



What people think,
feel and do



ICRIR

NI Baseline Polling – Phase 2 Qualitative Focus Groups



Key findings

19 February 2024



OPINIUM RESEARCH

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Project details

PROJECT NUMBER	UK24733
PROJECT NAME	NI Baseline Polling – Phase 2 Qualitative Focus Groups
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SAMPLE	Group 1 – Nationalists, 6 Participants Group 2 – General Population, 7 Participants Group 3 – Unionists, 7 Participants
FIELDWORK DATES	January 23 rd – 25 th

Methodology & Sample

Who did we speak to?

We conducted 3 focus groups with Northern Irish participants in January 2024.

These participants were a subset of participants of those who took part in Phase 1 of the research.

	NO. PARTICIPANTS ATTENDED	GENDER SPLIT	AGE SPLIT	EXPERIENCE WITH THE TROUBLES	AREA SPLIT
Group 1 – Nationalist	6	4x Female 2x Male	1x 25-34 years 1x 35-44 years 2x 45-54 years 1x 55-64 years 1x 65+	5x Yes 1x No/Prefer not to say	1x Rural 3x Urban 2x Suburban
Group 2 – General Population	7	3x Male 4x Female	2x 35-44 years 1x 45-54 years 3x 55-64 years 1x 65+	5x Yes 2x No/Prefer not to say	2x Rural 2x Urban 3x Suburban
Group 3 - Unionist	7	3x Female 4x Male	3x 25-34 years 2x 45-54 years 1x 55-64 years 1x 65+	6x Yes 1x No/Prefer not to say	3x Rural 1x Urban 3x Suburban

How was the research conducted?

We conducted face-to-face focus groups in Belfast as trust was established with the research team and among participants in Phase 1 of the research through the text-based method. Participants were able to build greater rapport among each other and with the team in this way.

Phase 2 of the research was designed to build upon areas identified in Phase 1, but also provide a space to ask questions and have clarity on any information that was shared in the previous session or that participants may have come across.

Confidentiality of ICRIR

Participants continue to carry scepticism about The Commission and public engagement with it

All participants agree that the level of independence of The Commission is questionable, necessitating transparency on its policies. Many voiced concerns over governmental influences, The Commission's motivations, and public confidence in The Commission as an institution. Uncertainty remains about the overarching implications for public trust and engagement with The Commission.

The General Population Group offers a distinct perspective by comparing The Commission with other institutions like courts, coroners, and public inquiries, emphasizing the variance in trust levels and suggesting areas for improvement in public inquiries to enhance their credibility and effectiveness. The General Population and Nationalist Groups are more sceptical of the UK government and in particular, the Conservative government that is currently in power. The impending general election does not sway their views.

"Regardless of whether or not it might be a good idea, it's not for the Westminster government to say whether or not it's a good idea. There was no consultation with any of the stakeholders. None. They need at least that."

General Population, 35 – 54, Experience of Troubles

However, a further layer of nuance of participant's support was the legal challenge launched by the Irish government to the UK government regarding the legislation which some participants were aware of. This further swayed them that if their local politicians were not in support then it was unlikely that local people would be.

"I was further sceptical about the fact that a lot of the major parties - and forgive me if I'm wrong - weren't in support of this measure, and the fact that the Irish government have also now stepped in to say that this isn't in keeping. That's further solidified my opinion, I guess. So, I've probably gone far from a probably against this and gone much more of a sort of concrete opposition."

General Population, 45 – 54, Experience of Troubles

"When was the last time you saw Sinn Féin and the DUP agree on anything? And yet they agree on this."

General Population, 35 – 54, Experience of Troubles

"Certainly, there's a lot of opinion here that The Conservatives produced it to help the army veterans, without really thinking of what the opinion in Northern Ireland would be of victims on both sides of the conflict."

General Population, 65+, Experience of Troubles

Each group articulated scepticism regarding The Commission's capacity to remain independent and secure the trust of various communities, emphasizing the complex nature of The Commission's mandate. Participants questioned the selection process for the commissioners who have been selected to lead The Commission, including the representation from different communities and whether there were international commissioners selected to help demonstrate the neutrality of The Commission.

"In the Good Friday Agreement, when it came to commissioners, they tended to appoint people from outside. It would have been better to be more objective"

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

"It needs to be away from the UK government [and] the Irish government. The people that are investigating these things shouldn't have a horse in the race"

Unionist, 25 – 34, No Experience of Troubles

"Independent, as you said, means non-political, but it also means non-accountable. So, there's no direct mechanism for popular removal of this or popular modification of it."

General Population, 45 – 54, No Experience of Troubles

Across all groups, there was evidence of a willingness to move forward. However, participants in the General Population group were most likely to rationalise that even if they do not agree with the legislation that The Commission was created from, it does create a path forward for the Northern Irish people. Nonetheless, there is an acknowledgement that public sentiment about the benefits of a public inquiry is not at the levels they were in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. While some other participants believe it is better to leave the past in the past.

"This doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel humane, it doesn't feel compassionate, it doesn't feel engaged, it doesn't feel consultative, it doesn't feel at all about getting the views of the people who are directly involved, but there is the practice end of things, and there's the pragmatic people who live here who...we need to start looking forward, we need our way, we need a mechanism."

General Population, 55 – 64, No Experience of Troubles

Additionally, some question whether the lack of engagement from stakeholders within the communities that have been impacted will raise expectations that The Commission will be able to produce new information or lead to prosecutions that previous inquiries have been unable to do. This could result in a negative impact on those impacted by the Troubles.

Overall, there is a feeling that the foundations that The Commission sit on will negatively impact public willingness to engage with it from all walks of life.

The current approach does not assure senior figures will be held to account

Participants agree that it is unlikely for new information to be recovered through the process that has been outlined by The Commission particularly as there is a 5-year window to present information, which some feel limits the possibility of emerging forensics to support prosecutions in the future.

While participants are clear that ordinary citizens should be held to account, they believe that they were acting in response to 'handlers' who have not had to stand to account for their actions and have benefited from coordinated methods to cover up their actions.

However, the Nationalist group express the necessity for senior figures to be held to account for their actions meaningfully. Other groups agree that no single individual should be used as the scapegoat, even if this means holding individuals who are currently MPs or other senior government figures to account.

For some participants, enforcing this aspect of the commission's remit signifies a way for them to be able to move forward in a meaningful way.

"Well, I think what's on offer here is purely for information. I very much doubt there will be very many prosecutions that will actually come out on this, but there's a lot of people who suffered during the Troubles who... well, I can't speak for that, but I'm aware of people who have suffered directly in the Troubles who really want answers more than [anything]"

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

"If we take a pyramid structure, the bottom... it's like a lot of them have already told their stories anyway, you know? So it's the higher-ups, and this is where this runs into a block, because I believe the people who are actually doing this work are genuinely doing the best effort and coming from the best place. They'll only be able to get so far, and then it can just be kept."

Nationalist, 35 – 44, No Experience of Troubles

However, caseworkers should be independent, adaptable, and trusted

All groups recognize the pivotal role of caseworkers in fostering trust, ensuring accountability, and facilitating effective communication with families, but there are nuanced perspectives on how best to achieve these goals. Nonetheless, participants agree that it is important that The Commission hire the right people for the job.

The Unionist group had a unique understanding of how tight-knit their communities already are. They thought this was important as it raises practical challenges in ensuring truly independent investigations and truly independent caseworkers due to biases and connections within small communities. On this basis, they were also uniquely interested in getting caseworkers from outside Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland or the UK.

“But we do live in a society where everybody is quite connected. What is it, four degrees of separation? We’re not that far apart. Somebody will know somebody on Facebook or whatever. So it would be very hard to find somebody that’s entirely unbiased.”

Unionist, 25 – 34, No Experience of Troubles

Participants state the independence and trust they would have with caseworkers is vital to the success of potentially unlocking new information, building relationships with families who are requesting information and ensuring engagement from the silent majority.

The independence of caseworkers is seen as important as The Commission, even just by virtue of being set up by the UK Government, is inevitably seen as a political institution. Therefore, when it comes to building a trusted relationship between the case worker and the requestor, there is an opportunity to display that it can act independently and with due diligence. This is best achieved by reassuring requestors that measures are in place to ensure case workers have no personal stake in the investigation or outcome.

“Case workers and the counsellors should surely be completely independent”

Nationalist, 65+, Experience of Troubles

Given the uncertainty on the number of requests that could be made to The Commission and the summer 2024 date, participants were uncertain how The Commission would adequately recruit and train the appropriate number of caseworkers to hold the roles and complete the work at a high level, particularly within the Northern Ireland pool of candidates.

This includes embedding rigorous principles when compiling Investigations and Reports

Overarching themes to consider when compiling investigations and drafting reports include transparency, accountability, privacy, and balancing public interest and confidentiality. These discussions reflect a collective aspiration for an investigative process that is equitable, transparent, and sensitive to the needs and rights of all involved, underscoring the intricate balance required in conducting investigations and compiling reports.

While participants agreed that it was sensible to have two different teams responsible for compiling investigations and drafting reports, they did not agree on whether these parties should be internal or external to The Commission and how they might share information or what level of information they would share.

A minority of participants raised concerns about data security for any information shared with The Commission, citing breaches in PSNI data and whether The Commission will be able to provide high levels

"It doesn't get disclosed to anybody that doesn't need to be, even within, within The Commission. You know I used to work in finance and in financing you'd have a thing called Chinese walls... if they don't need to know that information, you should not be sharing it with them."

General Population, 35 – 54, Experience of Troubles

"I'd say they'd have to justify why they refused to accept evidence, because there's been inquiries where evidence has just not been accepted, and no one knew about it unless you were involved in an inquiry."

Unionist, 45 – 54, Experience of Troubles

Managing Expectations

Reaffirming the desire for end-to-end contact, communication should also feel accessible and personal

The importance of communication in The Commission's process was reaffirmed in Phase 2 of the research programme as participants, regardless of background, reaffirmed their preference for end-to-end communication. This included further briefing on the role, objectives, powers, etc. of The Commission in addition to consistent updates throughout any investigation, even if there is no new information to share. Participants expressed that by maintaining a regular schedule of communication, which is not solely driven by the discovery of new information, the likelihood of re-traumatisation could be minimized as recipients may feel less anxiety over 'out of the blue' phone calls and periods of no news.

"I'm not sure there would have to be a key moment... I would want to hear after I don't know how long that it's still ongoing and this is where we got to and there's been no change... just to keep people on board, so you don't have any nagging suspicion in your head"

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

"Well, I thought that the regular update, whether or not it's good or bad, takes away that... if you don't know what's going to happen, then all of a sudden, the phone rings. You pick it up and you think, well, what is it?... if you know you're going to get a phone call anyway... it takes away that terror of the phone ringing."

General Population, 35 - 44, Experience of Troubles

The significance of direct and continuous communication is a recurring theme with participants stressing the need for families to have a direct line to caseworkers and regular updates to maintain trust and engagement. Participants emphasize the necessity for caseworkers to engage with families and respond promptly to inquiries, suggesting a response time within a week. They felt that this sort of quick-turnaround approach would be the most effective in minimising the potential risks of re-traumatisation. This further stemmed from a belief that waiting, in and of itself, may be traumatic for some who have already waited for a long time.

“If the family wants to speak or inquire about anything, the caseworker has to engage and fill them in, let them know where they're at with the investigation... like they're working for the family, so if the family requests X, Y and Z, then it's responded to within the week.”

Nationalist, 35 – 44, No Experience of Troubles

Participants suggested that communication should come via a key case worker and whether written or spoken, the information should be accessible, meaning in layman's terms that seek to actively avoid excluding or confusing the recipient. Communication should be delivered with care, mirroring the sensitive nature in which the case should have been handled. This personal approach would allow for trust to build between caseworkers and requestors whilst also recognising the sensitive nature of the investigation.

“I would like to read a little bit of narrative or something that made it human, made it accessible that way... Not too many bar charts and things that make you feel like you've been reduced to a number of people”

General Population, 35 - 44, Experience of Troubles

“In a standard format... there needs to be something that everybody follows”

Unionist, 25 – 34, No Experience of Troubles

As mentioned, there is an expectation for information to be shared throughout the process, not only at the end, to avoid any shock results at the outcome of the investigation. Participants in the General Population group expressed that the delivery of the final report would also benefit from a personal approach, with a key caseworker debriefing the recipient on its contents fully and on any next steps, leaving space for any reaction and/or questions. One participant highlighted the benefit of having a specialist present e.g., a trauma counsellor/therapist for a session like this.

“So, they say, here's your letter of information. Let's sit and read it together.”

General Population, 55 – 64, Experience of Troubles

“Speaking with the trauma counsellor, to see if that is something that would actually bring closure, or if the speaking itself was enough”

General Population, 35 - 44, Experience of Troubles

Participants discussed the possibility of communication, at certain stages, coming from someone or somewhere without direct involvement to The Commission. Due to the current lack of trust in The Commission, some suggested information on The Commission would be better received via a trusted community member or whilst they were with friends and family. For example, the General Population group discussed the possibility of using a town-hall style forum in which community members could come together, share experiences, and learn about The Commission in a safe space. However, they recognised some of the challenges of sharing their experiences in front of individuals from their local community.

“That idea that the Americans have about town hall meetings and things like that, face-to-face, I think it’s quite valuable. That’s why I used the term, because that’s the sort of thing you’re looking for... but I’m not sure it would be for discussing individual cases. You certainly wouldn’t discuss ongoing cases.”

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

“Would you find it less of an issue to have a community around you where you’re talking about this sort of experience versus a report?”

General Population, 35 - 44, Experience of Troubles

After prioritizing anonymity, where possible, any and all information compiled should be shared with the requestor

All groups expressed a desire for as much information as possible, both during the investigation and in the report, suggesting that greater transparency would add credibility to the process and build trust among requestors. Consistent with this desire for as much detail and information to be shared as possible during the process, participants from the General Population group specified that any actions taken be outlined alongside the outcome. This would be regardless of its then value to the case e.g., ‘we asked X about... and they declined’ and would demonstrate a willingness to maintain transparency by The Commission.

“This is A, then we move to B, then we move to C, and then your choices are D and E”

General Population, 55 – 64, Experience of Troubles

The General Population group, in particular, laboured over what information should or shouldn’t be included in the report and accessible because of its public publication. Finding the right balance

between public interest and confidentiality was a dilemma as participants considered the ethics of releasing potentially implicating information versus receiving a heavily redacted report. Ultimately, there was agreement across all groups that anonymisation should take priority, particularly when taking into consideration how close-knit local communities can be in Northern Ireland. On the one hand, groups understood the need for being publicly transparent and making sure information was well-disseminated so that it could be accessed by those who would find it comforting or useful. However, there is also the acknowledgement that for those who find these events raw, it could be potentially re-traumatising. The power to name should therefore remain with the requestor (e.g., the family of a victim) and could be a point of discussion with case workers when progressing through the investigation and building the report.

“Historically victims felt disempowered, so it’s important to give them the power”

Nationalist, Anonymous ‘sticky-note’ feedback

I would imagine that families should have the right to anonymize [a report]. But you know it’s sort of family A or victim B, this, and that. And yes, as you say, if the family feels inclined to go public with it that’s their business

Nationalist, 55 – 64, Experience of Troubles

“I don’t need to know any names of others, just that others are satisfied and that the process has a high success rate”

General Population, 55 – 64, No Experience of Troubles

“The data handling would be one of my major concerns about communication of this externally... You release what is necessary. It’s not that you just remove it – you could have someone with a pseudonym type thing.”

Unionist, 25 – 34, No Experience of Troubles

No group had strong feelings against The Commission using information from one report to build on another if it would be useful and remained confidential – there was an assumption and agreement by some that this would be the case. This was often based on the fact that existing bodies (E.g. the police) used information in this way so this was not new.

I would assume that’s what would happen, rather than stuff being put in a filing cabinet, and never being looked at, or cross-examined or links being made being made between them

Nationalist, 45 – 54, Experience of Troubles

A collaborative approach should be taken when developing a report, with reconciliation at its core

Participants across the three groups highlighted that the report writing process should have an element of collaboration, meaning there are ample opportunities for the requestor to review progress and provide input or suggest amends when information is being compiled. Emphasis is placed on the opportunity to review before publication, with the majority considering this essential. This could encourage the requestor to feel like they have an active role in the process of the investigation – something particularly important when revisiting a potentially traumatic event. A sense of participation could also help promote and encourage reconciliation.

“I would have thought The Commission would have come back to me in that process of regular contact and say, look, here’s the report – it’s a draft report, not a final report, so you get to say whether you wish your name or details or whatever to be included”

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

“What happens if somebody doesn’t agree with that draft report before publication? Do they come back and say, ‘Actually you have that all wrong and I don’t want this to be published?’”

Unionist, 25 – 34, No Experience of Troubles

As participants still lack faith in the overall process, there is work to be done to persuade them of the positive outcome or satisfaction that can come from a report. This is partly because participants don’t yet feel clear on what the objective of The Commission is or the rationale for the specific method The Commission is using. The lack of clarity on where reconciliation fits into the process is concerning for some participants who express that reconciliation should be the main focus, not just on investigations, but also on any report released. Several participants, particularly in the Nationalist and General Population groups, spoke of taking a victim-centred approach, and while recognising that justice is important, suggested that influencing change because of an investigation isn’t as high a priority as bringing reconciliation. During the development of a report, reconciliation should therefore remain a ‘north star’ that both caseworkers and requestors are aligned on. Any reconciliation process must be modelled on successful approaches that have been conducted elsewhere to gain support from participants.

“At what point does the option for reconciliation in that particular case get explored?”

General Population, 55 – 64, No Experience of Troubles

“This should be coming to a conclusion of reconciliation. And it’s still not even off the ground.”

Nationalist, 35 – 44, No Experience of Troubles

“I totally agree that reconciliation needs to happen, but I have no confidence that justice can, after all this time, be achieved”

Unionist, 25 – 34, Experience of Troubles

Overall satisfaction with how the process will be handled remains low, future communications can play a role in improving this

There is still a great deal of scepticism with the final report and steps requestors can take if they disagree with the report they receive. The possibility for participants to take an active role in the report development with consistent communication goes some way in alleviating this. However, many of these older documents are believed to be highly confidential so the reports will be compiled based on redacted documents leading participants to feel that nothing new will be added and fuelling frustration among some groups. A common thread across all groups is the significance of access to information for effective investigations for the Commission. Many voiced concerns about potential barriers, even with comprehensive authority, as they see it as interacting with bodies that are seen to not be transparent in and of themselves. Particularly when it comes to information recovery around matters considered to be official secrets, there is a perception that there will not be transparency.

“You can say, yes, we have access until they find the block that everyone else has climbed so far.”

Nationalist, 55 - 64, Experience of Troubles

“There’s black line after black line and there’s a gap between trust or do I believe you... I just wonder how much information can be shared without conflicting with other legislation and, I suppose, people’s right to confidentiality?”

General Population, 55 – 64, Experience of Troubles

“I’m interested in the amount of information that’s there and how much of this might be of general public interest, and then the tension there is between general public interest and confidentiality and not sharing all necessarily with everybody”

General Population, 55 – 64, No Experience of Troubles

Due to the timeline until The Commission begins to receive requests it is difficult for participants to have faith that a system for appeal will be set up in time – further adding to the mystery of the processes of The Commission.

Another potential area of concern is what individuals may do with the outputs once they receive the reports and whether any restrictions need to be put in place. For example, a participant questioned if The Commission would step in if requestors take reports to the media which could drive negative attention to The Commission. Participants expressed worry that, if released publicly, a report could generate unnecessary drama. For example, participants questioned the possibility of legal cases being brought forward, the potential for stories that undermine the contents of the report to be generated and sold for profit, and the potential for perpetrators, if identified, to use the attention to ‘showboat.’ None of which necessarily promote reconciliation.

“Next thing you know the Daily Mail is standing outside your front door”

General Population, 55-64, Experience of Troubles

“And then even if you say it’s incorrect, they can go to the papers and say ‘they’re lying again, collusion, it’s a cover-up’”

Unionist, 45 – 54, Experience of Troubles

“Even with the way social media is going now, generative AI, if you get a good story out, then the truths not going to matter”

Unionist, 25 – 34, Experience of Troubles

“I remember feeling, that guy did that because he’s such a narcissist. You know, he wanted to come and talk about the crime he had committed, and I don’t know how you manage against that”

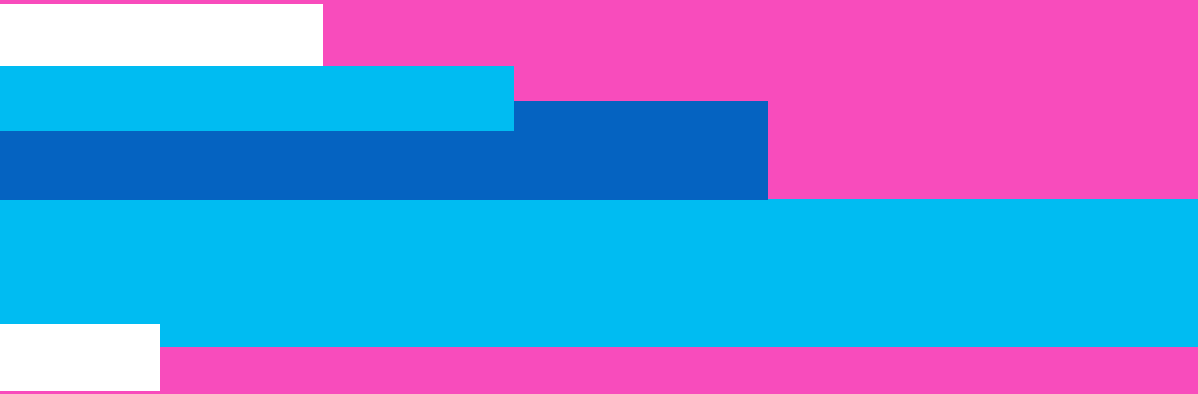
General Population, 55 – 64, No Experience of Troubles

How The Commission can overcome the ongoing challenges

Following the information shared about The Commission and its operations, there are still some areas of concern about its operations which participants have questions or concerns about. As a result the following compiles some feedback on how The Commission can overcome these challenges as it establishes itself as the go-to body for matters related to investigations on investigations related to The Troubles in Northern Ireland.

AREA	HOW THE COMMISSION CAN OVERCOME THIS
Role of The Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many do not believe The Commission Is capable of recovering any new information given the time since the Troubles so they should share clear information with the public about their expectations from this process. For example, being able to provide complete reports by piecing together information stored in multiple places or ‘x’ number of prosecutions. Participants are eager to see The Comission as more than another investigative body and are open to other roles it may play such as in supporting Reconciliation. They would like to know that the work of those who have worked in the space for decades is built on and not ignored. Additionally, there can be more public communications on Part 4 of the Act which provides for a range of oral history initiatives, supporting a different form of storytelling of The Troubles, that future generations can look back on.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, some participants are concerned that this will become another Troubles-related financial investment so it is important to have publicly available metrics to support any increases in staff numbers or the general length of time needed to continue its work.
Process to request support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While The Commission acknowledges it cannot control the communication that comes from other authorities who have previously conducted Troubles-related investigations, they should take the lead in providing public communication on the Information Recovery process. This information should be via channels that people from the 'silent majority' are more likely to use such as local TV commercials and grassroots organisations who work in local communities.
Development of reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caseworkers should provide regular updates so that the information or lack thereof that is included in the report is not a surprise for the requestor. The requestor should have full knowledge of the type of information that will or will not be included in the report, particularly any information that can personally identify a victim.
Outcome of request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear channels should be established for requestors to query information in the final report as well as be provided with support to handle any information they have been presented with.



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