

**ABAIR LEAT
HAVE YOUR SAY
HAE YER SPAKE**
THE NEW IRELAND IS FOR EVERYONE



CONAMARA PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

**Report of the
Conamara People's Assembly,
27 November 2023**



Sinn Féin

www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

Sinn Féin launched the Commission on the Future of Ireland (the Commission) in July 2022. Its primary aim is to conduct an in depth consultation with the people of Ireland and beyond, regarding the future of Ireland.

This is being achieved through organising public People's Assemblies across the country and internationally, collecting written contributions, and hosting sectoral meetings and private engagements.

The Commission has held 10 public events to date and it has received 200 written contributions from a wide range of individuals and diverse groups.

You can make a written contribution by emailing commission@sinnfein.ie or through the following website: www.sinnfein.ie/futureofireland

Declan Kearney MLA is the Chairperson of the Commission and Senator Lynn Boylan is the Vice-Chairperson.

This is a report from the People's Assembly held in An Cromptán in the Conamara Gaeltacht on November 27th, 2023.

A video of the Conamara Gaeltacht Assembly is available on YouTube: **Galway Gaeltacht People's Assembly - YouTube**



Declan Kearney MLA is Chairperson of the Commission.

Senator Lynn Boylan is Deputy Chairperson of the Commission



SUMMARY

“The new united Ireland presents wonderful opportunities for us to make significant progress in Conamara, the Gaeltacht, and the West of Ireland. This is a remarkable period filled with opportunities and hope for a better future” – Pearse Doherty TD

The theme of the Conamara People’s Assembly was ‘Have Your Say – The new Ireland is for Everyone’ and the event was independently chaired by Máirín Ní Ghadhra, the well-known broadcaster and journalist.

At the outset Máirín stated what a great honour it was for the people of Conamara to host the first ever People’s Assembly entirely ‘as Gaeilge’.

The panel of speakers included Breanndán Ó Beaglaoich, Musician and Activist; Róisín Ní Chinnéide, Advocacy Manager at Conradh na Gaeilge; and Máirín Ní Choisdealbha-Seoighe, Community Activist.

MAIN THEMES:

- Lack of Infrastructure in Gaeltacht Areas:
- Youth Emigration from the Gaeltacht:
- Investment and Suitable Employment in the Gaeltacht:
- Housing in the Gaeltacht:
- Irish Language Services in the Gaeltacht:



Opening Address from Pearse Doherty TD

In his opening address, Pearse spoke of the significant challenges facing the Gaeltacht community, including the continuous cost of living crises, peripherality, and economic disadvantage.

He highlighted the failures in investment in critical infrastructure such as roads, public transport, and broadband, as well as the ongoing issues of emigration due to job shortages, opportunities, and housing. There is also a significant lack of investment in healthcare services.

Teachta Doherty pointed out the long-standing neglect that has affected the Gaeltacht and the west of Ireland as a whole, stating,

“For many years, the people of the West have suffered due to the policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments. We were marginalized, and we have been economically disadvantaged for a long time. We have experienced this in the Gaeltacht, in rural areas, and in small towns, where young people have had to leave on the emigrant ship due to the lack of



jobs, opportunities, and housing.

“Young people in the west are waiting for years for satisfactory healthcare, and elderly people have to spend months on trolleys in hospitals due to service shortages caused by a lack of investment. The uneven development from one end of the country to the other is the root cause of all this.”

Pearse also drew attention to the possibilities for further development in the Gaeltacht within a United Ireland and the current progress being made regarding the political future of the island, highlighting it in the context of political developments such as Brexit, election trends, referendums, and recent population figures.

Pearse emphasised that the purpose of the People's Assembly is to allow ordinary people to express their opinions about our shared future, regardless of their views or political outlook. He stressed the importance of the government establishing a Citizens' Assembly to discuss constitutional change and begin preparing for the unity referendum.

In conclusion Teachta Doherty spoke about the need to create an inclusive island where everyone is welcome, where public services are provided, where employment is generated, and where democratic arrangements and structures are established that leave no one behind. He emphasized the responsibility to engage with unionism and the importance of its role in the overall discussion.



THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY



The independent chairperson, **Máirín Ní Ghadhra**, welcomed the gathered crowd and reminded the meeting that the aim of this assembly is to provide an opportunity for the Gaeltacht community to discuss Irish reunification and to present and discuss their vision for the future of the Gaeltacht in a United Ireland.



Breanndán Ó Beaglaoich, Musician and Activist:

Breanndán highlighted the issues of planning regulations in the Gaeltacht and the lack of investment in critical infrastructure such as the sewage system. He explained that these challenges

are preventing people from building homes and raising families through the Irish language in the Gaeltacht, ultimately leading to the decline of the language.

He said, "The Gaeltacht survived during the English regime and during the Famine, but it is now being smothered. Without the people of the Gaeltacht being allowed to live in the Gaeltacht, the language will be like Latin. There will be no need for TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta, or Údarás na Gaeltachta if the people leave the Gaeltacht."

"I believe that the planning regulations in place need to be torn up and started again. They are not working. We hear talk about clusters. We have clusters; we have named our villages, we have named our roads, we have named our rocks, and they have history. Let us start rolling out the rules made by our people and building houses in these clusters," he said.

He called for a challenge to the appropriate authority and highlighted the powerful role that musicians and artists can play in this campaign.

He also mentioned a different vision for the Gaeltacht, focusing on rebranding it rather than talking about non-Irish-speaking, semi-Gaeltacht areas and trying to promote them. He proposed the creation of Gaeltachts in counties like Meath to attract people interested in raising their children through the Irish language.



Róisín Ní Chinnéide, Advocacy Manager with Conradh na Gaeilge:

Róisín explained that she attended fully Irish-medium education before pursuing a law degree through the medium of Irish at University College Cork.

She mentioned that Conradh na Gaeilge itself held a Gaeltacht Conference in Gaoth Dobhair in the summer of 2023 on the theme of "An Ghaeltacht in Éirinn Aontaithe" (The Gaeltacht in a United Ireland).

She also noted Conradh na Gaeilge's campaigns for the Gaeltacht. As part of this campaign, efforts were made to convey the planning difficulties faced by Gaeltacht communities clearly to the government.

She expressed that the Irish language has a more vibrant life in Brussels than in most of Ireland and that it is highly regarded by European institutions. She emphasized the potential for a United Ireland to use the example of Europe to ensure Irish language services for the community.

She also drew attention to Irish language campaigning in the North and An Dream Dearg's philosophy of 'Ná habair é, déan é'/'Don't say it, do it'. She said it was through the Irish language community and Irish language organisations that she met Irish speakers from the North, in Belfast in particular. Irish can facilitate and nurture north-south connections in that regard.



**Máirín Ní Choisdealbha-Seoighe,
Community Activist:**

Máirín spoke about her concerns for the future of the Gaeltacht, particularly the issues related to planning and the challenges faced by people in the Gaeltacht. She expressed a sense of urgency regarding the future of the Gaeltacht and mentioned that young people in Belfast speaking Irish have connected with each other.

In her own life as a Gaeltacht woman and her work as a community activist, Máirín highlighted the major problems in the Gaeltacht, including the ability of people to stay in their own communities and build lives.

She drew attention to the lack of investment in infrastructure in Gaeltacht areas over the years, particularly the sewage system. She emphasized the need for the Gaeltacht Infrastructure Fund to be restored to allow Gaeltacht communities to have the power to develop essential infrastructure.

She also welcomed the upcoming re-election of the board of Údarás na Gaeltachta for transparency and the opportunity for Gaeltacht people to scrutinize the board's actions in line with the community's fundamental principles.

She felt that more support should be given to community initiatives/ language plans coming from the community, to ensure essential, efficient, and sensible community development in the Gaeltacht.

CONTRIBUTORS FROM THE FLOOR:

Seán Mac Donncha, Language Planning Officer, Glór na nOileán:

Seán pointed out that there should be a political representative in the Dáil responsible for Gaeltacht matters who is “fighting for the Gaeltacht community.” He believed that “the number of people speaking Irish is falling. In less than 5 years, it will be gone” because Gaeltacht residents are forced to leave their communities due to a lack of opportunities. Regarding the Gaeltacht’s status, he mentioned, “There is no power, no investment, no infrastructure, no people,” referring to the reason behind the establishment of Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Colm Ó Cinnseala, Cois Fharráige Language Planning Forum:

Colm stated that there are an estimated 2,800 households in the officially recognized Gaeltacht areas raising children with Irish, and that every effort should be made to ensure that every child is bilingual. He felt that a “national treasure” was being created with every child being raised speaking Irish and emphasized the duty of the state and parents to work towards that, recognising that it is just as important for children in fully Irish-speaking areas outside the Gaeltacht.

He referred to Irish as a “cultural society” in the Gaeltacht and emphasized the difficulty faced by people who do not speak any Irish in Gaeltacht areas. He also referred to the achievements of the Gaeltacht Language Planning Forum in Cois Fharráige and the difficulties they have faced in their efforts.

Colm proposed the creation of a new Irish language scheme available to families once a woman is pregnant. Under the proposed scheme, each primary school student would receive €5,000 per year, and it would cost around €10 million per year.

John Bhaba ‘Jeaic’ Ó Conghaola, Leitir Mealláin:

John highlighted the unique challenges faced by Gaeltacht areas, such as the lack of doctors and vital healthcare services, the emigration of young people, and the inability of Gaeltacht residents to obtain planning

permission to build homes within their own communities, contributing to an economic and linguistic decline. He referred to the Gaeltacht as a “source” of the Irish language and emphasized its importance for the future of the language. He said that it is time to end the talk and take action.

Máire Uí Mhaoláin, Comhar na nOileán

Máire strongly praised the People’s Assembly and informed the meeting about a survey conducted by Comhar na nOileán regarding housing issues on the islands. She explained that 60% of the islands in the Gaeltacht have been inhabited, with 15 islands having been inhabited in the past 30 years. There has been a significant decrease in the island population, with fewer than 3,000 people currently residing on the islands, compared to 50,000 in total in the past. She emphasized that housing issues are the most significant threat to the island population.

Máire felt that people on the islands cannot rely on the government or the state to address these issues, and islanders must take matters into their own hands. She mentioned that the Irish state has failed the islands since its establishment in 1922.

Máire offered the following suggestions;

Grant a “designated area free from restrictions” status to the islands off the coast. While these islands are essential for culture and language, there are difficulties regarding local housing. The islands can become areas of standard housing and work towards creating their own livelihoods.

It is essential to provide a special state fund for the islands to provide assistance and support. This can help with housing demand and economic development in their areas.

Aindriú de Buitléir, An Cheathrú Rua

Aindriú is actively involved in various community campaigns including support for Palestine, Take Back the City, The Irish Housing Network, and others alike. He is interested in the environmental crisis and its connection to the housing crisis and the language crisis. He stated, “In reality, what’s the point of discussing the future without addressing the severe environmental crisis? If we don’t confront this, there is no salvation for the Irish language,

no revival before us.”

He also highlighted the significant number of Airbnb properties and the importance of implementing policies to “put a stop” to them as part of the necessary radical changes required.

Pádraig Ó Táilliúra, Ros An Mhíl:

Pádraig focused on the challenges faced by Gaeltacht areas, including the lack of doctors and essential healthcare services, the emigration of young people, the inability to obtain planning permission to build homes within their own communities, the poor state of the road network, and the lack of planning permission rights. He expressed the need to address these issues urgently to ensure the survival of the Gaeltacht.

Patricia O’Hara, An Spidéal:

Patricia raised questions about the status of the Irish language in a United Ireland, wondering what would happen to the language. She asked if there would be a referendum on the status of the Irish language. She expressed concern about the lack of certainty regarding the language’s status in the education system.

Pádraig Ó Sabhain, Leitir Móir

He spoke about the status of the Irish language in a United Ireland and believed that the language cannot be lost as “the status of the Irish language is not correct at present. The Gaeltacht is the ‘source’ of the Irish language, and it is crucial for the future of the language. It is time to put an end to the talk and take action.”

Méadhbh Ní Eadhra, Writer and Journalist:

Méadhbh asked, “If we were to have a United Ireland tomorrow, what would happen to the language? Would there be a referendum on the status of the Irish language?” She emphasized the need for certainty regarding the language’s status in the education system and questioned whether Irish would be required for admission to university or employment in the civil

service. She mentioned that many Irish speakers are getting exemptions from Irish exams, and it is not necessary for them to take the examination.

Jimmy Ó Ráinne, Comhairle Ceantair na nOileán:

Jimmy emphasized the importance of creating employment opportunities in Gaeltacht areas and having an appropriate public transportation system. He pointed out that when people in Gaeltacht areas are leaving home at 6 am to go to work and returning at 8 pm, something is wrong. He also called for a change in the public transportation system to better serve Gaeltacht communities. He mentioned that Gaeltacht areas do not have planning permission rights, which limits their ability to build houses in their communities.



CONCLUSION

The Conamara People's Assembly was a huge success. Almost 200 people attended the conference in the An Cromptán, An Ceathrú Rua. The discussion lasted for two hours and was a fascinating and interesting conversation on the future of Ireland.

At the end of the meeting the packed hall unanimously backed the call for the Irish government to hold a Citizens' Assembly to begin the work of planning for the unity referendum that is part of the Good Friday Agreement.

Citizens' Assemblies have played a unique and important role in the last decade in helping to reshape Irish society. It makes sense that a Citizens' Assembly be part of shaping our future.

Many contributions articulated the hurt and anger felt by people living in the Conamara Gaeltacht and the islands. They feel forgotten and disregarded by the southern government. Those at the People's Assembly spoke of their hopes for their area and the Irish language in a new united Ireland. Many spoke passionately about the need to protect the language within the Constitution.

Some contributions referenced economic benefits of Irish unity; the advantage of building a single all-island health service funded by direct taxation; the damage done by Brexit; engaging with the Protestant/unionist people, and the imperative of creating a new Ireland that embraces everyone on the basis of equality and respect.

The debate on Irish Unity is now centre stage. It is a daily topic of conversation for many and the demand for the unity referendum that is part of the Good Friday Agreement is growing.

The Irish government is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. It has a responsibility to defend the Agreement and part of this must be to plan for the future. We all plan for the future in our lives. The government has to end its resistance to this.

It is crucial that those of us who want a united Ireland create the space

for those who are opposed to it or those have not made up their minds and who may be persuadable.

Sinn Féin is seeking a new, agreed and united Ireland. We want to build a just, fair, and equal Ireland, an economically prosperous and socially and culturally inclusive Ireland. We want to protect our Gaeltacht regions and the Irish language.

Equality is the touchstone upon which all our policies are formulated. This means protecting our most vulnerable, the elderly, children, the ill, ethnic minorities, those with

disabilities. This can all be done while protecting our culture and maintaining our Gaeltachts.

Finally, Sinn Féin appeals to all citizens who are interested in the possibility and potential of Irish Unity to become active on this issue.

Join in the conversation.





 **SinnFein**

 **@sinnfeinireland**

 **@sinn_fein**

 **www.sinnfein.ie**