

## **Summary note of Research Advisory Group meeting**

13:00 – 15:00, Monday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2024

### **Present:**

Prof. Emerita Caroline Fennell (Chair), Dr. Nuala Connolly, Dr. Pauline Cullen, Prof. David Kenny, Brian Killoran, Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Orla O'Connor, Dr. Brigid Quilligan (online), Niklas Wilhelmsson.

### Secretariat

Art O'Leary (CEO, for opening of meeting), Dr. Mary-Clare O'Sullivan, Hugh Burgess, Anthony Trindle.

### **Apologies:**

Prof. Kate Dommett, Prof. David Farrell, Adam Lambe, Dr. Paul Redmond.

## **1. Welcome**

- The CEO attended for the opening item of the meeting to welcome members of the Group and thank them for agreeing to participate. He emphasised the priority An Coimisiún is placing on its research function and the important contribution that research will make in informing future reforms and enhancements to Ireland's democracy
- The Chair also welcomed the Group and the opportunity to meet most of them in person for the first time.

## **2. Standing item- conflicts of interest**

- Whilst the Group has no statutory powers and is an Advisory Group, the Chair proposed that it would be best practice to agree a Code of Conduct for the Group and a draft Code was circulated in hard copy.
- The Chair explained that this was not for agreement at the meeting given the Draft Research Programme was to be the main focus for discussion.
- Members were invited to take the draft away and revert with any comments or feedback to the Secretariat.

- It was agreed that in the meantime there should be a standing item for each meeting where members would disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest that they might have associated with an agenda item.
- No conflicts were communicated by members related to the Agenda for the meeting.

### **3. Research scoping plan**

- Members had been provided in advance with the submissions to the consultation process and a scoping paper from the Secretariat to guide the discussion. Kate Dommatt and David Farrell provided written contributions in advance and these had been summarised and were circulated in hard copy. (Adam Lambe and Paul Redmond also subsequently provided written submissions which have been reflected in this note and circulated to members after the meeting).
- Members agreed that the research strand approach in the Draft Research Programme had been well received in the submissions and to proceed on this basis.
- It was also noted that An Coimisiún had committed in the Draft Research Programme to proceeding with two projects as urgent priorities: the National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS) under Strand A (Longitudinal Survey Research & Data Collection) and a Post Electoral Event Review for the March referendums under Strand C (Integrity of Electoral Events).
- Before the discussion on research priorities, Mary-Clare O’Sullivan provided an update on work done to date on these projects. The March referendums had been used as an opportunity to conduct a NEDS pilot study to inform future decisions regarding the NEDS methodology and collect some baseline data regarding democracy in Ireland and political knowledge and engagement.
- The findings are not yet available but once finalised they will be published although the full data sets and codebooks will require checking and cleaning first as is standard for Election Study datasets.
- Regarding the Post Electoral Event Reviews (PEER), Mary-Clare O’Sullivan explained that a PEER on the administration of the March referendums had been conducted as is statutorily required. An Coimisiún members and staff had visited nearly 100 polling stations in each county as part of this exercise with a particular focus on disability

and access issues as is provided for in the legislation. The PEER report will be published no later than 6 months after the referendums.

- In response to a member's query Mary-Clare O'Sullivan also updated the group that Parts 4 and 5 of the Electoral Reform Act 2022 had not been commenced and it was understood this was unlikely before the June elections. However, this does not preclude research being done in these areas pending commencement.
- After these updates, the Chair invited contributions on what should be identified as priorities for the first annual research programme under Strands B (Electoral Law, Electoral Systems and Electoral Infrastructure) & D (Education, Public Engagement and Inclusion) as well as potential additions for years 2 and 3. Some criteria to guide prioritisation had been suggested by the Secretariat prior to the meeting as follows:
  - topic is aligned with ensuring excellent and evidence-based delivery of An Coimisiún's statutory functions (e.g. the constituency review).
  - topic engenders high levels of stakeholder and public interest and engagement
  - topic aligned with achieving international best practice.
  - topic considered a quick win/ 'low hanging fruit'
- It was agreed that these criteria provided a useful basis for considering prioritisation.
- Members were also invited to make some initial suggestions regarding Strand E (Blue Sky/Curiosity-Driven Research) which was agreed to be a potentially exciting opportunity for ground-breaking research although it was acknowledged that the process for developing and delivering this strand would require more specific and detailed consideration.
- The topics highlighted by members during this discussion and in the written papers submitted by members are in a table in the Appendix to this note. The area which received the most discussion was how to increase participation by under-reached and under-represented groups and a large number of research areas under this heading were suggested.

#### **4. Next steps**

- In relation to next steps, the Chair advised that the Secretariat would produce a draft of a research programme detailing specific priorities and topics for Year 1 and a more

indicative list of topics and priorities for two further years informed by the discussion at the meeting and written inputs from members.

- It is hoped that this might be circulated to Group members before the end of April. The RAG might then meet online in May to discuss the circulated draft with a view to agreeing a version to go to An Coimisiún for its June meeting.
- It is currently intended that the next and in-person meeting would be held in July.

### Appendix: Members' Suggested Research Priorities

Strand	Topic	Comments made by members in support
A	National Election & Democracy Study (NEDS)	Members endorsed, welcomed plan to publish and suggested may be need to include alternative methods to explore inclusion, non-voting etc.
	Surveys of minority groups as part of NEDS	
	Candidate studies as part of NEDS	
B	Replacing Bye-Elections	One member recommended as being low hanging fruit.
B	Review of PR-STV	Principally in the context of minority participation.
B	Constituency Review: - Constituency Magnitude - Fixed boundaries	Could also incorporate issues of participation and inclusivity.
B	Electoral Act 1997	Has been sought for many years by some stakeholders.
B	Seanad Reform	Principally in the context of guaranteed minority representation in the Seanad.
B	Use of Posters	
B	Ballot Paper Design	Seen as low hanging fruit. Analysis of why ballots are spoiled could be included.
B	Compulsory Voting	
B	Centralised & Automatic Electoral Register	
B	Online/E-Voting	
B	Political Influence & Future of Citizens' Assemblies	

Strand	Topic	Comments made by members in support
B	Institutional infrastructure/rules needed to prepare for demographic Shifts	
B	McKenna Judgement – operational implications	It was suggested there is a perceived lack of clarity and understanding of the judgement and its implications which could be teased out through research.
B	Money & Politics: Fundraising, Donations & Spending	It was suggested there is a perceived lack of clarity and understanding of the rules and their enforcement.
C	<b>Mis/Disinformation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role of fact-checking</li> <li>- Review of Mis/Disinformation Toolbox</li> <li>- An Coimisiún's impact in combatting Mis/Disinformation</li> <li>- How Mis/Disinformation Spreads</li> <li>- Demand for misinformation as well as supply</li> <li>- Retrospective 2024 Mis/Disinformation Study</li> <li>- Consistent Monitoring of Mis/Disinformation</li> <li>- Use of AI in Political Campaigning and potential for Mis/Disinformation</li> </ul>	A number of suggestions were made regarding mis- and disinformation and these are grouped for ease of reference.
C	Abuse/Harassment of Politicians/Candidates	
C	Review of Political Advertising	
C	Post Electoral Event Reviews	
D	Equality Meta-Analysis	There are a number of small existing studies of under-participation by certain groups. A first step could be to do a meta-analysis of these.
D	Determinants of turnout and participation and tools for enhancing/ increasing these <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity and Nested Quotas</li> <li>• Minority constituencies</li> <li>• Review of existing gender quotas and their impacts</li> <li>• Use of civil society engagement</li> </ul>	

Strand	Topic	Comments made by members in support
D	Postal, Early & Weekend Voting	Extension of postal voting could include international meta-analysis. Security of postal votes would also need to be considered in such research.
D	How to Develop Under-Represented Groups Candidate Pipeline	
D	Review of Under-Represented Groups Candidate Supports	
D	Survey of Party Membership Composition	
D	Enfranchisement of those living outside Ireland	For example, voting at Irish Embassies.
D	Increasing participation of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nomadic population</li> <li>- Migrant population and non-nationals</li> <li>- People with disabilities both visible and invisible</li> <li>- People in direct provision/ international protection</li> <li>- Prison population</li> <li>- People experiencing homelessness</li> <li>- LGBTQ+ people</li> </ul>	Particular issues here include access to the register of electors and electoral information
D	Mechanisms of Minority Engagement & Information Provision	
D	Link Between Youth Work / Non-Formal Education and Political Participation	
D	Reducing the Voting Age	
D	Youth Engagement & Non-Traditional Participation	
D	Review of Politics & Society Leaving Cert Subject	
D	Role of Care in Politics	
E	Central Database of Candidates	
E	Central Database of Historic Election Results	
E	Using the outcomes of the <i>Creating our Future</i> DFHERS	

Strand	Topic	Comments made by members in support
	National Brainstorm as a starting point for exploration	
E	An Coimisiún: Trust & Impartiality, Outreach Activity	
E	Use of Behavioural Science/ Psychology Tools	e.g. Finnish example mentioned positive effects of SMS Reminders on Youth Turnout.