

## **The Citizens' Assembly**

### **Fact Sheet**

- The Citizens' Assembly was an exercise in deliberative democracy, placing the citizen at the heart of important legal and policy issues facing Irish society.
- It was the second deliberative democracy exercise in Ireland, following its predecessor the Convention on the Constitution which ran from 2012 – 2014.

#### Establishment

- The Programme for a Partnership Government 2016 committed the Government to 'the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly, within six months and without participation by politicians, with a mandate to look at a limited number of key issues over an extended time period.'
- Establishment of the Assembly was approved by resolution of both houses of the Irish parliament (the Houses of the Oireachtas) in July 2016.

#### Members

- The Chairperson was appointed by the Government and was former Supreme Court judge, the Honourable Mary Laffoy.
- There were 99 citizen Members of the Assembly, in addition to the Chairperson. Members were chosen at random to represent the views of the people of Ireland, and were broadly representative of society as reflected in the Census, including age, gender, social class, regional spread etc. They must also have been on the electoral register to vote in a referendum.

#### Topics

- The five issues the Assembly was mandated to consider were:
  1. the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution (which concerns abortion);
  2. how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population;
  3. how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change;
  4. the manner in which referenda are held; and
  5. fixed term parliaments.
- In respect of each topic, the resolution stated that 'all matters before the Assembly will be determined by a majority of the votes of members present and voting'. Therefore, the output of the Assembly was a series of voted recommendations following the development of a Ballot Paper in consultation with the Members.

### Expert Advisory Group

- The resolution provided for the establishment of an Expert Advisory Group to assist with the work of the Assembly in terms of preparing information and advice.
- The Chairperson put in place four distinct Expert Advisory Groups throughout the lifetime of the Assembly. The members of the Expert Advisory Group were academics and practitioners across a number of specific fields of interest, depending on the topic being considered.

### Steering Group

- A Steering Group comprising the Chairperson and a small representative group of Assembly Members elected by the Assembly Members was in place to support the Assembly in the efficient and effective discharge of its role and functions. In practice, the Group assisted with planning and operational issues associated with the work programme.

### Meetings

- The Assembly met on 12 occasions between October 2016 and April 2018, which includes an inaugural meeting.
- There were 5 meetings on the *Eighth Amendment*, 2 meetings each on both *how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population* and *how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change*, one meeting on *the manner in which referenda are held* and one meeting on *fixed term parliaments*.
- Each Assembly meeting was a full weekend (Saturday morning until Sunday afternoon) at a venue on the outskirts of Dublin.

### Reports

- The Assembly has published a final report and recommendations on the *Eighth Amendment, how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population* and *how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change*.
- The final report on *the manner in which referenda are held* and *fixed term parliaments* was published on Thursday, 22 June 2018. In Chapter 8 of the report, the Chairperson takes the opportunity to outline her recommendations around citizens' assemblies and the views of the Members taken at the final meeting form part of this.
- The report and recommendations on the *Eighth Amendment* was considered by a joint committee of politicians from both Houses of the Oireachtas, who in turn also recommended a referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment from the Constitution. This referendum took place on 25 May 2018 and passed by a majority of 66.4%.