



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Shared Island
Initiative

Shared Island Dialogue

Education systems and connecting communities

Introduction

Shared Island Dialogue series

Inclusive dialogue with all communities and political traditions is central to the Government's Shared Island initiative.

The Shared Island Dialogue series has brought together some 3,000 citizens and civic representatives to discuss how cooperation and interaction can help address challenges and take up opportunities that concern and connect the whole island.

The Dialogue series has sought to include as broad a range of experience and perspective as possible, including traditionally underrepresented voices in the Peace Process of women, young people and ethnic minority communities on the island.

Through the Dialogue series, the Government is listening to people's views on a range of common concerns, on how we can work across communities and borders for a shared future, in practical, meaningful ways.

Previous Shared Island Dialogues include [New Generations and New Voices_on the Good Friday Agreement](#) (Nov 2020); [Climate and Environment](#) (Feb 2021); [Civil_Society cooperation](#) (Mar 2021); [Equality _](#)(May 2021); [Economic recovery on_the island](#) (Jun 2021); [Health cooperation](#) (Jul 2021); [the future of Education](#) (Oct 2021); [Tourism_\(Jan 2022\)](#); [Sport](#) (Feb 2022); [Rural_and Community Development](#) (May 2022); [Identities on a Shared Island](#) (June 2022); [Arts and Culture](#) (October 2022); [Tackling Gender based Violence and Abuse](#) (Nov 2022) and [Media representations](#) (Apr 2023).

Reports and highlights from the Shared Island Dialogue series are available online [here](#).

Education systems and connecting communities

A Shared Island Dialogue on Education systems and connecting communities was convened on 16 June 2023, held at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin 7.

Over 100 civil society representatives, Teachers, academics, government and political representatives from North and South participated.

The Dialogue was moderated by Professor Anne Looney, Dean of the Institute of Education at Dublin City University and featured four panel discussions.

The first session 'School Systems and connecting communities'; explored the achievements and shortcomings in the education system over the past 25 years; and the panel discussed opportunities for fostering pluralism within the education system to greater support ethnic, cultural and faith diversity in society.

A second session put the spotlight on younger generations views, and speakers highlighted the importance of student representation in the policy development process.

The third panel discussed 'Vision and actions in education for a shared future?' and looked to the future on how we can better connect communities across the island through education systems and considering strategic opportunities to build on education cooperation on an all-island basis.

The fourth panel heard from political representatives from North and South, who provided their reflections on the day's discussions.

This report sets out the main themes and issues raised at the Dialogue to help inform further development of the Government's Shared Island initiative and as a contribution to broader discussion on how we share the island of Ireland, today and into the future.

Report: Shared Island Dialogue on *Education systems and connecting communities*

Overview:

A wide range of issues were raised discussed at the Dialogue, as reported below. Overall themes that emerged were:

- **Schools and teachers** cannot be in a position of carrying the full burden of “social transformation”, North or South. There is a need for **adequate training and supports for schools and teachers, in addressing current societal concerns, including community divisions, socio-economic disadvantage, identity diversity and meeting special educational needs.**
- The enduring legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, with areas most impacted by conflict, now grappling with increased rates of **educational underachievement, paramilitarism and community control, lower life expectancy, and a lack of employment opportunities.** Education systems alone cannot overcome these deep societal challenges, but they are central to achieving progress. The adverse impact of academic selection on rates of educational achievement in Northern Ireland was highlighted.
- The significance of school systems in connecting communities, both North and South was extensively debated, with a range of views expressed. **Many contributors saw an increase in integrated education as fundamental to overcoming enduring community divisions in Northern Ireland; others saw that communities can be well-connected through other forms of schooling, and in other impactful ways in society.** The fact that schools in the South are comparably organised, with both denominational and non-denominational schools, was highlighted. The value of pluralist school systems and freedom of choice for families was widely noted.
- It was discussed how **society has become more diverse, and this has significant implications for education systems.** There is a need for **more diversity in teaching, and teacher education,** and for mandatory diversity and anti-racism training and supports in schools. The need to consider curricula, so that they are more representative of the experiences and lives of the student body today was noted.
- The **contribution of Irish language education** was also noted, with education through Irish not available for many who would like to send their children to Irish language schools.
- The **importance of meaningful student representation in the education policy development process** was highlighted.
- The value of **greater familiarity and knowledge of the education systems** of both jurisdictions featured strongly in the discussion. The dialogue highlighted the extent to which issues in the education systems are shared across both jurisdictions.

Session 1

School systems and connecting communities

This panel was moderated by Professor Anne Looney and had the following panellists:

- Tracey Reilly – Education Development Worker, Pavee Point
- Tony Gallagher – Queen's University Belfast
- Emer O'Neill – Teacher and RTÉ Presenter
- Most Revd Dr Michael Jackson – Church of Ireland
- Lisa Dietrich – Community Relations in Schools NI

Key themes:

- Panellists reflected on **positive examples of communities connecting through education**, citing initiatives such as the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) and the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot project; Northern Ireland's first shared education campus; as well as diversity and inclusion and anti-racism training for student teachers; and, the work of civil society initiatives like the Spirit of Enniskillen Trust.
- The **achievement gap in Northern Ireland was identified as a key area of concern**. While the achievement gap between Catholic and Protestant students is relatively narrow, the differences in educational attainment between those from disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged backgrounds are acute and wider than in the South or in Great Britain. The impact of academic selection on education attainment rates in Northern Ireland was highlighted. The panel suggested that recent budget cuts may exacerbate these issues further and force difficult decisions around priorities for funding in education. There was a call for regeneration projects to be more inclusive of disadvantaged communities, particularly those in inner-city areas.
- **School attendance, participation, and completion was cited as a significant issue for the Traveller community**, with the panel noting that issues such as isolation, exclusion, and bullying can disrupt the educational experience of pupils from minority groups. In communities where attendance is an issue, schools may not always be the best place to seek to reach young people. Increased investment in community education is therefore essential, including in smaller community groups with strong reputations in their communities.
- It was noted that places in Northern Ireland that were most impacted by the Troubles now experience the most significant rates of **educational underachievement**. Paramilitary and related criminal activity in some of these communities is a significant issue, with a trend for criminals to target society's most vulnerable, including children. There is also a **gap seen in educational achievement for pupils with disabilities**, and disabled pupils are particularly affected by cuts to education support services.
- It was discussed how society has become more diverse, and this has significant implications for education systems. For instance, it is essential to ensure that **minority voices are more represented in teacher education**, including through mandatory diversity and anti-racism training. Schools and education institutions also need support in preventing and responding to instances of racism. There was a call for curricular changes, with the panel noting the need to diversify the history curriculum, in particular to ensure that the syllabus is reflective of the island's diverse student body.

- Participants noted the need for **different kinds of invitations to promote diversity and inclusion in education**. The need for different spaces was also stressed in this regard, with a focus in particular on community spaces. It was suggested that the Shared Island initiative should convene discussions at community levels to reach more people.
- The experience of different regions/areas in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour among young people was raised, with Drogheda noted as an example, with scope for sharing learning with other places.
- The importance of **Irish language education** was also noted, particularly that education through Irish is not available for many of those who would like to send their children to Irish language schools, with education through English the only option in many cases.

Session 2

Spotlight on younger generation views

This session was moderated by Professor Anne Looney and had the following contributors:

- Dermot Hamill - Editor in Chief, YouthVoice NI
- Caitlin Faye Maniti - President, Irish Second-Level Students' Union

Key themes:

- The speakers discussed a range of issues for young people including **the increased representation of student perspectives in education policy development** and the desire for education systems to focus on approaches that increase **pluralism, equity and equality**.
- The panellists cited the impact of funding cuts which may disproportionately disadvantage young people and their ability to enter the workforce. There was a perception that the current education systems in both jurisdictions are primarily focused on supporting students for examinations, but do not necessarily focus on acquiring transferrable skills beyond the exam hall. The panellists emphasised the need to revisit what the purpose of education is and to better equip young people in light of these challenges.
- The **importance of student representation in the policy development process** was discussed, with a more recent positive shift from a “tokenistic” approach to full and valued representation. The establishment of the Student Participation Unit by Minister Foley in the Department of Education as a means to seek out student perspectives and influence policy was commended. On the contrary, while positive advancements in student representation in Northern Ireland were noted, it was felt that attempts to increase student perspectives to shape policy lag behind those in the South.
- Key themes included the importance of **community education** and the need to focus on practices to increase equity - as well as equality - to improve education outcomes. The moderator recalled the discussion about the difficulties of placing responsibility on children to effect social change, but highlighted the possibilities when children are provided with **appropriate support and resources** to advocate for their interests.
- The desire for a more integrated education system in Northern Ireland, that could **celebrate community differences**, was expressed, noting the current cost of the education system due to ‘inherent divisions’. For Ireland, the desire for a more inclusive and equitable education system that addresses class and geographic differences built to support students to succeed, was echoed.
- Other themes were the lack of knowledge of the education systems in the other jurisdiction, particularly in the post-Good Friday Agreement generation; the differentiation between equality and equity; and, a desire for increased pluralism in education systems, both North and South.

Session 3

Vision and actions in education for a shared future?

This panel was moderated by Professor Anne Looney and had the following panellists:

- Peter Osborne - Chair, Integrated Education Fund
- Andrew Brown - Chair, Transferor Representatives' Council and Lecturer, Stranmillis University College
- Alan Hynes - Chief Executive - Catholic Education Partnership
- Sandra Irwin-Gowran - Head of Education and Development, Educate Together
- Dr. Martin Brown - Head of School of Policy and Practice at DCU Institute of Education

Key themes:

- The panel discussed a range of concerns around **achieving more inclusive education systems and policy**; aspirations, perspectives and challenges for integrated education in Northern Ireland; and, the importance of training and support for teachers.
- The **relatively low levels of integrated education in Northern Ireland featured strongly** in the discussions, with different views expressed. Currently, 68 integrated schools exist across Northern Ireland, with only 8% of the school population enrolled in integrated schools.
- **Many contributors saw an increase in integrated education as fundamental to overcoming enduring community divisions in NI; others disagreed and saw that communities can be well-connected through other forms of schooling, and in other impactful ways in society.** The fact that schools in the South are comparably organised, with both denominational and non-denominational schools, was highlighted. The value of pluralist school systems and freedom of choice for families was widely noted.
- One of the **obstacles to more integrated education in Northern Ireland put forward was the segregated nature of housing, communities, and politics** along community/religious lines. Observations of the increased secularisation of Northern Ireland, particularly in younger demographics, prompted discussions about the scope for reform of school systems to reflect societal change.
- Other points of discussion included: education policy should provide for **multiple and inclusive pathways for education at all levels**, particularly focusing on **points of transition** where attrition levels are highest; application of the **provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** on all policies of education; and, considering the **impacts of Artificial Intelligence** for education.
- The need for **greater familiarity and knowledge of the education systems** of both jurisdictions featured strongly in the discussion. The panellists noted the misperception in the North that the education system in Ireland is largely without challenge and that the discussions during this dialogue highlighted the extent to which issues in the education systems are shared across both jurisdictions to varying degrees.

Session 4

Political perspectives

The day's concluding session was moderated by Professor Anne Looney and had the following panellists:

- Fergus O'Dowd TD, Fine Gael and Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement
- Rose Conway Walsh TD, Sinn Féin and Member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement
- Senator Erin McGreehan, Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration
- Claire Hanna MP, SDLP
- Kate Nicholl, MLA, Alliance Party

Key themes:

- The **potential for young people to effect change in education systems**, with changes introduced to the Leaving Certificate following student activism during the pandemic noted as a prime example.
- **Debates around integrated education in Northern Ireland** featured strongly, with some members of the panel expressing strong support for integrated schooling.. Others noted the complexity of education choices, parents may choose schools out of convenience, or reputation rather than on faith/denomination grounds. It is important to ensure that all schools whether integrated or not, are not “masking” ongoing community issues. There is also a need for integration efforts to go beyond schools – to include housing, workplaces, and sports – to encourage genuine interaction across communities.
- **Academic selection** in Northern Ireland was another key theme raised on the panel. Academic selection creates ‘winners and losers’ and results in social segregation at an early stage, with primary education geared towards the eleven-plus transfer test from the outset. Despite concern about this system, parents are unlikely to want to experiment with a new process for their own children and are instead inclined to send them to established schools with strong records of achievement.
- Participants discussed issues relating to **education access for asylum seekers**. The panel called for further supports in this regard, including interventions such as free bus passes, to make it easier for asylum seekers to attend school and remain in the same school if relocated.
- The panel discussion also raised the scope to **align education initiatives with anti-poverty strategies** across the island and to reassess how educational attainment is measured to include learning in the community development setting, particularly for those in marginalised communities who are at times harder to reach through schooling. There was a call for interventions to address the fact that pupils from more affluent backgrounds progress to third level at much higher rates than those from disadvantaged communities.

- There was a view raised that there are **too many pilot educational projects**, North and South. Such successful projects should be mainstreamed to stop “reinventing the wheel”. Should pilot projects be found to not work, failure should be accepted.
- The **lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly** was noted as having a real impact on communities across Northern Ireland, with the panel noting for instance recent reductions in funding to primary schools for nurture classes – which will affect vulnerable children – among other recent budgetary cuts.
- The North West Tertiary Education Cluster, which involves four education institutes in the North West, was highlighted as a **positive North South initiative**. There was a critique of what participants termed “southern smugness” in Ireland when it comes to issues in Northern Ireland, including in relation to education.
- There was also a critique of the Irish education system as an “exam factory,” which participants said can knock the joy out of learning. There was also a call for **increased focus on social, personal, and health education** to teach young people how to be better as people, rather than a strong focus on passing exams.

Event Contributor Bios



Moderator Anne Looney, DCU Institute of Education

Anne Looney is the Executive Dean of Dublin City University's Institute of Education Ireland's largest faculty of education. She also leads DCU's engagement with the Further Education and Training Sector. From 2001 until 2016 she was the CEO of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the agency responsible for curriculum and assessment for early years, primary and post-primary education in Ireland. Anne also held the position of Interim CEO at the Higher Education Authority until March 2017.

Her current research interests include assessment policy and practice, curriculum, teacher identity and professional standards for teachers and teaching. She has also published on religious, moral and civic education, and education policy.

Anne has been a team member for reviews for the OECD on school quality and assessment systems and acts as a technical expert for the European Commission on projects in initial teacher education. She is the current president of the International Professional Development Association.

In 2020 Anne became the first woman to be appointed to the management committee of the GAA. In addition to her academic and policy work in Ireland and abroad on curriculum, assessment and teacher education, she is a regular contributor to media on education and social issues and tweets at @annelooney.

Session 1 – Education systems and connecting communities – School systems and connecting communities today?



Tracey Reilly, Education Development Worker, Pavee Point

Tracey Reilly is a community worker and key staff member of Pavee Point's education programme: Transforming Traveller Education from access to outcomes which seeks to link lived experience with the systemic change essential for equal Traveller and Roma education outcomes. Tracey is an early school leaver who previously worked in a number of jobs and continued her education through various routes including a Pavee Point sponsored return to learning programme in association with Maynooth University where she went to achieve first class honours in her professional Bachelor of Social Science (Community and Youth Work) degree.

Tracey is passionate about human rights equality and education and using collective community work approaches to progress them. As a Traveller woman she sees the particular importance of education both for young people and adult learners for progressing Traveller rights.



Tony Gallagher, Queens University

Tony Gallagher is a Professor of Education at Queen's University where previously he has held the posts of Pro Vice Chancellor, Faculty Dean of Research for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Head of the School of Education.

His two main research interests lie in the role of education in divided societies, and the democratic and civic role of higher education. For the past 20 years he has carried out research and development work on collaborative school networks, including the shared education initiative in Northern Ireland.

He has worked for many years for the Council of Europe, largely on higher education issues, and recently contributed to a project of the European Wergeland Centre on tackling radical extremism through education.



Emer O'Neill, Teacher & RTE Presenter

Emer O'Neill is a Teacher, RTE presenter, activist, author, and mother of two. She was born and raised in Ireland and is Irish/Nigerian and a Bray Co. Wicklow native. Emer has a BA in Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership and Administration. She has 13 years teaching experience and is currently on career break from her Physical Education and Transition Year Coordinator position at North Wicklow Secondary School in Bray.

She is a qualified Basketball, Athletics and Swim Coach and was the head coach of the Under 20's Woman's Irish Basketball Team who in 2015 competed in the European Championships.

Emer is a huge advocate for promoting positive body image and self-love in girls and women. She currently has a TV show on RTE2 about girls in sport and challenges the question of why girls drop out of sport during the ages of 12-14. She is also an anti-racism activist and works to bring awareness to the lack of diversity in the media, state jobs, positions of leadership and in our education system here in Ireland.

She helped write the Anti Racism CPD professional development course with the Irish National Teachers Organisation and is the author of a children's book called "The Same but Different" a tale about a little girl overcoming her self-doubt and journey to embrace her differences and uniqueness.



Most Revd Dr Michael Jackson, Church of Ireland

The Most Revd Dr Michael Geoffrey St Aubyn Jackson has been Archbishop of Dublin, Bishop of Glendalough, and Primate of Ireland since 2011.

He was [ordained](#) a [deacon](#) in 1986 and a [priest](#) in 1987. His first pastoral appointment was as a [curate](#) at Zion Parish, [Dublin](#), and he also lectured at [Trinity College, Dublin](#) and the [Church of Ireland Theological College](#) (now Institute). His next appointment was as College Chaplain at [Christ Church, Oxford](#), from 1989 to 1997. He returned to Ireland and served as the [Incumbent](#) of St Fin Barre's Union and [Dean of Cork](#), from 1997 to 2002. He was elected [Bishop of Clogher](#) in November 2001 and consecrated at [St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh](#) on 6 March 2002. On 2 February 2011, he was elected [Archbishop of Dublin](#) and [Bishop of Glendalough](#).

Archbishop Jackson has held many positions in the Church of Ireland. He plays an active role in the wider [Anglican Communion](#), especially in the areas of ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. He also serves as [Co-chairman](#) of the Anglican-Lutheran [Porvoo Communion](#).



Lisa Dietrich, Community Relations in Schools NI

Lisa Dietrich is the CEO of the peacebuilding charity, Community Relations in Schools (CRIS) that has been operating since 1984. Lisa has worked at CRIS since 2002, after her studies at Ulster University, having achieved a master's degree in communication, PR and Advertising.

Awarded in 2022 with an OBE for her services to peace education and community reconciliation, Lisa is committed to efforts that counter the 'separated' nature of the education system in Northern Ireland and engender greater participation in peace building work at the grass roots level by utilising schools as focal points for transformation.

Lisa believes it is essential to present narratives that counter polarisation and that share good news stories that inspire hope and celebrate diversity and our common humanity.

Lisa is a mediator and has further studies in business management and intercultural facilitation in divided societies. Her experience also includes developing the capacity of non-profit organisations and supporting their sustainability.

Other loves include being a Mummy, taking walks in mountains with her dog Stella, and dreams of getting back into painting – all of which help create the necessary balance in life.

Session 2 – Education systems and connecting communities – Spotlight on younger generation views



Dermot Hamill, Editor in Chief, Youth Voice NI

Dermot Hamill is a young political commentator, a former member of Youth Parliament and host of Youth Voice NI, Ireland's leading youth political podcast. Hamill also is a university debater, representing Queen's in the Irish Times Debate, earning the 2023 runner up, the most successful Queen's result in half a century.



Caitlín Faye Maniti, President, Irish Second level Students Union

Caitlin is from Letterkenny, Co Donegal where she attended Loreto Secondary school for six years, including a very active TY.

It was in TY where she discovered her ambition to join the ISSU, she attended the Annual Assembly (AGM) and got involved from there. Caitlin worked her way up, running as a student council rep for her school, then county representative for Donegal, and now as a national representative as the main spokesperson of the ISSU. She was delighted to be elected president last spring, taking office last summer.

Caitlin is currently taking a gap year to fulfil her role as Uachtarán on a full-time basis and intends to go to university next year; she has deferred an offer from Maynooth University to study entrepreneurship.

Session 3 – Education systems and connecting communities – Vision and actions in education for a shared future?



Peter Osborne, Chair, Integrated Education Fund

Peter has been involved in reconciliation work most of his adult life and undertakes a range of strategies, plans and interventions for public agencies and with the community sector.

Peter is currently a board member of the International Fund for Ireland and of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

His voluntary commitments include being chair of the Integrated Education Fund and chair of the Centre for Cross Border Studies. He is chair of the Northern Ireland board of Remembering Srebrenica.

Peter has chaired the Community Relations Council and was a commissioner and chair of the Parades Commission for a combined period of over ten years.

He served as a member of Castlereagh Borough Council 1993-2005 but has had no political involvement since then. He was a member of the BIG Lottery Fund. Peter founded and chaired Landmark East with the East Belfast Partnership (now East side Property), a property-based social enterprise in East Belfast winning an Aisling Award; and later has received an award for promoting inter faith understanding.



Alan Hynes, Chief Executive, Catholic Education Partnership

Alan Hynes is the Chief Executive Officer of the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP). Appointed to the role in June 2022, he previously served as the Director of St. Senan's Education Office, Limerick, where he was responsible for oversight of the governance of over five hundred Catholic Primary schools in four dioceses, and before then as an Education Advisor in Catholic Primary Schools' Management Association. He has a background in business and politics.



Martin Brown, Head of School of Policy & Practice, DCU Institute of Education

Dr Martin Brown is Head of School of Policy and Practice and Codirector at EQI – The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection based at DCU, Institute of Education, Ireland. He gained his PhD in Educational Evaluation and Comparative Education Studies and his master's degree from DCU.

He is an Expert Evaluator and rapporteur for the European Commission Horizon Funding stream, the recipient of the DCU Presidents Gold Medal awards for Civic Engagement, Research Impact and Teaching and Learning and has twice received the John Coolahan SCOTENS award for outstanding research into Teacher Education, North and South. Further details can be found at selfevaluation.eu



Andrew Brown, Chair Transferor Representatives' Council and Lecturer, Stranmillis University College

Andy Brown was a former Head of Drama at Ballymena Academy and is currently a Principal Lecturer in Teacher Education, Academic Head of Arts & Humanities, Head of the BEd Primary degree and a member of the Academic Leadership Team in Stranmillis University College. He has wide experience of strategic leadership and policy work and has been a representative on various bodies locally and nationally.

He has sat on the Court of the University of Ulster, the Board of Directors of the Ulster Association of Youth Drama, was Vice-Chair of the N. Ireland Teachers' Council and a member of the Department of Education's Strategic Advisory Group on post-primary schooling. As a member of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee and several high-profile working groups, Dr Brown has co-authored various schemes for teachers. In 2007, he became the youngest N. Ireland President, and in 2010 the youngest National President in the 127-year history of the Association of Teachers & Lecturers and was instrumental in creating the conditions which led to the formation of Europe's largest teaching union, the National Education Union.

Dr Brown is active in the local community as Chair of the Board of Governors of Broughshane Primary School, and in the church locally and nationally. He was a long-serving member of the Youth Board of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and now sits on the PCI's Council for Public Affairs, holds the Chair of its State Education Committee and represents the denomination on the Executive of the Transferor Representatives' Council, being appointed in 2019 as its Vice-Chair and 2022 as its Chair. In March 2017, Dr Brown was appointed as a director of the newly formed Controlled Schools' Support Council and, in May, as the Council's Vice-Chairperson. In June 2018 he was elected a Founding Fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching for his "significant contribution to education".



Sandra Irwin - Gowran, Head of Education and Development, Educate Together

Sandra Irwin-Gowran is Head of Education and Development with Educate Together, a diverse network of 117 schools across 21 counties in Ireland, ranging from small rural primary schools to large urban secondary schools. Educate Together schools are committed to being equality-based, learner-centred, co-educational, and democratically run. In this role she has managed the development of the organisations Ethos Quality Framework, and provision for Ethical Education to be taught from 6-18 years. In addition, she develops and manages innovative school-based projects such as the Educate Together Nurture project.

Sandra taught as a second-level teacher in Dublin's Liberties as well as rural Zimbabwe before joining the Curriculum Development Unit of then City of Dublin VEC (now ETB) where she coordinated educational projects related to social justice, citizenship education and human rights. She coordinated Ireland's response to Citizenship through Education in 2005 (Council of Europe Year) and developed guidelines for school community partnerships in social justice education.

Before coming to Educate Together Sandra was Director of Education Policy with GLEN where she collaborated with the Department of Education and Skills and key education partners in developing policy and practice to support LGBTQ+ young people in schools. During this time Sandra was a member of the Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Working Group which resulted in the Department of Education and Skills National Anti-Bullying Action Plan. Her time in GLEN afforded her the opportunity to work as a core member of the Yes Equality Marriage Campaign that led the campaign for civil marriage equality in the republic of Ireland in 2015.

Sandra's second-level school days were really important to her, as were some key teachers at that time. It is the potential of the student-teacher relationship to support students to flourish that continues to motivate her interest in schools and the education system.

Fergus O'Dowd TD, Fine Gael & Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on the Good Friday Agreement



Fergus O'Dowd is the Fine Gael spokesperson on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. He has represented the constituency of Louth as a TD since 2002 and is the Chairperson of the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. He is also a member of a number of Oireachtas Committees, including Housing, Planning, Community, and Local Government; Irish Language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands; and Housing and Homelessness. Fergus is formerly the Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources and Environment, Community & Local Govt, with responsibility for the New Era Project.

He has held a number of senior positions on the Fine Gael Frontbench and is a former Senator and Mayor of Drogheda.

Claire Hanna MP, SDLP Spokesperson for Europe & International



Prior to elected politics, Claire worked in international development, in a range policy and education roles, taking her to parts of the world such as Haiti, Zambia and Bangladesh. Her passion for international development and humanitarian affairs has endured and is a major inspiration to her political interests and activities.

Claire was first elected as a Councillor for Belfast City Council in 2011 for the Balmoral DEA, having been subsequently re-elected in 2014. In 2015, she was co-opted into the Northern Ireland Assembly as an MLA and re-elected in 2016 and 2018 until her election to Parliament in 2019.

In Council, she brought the motion that led to Belfast becoming the first Living Wage Council in Northern Ireland – paying a fair wage to all employees – and restricted use of Zero Hour Contracts. She also successfully introduced measures to combat the rise of predatory payday lending. She fought to amend Belfast City Council procurement policies to allow exclusion of companies engaged in tax evasion.

Continuing her passion for international development issues, she set up and chaired the first All Party Group on International Development. In addition, Claire introduced legislative proposals to increase the provision of free childcare to 20 hours and sought to introduce a law to protect mothers breastfeeding in public. Claire now sits on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster. She is the SDLP's Spokesperson for Europe and International Affairs.

Claire is mother to Eimear, Aideen and Niamh, and married to husband Donal. She is an avid reader, a regular Park Run participant and volunteer, and a regular punter in Northern Ireland's thriving arts scene.

Rose Conway Walsh TD, Sinn Féin & Member of the Oireachtas Committee on the Good Friday Agreement



Rose Conway-Walsh TD, Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Public Expenditure and Reform was first elected to Mayo County Council in 2009, making history as the first woman Councillor elected in Belmullet since the foundation of the State. She went on to retain her seat for West Mayo at the 2014 local election, topping the poll with 2,078 first preference votes.

Rose led the Sinn Féin team in the Seanad (2016 – 2020). She was a permanent member of the Finance & Public Expenditure Joint Oireachtas Committee and the Agriculture, Food & Marine Committee.

Rose is the first Sinn Féin TD elected in Mayo since 1920s when she was elected to the Dáil in February 2020. She now serves on the Committee of Education, Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Rose is a member of Sinn Féin's Ard Comhairle. As Frontbench TD she represents the Party Nationally and Internationally. She holds a BA in Public Management and a MA in Local Government and has a broad range of experience working for multi-national companies and not-for-profit organisations in Britain and Ireland.



Kate Nicholl MLA Northern Irish politician who is an MLA for Belfast South and who served as the 79th Lord Mayor of Belfast from June 2021 until her election as an MLA in May 2022. She is a member of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. She was the first Lord Mayor in recent history not to be born in the United Kingdom or Ireland.



Senator Erin McGreehan, Fianna Fail spokesperson on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration.

Erin McGreehan grew up in Castletown, Cooley, Co. Louth. She went to school locally in Mullaghbuoy NS and Bush Post Primary. Erin continued her studies in the National University of Ireland, Galway where she undertook a Degree in Public and Social Policy, followed by a postgraduate Bachelor of Laws. After that, Erin completed a Masters in European Economics and Public Affairs in University College Dublin.

Erin was elected in May of 2019 on her first Election Campaign to Louth County Council and in June 2020, she was nominated to the 26th Seanad by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin. Her priorities for her term of Office is to highlight inequalities for minorities, people with disabilities and the lower-waged. Brexit is a huge threat to our economy, and she will work to help mitigate the costs of Brexit. The strengthening of our towns and villages making them more sustainable and attractive and safer for communities is of huge importance to Erin. Growing up on a small farm, Erin understands and respects the importance of our agricultural industry. The rural way of life is an important cultural part of this country and needs to be protected.

Erin is a mother of four young boys and herself and her partner Donal run a small Engineering business. She and her family are active members of her local athletic club, Glenmore AC.

As part of the Shared Island Initiative
gov.ie/sharedisland



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