

Engaging Democracy

Programme Insight Summary



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About this report

In August 2023 Carnegie UK began a programme of engagement to help improve our understanding of participatory and deliberative democracy's ability to deliver democratic wellbeing. This work had a particular focus on understanding the relationship between voice in decision making, power, and existing democratic structures. This report captures the insights, ideas and observations generated from this programme of work, with findings grouped together in areas of thematic interest

Methodology

This report is informed by quasi-qualitative research undertaken in Scotland from August to December 2023. This was comprised by two primary methods:

- **Commissioner engagement:** We undertook six informal one-to-one interviews with commissioners and facilitators of recent participatory or deliberative democratic processes in Scotland
- **Participant engagement:** We worked with the Sortition Foundation to identify and convene four online and in-person workshops with thirty-four individuals that had themselves participated in recent participatory or deliberative democratic processes in Scotland.

In addition, Carnegie UK launched an open call in August 2023 to convene a group of 13 **Democratic Wellbeing Champions** from diverse backgrounds across the UK. This group generously shared their views, experiences and opinions on the current state of deliberative and participatory democratic initiatives across the UK and has helped us in understanding how the insights and observations generated from our engagement work sit in the wider context for these issues across the UK.

This research is not an evaluation of participatory democratic initiatives in Scotland. The observations and insights shared in this paper are intended to prompt further thinking and generate debate on how deliberative and participatory democratic initiatives can better contribute to Democratic Wellbeing now and into the future.

The findings presented in this report are the views of Carnegie UK alone and are not attributable to any individual that participated in our engagement activity. The findings are presented as a blend of anonymised quotes from participants and summarised insights from workshop and interview participants.

A note on Democratic Wellbeing

Carnegie UK defines Democratic Wellbeing as the degree to which we have agency or a say in the decisions that affect our lives, which is a core aspect of our collective wellbeing.

Despite its central importance, our [2023 Life in the UK](#) report found that Democratic Wellbeing was the area with most cause for concern across all nations of the UK with a widespread lack of trust in the UK's political systems and institutions. For example, 73% of people in the UK feel that they cannot influence decisions affecting the UK as a whole.

Key findings

The following are the key observations from this programme of work identified by Carnegie UK in summarising what was heard from our engagement with participants and commissioners in Scotland:



Creating the space matters: The spaces created by participatory or deliberative democratic initiatives to facilitate and enable understanding and consensus amongst those holding contrasting views and perspectives is significant. They demonstrate the potential to allow all of us to have a voice in decision making that affects us, even if our views contrast with those of others.



Without proper accountability, these initiatives risk being tokenistic: A recurring theme in what we heard was that a key factor limiting participatory democracy's success was the lack of formal accountability mechanisms within existing democratic institutions for the recommendations or decisions made to be upheld.



A narrow focus helps: We heard from participants and commissioners that the overly broad or vague topics that some participatory democratic activities have been based around can lead to unspecific or inadequate recommendations from those that participate in them. This can prevent their voice being properly integrated into decisions.



Clarity and transparency are vital: A lack of transparency and clarity at the outset about the intended outcome(s) of participatory or deliberative democratic processes and how they will be used or applied can jeopardise participants' trust in commissioning organisations.



Engagement in decision making can generate positive perceptions of democracy: The positive feelings reported by many participants that took part in deliberative or participatory democratic processes was notable and could be a route to increase wider engagement with democratic systems, contributing to improving our Democratic Wellbeing more generally.



However, participant positivity can fade: It is notable and concerning, however, that some participants' initially positive perception of their voice in decision-making faded as their involvement in the participatory processes went on. A lack of information sharing with participants on the outcome of their involvement in a participative or deliberative democratic process was a recurring concern. Several participants reported that they simply didn't know if the process they were involved in had any influence on policy decisions or not.



Design for accessibility and inclusion to ensure all voices are heard:

Participants highlighted to us that they could feel overwhelmed during their involvement in participatory democratic processes due to the nature and scope of the subject matter. In addition, good design of the format, structure and content of sessions is important to avoid participants feeling patronised or talked down to.






It is important to expose those in power to the process: The more that elected members and officials can experience, or be exposed to, participatory democratic processes first-hand, the more they see the practical benefits to engagement, debate and policymaking.


Conclusions and Considerations

The research summarised in this report was based on engagement with participants in and commissioners of participatory or deliberative democratic processes that took place in Scotland. However, the following recommendations have been co-produced by the group of 13 Democratic Wellbeing Champions from across the UK that was established to support this programme of work. These recommendations are intended for policy makers and the wider ecosystem of campaigners and advocates working to advance and embed participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives across the UK.

Conclusions

-  Participatory democratic processes most usefully contribute to Democratic Wellbeing if they are designed and delivered to high standards of inclusion and accountability.
-  If a high standard is not achieved in the design, delivery and subsequent accountability mechanisms for a participatory or deliberative process then they risk increasing the disconnect between individuals and our democratic structures.
-  Participants in these processes may be left with lower levels of trust than they started with if they are told their views matter but are not informed about how they are acted on or taken forward.

Recommendations

-  **Recommendation 1: Increase the quality of participatory democracy by establishing minimum standards of delivery and accountability.**

There are design and practice standards of participatory democracy that are essential to avoid risks of tokenism that can undermine our collective Democratic Wellbeing. These standards include communication with participants about the purpose of the process and its intended outcomes as well as investment in skilled facilitation that enables all voices to be heard. A set of standards that focus on clarity of purpose, process, communication and ongoing accountability should be developed.

-  **Recommendation 2: Build the democratic literacy of decision makers to encourage them to more effectively share power with those working at a local level.**

The findings of this research suggest that where participatory democracy works well it is often at a more local level. However, more support is required to enable individuals to engage and participate effectively in these processes. In addition, there is a need for better processes for sharing power and decision making at the

most local levels that must actively engage existing civil society organisations. People and organisations at the grass roots level in communities need the tools for consensus building in order to bring people together to constructively challenge traditional power structures.

✓ **Recommendation 3: Use the 2024 moment and potential for change to deliver better Democratic Wellbeing**

2024 is a significant year for democracy and delivery. The UK General Election and the marking of 25 years of devolution offers a moment in time to celebrate and make headway in terms of increasing awareness of the systems, structures, and processes of participatory and deliberative democracy. These initiatives can be powerful tools for countering polarisation in our society and politics and can help reconnect democracy to the decisions and issues that most impact on people's daily lives.

Thematic Insights


Theme 1: Participatory and Deliberative Democracy's ability to deliver Democratic Wellbeing



Insight from participants:

- Several participants shared that when invited to engage in participatory democracy, they were hopeful that their engagement would 'make a difference'. For example, '**I hoped to make a difference**' was repeatedly quoted by separate workshop participants when asked why they took part in a participatory democracy process.
- This suggests the potential some participants felt the process held for increasing their democratic wellbeing, with a feeling that their voice could genuinely improve the society of which they were a part.
- It is important to note, however, that some participants later shared that this hope was never actually fulfilled.
- Some participants talked about how engaging in a participatory or deliberative democratic process helped increase their empathy and understanding of different views and perspectives from others involved in the process.

It opened my eyes to a range of views – workshop participant. 

I learned and better understood others and their opinions and points of view. 
– workshop participant.

- Some participants reflected on the increased understanding that being part of the process gave them on important societal challenges, such as climate change.

It gave me a wider understanding of problems and considering other solutions. 
– workshop participant.

- Some participants reported an increased sense of personal confidence and a feeling of being valued and heard following their engagement. One participant said that the process helped them build more confidence, and another shared that they were '**empowered to raise issues locally**'.



Insight from commissioners

- Some commissioners we spoke to highlighted participants' increased engagement with societal issues from taking part in a participatory democracy initiative. For example, one commissioner shared that participants got '**huge amount of knowledge**' by participating in the process.

- Some commissioners highlighted the need for improved education and awareness of our existing democratic processes at a population level in order to make participatory democracy more effective. One commissioner shared that one of the gaps identified by their commissioning organisation was a need to **'go out and do education'** and another shared **'there needs to be information campaigns. There needs to be more education'**
- Some commissioners highlighted the sense of responsibility taken by individual participants to try to secure next steps and an outcome from their participatory democracy process.

People definitely took real ownership of the importance of the issue. – Commissioner interview



A smaller group of them remained quite active like sort of pushing and lobbying for stuff... – Commissioner interview



- Commissioners also stressed the importance of a successful 'outcomes' stage for participatory democracy, and the need to be clear at the outset what the outcome of the process could feasibly look like.
- A lack of transparency about the outcomes of processes before participants take part could jeopardise participants' trust in commissioning organisations, and in wider democratic structures in general. One commissioner shared **'they haven't really affected policy very much. I think there's a lot of reasons for that.'** and several others highlighted the **disappointment participants' felt from Government responses** to their collective recommendations.

Carnegie UK observations

- The spaces created by participatory and deliberative democracy for understanding and building consensus among those of contrasting views and perspectives is notable and shows the potential these initiatives hold to give more people a constructive voice in how decisions are made, even if their views conflict or contrast with others.
- A prerequisite to our Democratic Wellbeing is an awareness of the issues that affect us and what decisions are being made in relation to them. The response from commissioners we spoke to talks to the positive impact participatory democracy can have in relation to this aspect of Democratic Wellbeing.
- Ensuring that participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives have clear connections to existing democratic institutions is vital for holding those in power accountable to deliver against recommendations. The absence of these accountability mechanisms risks these initiatives being seen as tokenistic and further exacerbating levels of disengagement in our politics.

Theme 2: Voice in decision-making



Insight from participants

- Several participants were motivated to take part in participatory democracy initiatives because of the opportunity they perceived to have a voice in decision-making. One participant shared that taking part felt like a **'no-brainer'** because they had a **'unique opportunity to have voice heard and influence decisions'**.
- However, for some participants, this hope faded by the end of the process and they reported a sense of disillusionment and inability to impact decision-making.
- Participants that contributed to our workshops were asked to draw on a graph how much of a voice they felt they had in decisions that affected them as time went on in their process. At the end of our workshops the graph showed some participants feeling their democratic wellbeing stayed the same or went down after the process they were involved in.
- This led to some participants labelling participatory democracy as tokenistic. For example, one participant suggested that the small outcomes from their process was **'just a means to placate the mob'** and another shared **'I felt it was important and would make a change. However, this dwindled as I started to wonder if it would ever see light of day'**
- Several participants reported that they simply didn't know if their process had any influence on policy decisions or not. For example, one participant shared that it was **'hard to know what had been taken on board'** and another said they were **'still waiting to hear next steps'**, despite their process ending a while ago.
- There was an underlying theme in many workshops that the scale and challenge of the issues covered in participatory democracy were so big that participants' ambition to be involved in decision-making on such issues seemed unattainable. When asked if they thought the process they had taken part in had influenced policy-change, one participant shared they were **'hopeful but unsure as it's a massive undertaking'**



Insight from commissioners

- Some commissioners we spoke to highlighted the need for voice to be integrated into all elements of a participatory democracy processes, and that this is not always currently the case.

You can still say, "what we're going to do is involve the public. Before and after or before and during, not just before." So you're not necessarily changing when you're doing things, but you might just be doing it slightly more, maybe spreading it out slightly more so that you actually do test some ideas and then listen to what you hear back. – Commissioner interview



- Several commissioners also highlighted that the overly broad topics many participatory democracy activities are based on leads to unspecific and inadequate recommendations from participants. This ultimately prevents their voice being integrated properly into decisions.

There's too many recommendations and many quite broad... (specific recommendations) that's how you get the accountability. – Commissioner Interview



Carnegie UK observations

- There was a recurring aspect in this theme about the risk of participatory or deliberative democracy being done badly or leading nowhere in terms of wider impact, accountability and change.
- This risk of tokenism in how and why participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives are run could exacerbate existing problems of disengagement and a lack of trust in democracy.
- The transparency of motivation from commissioning agencies is important in relation to ensuring people's voices are heard and incorporated properly.
- Participatory democracy must not be viewed as just an extension of a consultation process but as a meeting of equals to grapple with difficult problems together.

Theme 3: Power



Insight from participants

- Participants shared that, in general, there was good representation of individuals from a variety of backgrounds taking part in their respective processes. For example, one participant shared

There was a varied range of ages, genders, experiences and political ideas represented. – workshop participant.



There was a 'broad spectrum of participants.' – workshop participant.



- Despite this demographic diversity, several participants still suggested the power dynamics at play between participants, whereby the loudest voices were sometimes the most heard.

We all had the opportunity to speak, but some did more talking than others. – workshop participant



- Some participants highlighted that they could feel excluded from participatory democracy processes due to their inaccessible format and the nature and structure of the content, with some sharing that they had felt patronised.

It was patronising and the skill required was a barrier to involvement – workshop participant.



Intimidating, jargon-heavy language. – workshop participant.



Insight from commissioners

- Some commissioners highlighted that participants had sometimes perceived government responses to participatory democracy recommendations to be inaccessible.
- One commissioner described one such official response as: **'it's too long, it's too detailed'** and another implied that participants' lack of awareness of wider democratic processes left them dissatisfied with the formal response to their recommendations.

(in the context of the policy building process) Actually you can't just go 'we're going to stop this tomorrow', you know? And it was like 'we're consulting on this further' and people didn't like that language. – Commissioner interview



- Commissioners highlighted the power of the 'status quo' in potentially diminishing the perceived legitimacy of participatory democracy, especially in comparison to representative democracy
- It was noted that there was a risk for some elected members that their traditional sense of authority may be perceived as being threatened by participatory democratic processes: **"That's what I've been elected to do. That's what I worked for... And I know what my constituents think cause that's my job."**
- Despite these challenges, some commissioners thought that participants were empowered from taking part in participatory or deliberative democratic processes.
- The importance of the relational aspects of this empowerment, especially through participants' development of relationships with elected officials, was noted in particular.

Lots of opportunities were created for them to speak to MPs- Commissioner interview



- It was noted that the more exposure those in more traditional positions of democratic power had to participatory or deliberative democratic processes, the more receptive they could become to their benefit.

We would always, I think, have representatives and the commissioner there to observe, but also hearing from members of the public in their own voice. – Commissioner interview



Carnegie UK observations

- The potential undoubtedly exists for a degree of tension between traditional forms of representative democracy and emerging initiatives for deliberative or participatory democracy.
- It is important to emphasise that this is not a zero-sum game and that these two approaches can work side-by-side, particularly in relation to complex issues where there are no easy answers, without undermining traditional forms of democratic authority and accountability.
- There is significant value in considering how best to expose more elected officials and those operating in traditional forms of institutional power to well-designed and well-run forms of participatory democracy to help demonstrate and explain its value and potential to our democratic wellbeing.

Theme 4: Existing democratic structures



Insight from participants

- Within the Scottish democratic system, there was an underlying feeling amongst participants that democratic processes (including participatory democracy) only play a small part within a wider system of policymaking, limiting their overall voice in policy decisions. For example, one participant explained that they were unsure of the outcome of their process as it was '**ultimately only one factor in decision-making**'
- When asked about how they would describe their democratic wellbeing in general, some participants focused on Scotland's democratic relationship with Westminster, and how they felt this negatively impacted their ability to influence decisions that affected them.

I feel I have some impact in Scottish democracy but little impact on UK/ Westminster policies. – workshop participant.



Being in Scotland limits the influence in things not governed by the Scottish Government. – workshop participant.



- Those participants who took part in participatory democracy processes at a local level (such as within community councils) generally seemed to report greater optimism about the change made by their processes than at a national scale.

The local projects I am involved in will hopefully have a positive impact on people's lives and wellbeing. – workshop participant.



(there are) better relationships between community council and regional council – workshop participant.



Insight from commissioners

- Several commissioners highlighted the bureaucracy, time and cost associated with participatory democracy processes within democratic institutions, and how this limited their effectiveness and how easily they can be implemented.

And even when there is a team who have decided that they want this type of insight and they commission a project and scrutinise a report they're all happy and everyone was happy with what happened, even they would be like, 'well this now needs to go through various channels before it even gets published, let alone implemented'. So that is tricky.– commissioner interview.



- One of the key factors named by commissioners as limiting participatory democracy's success was the lack of formal accountability mechanisms for participatory democracy outcomes within democratic institutions. One commissioner shared that after the process was over '**no one had ownership of it anymore**'.

It wasn't just going to one ministerial department who were kind of expecting this and waiting for it and prepared for it. So that made it really difficult because then it's just landing on the minister's desk and they're like, well, what am I meant to be doing with this? – Commissioner interview



- Several commissioners also named a culture of resistance towards participatory democracy within democratic institutions as a key limiting factor to its success.

There's still definitely a lot of scepticism there. I mean, there's some politicians I've spoken to are just, almost against the whole idea of public engagement. Full stop. – Commissioner interview



- Some commissioners reflected that there can be a risk of ulterior motives for engaging or commissioning participatory democratic initiatives, which can be for political reasons. For example, one commissioner described participatory democracy as a '**political football that can be picked up and dropped around, whenever they pick and choose**'.

Carnegie UK observations

- It is notable that some participants felt more connected to participatory processes that related to more local issues – such as at local government level rather than national government level. The proximity and locality of issues people were asked to engage with would seem to have a bearing on how positive they felt about their involvement.
- Despite a welcome rise in the number and quality of participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives in Scotland in recent years, there are still important challenges around both the prevailing political and policy making culture and how those in positions of authority are held accountable for delivering on the recommendations made by the people involved with these initiatives



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