter a power-sharing government; they can enter opposition instead. By the end of the event, a majority of the participants (70%) said that it was important that parties eligible to enter the Executive can still choose to enter an Official Opposition instead. This was sharp increase from the start of the event.

In the round, we suggest that these figures help to explain the lack of significant support for replacing the current system. Despite widespread frustration towards the way the existing system has worked, participants do still generally value many of its features, but seem to want some to be better utilised (i.e. opposition) and some reviewed (i.e. community designation).

**Figure 8** Percentage of participants perceiving features of the current system to be important (very or somewhat)



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## The importance of behavioural change

Those participants who did not support the idea of a new model of government for Northern Ireland tended to emphasise the need for behavioural change or for reforms to be implemented within the current framework of mandatory coalition (Box 16). Some participants made the case that 'orange and green' disputes, given their potency, would continue to cause problems irrespective of the model of government adopted in Northern Ireland. Others worried that a new model of government could make problems worse and

cited 'fear of the unknown' as a reason for maintaining the current system. The need for behavioural change on the part of political parties was emphasised in several groups. It was argued, for instance, that the current system could work better if parties displayed better cooperation towards one another. A similar argument expressed was that political parties needed to do more to demonstrate they can operate the current system successfully before a new model of government is introduced.

### Box 16 Views on maintaining the current system

*'It's not the system that has to change, it's the mindset from the leaders and to be more accommodating.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'The voluntary coalition would be split into one community and the QVC [qualified voluntary coalition] would have the same problems as now, where parties don't agree, and nothing gets put forward.'*

Male, 18–24, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'It's better the devil you know. We don't like the groups we vote for, but we vote for the same people. You can talk about this until you're blue in the face. Come May, we'll vote for the green or the orange. At the end of the day, we are frightened of change.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither

*'I'm just wondering, is it the devil you know? Can we tweak the one we have rather than going to a new system? [...] I think if we could get rid of the vetoes as we have them, and stop the collapsing, I would just stick with what we've got.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'Stick with mandatory. No point moving on when they can't even do the basics right.'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'If there's going to be a new system, I would go for qualified voluntary, but I would stick, work on, and respect the mechanisms, and make it work. The politicians need to be potty trained on it.'*

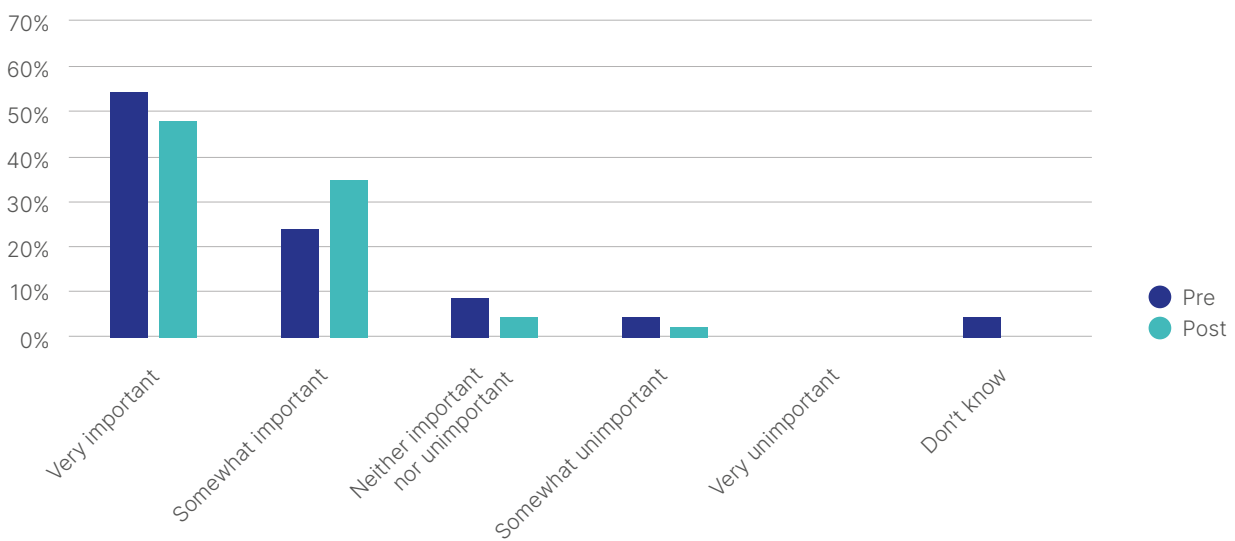
Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

# How should any reform come about?

Separate from individual preferences for or against any particular reform as an ultimate outcome, we asked participants about their thoughts on the process by which any reform should come about. In other words, we were interested in understanding the basic conditions people

felt should be met in order for any reforms to the current system to be accepted as democratically legitimate. The vast majority of participants said that it was important to some extent that a majority of MLAs should support any proposed reform (see Figure 9).

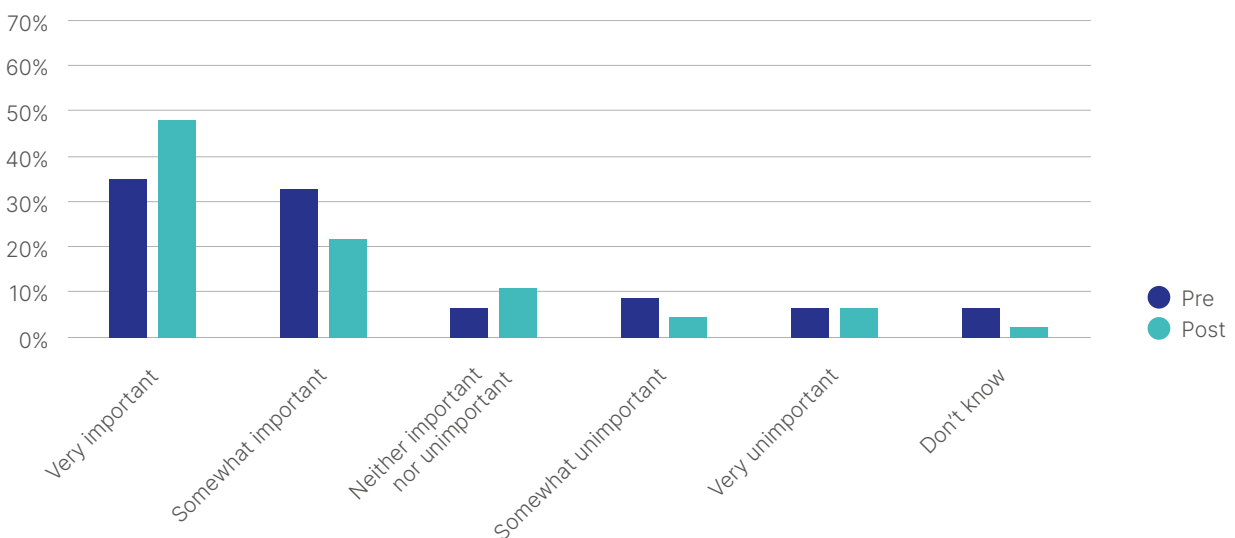
**Figure 9** Perceived importance that a majority of MLAs support the reform

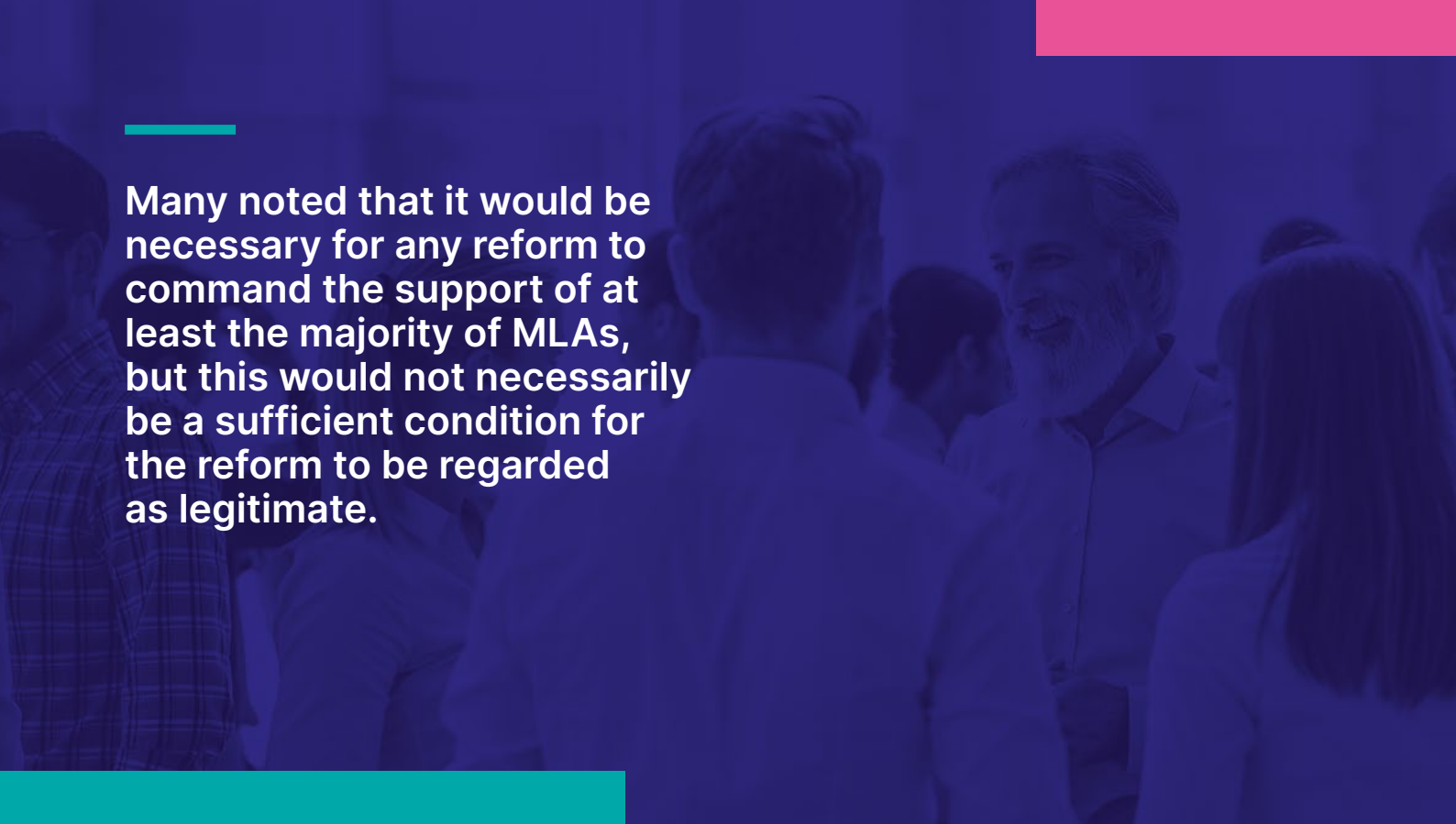


Similarly, the vast majority of participants said that it was important that both a majority of unionist MLAs and a majority of nationalist MLAs should support the reform (see Figure 10). Before the presentations and group discussions,

a roughly even number of participants thought this condition was 'very' or 'somewhat' important. Afterwards, there was a notable increase in the number of participants who thought this condition was 'very' important.

**Figure 10** Perceived importance that a majority of unionist MLAs and a majority of nationalist MLAs support the reform





**Many noted that it would be necessary for any reform to command the support of at least the majority of MLAs, but this would not necessarily be a sufficient condition for the reform to be regarded as legitimate.**

The increased level of perceived importance attached to cross-community support among MLAs was reflected in the group discussions among participants. Many noted that it would be necessary for any reform to command the support of at least the majority of MLAs, but this would not necessarily be a sufficient

condition for the reform to be regarded as legitimate. However, it should be noted that this condition was not seen as important by all participants (see Box 17). Notably the clearest scepticism was articulated by a participant who identifies as neither unionist nor nationalist.

#### **Box 17** Importance of support from MLAs

*'That would be the minimum (majority support from MLAs). I prefer to see the parallel consent where you have the majority from each community.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'We need to look at cross-community support again. Something like that.'*

Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'Who would decide that you were going to move to the voluntary qualified or unqualified coalition. Would it be the people in Stormont or the people in Westminster?'*

Male, 60+, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'I think they would have to agree, or they would only play up.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*'Just because all the unionists and all the nationalists don't agree with this, doesn't mean it has to be wrong. I don't like this idea that it has to be 50/50.'*

Male, 18–24, ABC1, Neither, Neither

*'That would be great, but I don't think it's realistic. If every policy was like that, it would be great, but so few have been like that.'*

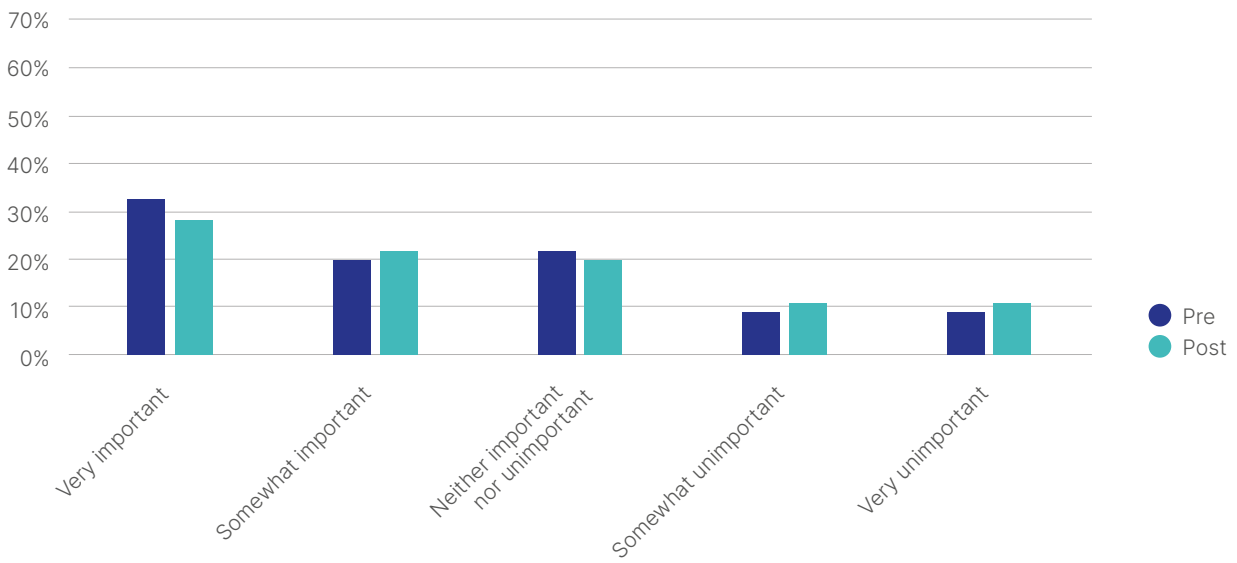
Male, 18–24, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'You would struggle to get the MLAs to make any decision which would represent the people. They're public servants, so we should be telling them what we want, end of.'*

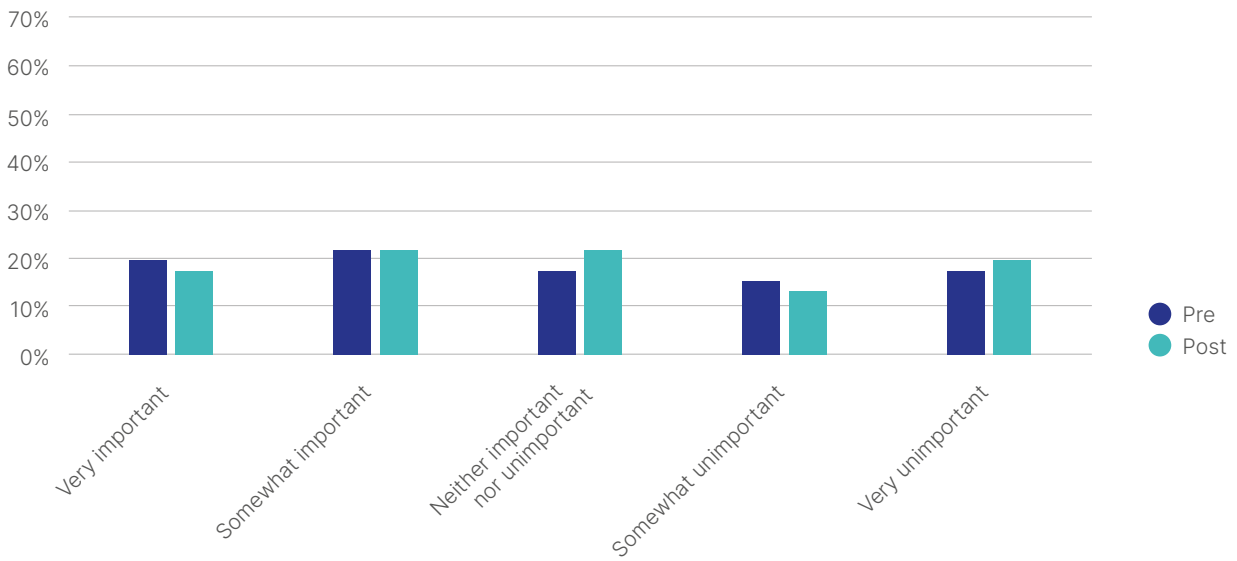
Female, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Neither

In general, participants were much more ambivalent about the extent to which it would be important for the British and Irish governments respectively to recommend any proposed reform (see Figures 11 and 12).

**Figure 11** Perceived importance that the British government recommends the reform



**Figure 12** Perceived importance that the Irish government recommends the reform



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The dominant view emerging from the group discussions was that it was primarily up to the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives to negotiate and endorse any reforms to the nature of devolved government (see Box 18). There was a general sense that if any particular reform(s) did command sufficient support from within Northern Ireland, it would be unlikely that either the British or Irish government would stand in the way. There was even suggestion from a participant that involvement

by the governments in London and Dublin could be counter-productive. A different perspective was articulated by one participant, who thought it would be important to secure the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders, such as the European Union and the United States. This suggestion seems to be rooted in a perception that the other parties would be too immature to manage any process of institutional reform on their own.

#### Box 18 Importance of support from MLAs

*'I think both of them have to (agree). They're stakeholders. There has to be buy-in from all stakeholders before you move forward.'*

Female, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Neither

*'They've always been involved anyway. They were involved to get us to this stage so it follows that they should be involved in the next stage of moving it along.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

*'I would be surprised if there has been an agreement with the change, and the British don't agree with it. In a sense, I don't know if that would lead to a buy-in from them because it is we who are living under the system, not them.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'I don't think it's the most important thing. I think we need our own committee to be deciding. If our crowd here don't agree with it, I don't think it's the most important thing.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

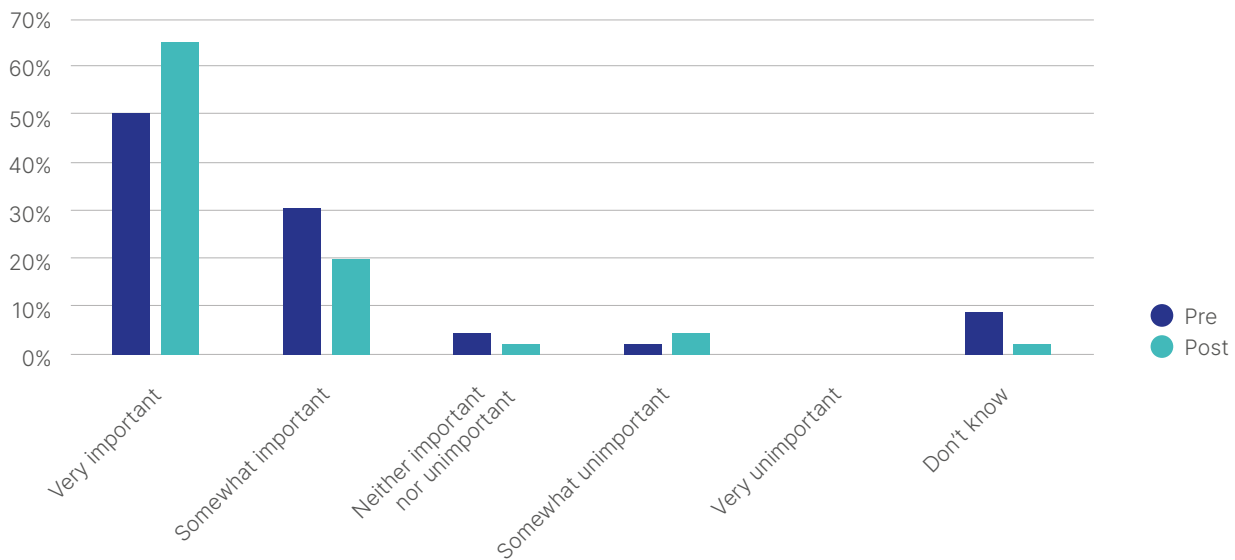
*'It's more important for the people of Northern Ireland to support the reform. Then get London and Dublin involved. There's no point in Dublin and London coming in saying what we have to do. That's what gets everyone's backs up here.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither

*'You would have to have the thoughts of the other stakeholders as well, like the European Union and the United States who were the other stake holders in the peace process. You need the grown-ups in the room.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

\*These were separate participants in different discussion groups.

**Figure 13** Perceived importance that a majority of voters support the reform in a referendum

It is clear from both the survey data and the qualitative data from the group discussions that participants consider it important that the public should be properly consulted ahead of any reform(s) being introduced. Indeed, by the end of the event, a decisive majority of participants (65%) said that it would be 'very' important for any reform to receive the support of a majority of voters in a referendum in Northern Ireland (see Figure 13). The perceived importance of this condition increased after participants listened to the expert presentations and engaged in group discussions with each other. It was also the highest level of importance attached to any of the conditions considered by the participants.

Box 19 summarises the views expressed by participants during the group discussions. The discussions highlight a general perception that the public should ultimately have ownership over their political system, as well as a perception that the public have not been properly consulted about fundamental questions of governance since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Some expressed the view that it would be unfair for MLAs alone to agree any institutional reforms. However, the perceived importance of consulting the electorate via a referendum was not unanimously shared. One participant thought that it would be time consuming and unnecessary. To the extent that other participants did express some concerns, they were more about the process rather than the principle of holding one. Participants who expressed these concerns highlighted the importance of it being conducted in a fair manner (not biased towards any one side) and that voters have adequate information to allow them to make up their minds.



### Box 19 Importance of a referendum

*'It should be democratically decided. A referendum, absolutely. What we have now was picked at referendum and what we have next should be. I'd be in the streets protesting if it was decided by somebody else.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

*'It's a hard one. You're down to the folk. It's down to the public. Everybody in Northern Ireland should vote and they should bring the voting age down as well.'*

Male, 45–59, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'I believe that if it was to go ahead it should be put to a vote. It's our country, so we should have a say in how it's run.'*

Female, 35–44, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'Referendum. Otherwise, if you're leaving it up to MLAs are you going to get a fair call on it?'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'It's a good way to make sure you get the majority of what the people agree to rather than those who are neglected and who could have a harmful agenda. [...] If the referendum is done right, there is not much of a downside. But this is a lot easier said than done.'*

Male, 25–34, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*'Because it's such a difficult topic, sometimes you are told to vote for something particular or you don't understand what you are voting on at the referendum. They go for what other people say, and they are not thinking it through themselves.'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Nationalist

*'Not a lot of people know politics. The majority would have to be explained properly or having independent people trying to explain who they are voting for.'*

Female, 60+, C2DE, Protestant, Unionist

*'The public would need to be informed of the option, and how it's going to work. I feel that in the past, we've been kept in the dark.'*

Female, 45–59, ABC1, Protestant, Neither

*'I think the biggest thing is, would the public in Northern Ireland give these (possible reforms) a chance? [...] It might be a good thing if they went to a referendum and asked people what they want, give the people a vote on it. But tell people the ins and outs of it, explain to people and give them a chance to make up their own minds.'*

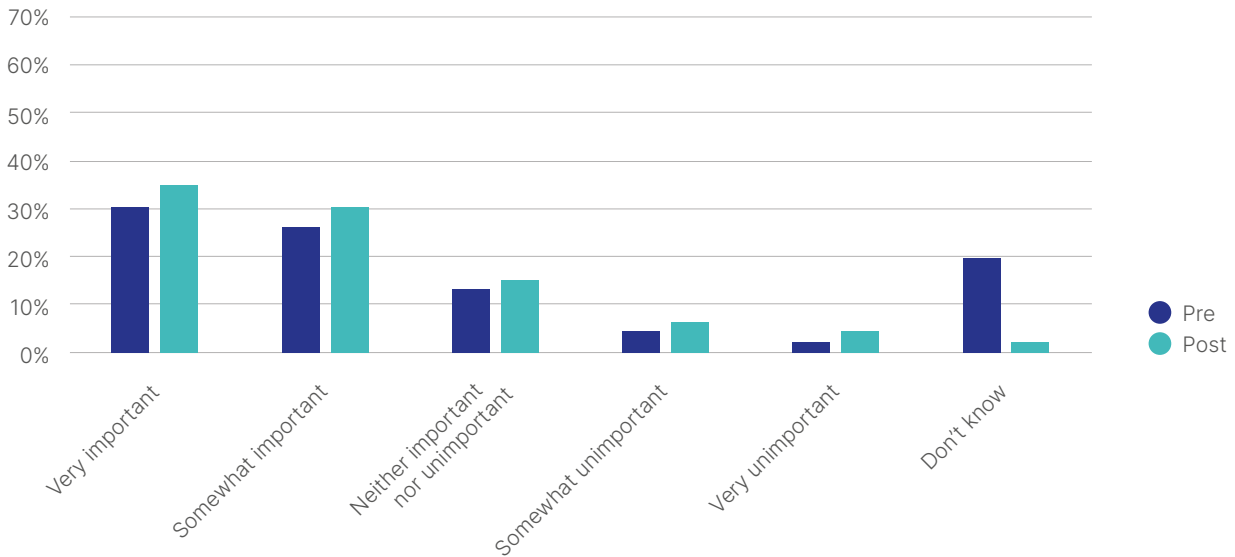
Male, 60+, C2DE, Catholic, Nationalist

*'Referendums are time consuming. We already have the MLAs in place. We have London and Dublin negotiating. Between those 3 parties as such, surely, they can come up with an agreement that is suitable to all parties?'*

Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Neither\*

\*These were separate participants in different discussion groups.

**Figure 14** Perceived importance that an official citizens’ assembly recommends the reform



By the end of the event, a majority of participants (65%) said that it would be either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ important that any proposed reform(s) should be recommended by an official citizens’ assembly (Figure 14). This marked an increase in the perceived importance of this condition being met, compared to participants’ initial views. There was also a sharp decrease in the number of participants who said they didn’t know if it was important or unimportant for this

condition to be met. When asked about their views on a potential citizens’ assembly in the group discussions, participants tended to echo their views about referendums: that they provide an opportunity for the public to be part of the process of considering possible institutional reform. There was also a sense that a citizens’ assembly could complement a referendum by trying to find common ground before putting any recommendation for all voters to consider.

**Box 20** Importance of a citizens’ assembly

*‘The public would need to be informed of the option, and how it’s going to work. I feel that in the past, we’ve been kept in the dark, and we don’t really understand how the political parties, how the executive, is made up.’*  
 Female, 45–59, ABC1, Protestant, Unionist

*‘(A) citizens’ assembly should be used. A referendum is cut and dry. With citizens assembly, you get a feel for different communities, rather than, 50% plus one. I don’t think that would be good for here.’*  
 Male, 45–59, ABC1, Catholic, Neither

*‘Listening to what people want instead of what they (politicians) think we want (is the most important condition).’*  
 Female, 45–59, C2DE, Protestant, Neither

*‘How much of a say would they have if there was a citizens’ assembly? [...] How many would there be in there? Would that just be a voluntary thing? Would they get paid as the elected people would? Or is it random like jury service? How do you form a citizens’ assembly?’*  
 Female, 25–34, C2DE, Neither, Neither



**One of the most important findings to emerge from this research is that, contrary to how often it has featured in recent political discourse, the issue of institutional reform is new and unfamiliar to citizens in Northern Ireland.**

## Conclusions

Nearly 25 years after the Agreement, survey evidence suggests that the public seeks some kind of reform to the way government works in Northern Ireland. According to the most recent Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2020, for example, 23% of people said that the 1998 Agreement remains the best basis for governing Northern Ireland in its current form; only 6% said that it has never been the best basis for governing Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup> However, a majority of people expressed support for some kind of reform: 45% favoured at least ‘some’ changes to make the system work better, with a further 9% favouring ‘substantial’ change. The goal of this research has been to understand in greater depth what people think about the current system of government in Northern Ireland as well as how it could be reformed.

One of the most important findings to emerge from this research is that, contrary to how often it has featured in recent political discourse, the issue of institutional reform is new and unfamiliar to citizens in Northern Ireland. This is not due to a lack of interest in the topic — indeed, evidence from the discussion groups would suggest the opposite — but, rather, is the result of a lack of information and consultation. The prospect of significant institutional reform took participants by surprise, which should give policy-makers pause for thought in terms of the readiness of the population for potentially significant changes to their democratic institutions. A sustained effort to inform and engage citizens on the issue of institutional reform must therefore be the first step in any process which could change how government operates in Northern Ireland.

Asking citizens what they expect of ‘good’ government provides a set of key principles towards which institutional reform could strive. People desire stability, a focus on delivery of public policy commitments, inclusivity, and an Executive which governs with a sense of common purpose. Some of these expectations are linked to, and contrast with, citizens’ experiences of devolved government thus far. Instability has stunted the Executive’s ability to develop and deliver public policy, whereas poor working relationships between the governing parties have made it difficult for the Executive to govern in a cohesive fashion. In terms of inclusivity, the institutional status quo would appear to satisfy citizens’ expectations. Citizens regard inclusivity and the sustained period of relative peace in Northern Ireland as the two most important benefits to have emerged since the arrival of power-sharing devolution in 1998. Whilst people do not take these two interrelated benefits — inclusivity and peace — for granted, there is a sense of disappointment that devolution has not delivered more.

<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2020), available at: [https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political\\_Attitudes/VIEWGFA3.html](https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/VIEWGFA3.html).

Complaints about the institutional status quo tend to pertain to the Executive. The ease with which one political party can collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive is regarded as deeply problematic by citizens from all backgrounds. Although safeguards exist enabling caretaker ministers to temporarily remain in office during periods of Executive abeyance, palpable frustration with the situation at the time of the deliberative forum, held against the backdrop of a recent Executive Office resignation,<sup>9</sup> would suggest the public do not regard these safeguards as sufficient. When the Executive does govern, there is a perception that it does so in fragmented fashion, with poor inter-party relationships in the coalition working against cohesive government. Other issues raised by participants would not be especially difficult to resolve. Consistent with research elsewhere, for example,<sup>10</sup> citizens appear to be open to the idea of renaming the positions in the Executive Office to better reflect their co-equal status. In any case, whereas previous debates about institutional reform have tended to focus on the Assembly, such as in relation to the Petition of Concern, it would be beneficial if greater emphasis were placed on the Executive in any future reform process.

The Assembly is not immune from public criticism. Whilst the perceived dominance of ‘orange and green’ issues among the parties is a behavioural problem, the public do make an institutional connection to the Assembly. For example, it was argued that the voices and issues of those who do not identify as nationalist or unionist are side-lined in an Assembly which affords precedence to securing agreement between nationalists and unionists. The Assembly’s cross-community consent procedures have long been a subject of academic debate,<sup>11</sup> however it is worth noting that this debate clearly resonates with sections of the general public. Relatedly, there was some ambivalence as to whether or not communal designation is an important feature of power-sharing and, as such, there may now be a case for reconsidering whether MLAs should designate as nationalist, unionist, or other. Support for alternative approaches to demonstrating cross-community consent, without the need for communal designation, have been explored in recent public opinion research.<sup>12</sup>

The issue of whether Northern Ireland should adopt an entirely new model of government is likely to provoke considerable debate. The qualitative evidence suggests that a simple voluntary coalition model would lack broad public support in Northern Ireland. Although some participants saw value in a simple voluntary coalition model as a long-term destination, there were concerns about its suitability at present. The potential for an Executive being formed in which only one community was represented — for example an exclusively unionist or an exclusively nationalist Executive — was regarded as potentially destabilising. Others questioned whether this model would deliver more stability than the status quo given its reliance on voluntary cooperation between parties with a poor record of working together. Indeed, as with other potential models of government, the behaviour of Northern Ireland’s political parties was often presented as a significant obstacle to progress. In that regard, and as several participants argued, behavioural change is as important as institutional change.

Primarily because it would ensure some continuity in cross-community government, citizens were more open to the concept of a qualified voluntary coalition (QVC). QVC would leave it up to the parties, post-election, to negotiate a coalition agreement that could demonstrate a degree of cross-community support. Crucially this would avoid an Executive being formed in which only one community was represented, and the necessity of some kind of cross-community inclusion was widely recognised. Notwithstanding the cross-community requirement, which would still require parties of different traditions to work together, participants were generally optimistic that QVC Executives would be more agreeable and cohesive and that it would facilitate a more ‘normal’ system of government and opposition. Participants were just as aware that QVC would be accompanied by its own set of drawbacks, such as the potential for lengthy post-election negotiations.

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<sup>9</sup> First Minister Paul Givan resigned as Northern Ireland First Minister on 3rd February 2022. At the time of the Deliberative Forum on 5th March 2022 Northern Ireland was still without a fully functioning Executive.

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Irish Studies April 2022 Opinion Poll, available at: [https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute\\_of\\_Irish\\_Studies\\_Irish\\_News\\_Poll\\_March\\_2022.pdf](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute_of_Irish_Studies_Irish_News_Poll_March_2022.pdf). See p.11.

<sup>11</sup> A. Schwartz (2010), ‘How Unfair is Cross-Community Consent? Voting Power in the Northern Ireland Assembly’, *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 61 (4): 349–362.

<sup>12</sup> Institute of Irish Studies April 2022 Opinion Poll, available at [https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute\\_of\\_Irish\\_Studies\\_Irish\\_News\\_Poll\\_March\\_2022.pdf](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute_of_Irish_Studies_Irish_News_Poll_March_2022.pdf). See p.11.

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If the concept of QVC were to garner wider public support, there would also be the added challenge of establishing criteria for ‘cross-community’ government. Defining ‘cross-community’ in terms of nationalism and unionism would likely attract criticism in light of the growing number of citizens in Northern Ireland who identify as neither nationalist nor unionist.<sup>13</sup> A tripartite understanding of cross-community representation — incorporating nationalists, unionists, and others — could therefore elicit broader public support. It would, however, raise the issue of maintaining some form of communal designation (at least for political parties in the Executive, if not for individual MLAs). Whether it be through the use of quotas in the Executive or through a more flexible arrangement, establishing workable and acceptable criteria as to what exactly would constitute a cross-community government in a QVC scenario would require careful consideration.

We should highlight that in the present study, we presented participants with three broad options: maintaining the current system of power-sharing, commonly known as mandatory coalition; simple voluntary coalition; and qualified voluntary coalition. We did so having judged that through learning about and discussing these three options in the relatively short time available, the participants attending the deliberative forum would be able to consider the main principles underpinning the nature of government in Northern Ireland — including the trade-offs that may be necessary when it comes to implementing these principles through institutional design. It should of course be acknowledged that other options for reform exist beyond those explored here.<sup>14</sup> This report is simply intended to provide an initial insight into public attitudes towards government, democracy, and institutional reform in Northern Ireland.

If significant institutional reform is to come about, the public have clear ideas as to how this should happen. Participants were strongly of the view that the public should be widely consulted on whether Northern Ireland should retain, reform, or replace its current system of power-sharing. Even amongst those who were critical of the Assembly and Executive, there is a sense of ownership of the devolved institutions which likely stems from their public endorsement, via referendum, in 1998. Although there was strong support for the idea of any new institutional order being put to a referendum (85% thought this would be ‘very’ to ‘somewhat’ important), participants argued that other indicators of support would add further legitimacy to new institutions, for example if a majority of unionist, nationalist, and other MLAs supported the move, or if it was recommended by a citizens’ assembly. More generally, appreciation for the value of citizens’ assemblies as an educational tool for institutional reform, and as an opportunity for public input, deepened as a result of participants’ involvement in the deliberative forum.

The importance of public consultation on the issue of institutional reform cannot be understated. It is clear that citizens would feel both aggrieved and cynical about significant changes to the Good Friday Agreement institutions were they to occur in the absence of an inclusive and accessible public conversation about what is at stake. Advancing the institutional reform debate without meaningful opportunities for public input would likely undermine the legitimacy of any new institutional arrangement.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Coakley (2021) ‘Is a middle force emerging in Northern Ireland?’, *Irish Political Studies*, 36:1, 29–51.

<sup>14</sup> Some have suggested, for example, that if a party is unwilling to participate in the Executive Office, the opportunity to nominate could pass to next qualifying party of the appropriate size and designation — see S. Haughey (2019) ‘Worth Restoring? Taking Stock of the Northern Ireland Assembly’, *The Political Quarterly*, 90 (4): 705–712. Alternatively, all Executive ministries could be allocated via d’Hondt (including the positions of First and deputy First Minister), without compelling eligible parties to take the position(s) to which they are entitled — see <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2022-northern-ireland-assembly-elections/>.

## Recommendations

A public conversation about institutional reform has yet to begin in earnest. In bringing to a close what we consider to be only a first step in initiating this conversation, we make the following tentative recommendations:

1. Inclusive and extensive public consultation should be the first step in any institutional reform process. The value of public consultation is two-fold. Firstly, asking citizens what they expect of government and democracy in Northern Ireland will furnish key principles to shape the reform agenda. Secondly, public involvement in the process will add democratic legitimacy to any reforms, should they be implemented.
2. Greater emphasis should be placed on the Executive, particularly the Executive Office, in any future reform process. The ease with which one party can collapse or prevent the formation of an Executive is widely regarded as problematic. Any reform process which seeks to reconsider the institutional arrangements of the Executive Office would likely resonate with the public.
3. Other issues to do with the Executive are worthy of further exploration. People do not seem to see much value in distinguishing between a First and deputy First Minister given the co-equal status of these positions. Indeed, consistent with research elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> the evidence suggests the public would be open to the renaming of these respective positions to 'Joint First Minister'.
4. Consideration should also be given to measures which (i) enhance cooperation and coordination within the Executive and (ii) sharpen the government's focus on public policy delivery. These would address two common complaints about devolved government.
5. In terms of reforms to the Assembly, it may be time to reconsider the current system of communal designation. While there is still clear support for the principle of power-sharing, it is not clear that the current designation procedure is regarded as a necessary feature of power-sharing. Research elsewhere indicates public support for alternative approaches to demonstrating cross-community consent, such as a 60% majority, which would not require MLAs to register a designation.<sup>16</sup>
6. More significant institutional reform, particularly the question of whether to replace or retain mandatory coalition, should be approached with caution. This question divides opinion and prompts calls for further information as to how alternative models of government would work in practice.
7. A simple voluntary coalition model of government would likely be unworkable in Northern Ireland at present. Widespread concerns about the potential loss of cross-community representation in a voluntary coalition Executive suggest this model would cause communal anxieties.
8. There may be more value in exploring the potential of a qualified voluntary coalition (QVC) for Northern Ireland. Citizens appear more open-minded to QVC and recognise both the model's potential benefits as well as its potential drawbacks. Designing acceptable and workable criteria as to what would constitute a 'cross-community' government in a QVC scenario would require careful consideration.
9. If Northern Ireland is to transition to a new model of government, consideration should be given to how the public can meaningfully contribute to the institutional reform process. People are strongly of the view that the decision to retain or change the region's model of government should involve the public. There are high levels of support for a referendum on the issue, but also for mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies which could inform and engage citizens on the issues at stake.
10. Significantly reforming the devolved institutions without creating opportunities for civic input would risk undermining the legitimacy of any new institutional order. Even amongst those citizens who are critical of the Assembly and Executive, there is a sense of ownership of the institutions which likely stems from their public endorsement, via referendum, in 1998.

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<sup>15</sup> Institute of Irish Studies April 2022 Opinion Poll, available at: [https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute\\_of\\_Irish\\_Studies\\_Irish\\_News\\_Poll\\_March\\_2022.pdf](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/humanitiesampsocialsciences/documents/Institute_of_Irish_Studies_Irish_News_Poll_March_2022.pdf). See p.11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



June 2022

**Public Attitudes to  
Institutional Reform  
in Northern Ireland**

Evidence from a  
Deliberative Forum

Dr Sean Haughey, University of Liverpool  
Dr Jamie Pow, Queen's University Belfast