

Thematic Analysis Report on Consultation on Constitutional Change and Irish Unity

An analysis of views, experiences, research and evidence on views of constitutional change and the implications on the Council area and the wider North West Area.

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Thematic Analysis Report on Views of Constitutional Change and its Implications for the Council Area and the Wider North West Area

This report presents the findings of a thematic analysis of 242 free text responses drawn from the results of a public consultation exercise (conducted by Derry City and Strabane District Council) on constitutional change and the implications for the Council area and the wider north-west. Participants were asked to provide their views on constitutional change based on the prompt “Please provide us with your views, experiences, research and evidence on views of constitutional change and the implications on the Council area and the wider North West Area”.

The responses were first screened, and duplicates and single word responses were removed. Then a ‘Thematic Analysis’ was conducted to identify and highlight the key themes that emerged across the responses. Each main theme was then explored in terms of its constituent parts and more detailed subthemes were developed. These were described and direct quotes (with participant number in parenthesis) were used as supporting evidence to capture the diverse perspectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of the themes. The following main themes emerged.

Main Themes

1. Support for Irish Unity – Emphasised aspirations for reunification, and the associated economic and social benefits.
2. Economic and Infrastructural Development – Focused on the economic potential and infrastructural improvements expected from constitutional change.
3. Governance and Political Reform – Explored demands for transparent, accountable, and effective government structures.
4. Social Justice and Historical Grievances – Addresses the need to rectify inequalities and acknowledge past injustices.
5. Concerns and Opposition to Change – Highlights fears about economic uncertainty, identity preservation, and political instability.

Theme 1: Support for Irish Unity

Many participants expressed support for Irish unity, referring to potential economic, social, and cultural benefits. Many viewed reunification as an opportunity to address inequalities that have been seen to be caused by partition, restore Ireland's position within the European Union, and create new and effective governance structures. For some, Irish unity was proposed as a way toward fairness, equality, and sovereignty; there were an emphasis on inclusivity and democratic planning to ensure a successful transition to Irish unity.

Participants identified the partition of Ireland as an important cause of economic underdevelopment and inequality, and this was felt most strongly in the North West region. One participant argued that "...the North West of Ireland will always suffer deprivation as long as Ireland is partitioned" (P27). Others described the border as an obstacle to economic growth and social cohesion. One participant noted, "There would a greater opportunity to develop tourism in the Derry/Donegal area. The invisible border even hinders people going both directions. There would be a greater opportunity to share our emergency services and provide a more rapid response for our citizens. The border has divided our communities and removal of the border could be a step towards bringing us together" (P84).

Brexit featured prominently in participants' views, with many citing it as a political event that has intensified support for unity. For example one participant stated that "...Irish unity is a must given the mess Brexit has left us in" (P66) and another stated, "Given the colossal impact of Brexit on the North West and the overwhelming dissatisfaction felt by many at the current state of affairs, it is only logical that more and more people are now considering the prospect of a new and united Ireland" (P90).

The economic consequences of Brexit, including the loss of access to EU markets and funding, were highlighted as major reasons for reunification: "Irish Unity would allow us back into the EU and would be a huge benefit to the people of the west" (P160). Support for unity was often tied to aspirations for fairness and social cohesion. One respondent stated that, "...it must serve us all, Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. Respect must be shown to those with an allegiance to Britain too" (P9).

Subtheme 1.1: Desire for Reunification

Many participants articulated a strong desire for reunification, emphasising the potential for it to deliver fairness, equality, and independence. For these respondents unity was considered as both a practical necessity and an emotional aspiration. One participant stated, "I personally believe Ireland should be reunited... I feel the social and economics of being as one are excellent" (P1). Brexit was also identified as a motivating factor ("I am in support of a united Ireland especially since Brexit" (P26)). Others framed unity as something

that could correct perceived historical injustices (“As an Irish republican, I want to see Ireland rightfully reunite as one sovereign nation” (P40)).

Subtheme 1.2: Cultural and National Identity

Cultural and national identities emerged as an important reason for supporting reunification. Many viewed the existing border as an artificial divide that failed to reflect shared heritage and connections. One participant stated, “Ireland is a very small island. It is natural that they should be united under one form of rule. Business, culture, flourish from the grassroots of the piece of earth. It was artificially divided by a country that had no right to do so. The purpose for the division, a Protestant country for a Protestant people has disappeared. Ireland including the Northern bit are becoming multiethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious” (P13). Several participants emphasised that cultural integration was already happening. A participant observed, “Daily life already ignores any border, we use resources already both sides of the border” (P2).

Subtheme 1.3: Calls for Citizens’ Assemblies and Referendums

Participants stressed the need for structured democratic processes, including Citizens’ Assemblies and referendums, to ensure that any constitutional change would be inclusive, and properly designed and implemented. One respondent said, “I support constitutional change, a referendum on Irish Unity, and want the Irish Government to establish an all-Ireland Citizens Assembly” (P7). Another emphasized the importance of a considered approach to the process: “We can’t have a repeat of the Brexit debacle, where people are voting without all of the information” (P123).

Theme 2: Economic and Infrastructural Development

Economic growth and the development of infrastructure emerged as central issue for many participants who advocated for constitutional change. Many responses identified the economic inefficiencies that have been created by partition, including duplication of services, ongoing lack of significant investment, and failure to plan and implement plans for regional development. Participants argued that Irish unity could address these issues by streamlining governance, attracting international investment, and improve the existing (and develop new) infrastructure.

Participants described the current economic framework as neglectful of border regions, particularly the North West. One participant stated, “It is not practical or efficient for Derry/Strabane and Donegal to have to push separately for development. The running of two different systems in these poorly developed regions themselves are inefficient, both in terms of financial resource and physical resource. As one voice, the regions can work

together to have a unified strategic development plan for the region. An analysis of the strengths and weakness in each area and how to best combine resources, will allow a streamline of the plan so that resources can be directed to the areas where they are really required. This togetherness will carry greater weight to push for the required public and private investment.” (P2). Another participant highlighted the relationship between infrastructure and economic growth, “Better infrastructure to the NW, better roads and rail networks in the future = better paying jobs and businesses coming to the North West. Better paying jobs = better quality of life with less pressure and stress to pay for holidays and things to do for families. The northwest has been left behind by Westminster....as a United Ireland we would prosper, and everyone on the island would get the benefits of this.” (P88).

Subtheme 2.1: Regional Disparities and Marginalization

Participants identified the economic marginalisation of border regions, emphasising the poorer infrastructure and lack of investment and services caused by partition. Many argued that reunification could address these inequalities, “The border imposed on this island not only fractures economic relationships but also community relations as well. It is well documented that the border regions remain the most underdeveloped economic regions on the island of Ireland. It is very clear to the residents on both sides of the border in the north west in particular. It is also demonstrated by economists such as David McWilliams that not only has border regions fared poorly but so too has the economy of the north of Ireland since partition. The north of Ireland, at the time of partition, was the industrial centre of the island but since that time it has continued to decline lagging well behind the growth of the Republic of Ireland”. (P190). Another respondent added, “Since we've had partition the economic potential of this country has been limited, we here in the North West have been left behind for so long and that has had a detrimental on our economic development. A United island has the potential to create new opportunities and this can only benefit the people of the island of Ireland” (P192).

Subtheme 2.2: Infrastructure and Transportation Links

Investment in infrastructure, particularly transportation networks, was identified as a critical area for development as part of reunification. Participants pointed out the poor state of roads and public transportation, especially in the North West - “Infrastructure, like the A5 and railway connections could be dealt with much quicker and efficiently than the current snail like progress we are receiving. As we all know better infrastructure is a must if we're to increase the skilled and better paid jobs that is so lacking in the NW region” (P86). Another participant remarked, “Our public transport infrastructure is not fit for purpose. We have no motorways anyway near our council area, one train station, and any serious infrastructural projects feel to be perpetually kicked down the road, case in point being the A5 which, despite being among the most dangerous roads in Ireland, has still yet to be commenced.

The completion of the new Derry to Dungiven dual carriageway is a positive step - however still falls short of the Belfast-Derry motorway originally started in the 1960's. Sixty odd years later and our infrastructure is still playing catch-up with other parts of our island" (P235).

Subtheme 2.3: Economic Growth and EU Membership

Participants expressed a positive view about the potential for economic growth associated with reunification, particularly with a return to EU membership. Brexit was frequently cited as having exacerbated economic problems and challenges in the North. "Brexit has been catastrophic for the north in terms of the loss of EU funding, with many community workers in our area now facing uncertainty over the loss of the European Social Fund. In the event of a successful unity referendum, we would automatically rejoin the EU and benefit again from that membership. The debacle arising from the Brexit chaos is evidence that you need to plan for the future" (P194). Another respondent stated, "Being a member of the EU is very important to me and my family. Irish reunification has already been recognised as the easiest path for the north to take back into the EU. Border communities and rural communities would benefit from regaining EU membership" (P187).

Subtheme 2.4: Eliminating Duplication of Services

Several participants noted the inefficiencies caused by having dual systems of governance, health, and education on the island. They argued that reunification would streamline these services thereby saving money and improving delivery, "The current duplication of public services between the 26 counties and the 6 counties is costing our society both financially and in terms of efficiency. There are good examples already of how working on an all-island basis would create a better society. Cross border health is a good example of this such as the cancer services in Derry" (P194). Another participant explained, "An all-Ireland system will reduce waste and create shared services that are more effective and less costly. It makes sense to have a single healthcare service and unified educational systems to ensure better standards and equity" (P189). The harmonising of tax systems was identified as an important outcome, "Partition has been disastrous for both north and south and locally derry and Donegal by minimising economic development in the Northwest region, creating duplication in our health and education systems, creating two separate tax systems and in general wasting millions every year on delivery of similar services on both sides of the border. An all-Ireland system will allow us to have complete control of our taxation and currency which will in turn maximise our ability to attract inward investment" (159).

Theme 3: Governance and Political Reform

Governance and political reform emerged as important areas of focus for participants, many of whom who expressed dissatisfaction with the current political structure under Westminster and Stormont. Many participants believed a united Ireland could provide

opportunities for more effective governance, accountability, and policy-making and these would better serve local needs.

One participant stated, “We need to arrest the decades of chronic underdevelopment (from all governments) that the north west has suffered from. We need to look to Dublin. We are so far removed from London and its view, that we will never get a fair deal on support needed here and that required funding or support will always have a subconscious 'proximity to the capital' weighting, so that the furthest away gets the least help.” (P2). Another participant highlighted a desire for greater self-determination, saying, “We want the ability to manage our own affairs/enjoy self-determination without being dictated to by Westminster and this has been reinforced by the imposition of Brexit despite a majority in the North voting against it” (P159).

Calls for accountability and transparency were also common. Participants stated the need to reform political structures to promote fairness and reduce inefficiencies. One respondent argued, “Political reform and accountability.. politicians wages set at a national average. Administration and recruitment for politicians recruited openly and transparent, no family members. Ban lobbying.. conflict of interests ie landlords, businesses. Review of judicial system and policing.” (P18).

Subtheme 3.1: Local Decision-Making

Participants stressed the need for greater autonomy, arguing that governance under Westminster had failed the specific needs of the region. For many, reunification offered an opportunity to shift decision-making closer to local communities, “We want the ability to manage our own affairs/enjoy self-determination without being dictated to by Westminster” (P159). Another participant had broader ideas, “What is the best model of governance that can be adopted by this opportunity of reunification? Should the whole structure and system of local Government in Ireland be refreshed, in order to bring better results for rate-payers and citizens? My suggestion is to consider a Provincial Government structure i.e Ulster (nine counties), Connacht, Munster and Leinster. I think research could be commissioned into options and recommendations for how to most effectively balance urban and rural needs e.g. cities of Derry, Belfast and large towns Enniskillen, Newry, Ballymena, Donegal and smaller settlements and rural areas. We want proper representation in the new Ireland but we do not want an administrative and bureaucratic mess of local government / Councils. I think the local Government / Council authorities in the nine counties of Ulster could take an initiative with this and commission preparatory research work for best practice recommendations and planning.” (P220).

Subtheme 3.2: Accountability and Transparency

Participants noted that they were in favour of reforms to increase accountability and transparency in governance. Many respondents highlighted the need for policies that reflect the priorities of local populations and reduce inefficiencies - “people should, in advance, be able to understand how local Government would be structured; how their representatives

would be elected; how peoples voices could be heard most effectively; how rates (domestic and commercial) would be set and monies collected and spent transparently; how Council staff would be retained / recruited / contracted; how a spirit of genuine public service would be cultivated; how much autonomy local Councils / Provincial Governments would have, etc etc etc.” (P220).

Participants indicated that planning for constitutional change must include consultations, “Consultations are most often the only accepted method of participation in decision making” (P232) and acknowledges that broader views should be sought – “This DCSDC consultation is a welcome development and the present Dublin government should convene without delay a civic forum which can similarly garner the views of as wide a cross section of society as possible on the need for fundamental constitutional change on the island of Ireland” (P157).

Theme 4: Social Justice and Historical Grievances

Participants noted the need for social justice and the necessity for historical grievances to be acknowledged. Many respondents reported systemic inequalities in education, access to employment, and healthcare, as well as a legacy of discrimination. The potential for Irish unity to address these injustices and promote fairness emerged strongly.

Participants stated that partition was associated with long-term social and economic deprivation, and this was particularly evident in the border areas. One participant stated, “Those people who live along the border corridor both North and South regardless of their religion, class, rural or urban have experienced the highest case of deprivation, in educational under achievement, highest rates of poor health, jobs, investment and poorer standards of living. This is not by accident it was caused by design. For this council area to achieve a better life and achievements for its residents then it must look at an end to partition., it has served no one, it has only been a source of discrimination, 2nd class citizenships regardless of your religious beliefs.” (P24). Another emphasised the legacy of historical inequality, “The two states created through partition on the island of Ireland have failed the vast majority of people over the last hundred years. Partition resulted in two reactionary clerical states dominated by elites. Partition divided the working class across the island and created a permanent division between working class communities in the North. Partition has been cynically employed by elites in the North, and the South, to stop progress, entrench inequality and whip-up sectarian division.” (P236).

Many participants reported that they believed constitutional change could positively address these inequalities and create a more inclusive and equitable society. One respondent noted, “I look forward to the day that Ireland will be reunited once again.

Partition is not working and that is clear when you look at the current state of our health service for example. This is a once in a lifetime, unique opportunity to change current systems which are currently failing people in all our communities. An opportunity where a New Ireland will allow us all to build a better life for us and our children and grandchildren and to rebuild society how we want, an ideal society to create an Ireland of equals.” (P37).

Subtheme 4.1: Addressing Inequality

Participants reported concerns about persistent inequalities caused by partition, particularly in border regions. They argued that Irish unity could reverse patterns of deprivation and economic marginalisation. One participant noted, “The North West of Ireland will always suffer deprivation as long as Ireland is partitioned. Currently, Westminster controls the purse strings. They don't need to legislate in our interests because we have no influence over them.” (P27). Similarly, another respondent noted, “The west of the Bann has been neglected throughout the years, ie travel corridor, A5, job opportunities. Lack of investment with no interest from British politicians about the welfare of People in the North of Ireland. Withdrawal of European funding after the Brexit chaos. Rural business fund being a massive boost to small rural businesses. Let's have unity on our Island and have 1 health service, free at point of entry to all its citizens. 1 tax system, 1 welfare system” (P222).

Many participants believed that unity would provide the opportunity to create equal access to services and economic opportunities. One participant stated, “. A more equal, greener health society and economic is possible through the reunification of our island.” (P82) and “We need a new and agreed Ireland one that embraces everyone. One that everyone feels equal. More people now than ever are engaging and talking about making this change happen. A referendum on a new and agreed Ireland should take place. There is no better time now to put a citizens assembly in place to hear everyone's view” (197).

Subtheme 4.2: Recognition of Past Conflicts

The impact of historical conflict and discrimination was a recurring theme. Participants highlighted how partition had entrenched divisions and fostered inequality, with some viewing reunification as a way to heal these divides.

One participant stated, “The partition of Ireland has been devastating for our entire country. It has cost lives, fostered division, reduced our ability as an island to maximise our economic potential and cost a fortune in the duplication of services. It has also denied the Irish people as a whole the right to determine their own affairs and future. Constitutional change in the form of a border poll needs to be pursued as a matter of urgency to remedy this situation.” (P131). Another stressed the need to learn from past experiences, stating, “We need to learn the lessons from the Brexit experience to ensure that the required Constitutional change is properly explained and managed so that all citizens are in possession of maximum information to make a mature and informed decision when confronted with a Border Poll.” (P102).

Participants also saw reunification as a chance to acknowledge and address these past grievances. One participant stated, “It is essential to continue the conversations about how we will organise and administer in a new and united island. It won't just happen. It has to be planned incrementally. It will rectify the injustice of partition. It must serve us all, Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Respect must be shown to those with an allegiance to Britain too.” (P9).

Subtheme 4.3: Social Inclusion

In addition to addressing past injustices, participants highlighted the importance of creating a socially inclusive and equitable society in a united Ireland. Many stressed that constitutional change must protect the rights and identities of all communities. One participant argued, “It must serve us all, Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. Respect must be shown to those with an allegiance to Britain too” (P9). Another suggested broader inclusion, stating, “I want an Ireland that caters for everyone, regardless of their colour, creed, class or sexual orientation. Inclusion would be a big part of my united Ireland, we have to sit down in the meantime and debate, organise this, so that no one is left behind.” (P168).

Several participants spoke about the importance of building inclusivity through education and shared spaces. One stated, “This change is inevitable and can be beneficial to all on this island ... education and information are important for this transition. (P60).

Theme 5: Concerns and Opposition to Change

While many participants expressed support for Irish unity, a few articulated concerns about its effect on economic stability, ensuring identity preservation, and political instability. These concerns highlight the need for inclusive planning and dialogue to address fears and opposition to constitutional change. Unionist perspectives were a recurring theme, with some participants opposing change outright. One respondent stated, “There isn't going to be constitutional change. Not now and not ever. You aren't going to take my country away from me.” (P25). Others voiced apprehensions about economic viability and social cohesion. For example, one participant warned, “A United Ireland would be a disaster economically. We, the majority, of the Waterside, do not and will never support Irish Unity” (P14).

Participants also raised concerns about potential instability and conflict, particularly given Northern Ireland's historical context. One participant reflected, “I would support a united Ireland as a nationalist but I am concerned about a potential for violence. I am 20 and have grown up in the post troubles society, therefore in order to support a united Ireland there would have to be allowances made for unionists and special circumstances put in place for

them to feel welcome in a new Ireland. If I felt there was a potential for a return to turbulent times i would consider moving to another country.” (P8).

Subtheme 5.1: Opposing Perspectives

Some participants voiced strong opposition to constitutional change, “Ulster is British and we don’t want no Finian rule from Rome. No Surrender. For God and Ulster. God save Ulster. God save Trump” (P240).

Subtheme 5.2: Economic Uncertainty

Concerns about economic instability were prevalent among respondents opposed to constitutional change. Participants highlighted fears of increased taxation, economic downturns, and inadequate financial planning. One participant argued, “I believe this would be detrimental to the social and economic prospects of the area and the wider north west area” (P11). Another respondent stated, “A United Ireland would be a disaster economically.” (P14).

Several participants questioned whether the economic costs of reunification had been adequately considered, with one noting, “To undertake this union needs adjustment, but also complete change in certain areas. There are financial implications as well.” (P13).

Subtheme 5.3: Fear of Instability

Several participants expressed concerns about political instability and the potential for conflict, particularly in light of Northern Ireland’s history. Younger respondents were particularly concerned about the risk of renewed division. One participant shared, “I am concerned about a potential for violence” (P8).

Conclusion

This thematic analysis highlighted the wide range of perspectives on constitutional change and Irish unity, albeit most views were positive. While most participants supported reunification as a means to promote equality, economic growth, and governance reform, others expressed concerns about economic stability, identity preservation, and political instability. The findings emphasise the importance of careful planning, inclusive dialogue, and transparent processes, such as Citizens’ Assemblies, to address both aspirations and fears. Participants stressed the need to learn lessons from the Brexit process and ensure that all voices are heard. Moving forward, detailed planning, economic analysis, and social inclusion must be prioritized to create a fair and stable transition process.

Limitations and Future Research

There are number of limitations that limit the inferences that can be made from this analysis.

1. The sampling of participants was opportunistic and self-selecting. This means that the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population.
2. The nature of the issues being explored may have impacted on who chose to engage with the survey, and how they answered.
3. The study was qualitative in nature, and this means that themes can be identified but their overall significance and importance cannot be assessed.

This consultation has identified several important themes that could be addressed in future research. More definitive findings could now be gained from a large qualitative survey based on a representative sample.

Sentiment Analysis of the Text

A sentiment analysis was performed using *TextBlob*, a Python library that provides a simple Application Programming Interface for performing natural language processing tasks, including sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis through *TextBlob* makes use of a lexicon containing words with associated sentiment 'polarity' scores: This measures how positive or negative the text is, on a scale from -1 to +1. A value of +1 indicates a very positive sentiment, -1 indicates a very negative sentiment, and 0 indicates a neutral sentiment. *TextBlob* also scores 'subjectivity', that represents the degree to which the text is expressed as 'objective' or 'subjective' and this is scaled in the same way as polarity.

In terms of sentence construction, the shortest sentence was a single word and the longest was 155 words, with the average number of words per sentence being 16 words. The relationship between response length and sentiment was low; the correlation coefficient was -0.052 indicating that sentence length and sentiment were not associated.

The sentiment analysis using *TextBlob* revealed that the responses exhibited a slight overall positive tone. The average polarity score was 0.10, suggesting a tendency toward positivity, while the average subjectivity score was 0.41, indicating a blend of objectivity and subjectivity.

Word Clouds

A word cloud, sometimes referred to as a tag cloud, is a graphic representation of text data in which the size of each word indicates how frequently it occurs. Larger font sizes are used for words that occur more frequently in the provided text, while smaller font sizes are used for terms that occur less frequently. Word clouds are a useful technique for displaying important ideas, trends, or patterns in qualitative data and are frequently used to swiftly communicate the most prevalent terms or topics in a body of text. Word clouds based on increasing words from the original responses are below.



