



CONSENSUAL DECISION MAKING

Manual



St. Columb's Park House
THE HEART IN THE PARK





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



A message from:
Helen Henderson, Chief Executive
St Columb's Park House



How we make decisions is vital to how we function as a society. When important decisions are being made, it is vital that all opinions and concerns are taken into account, especially those who may be in a minority due to their background or beliefs.

St Columb's Park House believe that consensus based decision making is a key tool in the toolbox of democracy and the practice of non-violence and inclusion. The tool provided here in this manual is called the Modified Borda Count and this provides a very clear and simple process.

In Western society we tend to rely on the 'majority rules' way of making decisions so a 51% majority can overrule a 49% minority. The Brexit vote is an example of when a decision is made on a majority vote but has a significant minority of people who feel disenfranchised. This can cause conflict, division and apathy.

We are committed to developing greater consensus in decision-making and providing a resource for communities and decision-makers to help them take more consensual decisions affecting, involving and led by civil society.

The pre-pilot testing of the materials was also invaluable and we would like to thank everyone who participated for their patience and encouragement including:

- DEPARTMENT FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, IRELAND
- RATHLIN DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION
- DERRY CITY AND STRABANE DISTRICT COUNCIL
- ARMAGH BANBRIDGE AND CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL
- CAUSEWAY COAST AND GLENS
- BOROUGH COUNCIL
- CORRYMEELA COMMUNITY
- FRIENDS OF THE EARTH
- CURRYNEIRIN COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION
- TULLYALLY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP
- HOLYWELL TRUST
- AND MANY, MANY OTHERS

This project would not have been possible without the support of the Reconciliation Fund. The support of the Fund has enabled us to explore and experiment with a tool to make decision making more inclusive and democratic. Northern Ireland is a society still coming out of conflict and coming to terms with how to take difficult decisions in a sometimes highly contested environment. Exploring constructive options to make the process of decision-making better is important and timely.

Helen Henderson
Managing Director, St Columb's Park House

“A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a moulder of consensus”

Martin Luther King Jr.



FOREWORD



In a contested environment trust is built slowly but can evaporate in an instant. And in a contested environment where sensitive issues need voted upon, how a decision is taken can be as important as the decision itself.



It takes courage when you are in a majority to adopt a decision-making process that seeks consensus for the civic good; it takes courage when you are in a minority to adopt such a process and commit to the outcome.

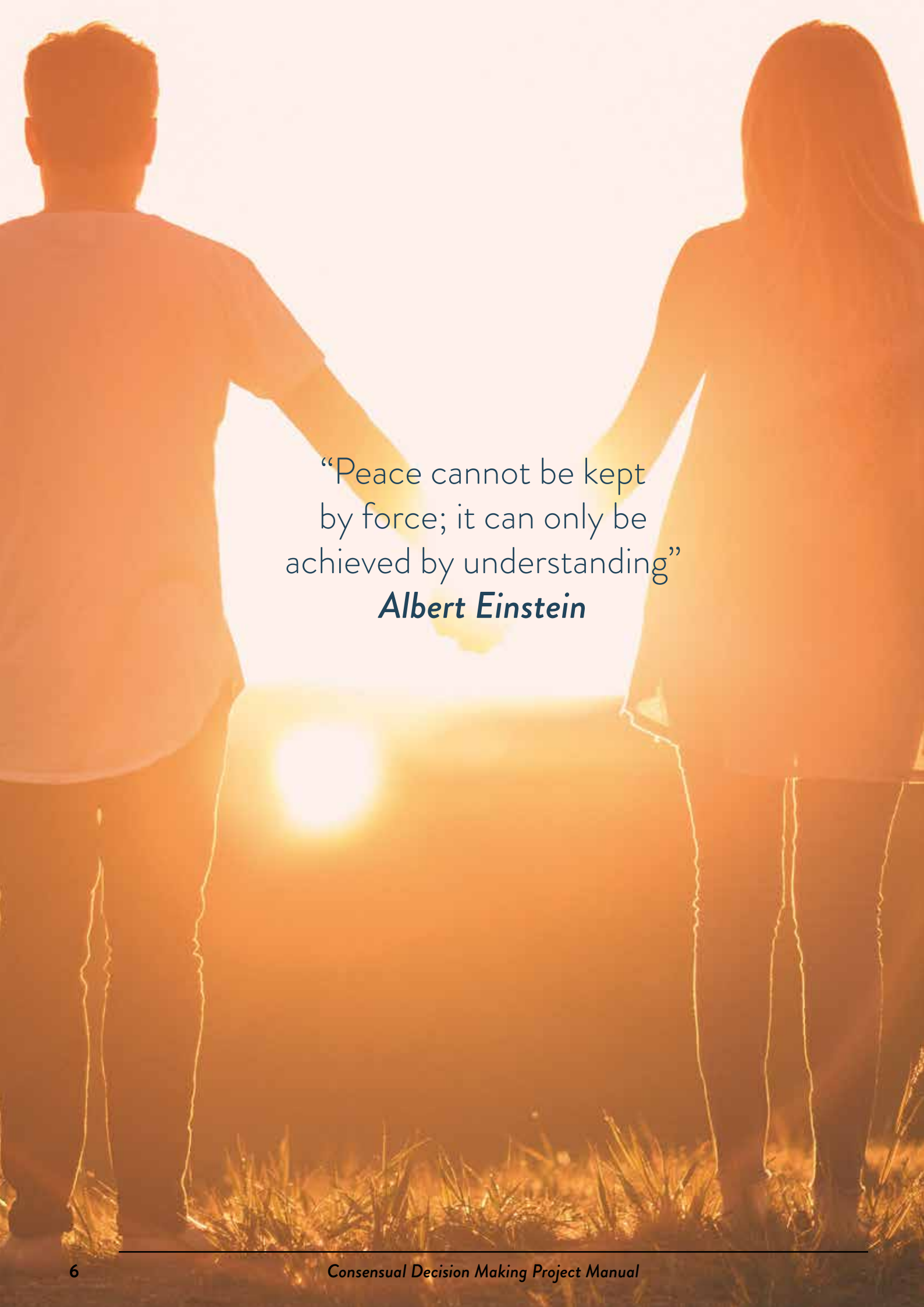
This toolkit is an imaginative approach to support more consensual decision-making. It is a welcome addition to the options available to those taking tough decisions who want to explore beyond a traditional straight majority vote.

I want to especially commend those who used the consensual decision-making process during this pilot phase; these are people who embrace a genuinely civic not sectional approach to resolving issues.

I hope the manual proves useful to those within the public, voluntary and community, business and political sectors, who understand the importance of building trust and who have the courage to seek a better way of taking difficult decisions.

Cllr Maoliosa McHugh, Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council





“Peace cannot be kept
by force; it can only be
achieved by understanding”
Albert Einstein

WHAT IS A CONSENSUAL PROCESS?



Consensual decision-making is a process to arrive at a consensus often when considering sensitive or difficult issues. Beyond facilitating a dialogue, this manual explores using a vote to arrive at a decision when consensus cannot be reached through discussion, by using a modified Borda count vote.

The consensual decision making process using a modified Borda count is designed to achieve a number of outcomes. These include:

BETTER DECISIONS – through the discussion, exploration of options and taking account of all issues raised. Identifying options and answers that are most acceptable to all participants. There will always be a clear, positive result.

BETTER IMPLEMENTATION – because the process and outcome, by being more inclusive, has a better chance of getting buy-in from participants.

BETTER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION – because the conversations should allow people to better understand where others are coming from, improve relationships and reduce contention.

BETTER SKILLS AND COMMITMENT – the process itself will develop skills and relational understanding, but participants may wish to reflect on how to further improve consensual skills.

WHY?

To help participating organisations arrive at better decisions. It may help to improve relationships in the process and, by achieving more buy-in to final decisions, it may help in the implementation of decisions.

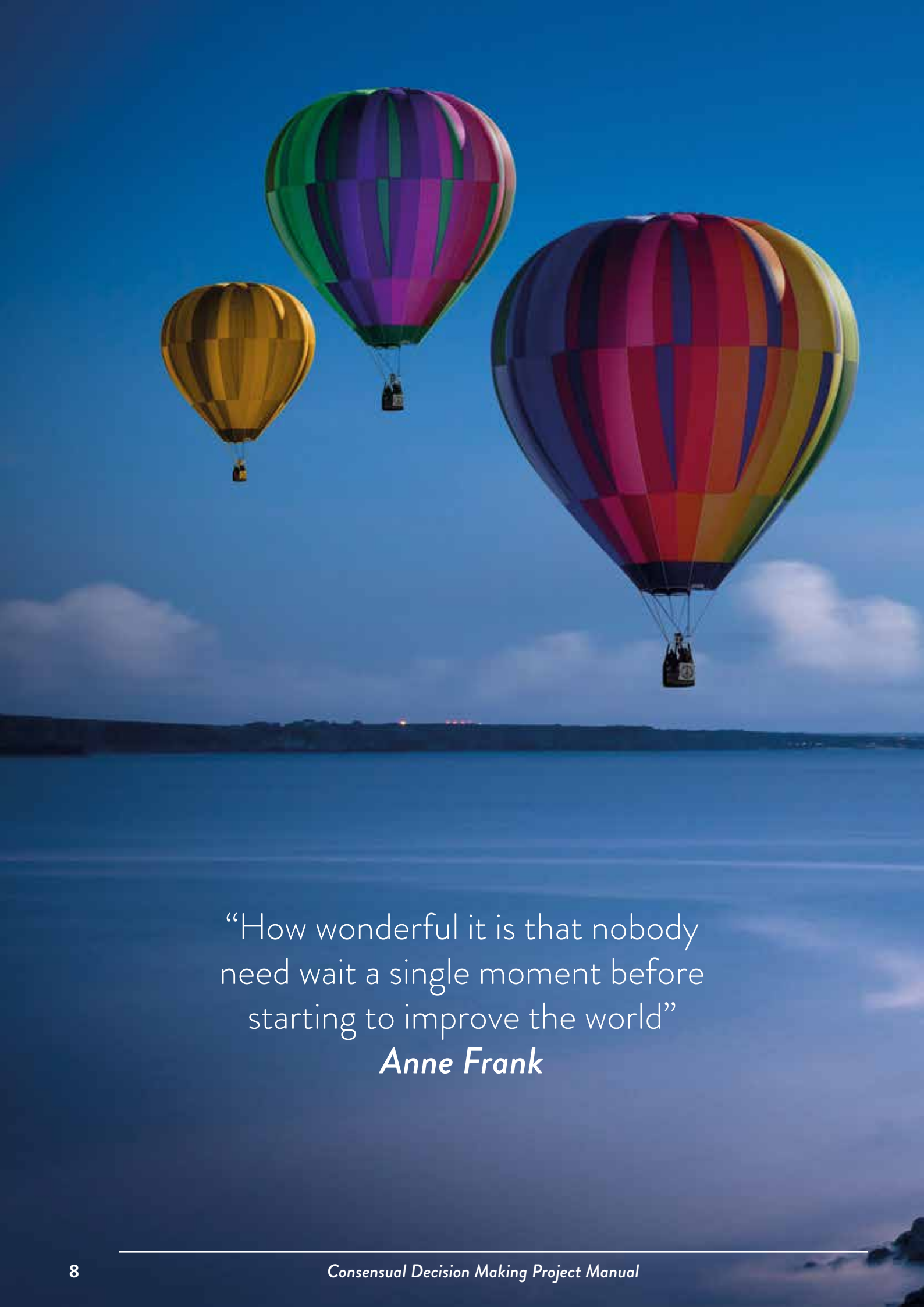
As a result, in some circumstances, it may help participating organisations (including Councils) avoid reputational damage. It may help create a more positive image for participating organisations, seen to want to involve and embrace minority populations and their representatives; an organisation that encourages generosity between communities is an organisation providing civic leadership for all.

WHAT?

While the manual ultimately is aimed at addressing particularly sensitive and potentially contentious issues, it does not need to do so. In fact, it may be better if a consensual decision making process is run initially without the added attention and pressures of a sensitive issue. Participants may also wish to understand better the process before considering whether to use it on a sensitive issue.

HOW?

A selection of materials is outlined in this manual. Additional materials will be used by facilitators. Materials may vary depending on the issue being discussed, the amount of time facilitators are afforded and the context of the consideration.



“How wonderful it is that nobody
need wait a single moment before
starting to improve the world”

Anne Frank

PRINCIPLES



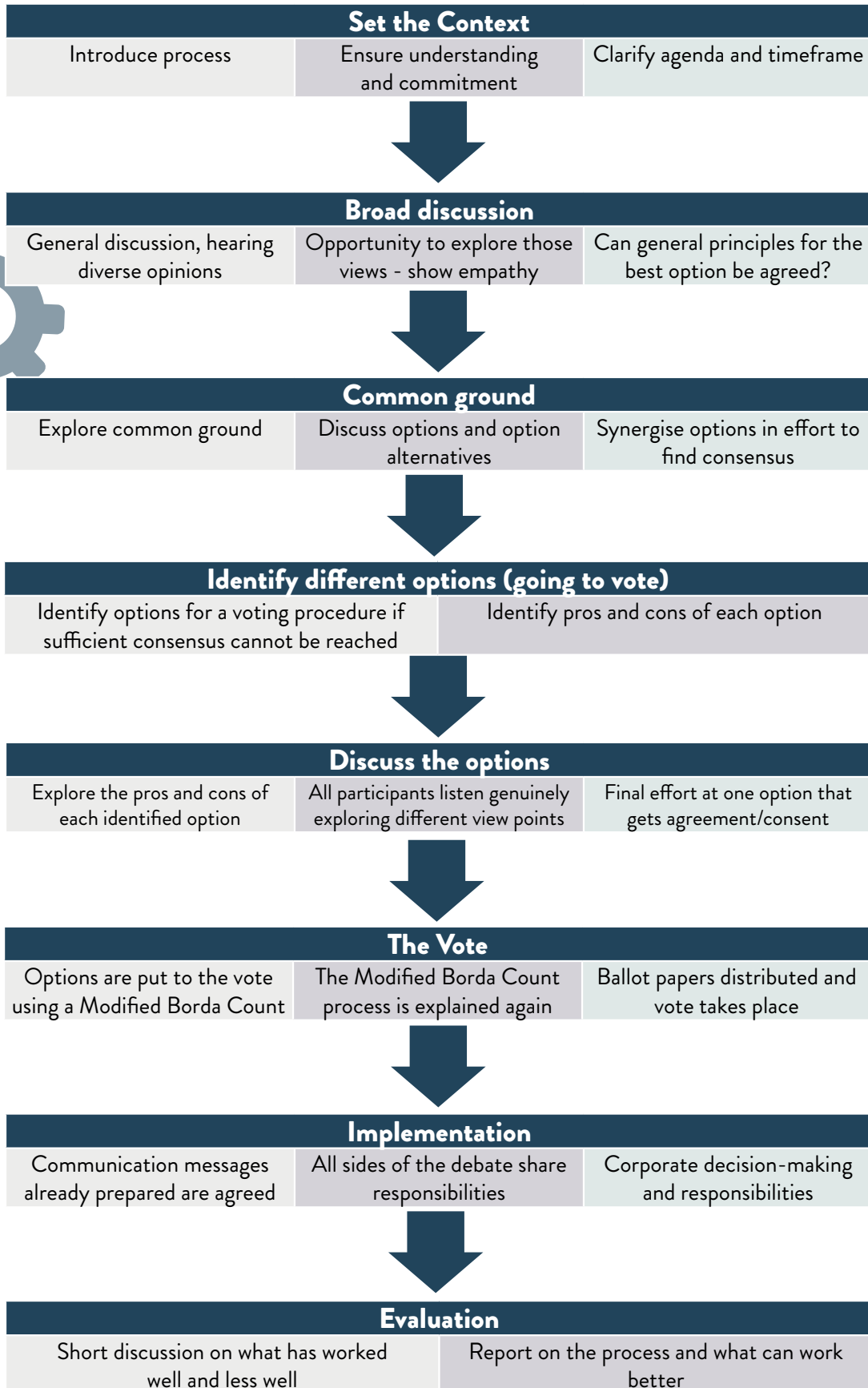
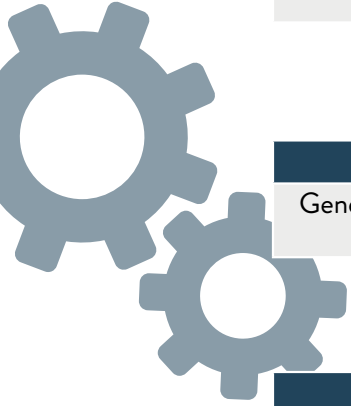
A consensual decision making process should be undertaken working to a number of key principles. These include:

1. **INCLUSIVE** – all participants are included in the process.
2. **PARTICIPATIVE** – participation is on an equal basis; all are asked to contribute; and all have the opportunity to suggest and amend options.
3. **COLLABORATIVE** – all participants are asked to listen, seek to understand others and try to find common ground.
4. **AGREEMENT PRIORITISED** – participants should understand that the first parts of the process especially are designed to get as much agreement as possible, without a vote.
5. **COOPERATIVE** – focused on the good of all participants.
6. **TRUST** – people need to examine their own attitudes, be open to new ideas, and be interested in understanding the needs of others.
7. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES** – people are different and may have different cultural and identity perspectives; a good working relationship will embrace these differences.
8. **RESPECTFUL** – listening genuinely is an important part of gaining peoples’ respect, and having it reciprocated. Difference is respected.
9. **CREATIVE** – all participants are in the business of seeking creative solutions.
10. **RESPONSIBILITY** – responsibility for finding consensual options and an agreed outcome is shared by all.





PROCESS



HOW DOES THE VOTE WORK?



The table below explains the voting process. Voting can be done electronically but it may be best to use paper ballots to help people understand the process and to keep a paper trail of votes cast.

The vote can be a stand-alone session if options have already been identified or if it is only a vote that is required such as with funding decisions.

The Vote

If consensus cannot be achieved through the facilitated discussion that session should end by identifying a number of options, in consultation with participants.

In the final session a discussion should ideally occur on the merits and demerits of each option. This will not be about trying to find consensus on them – although if it happens all the better. It will be about participants explaining why they think each option has merit and why other participants may/should vote for it.



Participants will then vote for their preferences in order, using a consensual process such as Modified Borda Count (MBC). In the MBC if there are, for example, four options, points will be awarded to their preferences, but the points awarded will depend on the number of preferences expressed.

Options	Preference	Points
Option A	1	1
Option B	Did not express a view	0
Option C	Did not express a view	0
Option D	Did not express a view	0

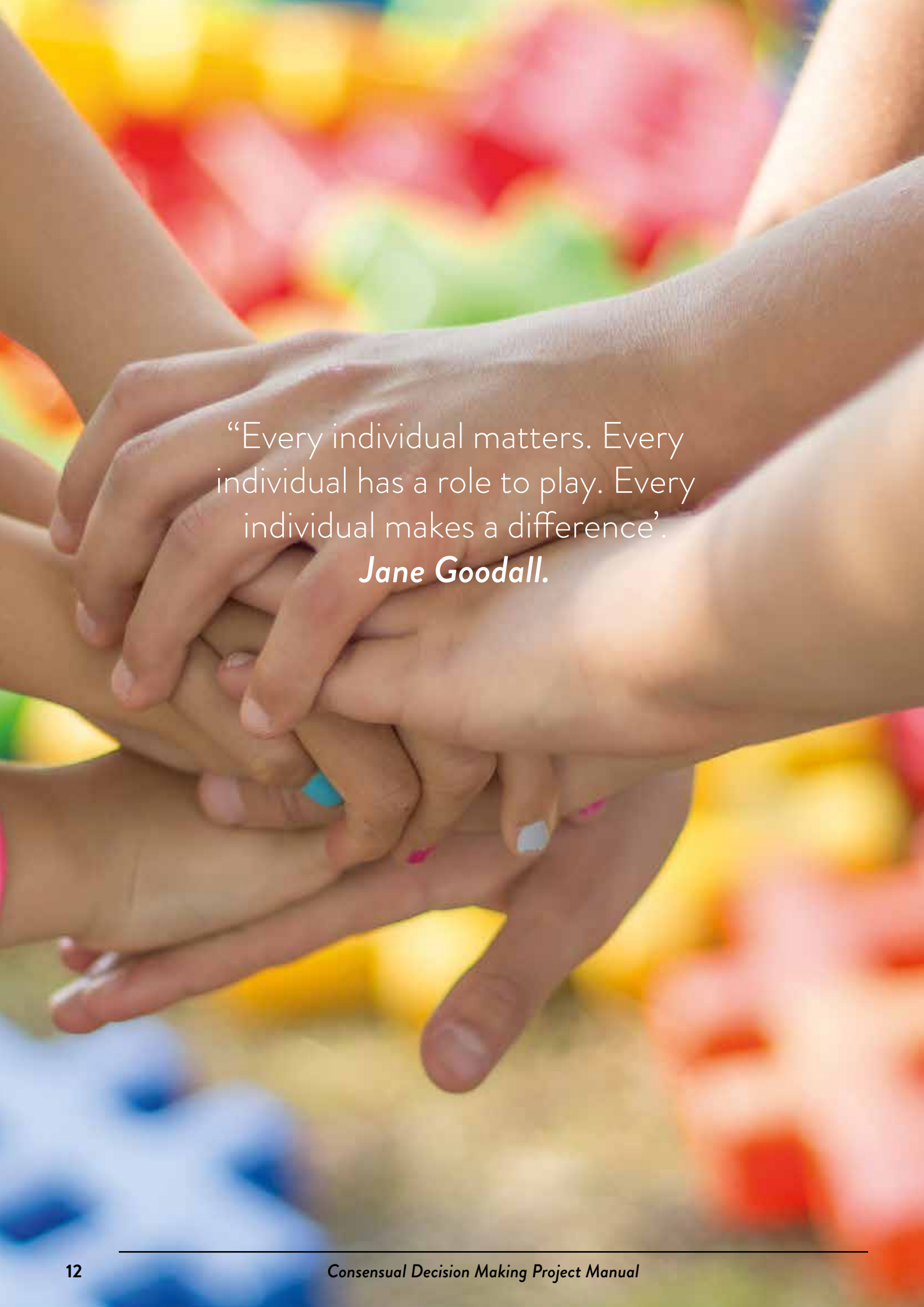
Or

Options	Preference	Points
Option A	1	2
Option B	2	1
Option C	Did not express a view	0
Option D	Did not express a view	0

Or

Options	Preference	Points
Option A	1	4
Option B	2	3
Option C	3	2
Option D	4	1

The option with the highest score is the preferred option and wins the vote. Ballots are cast; they are secret and can be retained by the participating organisation to retain a paper trail.



“Every individual matters. Every individual has a role to play. Every individual makes a difference’.

Jane Goodall.

WHEN TO USE A CONSENSUAL DECISION MAKING MODEL



Consensual decision making can be utilised for a wide variety of issues.

Consensual decision making is more than about tackling sensitive or contentious issues. However, the process may be helpful in dealing with those inevitable challenging and sensitive decisions that will need to be taken in years to come.

WE HAVE IDENTIFIED FOUR THEMES:

CONSULTATION – we piloted two processes with the Irish Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade and with Tullyally/Currynieran Community Associations

PARTICIPATION – we piloted two processes to name the new ferry on Rathlin Island and provide the voting process at the Holywell Stews

PRIORITISING – we piloted two processes with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and with the users of St Columb's Park

CAMPAIGNING – we piloted two processes with environmental campaigners at Corrymeela and during Democracy Day in 2017.



It is so complex to work through funding priorities, so to be able to use a consensual vote added significant value to being able to see what had broader and less broad support.

David Jackson, CEO Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council



CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY:

DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE ANNUAL RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE

“At our annual Reconciliation Networking Forum in October 2017, we had a practical demonstration of the Consensual Decision Making Model, through which Forum participants conducted a vote on key priorities for the sector. The process was simple and effective. In our view, CDMM is a valuable addition to the decision making toolkit, with great potential for dealing with sensitive and contentious issues in particular.”

*Reconciliation Fund,
Department of Foreign Affairs
and Trade, Dublin.*



The Reconciliation Fund of the Irish Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade invests millions of Euro in peace-building initiatives in Ireland, North and South. The Fund has made a remarkable contribution to developing reconciliation on the island including on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland.

The Fund engages with people and organisations working on-the-ground on a regular basis updating itself on needs in the region to continue building relationships and breaking down prejudice.

The Fund decided to use our consensual decision-making process at its annual conference with funded projects to identify priorities for the Fund for the next financial year. In total 130 people attending the conference voted on the ten possible priorities identified from previous engagement and consultation.

A clear priority emerged with well over 70% consensus, which will be reflected by the Reconciliation Fund in the programme during the next financial year.

CASE STUDY:

NAMING THE RATHLIN ISLAND FERRY

The consensual vote was a great way to involve islanders in naming the new ferry and to make sure the winning name, Spirit of Rathlin, had genuine widespread support.

David Quinney Mee, Rathlin Development Community Association



Rathlin Island is located six miles off the coast of the island of Ireland, and is the only inhabited island as part of Northern Ireland.

The Department for Infrastructure decided to supply a long overdue new ferry for the island, but had asked that residents help name it.

Rathlin Development Community Association (RDCA) asked for nominations for the name of the new ferry, and short-listed those down to ten possible names. All names included the word “Rathlin”.

Islanders attended a celebratory event that combined future planning for RDCA and also vote to name the new ferry.

The consensual decision making project undertook the voting process involving 70 of the island’s near 100 adult population.

The winner, Spirit of Rathlin, achieved a 67% level of consensus with a score of 363 and the runner-up Oilean Rachrai achieved a 61% level of consensus with a score of 334.

The new ferry is now fully working and taking passengers and vehicles to and from the island. The Spirit of Rathlin is part of island life of the island’s 100 or so adult population.

CASE STUDY: HOLYWELL STEWS

Our Stew events had quite a buzz and people were actually walking away with a cheque to make things happen in communities. That we used a consensual decision making vote with proper ballots that identified a clear winner really added to the events. It didn't just identify a clear winner; it made sure we got a winner with broad support not just 50% +1

Gerard Deane, Holywell Trust



Holywell Trust supports a number of community development and peace building initiatives in Northern Ireland. Based in Derry/Londonderry Holywell Trust works closely with many other community-based initiatives.

The Holywell Trust organised a number of events, to support new and small initiatives in the city that might make a practical difference to issues and peoples' lives.

These events, called Holywell Stews, brought together 60-100 people, each paying an entrance fee for food and to hear pitches from four people and small organisations. A consensual vote was taken after the pitches and the winner left the meeting with the proceeds raised at the door. They won over £600 as reward for a three minute pitch.

A consensual vote was taken as part of the event. After the pitches, those attending were issued with ballot papers and voted by lodging the ballots in a ballot box in a polling booth.

The use of the consensual vote meant that the winning pitch wasn't just the one that got most first preference votes, but the pitch that got a lot of first and second preferences and very few lower ranking votes.

The overall most popular pitch won – always with a consensus of around 70%.

CASE STUDY:

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES FOR ST COLUMB'S PARK

“We want to understand peoples experiences in the park and work in partnership with local people to find solutions to complex issues and ensure the park can be a safe shared space for all. The Consensual decision making model offers a way to consult large numbers of people in a very simple quick process”

Colleen O'Neill (Peace in the Park Coordinator, SCPH)



St Columb's Park is an urban park located in the waterside area of the city and since the construction of the peace bridge it has seen a huge increase in people using this public space for sport and leisure. The park is also adjacent to the Ebrington site, currently owned by the Executive Office and is one of the key economic development sites for the city and district. However, there has been an increase in the amount of alcohol consumption in the area and recently the top of the park has witnessed the potential risk of becoming an interface flashpoint for sectarian violence. One of the key issues is the lack of 'ownership' of the park by the local community so consulting local people in terms of what they thought were the main issues but also their ideas and priorities was a logical next step.

Option	Name of Option	Your Preference	Points (ranked by preference)
1	Events, activities and performances	3	8
2	More or better play areas	4	7
3	More children and youth areas	2	9
4	More supervision and attendants	7	4
5	Nature trails	5	6
6	Parking	6	5
7	Provision and marketing	10	1
8	Space for children and teenagers	1	10
9	Toilet, cleaner and more bins	9	2
10	Takins	8	3

A two-stage process was developed and the initial consultation was very simple with 2 key questions:

1. What are the main issues affecting the park and park users at the minute?
2. What developments would you like to see in your park?

This initial survey informed the ballot for the Modified Borda Count and 10 options were printed onto a ballot sheet and this was used to prioritise what is most needed in St Columb's Park.

The results of the consensual vote was to identify priorities for more events and activities, better toileting and seated areas, and more imaginative space for young people.

CASE STUDY:

DEMOCRACY DAY DEMANDS AN “ASSEMBLY PLUS”

“Democracy Day was a huge success with so many good ideas and challenging yet imaginative conversations. The consensual vote was a real addition to the festival and showed demand for a more innovative and inclusive deliberative democracy with participative tools that complement and add value to a representative Assembly”

Paul Braithwaite, Building Change Trust



During the Imagine festival in 2017, we ran a consensual vote with the 100 and more people present to find out what form of democracy they wanted in Northern Ireland.

The results were clear. They did not want Direct Rule or a return to the recently collapsed Executive on its own. On a consensual vote 93% of people favoured an Assembly Plus model of a representative Assembly supported by deliberative democracy tools such as participatory budgeting and a Citizens Assembly similar to the one operating successfully in Ireland.

The results gained significant attention in the media and social media and have helped Building Change Trust develop its programme for creative space for civic thinking programme widening creative space.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful
committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”

Margaret Mead





Here is a scenario that explains why a consensual vote may be useful to a campaign when activists are divided about the best way forward. Some of the options significantly divide opinion while one enjoys broad support.

This is a fictional case study. Any similarity to actual people, areas or businesses is entirely coincidental.

Scenario: Ballygoforwards is under attack!

A multinational company from another continent that packages shell fish called **Sell Shells and Fish, or SelfFish** Inc for short, is diversifying in to the gas business. It has received planning permission from the Minister for the Environment to drill in the hills above Ballygoforwards, a local area of natural beauty. It will drill for natural resources (gold, oil, gas, or anything else that it finds that could be profitable).

The local community is mainly against the drilling although the Councillors of the same party as the Environment Minister are divided. Various groups have developed to express opposition to SelfFish Inc. ravaging their local area by drilling.

These groups include 'Many Against Drilling' or MAD for short, Save our Forest and Trees (SoFT), Smash the Mash, and Boot the Root. However, the local police have formed a unit in Special Branch to monitor and maybe arrest those groups opposed to the demolition of the forest. It's headed by Sergeant Vine who has roots locally, but most believe his bark is worse than his bite.

There are many concerned individual residents opposed to the drilling who have not aligned with any grouping; while local Councillors are also vocal (elections are being held next year!). The Councillors from the party of the Environment Minister have been called the Dr Dolittle's as they resemble a Push Me Pull You, saying completely different things, often at the same time.

Local faith leaders are also opposed to the drilling as access to the site is through the graveyard which

serves all sides of the community. Graves would have to be disturbed and possibly moved to allow drilling to go ahead. They are led by Father Burke and Rev Hare on a cross community basis and their group is called Ministers Against Grave Incursion – locally they are known as the Magi.

Additionally, regional environmental groups are opposed to the drilling though they don't have any local members. These include Friends of the Planet, Green Action and Save our Planet.

There is no agreed way forward. SelfFish Inc. assures locals that there will be no environmental impact caused by the drilling; but the community is not convinced especially since 10-tonne trucks have moved in to the area and are parked on the beach. Local people feel there was no consultation with the local community before initial planning applications to drill were lodged.

A few meetings have been held in the local community centre but these have been heated, frustrating and no agreed way forward has been reached.

Time is running out.

In growing despair, one local resident has suggested that they try and reach a decision by a process called consensus based decision making. All groups and residents are open to this process as a potential means of moving forward and identifying agreed priorities for action.

THE IDEAS IDENTIFIED SO FAR ARE:

- A.** Take direct action immediately and set up a camp (human barrier) across access to the site
- B.** Lodge legal action to planning office and courts who gave original permission and wait for outcome of this lengthy and expensive legal process
- C.** Leave it with the elected representatives to achieve a political outcome (and there is another election happening next year!)
- D.** Support a united clergy initiative, the Magi, to lead a protest since interference with the graveyard affects all families in the community
- E.** Launch a massive PR campaign targeting MLAs and the media to get public opinion on your side.

Time is running out – can you agree a way forward.
 You can't do them all – which would be your priorities?

ACTIVISTS VOTE ON PRIORITISING SUPPORT

The worked voting example below shows activists voting on the five options. For the sake of brevity we have used just nine activists votes. Here are the results:

HERE IS HOW THEY VOTED FROM 1 TO 5 IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE

Action	Activist A	Activist B	Activist C	Activist D	Activist E	Activist F	Activist G	Activist H	Activist I
Direct action	1	1	5	5	5	1	4	1	1
Legal action	4	3	1	1	3	3	5	3	4
Elected representatives	3	4	2	3	4	4	2	5	5
United clergy	5	5	4	4	2	5	3	4	3
PR campaign	2	2	3	2	1	2	1	2	2

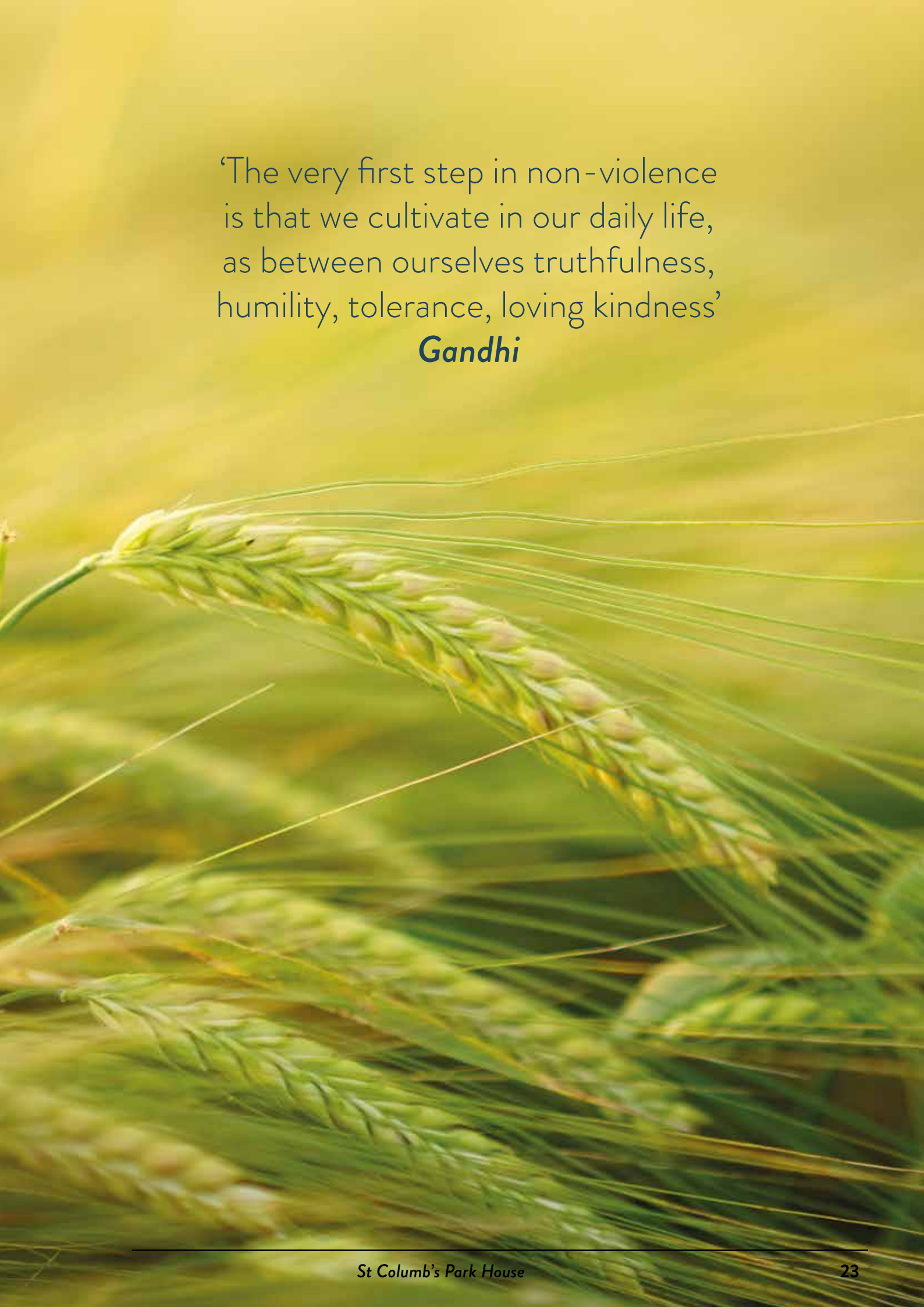
SO WHO WOULD WIN?

In a straight vote using majority rule: Direct Action
 In a vote using proportional representation: Direct Action
 On a modified Borda count: PR campaign

Direct Action would win on a straight vote with five votes out of nine. But while five opt for Direct Action as their first preference the other four have it last or next to last. Many people really don't like it.

However, the PR campaign is liked by everyone, getting two first preference votes, six second preference votes and one third preference vote. It is high up everyone's options and no one actively dislikes it.

The PR campaign would win a consensual vote.



‘The very first step in non-violence
is that we cultivate in our daily life,
as between ourselves truthfulness,
humility, tolerance, loving kindness’

Gandhi



WHAT MAKES A CONSENSUS MORE LIKELY?

The process has two stages. The first stage seeks consensual agreement or consent without a vote being taken. If that is not possible, the second stage will be a vote using a Modified Borda Count.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CONDITIONS THAT WILL HELP EFFORTS TO REACH AGREEMENT OR CONSENSUS. THESE INCLUDE:

- An understanding that decisions affect everyone and a desire to incorporate the concerns and needs of others in the overall decision.
- Clarity in the process and in the expectations placed on participants.
- Good relationships and a reasonable degree of trust between participants.
- Participants understand that the needs of the overall participating organisation may lead to an outcome that may not be their first preferred outcome.
- Participants are able and willing to give up the required time to participate fully.
- There is skilful and knowledgeable facilitation.

HOWEVER, ULTIMATELY THE SUCCESS OF THE PILOT AND OF THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSENSUAL DECISION-MAKING IN A PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION WILL DEPEND ON PARTICIPANTS AND WHETHER:

- There is motivation to find different and potentially creative solutions that are more inclusive.
- Trust and respect between participants is sufficient to take on board the views of people from different backgrounds and perspectives.
- There is adequate and strong leadership to support the outcome and take responsibility for its implementation.



WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?



LOTS OF TACTICS, ATTITUDES AND PROBLEMS CAN GET IN THE WAY OF EFFECTIVE CONSENSUAL DECISION MAKING. THESE INCLUDE:

- **LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS** – participants engage in the process ineffectively.
- **LARGER GROUP INTERESTS** – a number of people don't trust the process which negatively impacts on the quality of engagement.
- **PERSONAL BIAS** – prejudice, sectarianism, racism are all issues in this society and may still impact on the nature of the debate.
- **LACK OF EMPATHY FOR INTERDEPENDENCE** – people who are tied to getting their way regardless of the views of others and in doing so don't want to explore or try to understand other perspectives.
- **UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION** – every participant has equal rights and responsibilities in the process, and the process needs to ensure all people are empowered and participate equally.
- **INDIVIDUALS ATTEND WHO ARE INTENT ON BLOCKING** – some individuals may not want the process to work, and be deliberately obstructive.
- **MINOR CONCERNS CAN CREATE MAJOR BLOCKAGES** – seemingly small issues may harbour larger worries and concerns which if left unaddressed may divert the process.





EVALUATION

Evaluation is important – but after the completion of the overall process there should be a very quick evaluation lasting 5-10 minutes. It could be carried out verbally with participants seeking to explore what parts of the process worked well and less well. A fuller written evaluation feedback sheet or survey may be carried out later.

EVALUATION IN THIS WAY WILL PROVIDE LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE. IT SHOULD:

- Explore how the process can be improved.
- Help participants reflect on the process and how their contribution may have been better.
- Identify behaviours that were unhelpful to the process and that may not be helpful in the general work of the participating organisation.
- Help in the understanding of cultural backgrounds.
- Reflect on the goals and expectations from the start of the process.
- Provide closure to the process.



NEXT STEPS



We hope consensual decision making will gather more support and will be used increasingly when decisions need taken across all sectors.

We hope it will make a major contribution to how sensitive issues are managed by civil society, local and central government, public agencies and the VCSE sector.

This is the start of a journey from which we will learn and further develop the resources and the process itself.

Anyone with an interest and wants to keep up to date with the pilot and the outcomes can do so through St Columb's Park House:

Helen Henderson

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or Rubicon:

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APPENDICES
Materials

OPTION DISCUSSION TEMPLATE



PROS AND CONS

Option	Pros – Positives	Cons – Negatives	Your views?
A	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	
B	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	
C	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	
D	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	
E	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	
F	Summary of discussion	Summary of discussion	



VOTING PAPER

Paper No:

Option	Name of Option	Your Preference	Points (completed by facilitators only)
A	Option A - description		
B	Option B - description		
C	Option C - description		
D	Option D - description		
E	Option E - description		
F	Option F - description		

FACILITATORS SCORING MATRIX



The statistics provided give an indication of the matrix who may have after a vote of 100 people with six options available.

Option	Total Score	Average	% Consensus	Rank
A	450	4.5	75%	1st
B	310	3.1	52%	4th
C	280	2.8	47%	5th
D	270	2.7	45%	6th
E	380	3.8	63%	3rd
F	410	4.1	68%	2nd

TOTAL SCORE is the total points gained by each option after adding all ballots where scores after the vote range from 6 points for those voted 1st to 1 point for those voted 6th.

AVERAGE is the total points for each option divided by the total number of ballots.

% CONSENSUS is the level of consensus. If 100 ballots are cast with all six options voted on, the maximum score any option can get is 600: $100 \times 6 = 600$. If one of the options scored 450 they would have achieved 75% consensus.

RANK is the order of preference of each option depending on the level of consensus from highest to lowest.

In this case Option A is the consensual winner with a high level of consensus at 75%.

If you were looking to prioritise, for example, three funding applications or development possibilities Options A, F and E would be the three clear priorities



St. Columb's Park House
THE HEART IN THE PARK



An Boinn Gnóthaí Fachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Rubicon Consulting

The OSBORNE Partnership

