

## Rebuilding trust in politics & government



- Welcome - Adam Lang, Carnegie UK
- Presentation on Parliamentarians' perspectives on deliberative democracy - Adam Lang, Carnegie UK
- Presentation on Blueprints for Democratic Wellbeing - Prof Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh
- Reflections - Miriam Levin, Demos
- Discussion and Q&A
- Closing remarks

## Key findings:

- 72% do not feel that they can influence decisions affecting the UK, unchanged on previous years.
- 54% have medium or high trust in the UK Government, nine percentage points higher than in 2024.
- 68% have medium or high trust in local councils, four percentage points lower than in 2023.
- People who live in the most deprived areas, who have a democratic wellbeing score of 38 out of 100. This is six points lower than for those who live in the least deprived areas.
- Disabled people, who have a democratic wellbeing score of 37 out of 100. This is six points lower than for those without a disability.



# Engaging Democracy

- **Engagement works:** Engagement in decision making can generate positive perceptions of democracy among the public.
- **Accountability matters:** Without proper accountability, these initiatives risk being tokenistic. Formal accountability mechanisms matter.
- **Positivity can fade:** However, participant positivity can fade if they do not see their recommendations being acted on.
- **Exposure is essential:** It is important to expose those in power to deliberative and participatory approaches to generate support.



# Polling of Elected officials

## Methodology

- 100 MPs of the House of Commons
- 40 MSPs of the Scottish Parliament
- 30 MSs of the Senedd
- 33 MLAs of the Legislative Assembly

## Questions covered

- What awareness do elected members have of deliberative democracy and why they are/aren't open to adopting them in UK Parliaments/Assemblies?
- What is the self-perception of UK Parliament elected members in terms of the institution's role in addressing low public trust in democracy?



# Key findings

## Awareness and experience of deliberative democracy

- Awareness varies significantly by jurisdiction:
  - Highest in Scotland (84% MSPs heard of it)
  - Wales (76% MSs)
  - UK Parliament (69% MPs)
  - Lowest in Northern Ireland (44% MLAs had never heard of it).
- Experience is limited overall, with only a minority of representatives having directly **participated or observed** deliberative processes.

# Key findings

## Responding to public trust in democracy and devolved institutions

- Limited confidence that deliberative democracy will improve trust:
  - Agreement is highest in Northern Ireland (55%)
  - but below half in Scotland and Wales (44%)
  - lowest in Westminster (35%).
- Broad consensus that all institutions (UK, devolved, and local government) have a role in addressing low public trust, but leadership is often seen as sitting with UK-level institutions or civil society rather than devolved bodies alone.

# Key findings (continued)

## Biggest perceived barriers to adopting deliberative democratic practices

- **Limited awareness and understanding:** Uneven knowledge across legislatures creates a foundational barrier, with some representatives unfamiliar with what deliberative democracy involves or how it works in practice.
- **Concerns about legitimacy and democratic mandate:** Perception that deliberative processes lack a mandate, raising fears about undermining representative democracy.
- **Perceived duplication of elected representatives' roles:** Widespread concern that deliberative processes may overlap with or replace core parliamentary functions, particularly among Westminster MPs.
- **Resource and capacity constraints:** Time, cost, and logistical demands seen as major barriers; belief that institutions are too stretched to adopt new processes effectively.
- **Resistance to change:** Entrenched norms, procedural “red tape,” and political culture (including partisanship and short-termism) limit openness to innovation.

# What does this mean for rebuilding trust?

- **Build awareness of deliberative processes among elected representatives.**
- **Clarify how deliberative processes can complement and enhance representative decision making.**
- **Institutionalise deliberative processes into existing legislatures.**



# Blueprints for Democratic Wellbeing:

Strengthening UK Parliaments with Citizen Deliberation

Prof. Oliver Escobar (University of Edinburgh)  
and Prof. Stephen Elstub (Newcastle University)

### *Acknowledgements:*

- Carnegie UK team
- 4 roundtables in Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff and London

# What is a mini-public?

Mini-publics are civic institutions that involve a cross-section of the public in evidence-informed deliberation to inform decision-making.

Participants are selected through civic lottery to reflect the diversity of the population in terms of demographics and viewpoints and supported with resources to reduce barriers to participation.

Mini-publics can:

- gather a diverse cross-section of the population,
- address complex issues,
- examine wide-ranging evidence,
- find common ground and overcome political deadlock,
- engage productively with differences, conflict and trade-offs,
- and agree conclusions motivated by public interest.



# Why institutionalisation? Why now?

- Global democratic recession: representative institutions need shoring up to address the challenges of our time – a new working relationship between citizens and their representatives is crucial to democratic wellbeing
- Public trust in parliamentary democracy is low and falling – many people feel politics doesn't work for them. This isn't abstract: low legitimacy makes hard decisions harder to deliver
- Parliamentarians face mounting issues, pressures, noise – and less usable insight.  
Traditional engagement:
  - usually captures the loud, organised or resourceful
  - rarely shows what people think *after* considering evidence and trade-offs
- Learning from history: parliaments endure because they evolve
- Institutionalising mini-publics can give them the stability, value and power necessary for them to make a difference to people's lives

# What can mini-publics do for parliaments?

- Provide considered public judgement, not just opinion or lobbying
- Help parliamentarians:
  - assess policy options
  - understand how citizens deal with policy trade-offs
  - anticipate backlash and implementation challenges
  - connect with voters in new ways
  - show commitment to working with the public
- Bring additional deliberative capacity into parliamentary work
- Temper influence of media cycles (e.g. short-termism), social media outrage, narrow interest groups, etc
- Generate usable recommendations, grounded in evidence and lived experience
- Offer political support for difficult decisions informed by a cross-section of citizens through processes that are transparent and defensible
- When done properly, they can increase trust, credibility and authority of parliamentarians

# Blueprints and context

**Four adaptable “blueprints” to institutionalise citizen deliberation in parliaments across the UK** –from mini-publics on request to major reforms like a standing citizens’ chamber.

**Across the UK, some foundations are already in place:**

- **Wales** has combined practical experimentation with official endorsement through the Citizens' Assembly for Wales and the Constitutional Commission.
- **Northern Ireland** has experience of citizen deliberation on sensitive and contested issues, alongside commitments to integrate mini-publics into policymaking (New Decade, New Approach 2020 agreement).
- **Westminster** has commissioned citizens' assemblies through select committees, including on social care and climate change.
- **Scotland** has experience of citizens' assemblies, local deliberative processes and quasi-permanent parliamentary People's Panels.

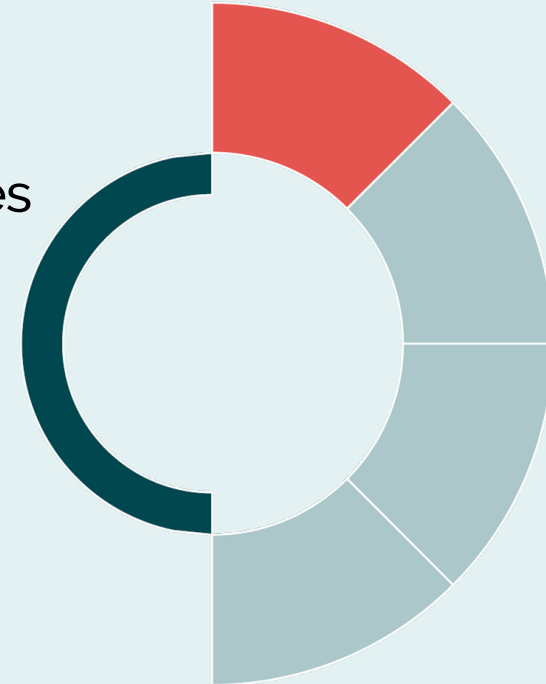
**These experiences (and 30 years of broader UK evidence on mini-publics) can help to move from intermittent practice to durable civic institutions.**

The blueprints provide structured pathways that can be adapted to different parliamentary traditions, capacities and political contexts while pursuing a common goal: Embedding citizen deliberation as part of parliamentary democracy across the UK.



# Blueprint 1: Mini-publics on Demand

- **What:** Convene a mini-public when parliamentarians (e.g. through committees) request it. Parliamentary rules are adjusted so that mini-publics are a formal option, with in-house staff support for design and facilitation.
- **How it works:** Parliamentarians and committees choose issues (e.g. policy under review). Deliberations feed directly into scrutiny: recommendations are addressed by committees or could be tabled and debated in the chamber, and the executive responds.
- **Advantages:** Flexible and relatively easy to start. Aligns mini-publics with parliamentarians' priorities, giving citizens input on issues that representatives care about. Uses familiar committee process.
- **Risks:** Remains sporadic; risks tokenism. If used too infrequently, it may not provide ongoing insights, shift culture or build trust.



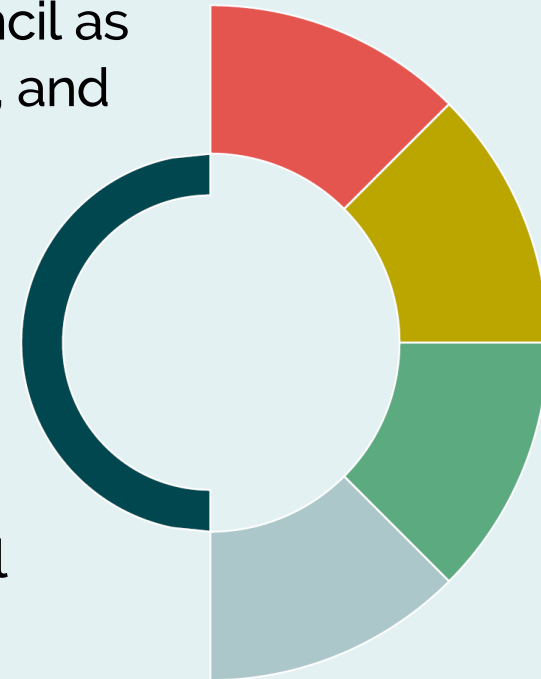
# Blueprint 2: Petition-initiated Mini-publics

- **What:** Citizens set the mini-public agenda via e-petitions.
- **How it works:** People support an e-petition on the Parliament's online portal. Meeting the threshold triggers a mini-public to develop recommendations that go to committees or chamber debates for formal response.
- **Advantages:** Links broad public support with deep citizen deliberation. E-petitions reflect public priorities, and the mini-public considers the issues in depth.
- **Risks:** May direct parliamentarians onto issues they didn't prioritise. Well-resourced groups could game the petition threshold. Mitigations include setting high signature thresholds and strict design oversight.



# Blueprint 3: Citizens' Council & Themed Mini-publics

- **What:** Create a permanent Citizen Council (e.g. 24 members by lottery, serving limited terms) embedded in Parliament. The Council works year-round, spotting issues and teaming with parliamentarians to launch topic-specific mini-publics.
- **How it works:** Council sets priorities, maintains quality standards, and ensures continuity over election cycles. Throughout the term, themed mini-publics (on health, housing, environment, etc.) meet for short periods. Some citizens rotate into the Council as terms end. Recommendations feed into committee inquiries, policy reviews, and chamber debates.
- **Advantages:** Balances stability (institutional memory, learning) with renewal (new citizen participants regularly). Over time, this can normalise citizen deliberation in the legislature.
- **Challenges:** More complex and resource-intensive than Blueprints 1 and 2. Requires clear mandate (avoid overlap with committees) and strong political will. Risk that the Council is sidelined if its role isn't legally defined.



# Blueprint 4: Citizens' Second Chamber

- **What:** Establish a permanent mini-public as a second chamber –e.g. a House of Citizens instead of the House of Lords.
- **How it works:** This could sit continuously reviewing legislation and long-term policies – complementing the work of the elected chamber. Citizens serve staggered terms. It has rights to receive referrals from government or parliamentarians, report directly to the elected chamber, and demand government responses.
- **Advantages:** Strong symbolic weight –a clear statement that citizen deliberation is at the heart of parliamentary democracy. A standing chamber can delve into complex and long-term issues beyond the capacity of temporary mini-publics.
- **Risks:** Radical change. Constitutional questions arise (e.g. how it interacts with the elected chamber). Resource-intensive and high demands on citizens (life-altering, wide policy coverage, vulnerability to lobbying). Resistance from those who see it diluting elected power.



# Key considerations across the Blueprints

The document also addresses questions about:

- **Division of labour**
  - Scrutiny
  - Agenda-setting
- **Authority**
  - Advisory
  - Mandatory public response
  - Shared authority
- **Accountability**
  - Deliberative
  - Multidirectional
- **Governance**
  - Procedural integrity and autonomy
  - Clear roles and responsibilities
  - Evaluation, learning, and institutional confidence
  - Governance as democratic infrastructure

# Advancing democratic innovation

- **Infrastructure**

Formalising mini-publics in Standing Orders. Rules for initiation, follow-up and debate. Building on existing teams (e.g. clerks, researchers, outreach). Securing ring-fenced funding. Developing in-house expertise and training (process design, facilitation, methods, impact).

- **Culture change**

Normalising citizen deliberation as part of parliamentary routines. Building understanding of what mini-publics are (and aren't). Learning from existing evidence and experiences. Supporting parliamentarians to see and discuss their value in practice and participate in co-design.

- **Leadership**

Embedding cross-party political support alongside strong staff stewardship. Supporting political champions, empowering officials to maintain quality, and working with civic and academic partners to sustain learning and credibility over time.

# Conclusion: From democratic innovation to democratic infrastructure

1. Over three **decades**, mini-publics across the UK and internationally have shown that diverse citizens can deliberate on complex issues, engage constructively with difference, and contribute valuable public judgement.
2. **Representative democracy** has never been static. Parliaments have endured because they have adapted to changing societies, expectations and challenges.
3. Mini-publics can strengthen the relationship between citizens and their representatives as part of **a broader agenda for democratic wellbeing**.
4. The challenge is no longer to prove that citizen deliberation works. It is to build **the institutional foundations** that allow it to contribute consistently to parliamentary democracy and public governance.
5. The Blueprints offer four pathways for moving **from occasional democratic innovations to lasting democratic institutions**.

*“Democracy can move forward or backward, but it cannot stand still.”*

John Dryzek (1996, p.5)



**Thank you.**