Democracy Day ‘Wall of Ideas’
How do we get a better democracy in Northern Ireland?

On the 24th March 2017 Building Change Trust hosted a Democracy Day at the MAC, Belfast, as part of the Imagine Festival. The aim of Democracy Day was to explore the health of democracy in Northern Ireland and beyond through a deliberative lens – showcasing some groundbreaking experiments both locally and internationally and initiating a dialogue about how to get a better democracy in Northern Ireland.

The Democratic Society and Involve hosted a Wall of Ideas and encouraged participants at Democracy Day to put forward their ideas and solutions for achieving a ‘better democracy’.
The Wall of Ideas posed various questions to prompt ideas, including:

1. Who needs to be involved?
2. What culture do we need?
3. What skills do people need?
4. What methods should we use?
5. What needs to happen next?

Participants had access to a number of Idea Cards and were encouraged to note their thoughts, reactions and ideas as the day of workshops and discussions progressed.

The Camper Van of Dreams was also present outside of the MAC to collect thoughts of passers by and participants were invited to give additional thoughts via an evaluation survey.

Below is a summary of the ideas generated by participants and a few thoughts about how to take them forward to create a better democracy in Northern Ireland.
1. Who needs to be involved?

When thinking about who needs to be involved in shaping a better democracy, there was a desire for getting more diverse groups of people engaged. A clear priority was involving young people because ‘listening to them will make them feel involved and get in the habit of voting’. It was felt this should start at a young age through ‘educating children and teaching them the history of Northern Ireland’, and continue through to young adults and students to ensure that their voices are ‘considered by policy makers’. The ideas suggested that the overall aim of involving a wider range of people in democracy in Northern Ireland is to ensure that the political system works for the most marginalized and disadvantaged in society.

2. What culture do we need?

Participants highlighted a need for a culture of participation, transparency and accountability that builds better trust with the government in Northern Ireland.
Idea cards encouraged the need for government to ‘take risks’ and ‘keep innovating’, with one call to mainstream participative democratic processes that work saying that things have been experimented with and ‘piloted’ enough and that there should be no need for more pilots. There was also a call for ‘more democratic innovators’ to assist the growth of better democracy in Northern Ireland.

Attendees envisioned a democratic culture of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ with ‘more opportunities for grassroots’, ‘communities being empowered to have their voices heard’, ‘more opportunities for citizen deliberation’ and ‘more opportunities for citizen participation in problem solving’. One attendee wished for democratic culture where ‘we all see our role in democracy and don’t leave it to ‘them’”, referring to mistrust in political representatives.

There were some suggestions that people and communities themselves needed to be better informed and more active citizens. Specific ideas included people needing ‘to understand that they have rights and the current system is failing them’, campaign groups needing to ‘be more active and support individuals to take political action’ and communities needing to better understand ‘how systems work and how decision affect them’.

On top of a desire for a culture of increased ‘participation’, ‘transparency’, ‘accountability’, and ‘innovation’ there was a strong call for a political culture that moved away from sectarian politics towards all-inclusive politics. Participants thought democracy in Northern Ireland would be improved by: ‘a culture where one ‘side’ winning doesn’t mean another ‘side’ losing’, a culture that ‘concentrates on the future rather than the past’; ‘without the playground politics or sectarian agendas’; a culture that focuses on bringing people together to focus on ‘policy’ and ‘impact’.
3. What skills do people need?

Idea cards pointed to a need for ‘facilitation skills’ in order to help deliver a more participative and deliberative democracy in Northern Ireland.

Some ideas also referenced the need to involve young people in democracy and encouraged ‘politics to be taught in schools’ and to foster democratic skills such as objectivity and rational evidence based thinking.

4. What methods should we use?

Different forms of deliberative democracy were proposed as methods to utilise to help achieve a better democracy in Northern Ireland. While some techniques such as forum theatre, open policy making, participatory budgeting and democratic audits were proposed, there was clearly strong interest in formal spaces for deliberative democracy. These spaces could be similar to the now disbanded Civic Forum which engages with people on policy and is listened to by political representatives. These formal spaces for democracy could also take the form of a people’s forum or assembly with citizens directly inputting: where people could partake in surveys, discussions on proposed legislation, and put forward their own ideas for legislation. It was felt that these forums should be taken seriously by decision makers and should have influence.
Beyond ideas for more participation and deliberation there were also ideas for improving representative democracy such as:

- Votes online for issues, rather than voting for parties
- Sortition – representatives selected by drawing lots
- Taxpayers juries (selected by sortition) to replace elected councillors of the planning committees
- Changing the electoral system
- Direct election for mayors
- Using technology for participation online such as an app

5. What needs to happen next?

Democracy Day participants put forward a host of ideas for what activities should happen next to improve democracy in Northern Ireland.

Ideas submitted included beginning ‘a campaign for greater citizen involvement’. Other ideas included deciding ‘where to make participative democracy interventions’ and calls for citizen participation in planning health and social care services. The idea of holding a citizens’ assembly was proposed a number of times.
A number of ideas focused on better informing citizens and communities on issues such as the importance of voting, people’s rights, and the transparency of Northern Ireland politics (e.g. funding of political parties).

Specific ideas for doing so included taking events like Democracy Day to people and communities at a local level, the use of Forum Theatre and other active methods within communities, and turning “Democracy on Trial” (a lively debate run in a mock courtroom setting) into a play that tours Northern Ireland to increase people’s understanding of their democratic rights.

There were also proposals to inform the public about participative and deliberative democracy by ‘telling stories that would not otherwise be told’ and by ‘making documentaries that matter.’

Participants also suggested some immediate changes they thought needed to be made to government, which included ‘greater transparency’, ‘greater access to policy information’, public services incorporating empowerment approaches to service delivery’ and education of politicians on deliberative and participatory democracy.

Finally, participants suggested a ‘what works centre’ or a ‘think and do tank’ that explored democratic innovation in Northern Ireland and welcomed an approach to help build confidence and identify good practice that would build a better, more deliberative and participative democracy in Northern Ireland. One idea proposed that civil society should take a lead on this by holding deliberative events to show policymakers that they are ‘practical and sensible supplements to representative democracy.’

“What has to happen next?” and Ideas Cards
Other

Below are specific policy suggestions that were heard but which perhaps fall outside the ask of the ‘Wall of Ideas’:

- To see freedom for victims of human trafficking in NI, freedom of movement, speech and to dream
- More equality for people with disabilities across NI
- University fees to be reduced or free
- A 32 county socialist republic
Recommendations

There was clear desire for change in a variety of forms, with the key messages including:

● Focus on involving young people
● Innovate and encourage a culture of participation, deliberation and empowerment
● Develop skills and educate people in politics, rational evidence based thinking and facilitation
● Create formal spaces for public dialogue and debate (e.g. a citizens’ assembly or civic forum) in addition to improved representative democracy structures

This summary has been written by The Democratic Society and Involve, April 2017.