

CA – Chair’s Video 1 on Pathways to Recommendations

Since we began our work last year, we have had fascinating presentations on a wide range of gender equality issues. We heard from experts, from advocacy groups and from people sharing their own experience with us. You have discussed all of this information in small groups, comparing views with enthusiasm and energy, bringing your own life experience to the wider discussion of what we could do to advance gender equality in Ireland. I see this as the first part of our mandate – to consider a list of issues, to listen to and exchange views.

We are now entering the second stage which will involve taking a position on these issues and reporting back to the Oireachtas with our recommendations.

I know that some of you would have liked more time to go deeper into the topics we have discussed. As a former policy person I can identify with that feeling. However, the purpose of this Citizens’ Assembly is not to answer all the questions, to do deep analysis or to draft new laws or policies. Our role is to have an informed debate and then tell our political representatives what this representative group of citizens thinks about the issues.

Previous Assemblies have shown how powerful, and even life changing, this process can be. In recent times, we have seen how a representative group of citizens, equipped with the facts, can steer opinion and decisions in a way that the regular political process does not.

SLIDE 2

Getting to where we are today has not been easy. We have had to contend with two big challenges: a very wide ranging agenda and the Covid dictated move online.

Our agenda has been vast. Previous Assemblies were asked some more specific questions – do you want to repeal the 8th amendment or do you want to allow marriage equality? They were also asked more general questions such as how to respond to the challenges of an ageing population or how to make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change.

SLIDE 3

In contrast, as you can see from this slide, parts of our mandate are quite detailed and have required us to go into greater specificity and depth than our predecessors.

We have also had the challenge of moving online. Most of us wish we could have gone on meeting face to face. The informal chats over breakfast, in coffee breaks and in the evenings were exactly the kind of opportunities for discussing and challenging each other that we Irish so enjoy. But we have accepted the current reality and adapting.

As you have seen, we have tried to maximise the time you have for discussion in each session. I think some of you have also enjoyed the opportunities for informal conversation between our formal sessions. We all know that working online inevitably means we have less time overall and less time to engage as much as some would like with each other. Judging by the feedback you have given us, I can see that your views are taking shape and that trends are emerging on some issues across the different discussion groups. This is not to say that you have yet agreed on anything as a group, but just that I can see some clear trends and messages emerging.

I decided to make this video in advance of our next meeting because I want to ask you to prepare for a different kind of participation from now on as we move from discussion to preparing for decisions. In all likelihood, we will not be able to meet again in person so we have to take the constraints of working online into account in planning how to adopt our recommendations.

SLIDE 4

We have three meetings left before we conclude our work. On 13 February we will focus on the Constitution and I have prepared a separate video to explain how we propose to organise that meeting. Then in March we will have one session on gender based violence and one session where we will begin to discuss how to prepare our recommendations and voting. Finally, on 17/18 April we plan to finalise our recommendations and you will vote on them.

SLIDE 5

How will we prepare our recommendations? I think we can all agree that we need to send a clear message on what we think to the Oireachtas. In all likelihood this will be a mix of principles and specific proposals on a variety of issues. We have covered a lot of ground in our meetings but now we come to the point where we need to prioritise. This will mean deciding on what you think are the most important messages. Through your votes on different issues, we will also see how much support each recommendation actually has. We also need to prioritise for two further reasons – to have the kind of impact we want our messages to have, we need to be focussed and short. We also have to deal with the reality of working online which means much tighter time frames for discussion than if we were meeting in person.

Together with the secretariat, I have looked at how previous assemblies prepared for finalising their recommendations and voting on them. The Chair and Secretariat prepared draft ballot papers in advance and circulated them to the members for their consideration. They then decided in 3 steps to

- Agree on the issues to be included in a ballot
- To agree on the wording of the ballot
- And finally to vote on what they had agreed.

SLIDE 6

In our meetings we have discussed gender related parts of our Constitution as well as old and new laws and several policies. I propose to organise our main recommendations into 4 sections. These will cover

- Changes to the Irish Constitution
- Changes to our laws including the possibility of proposing new laws
- Changes to policy/proposals for new policies
- Changes to attitudes and behaviour.

Each of these sections is equally important and there is no ranking between them. Just think – if the attitudes of our society were genuinely based on belief in and commitment to gender equality, we would not need to debate most of the issues which have occupied us in the past year.

SLIDE 7

On this slide you can see an example of a ballot paper taken from the last Assembly. As you can see, they grouped a range of proposals under a general message of where they felt the State should take a leadership role.

SLIDE 8

Building on all of that experience I have decided to follow a similar approach because I think it will work well for us. We have been busy analysing the reports of the feedback sessions, the notes we have from the breakout groups and your responses to all of our surveys. This helps us to build up a picture of the views and positions that are emerging.

SLIDE 9

In addition to your input, we also need to consider the impacts of potential costs and legal requirements. We have our Expert Advisory Group on hand to help with that. We will put all of this together in papers that we will send to you in advance of our March and April meetings.

SLIDE 10

Based on your reactions to these first drafts we will then prepare revised versions. Where it is clear that there is a broad consensus it will be relatively straight forward to formulate a ballot paper setting out a recommendation. Where views are less clear, or where there are different views, we will need to discuss during our March and April meetings.

SLIDE 11

Through discussion between us a prioritised list will emerge and can then become the actual ballot papers on which you will vote on Sunday 18 April. We are exploring options for online voting and I am confident we will be able to manage this. The model we choose will be the one that gives us timeliness, security and ease of use and we will take particular care to ensure the integrity of the vote itself.

I want to ask for your help in making all of this a process we can manage within the constraints of working online. In practice this unfortunately means that we

cannot spend long hours discussing all the options and we cannot have too many options because we simply will not have sufficient time. I do not think that these limitations will restrict the scope or impact of our recommendations, it is more a matter of focussing on the most important aspects.

Having said all of this, I want to emphasise that you are the Assembly and it is up to you to decide what you recommend. It will be very important that you take ownership of the ballot. The secretariat and I are here to facilitate your choices.

SLIDE 12

As I mentioned, our 13 February session will be focussed on the Constitution. This will be a trial session to see how we can agree to move towards agreeing on a ballot paper. There are some very important questions relating to the Constitution but they can be formulated in a small number of questions. I will cover how we propose to do this in my next video.