

Summary note of Research Advisory Group meeting

14:00 – 16:00, Wednesday 10th September 2025

Present:

Prof. Emerita Caroline Fennell (Chair), Valeria Aquino (on behalf of Teresa Buczkowska), Dr. Pauline Cullen, Prof. David Farrell, Prof. David Kenny, Adam Lambe, Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Jane-Ann O’Connell, Dr. Paul Redmond, Niklas Wilhelmsson.

Secretariat

Dr. Mary-Clare O’Sullivan, Dr. Catherine Lynch, Dr. Adam Whittle, Hugh Burgess, James Clarke, Ciara O’Riordan, Anthony Trindle.

Apologies:

Prof. Kate Dommett, Orla O’Connor, Dr. Brigid Quilligan.

Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

The Chair welcomed the members of the Group and provided an update to members under matters arising:

- In terms of Group membership, members were advised that Mr. Brian Killoran and Ms. Orla O’Connor were departing the group, they were thanked for their contribution. In addition, the Chair advised members that Ms. Jane-Ann O’Connell and Ms. Teresa Buczkowska had joined the Group.
- The Chair advised that the Electoral Commission had noted the Research Ethics and Integrity policy at its meeting of 13th February 2025, the policy was circulated to RAG members for their records.
- In addition, the minutes of the meeting on Friday, 28th March 2025, were agreed without amendment.

2. Chair’s Business

- The Chair proposed to proceed directly to item 3. Conflicts of interest.

3. Conflicts of interest

- In terms of conflict of interest, the Chair advised that two members had expressed an interest in participating in the New Foundations Research Partnership.

4. Research Programme 2024-2026 Update

- An update on the Research Programme 2024-2026 was circulated in preparation for the meeting; the update included information on the National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS), research on political postering, research on the ballot paper address, and research on reducing the voting age.
- In response, members welcomed progress on the research programme and provided comments on the following areas of the programme:
 - It was noted by members that as research on reducing the voting age includes discussion on forms of political engagement and civic education, it is important to be cognisant of these matters as conditioning variables and the manner in which they are incorporated in formal education.
 - Dr. Mary-Clare O’Sullivan advised that it was An Coimisiún’s intention to examine formal education as a component of civic education in regard to research on reducing the voting age.
 - In addition, research curation was considered, recommendations regarding the circulation of research calls and distribution lists were discussed by members.
 - In respect of this, members discussed the eligibility and inclusion of international researchers, commenting that while public sector research funding is primarily limited to research institutions based on the island of Ireland, research partnerships with academics based outside of the island of Ireland are provided for and would be worth entertaining.

5. Finland’s National Democracy Programme

- Mr. Niklas Wilhelmsson presented to the Group on democratic initiatives implemented in Finland to encourage the electoral participation of under-reached groups, advising that the types of measures being implemented by the Department of Democracy in Finland focused primarily on the following policy areas:
 - voter turnout
 - inclusion of children & young people
 - culture of engagement
 - international democracy cooperation

- An area of interest and discussion for members concerned initiatives intended to promote political engagement outside of the electoral cycle. In respect of this, it was noted that evidence indicates that certain types of engagement, for example, citizens' initiatives, promote electoral participation, particularly as regards younger people.

6(i). Review of electoral participation and inclusivity

- Chair Caroline Fennell introduced the 'Review of electoral participation and inclusivity'.
- Dr. Mary-Clare O'Sullivan commented on the origin of the research project and the intention to determine the areas of information on electoral participation discussed in existing research and the areas of information that required additional research.
- Dr. Catherine Lynch provided members with an overview of the research, advising that the research paper identifies essential variables in electoral participation and established patterns of electoral engagement.
- In commending the research paper, members provided the following comments:
 - In response to the overview of the research members considered additional academic material on voter turnout that would be useful to include in the research.
 - In addition, members advised that it would be useful to include further information on the research methods employed, while ensuring that the research paper remained accessible.
 - In terms of direction, members emphasised that the conclusion from the research indicated that a wider conception of democracy as deliberative and encompassing various forms of political engagement is required.
 - In this regard, members advised that there was valuable research being conducted in extending the democratic and deliberative space which would be of value to An Coimisiún in conducting further research.
 - In conclusion, members agreed that there was value in publishing the paper to ensure public awareness of the research being conducted by An Coimisiún.
- Chair Caroline Fennell advised members that An Coimisiún's researchers would reflect on the direction of the research paper based on members' comments. In conclusion, the Chair invited members to provide written comment on the research to An Coimisiún.

6(ii) – Strand A: NEDS next phase

- Dr. Adam Whittle provided an overview of the National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS), advising members that the intention was to provide an opportunity to reflect on the

NEDS as conducted in connection with electoral events to date, as well as the future of the NEDS.

- Dr. Whittle advised members that the intention was to consider ideas for the NEDS outside of the electoral cycle.
 - In regards an inter-electoral NEDS, one consideration discussed by members was the idea of democracy audit using various democratic indicators as metrics.
 - In addition, members discussed the concept of the electoral life cycle. In this respect, members advised that an inter-electoral NEDS presented an opportunity for An Coimisiún to explore different methods of democratic engagement, particularly those which occur outside of the election period.
 - In terms of methodology, members advised that, in addition to consistent surveys, thematic surveys focusing on democracy and political engagement were an option to consider including in an inter-electoral NEDS.
 - In addition, on methodology, members advised that the incorporation of a longitudinal component to an inter-electoral NEDS would be valuable.
 - In terms of research outreach, members commented that engaging in qualitative research at a local level would enable An Coimisiún to capture political agency.
- In conclusion, the Chair invited members to provide written comment on the NEDS to An Coimisiún.

6(iii) – Postal and advance voting

- Dr. Mary-Clare O’Sullivan advised of An Coimisiún’s intention to commission International IDEA to conduct research on postal and advance voting.
- Dr. O’Sullivan commented that An Coimisiún would establish a research advisory board to ensure that domestic elements of the political process are captured accurately in the research.
 - In response to this, members commented that research engagement with International IDEA was a valuable development.
 - In addition, members advised that establishing research links would require dedicated time and investment.
 - Dr. Mary-Clare O’Sullivan commented that IDEA International would be expected to consult widely in conducting this research.

7 – AOB

- In concluding, the Chair advised members that the following in-person of the Research Advisory Group was expected to be conducted in the first quarter of 2026, with a research update circulated to members in the interim.