

Conveners Group
Wednesday, 19 March 2025
2nd Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Public participation blueprint

Introduction

1. The Group will hear a short presentation and consider an update on the Citizen Participation and Public Participation Committee's ('the Committee') public participation inquiry at this meeting.

Background

2. The CPPP Committee reported in September 2023 on its inquiry on how to embed public participation in work of the Scottish Parliament. The Committee's report made a number of recommendations, including that two further People's Panels should be held this session and that, along with these Panels, further work should be done to produce a blueprint for public participation in Session 7.
3. These panels (one on the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and one on drug harms) have now taken place. In line with the Committee's recommendation, the panels have been externally evaluated and the executive summary of the evaluation report is included in **Annexe A**. As with the Committee's own people's panel, feedback from participants on both the quality of the panels and the impact on them and their relationship with the Scottish Parliament has been positive.
4. The Committee have now considered a draft of the participation Blueprint and agreed that this draft should now be consulted on ahead of the Committee considering a final version and short report in May. A copy of the draft Blueprint is provided in **Annexe B**. Once the Committee has agreed the Blueprint, the Committee's intention is to seek a Chamber debate to allow the Parliament to consider the Blueprint.

Recommendation

5. The Group is invited to note the update on the Committee's public participation inquiry and offer feedback on the draft Blueprint.

Clerks to the Conveners Group
March 2025

Annexe A: executive summary of the evaluation of the two people's panels

The Scottish Parliament ran two People's Panels in 2024. The first, [the People's Panel reviewing the Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) (PPCC), took place in February and March 2024 and aimed to answer:

How effective has the Scottish Government been at engaging the public on climate change and Scotland's climate change targets?

What else (if anything) could the Scottish Government do to inform and involve the public to help meet Scotland's climate change target?

The second panel, [the People's Panel on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland](#) (PPDH), occurred between October and November 2024 and addressed:

What does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug-related harms?

A group of citizens representative of the Scottish population was selected for each panel. Twenty-three participants (later reduced to 21) took part in the PPCC, and 23 participated in the PPDH.

As academics from the University of Edinburgh, we were commissioned to independently evaluate the design, implementation, outputs, outcomes, and impact of the panels.

Panel Size and Composition

The sortition was outsourced to the Sortition Foundation, a registered company with a credible track record of designing democratic lotteries. The sortition followed a stratified approach that provides evidence that the final composition of the Panel resembles key socio-demographic characteristics of the wider Scottish population.

A substantive innovation was introduced by including representation of thought alongside socio-demographics, with panels reflecting diverse perspectives on climate change.

Participants perceived the panels as representative of Scotland, especially socio-demographically.

Evidence Provision

Panels received a broad range of credible, trusted evidence from experts, practitioners, and those with lived experience.

The PPCC faced challenges in using evidence to address its questions, which were mitigated in the PPDH by introducing a mapping exercise and evidence guides.

Participants in both panels were satisfied with the quality and quantity of information provided.

Design and Facilitation

Facilitation was highly effective, creating inclusive, engaging environments with clear explanations of roles and processes.

Participation methods were diverse, including small-group ideation, individual voting, and plenary discussions, which fostered deep engagement.

Challenges in the PPCC included:

Complex framing questions requiring deliberation on multiple topics (climate change, public engagement, policy, legislation).

Balancing scrutiny of existing policies and generating new recommendations, with more focus on the latter.

Limited time for the final plenary session, restricting deliberation on recommendations and minority statements.

Improvements in the PPDH included:

A single guiding question, clarifying participants' roles.

A small-group voting system for better time management, however more time for final plenary deliberations is still needed.

Participants in both panels were extremely satisfied with the quality of the facilitation.

Impact on Participants

Participants showed significant learning improvements and enhanced views of the Scottish Parliament.

Internal efficacy (belief in their contribution's value) increased, alongside willingness to engage in community initiatives and perceived value of lived experience.

Trust in politicians and external efficacy (confidence in the panel's impact on Parliament and Government) did not see similar improvements, reflecting wider societal tendencies.

Expectations of Impact on Parliament

The journey from citizen recommendations to policy change follows a complex pathway involving parliamentary scrutiny and Government interpretation.

Participants expected direct action on their recommendations but gained valuable insight into parliamentary processes through role-playing activities.

The PPDH improved participants' understanding of how the process impacts policy and emphasised communication pathways to keep participants informed.

Conclusion

Scottish Parliament staff dedicated significant time to creating a caring and formative space for citizens, demonstrating adaptability by improving the second panel's design. Expert witnesses were credible, facilitators ensured inclusivity, and participants highly valued the experience.

For participants, the panels were empowering, fostering learning and reconnecting them with politics. Older participants challenged self-perceptions of having "nothing left to contribute," while younger participants engaged as equals in policy debates for the first time.

The PPCC and PPDH represent two distinct deliberation scenarios: post-legislative scrutiny (PLS) and pre-legislative input. The PPCC grappled with balancing policy evaluation and recommendation-making, but PLS provides citizens with concrete policies to assess. In contrast, the PPDH focused solely on generating recommendations, making it more adaptable across policy areas but less anchored in existing policy, leading to broader and potentially less focused discussions.

Overall, the panels successfully drafted recommendations and collective evaluations of the Scottish Government. As external evaluators, we observed a high-quality process throughout.

General recommendation

The Scottish Parliament's approach to deliberation is characterised by its high degree of responsiveness and tailored design. Their processes demonstrate an exceptional ability to adapt to citizens' emerging ideas, adjust materials guiding deliberation, and meet evidence needs. This adaptability also extends to integrating external feedback, as seen in the improvements made between the first and second panels. Such responsiveness is closely linked to the Parliament's internal capacity building, which equips the in-house team with the expertise and reflexivity needed to design context-specific participatory methods. This in-house capability appears critical to delivering the high-quality deliberative processes that define their approach.

Against this background, **we strongly recommend that the Scottish Parliament continues organising deliberative panels. We conclude that in-house professional staff carefully designed the process to maximise its benefits and make people feel engaged, valued and listened to.**

Annexe B: draft blueprint for public participation

Embedding deliberative democracy in the Scottish Parliament

What is deliberative democracy?

1. Deliberative democracy is an approach to democratic participation that allows members of the public to engage in inclusive, respectful, reasoned and informed discussion and debate on significant issues. Decision making is informed by this deliberation.
2. When we talk about embedding deliberative democracy in the Scottish Parliament we mean building it into the Parliament's structures in such a way that it becomes a normal and established way for the public to participate in Parliament.
3. One of the approaches we embed should be People's Panels, the Scottish Parliament's particular model for public deliberation based on random selection. We also see wider applications for informed and reasoned deliberation – for example, deliberative lived experience panels, where groups selected on the basis of their shared experience (rather than randomly) are facilitated to learn, discuss and reach informed and thoughtful recommendations. These should also be part of the Parliament's approach.
4. As the Parliament's understanding and expertise in deliberative methods grows, it should explore how to gain some of the benefits of deliberative approaches within small scale events, educational activities, surveys and even in the way that MSPs on Committees deliberate with each other: for example, in scoping inquiries or reviewing evidence.

How does deliberative democracy fit with other public participation approaches?

5. As the previous [CPPPC report](#) emphasised, deliberative democracy needs to sit within a full programme of participative and engagement approaches. This was well captured by the Scottish Government's [working group on institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy](#) (IPDD):

“The benefits of democratic innovation go well beyond one type of process and will be more effectively delivered if this work takes place in a system that values and uses participation as a core part of its operation ... It is in smaller-scale and local processes that shifts in the way decisions are made can reach larger numbers of people who are currently unheard”.
6. Deliberative approaches such as our People's Panels have the potential for very high impact on policy and on the participants; they are also among our most resource-intensive methods, in terms of financial cost, staff time and the time demands on participants. They therefore need to be reserved for the right questions at the right time. And Panels need to sit alongside a wide-ranging and strategic public engagement approach which makes it easier for even those with limited time or confidence to contribute. Our approach needs several

strands: educating and informing the Scottish public; listening to people to understand how the Parliament can be of value and have impact; and giving people many different ways to have impact on scrutiny by sharing their opinions and experience.

7. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has commissioned a review of its Public Engagement Strategy in readiness for the next session of Parliament which begins in 2026. This paper does not therefore address the wider participation landscape other than to highlight the recommendations of the CPPPC's People's Panel on Participation and the Committee's recommendations drawing on the Panel report.

Why should the Scottish Parliament embed deliberative democracy?

8. Every year we are seeing more reports across democracies worldwide of falling trust in political institutions and elected representatives. Trust in the Scottish Parliament used to be significantly higher than in the UK Parliament, but this difference is reducing. One of the key ways to increase trust appears to be by giving people more of a voice in decision making, in partnership with elected representatives. This very much aligns with the Scottish Parliament's [founding principle of power sharing](#). There are many ways to meet the public desire for a greater role in decision making but there are particular characteristics of deliberative approaches which suggest that they should be a core element of our approach to public participation in the scrutiny work of Parliamentary committees.
9. We are currently tracking the impacts on scrutiny of the two pilot Panels run in 2024 on climate change and on drug harms. We will include an assessment of scrutiny impact in our final report which will also draw on an independent evaluation by the University of Edinburgh.
10. These are some of the key characteristics which create the potential for a significant impact on the quality of Parliamentary scrutiny:
 - Participants in deliberative processes tend to come out knowing more about the topic and to revise their opinions in light of new information and opportunities to deliberate together. This is in striking contrast to much current public debate, which tends towards polarisation, fixed opinions and misinformation. Deliberative processes encourage participants with very varied backgrounds and experiences to listen to other people respectfully and with an open mind. Participants draw on information they hear to re-form and justify opinions. There is a lot of evidence that participants change their views through these processes.
 - Deliberative processes can be used to address complex policy issues, including those which have become politically stuck and where it is challenging to find solutions that can gain public support. As well as engaging with each other, deliberative participants can increase their understanding of the challenges that face their representatives in making political decisions and can understand better the trade-offs that elected members have to make.

- Deliberative processes take participation far wider than the usual suspects: random selection allows the creation of a diverse group reflecting the population of Scotland. Many participants will not previously have been involved with the Parliament or shared their views on public policy. Despite that, expert witnesses regularly comment on the quality of questioning they receive from People's Panels.
 - Methods like petitions, campaigns and lobbying tend to attract the most politically active or those with the strongest opinions about the issue, while offering little encouragement for people to consider alternative arguments or seek out new information – both strengths of deliberative processes.
 - Participants in deliberative processes tend to come out with more trust that political institutions are interested in their views and more confidence in their own capacity to be actively involved in politics in the widest sense.
11. While deliberative democracy, and participation more generally, are important tools to support the work of the Parliament, we agree with the IPDD that “public participation will not be suitable for or resolve every issue, and will be one of many evidence sources used to make decisions. In these situations, credibility and trust can be maintained by being open and transparent about how decisions are made.” Part of effectively embedding deliberative democracy as an approach means ensuring it is used where it can provide the most value and that committees are supported to identify their best option from a range of approaches.

Principles and standards – embedding best practice

12. Principles for how and when deliberative approaches are used are essential to successfully embed them in the work of the Parliament. These principles should also complement the Parliament's wider participation strategy
13. Our starting point is the principles that the Committee previously proposed:
- That deliberative democracy should complement the existing model of representative democracy and be used to support the scrutiny process.
 - That the way in which deliberative methods are used, from recruitment through to reporting and feedback, should be transparent and subject to a governance and accountability framework.
 - That the deliberative methods used should be proportionate and relevant to the topic, and the scrutiny context.
 - That participants in deliberative democracy should be supported, empowered and given feedback on how their recommendations are used.

Principles for the use of People's Panels in committee work

14. The following principles are about how committees should use People's Panels:

- The primary purpose of People's Panels is to contribute to informed and evidenced scrutiny
- It should be the responsibility of committees to decide on and put forward topics, to respond in a timely way to the recommendations of Panels and to make the fullest possible use of Panel recommendations in developing legislative or policy recommendations and holding the government to account
- In agreeing to a Panel, Committees are also committing to give a considered and reasoned response to the Panel's recommendations, whether or not they agree with them. Committees should be expected to respond in detail to People's Panel reports and there should be a space in the Parliamentary programme for a debate on any Panel that takes place.

15. Some of these points should be considered for inclusion in Standing Orders to further embed the process in the Parliament's work.

Principles for selecting topics for People's Panels

16. The following principles should be used to select topics:

- Topic selection should be the responsibility of Conveners' Group, based on an evaluation from SPICe and PACT staff as to which topic best meets the selection criteria.
- All topics proposed should have the support of the relevant subject committee.
- Selection should be based on clear criteria. We endorse the criteria (developed by Professor Stephen Elstub during his academic fellowship with the Scottish Parliament) which were agreed in 2023 by the Conveners' Group:
 - **Problem:** The topic focuses on an issue that needs solved & would benefit from deliberative input. In the context of post-legislative scrutiny this means assessing if a review of the implementation and impact of an Act would benefit from consideration by a panel of informed and broadly representative members of the public.
 - **Scope:** The topic is sufficiently broad in scope; it is an issue that will affect various members of the public and have an impact on broader society
 - **Framing:** the topic can be posed as a question or in the form of a problem to solve. For example, is an Act achieving its intended purpose? Is it benefitting people in the way originally intended by lawmakers?

- **Timing:** It is a timely topic - both the public and politicians are still in the process of forming opinions on the issue. In the context of post-legislative scrutiny, it would mean that the Act being scrutinised has the potential to be considered for amendment in the near future.
- **Impact:** the topic is relevant to a current or forthcoming committee inquiry, committee members and staff see potential benefit from a deliberative panel and there is a commitment to considering and responding to the panel recommendations as part of the committee's inquiry
- These criteria should be used to inform the assessment framework for choosing between topics so that there is a demonstrable benefit for scrutiny from a People's Panel.

Principles for delivering People's Panels

17. The following principles should be used for delivering People's Panels:

- The question chosen and breadth/balance of evidence given to panels should meet high standards of transparency and legitimacy. This element of independent oversight is often achieved through an independent Stewarding Board which includes a variety of stakeholders.
- Recruitment should be by a valid method of random selection, where all Scottish adults have an equal chance of being selected
- The final sample should be stratified by age, gender, location, education (or other socio-economic indicator), ethnicity, disability and where appropriate using a question to ensure that the panel reflects the range of Scottish public opinion
- To minimise barriers to participation, participants should be offered a payment for taking part based on the Parliament's payment for participation policy and participants' travel and expenses (hotel, food etc) should be met in full.
- People's Panels should also be underpinned by wider public engagement, with communication campaigns before, during and after events. We should amplify the impact of events using panel members, panel witnesses and MSP champions as ambassadors for media and social media; incorporating information about Panels in education and parliamentary awareness sessions; sharing information with external partner organisations.

Quality of deliberative events

18. As far as we know the Scottish Parliament is unique in having an in-house team of experts in PACT to deliver People's Panels. The quality and flexibility of PACT's delivery has been highlighted by the independent evaluation of our two pilot panels. Delivering events with our own staff also allows us to make use of the prestige of the building and other skilled resources such as our SPICe researchers and our communications team. It also reduces costs. However

delivering events in-house makes it particularly important that we maintain rigorous standards to maintain trust in the process among Members and the public.

19. This should include guidance and training – for PACT facilitators, clerks, SPICe researchers and Members - to develop skills and understanding and also to expand the pool of skilled facilitators able to support committees. This will benefit all Committee participation work, not just Panels. Training should also cover trauma-informed approaches and safeguarding for participants who are vulnerable or hearing distressing evidence. Again this will benefit all committee work.
20. All Panels should be rigorously and publicly evaluated and lessons learned to drive future improvement and development. Evaluation should draw on the [principles and questions](#) developed by our academic fellow Dr Ruth Lightbody.

Resourcing

21. It is primarily for the SPCB to consider what resources are needed to support the delivery of these recommendations. The two pilot People's Panels cost £50-60k each plus staff time (which could otherwise be spent on other activities). This is significantly less than an externally contracted deliberative event would cost.
22. Our guidance on resourcing would be:
 - There needs to be sufficient and stable staffing and financial resource earmarked for this work on a year to year basis over the course of session 7. We suggest aiming for 4 Panels across the Parliamentary session. In the first year of a session, committees are establishing themselves and unlikely to have capacity to take on a Panel. Panels could be held each year from 2027-2030.
 - It would be desirable to have flexibility to vary in size from 25-35 participants and 2-3 weekends depend on the scale and significance of the topic.
 - An inflationary assumption should be built in. The majority of panel costs increase with inflation (hotels, travel, food, staff overtime and the recruitment contract).
 - Demand from Committees for PACT's other services is increasing and this is likely to continue, to meet public expectations of participation in the policy process. In deciding on the appropriate level of resource, the SPCB should ensure that the delivery of a People's Panel every year does not jeopardise delivery of PACT's other committee participation activities which, as highlighted above, are also key to improving scrutiny and building public involvement and trust.
 - Because of the factors outlined above, the current level of resource does not allow sustainable delivery of regular annual Panels.

- The current recruitment contract with Sortition Foundation ends at the end of this session. A flexible contract for the period of session 7 should be in place by summer 2026 – fair recruitment is key to maintain trust in the process.
- [NB – additional information on resourcing will be provided in the final version of the blueprint.]

Beyond session 7

23. This is a field where innovation and learning can and should continue. The Committee, and PACT, have drawn extensively on academic and practitioner expertise, nationally and internationally. This should continue. We should also collaborate with Scottish Government, local government and other UK Parliaments to share best practice, expertise and training.
24. One area the Parliament should explore is the scope for increasing public input to generating topic ideas and to contributing evidence to Panels. This would increase the profile of People's Panels and add a further layer of public involvement, as well as potentially generating a wider and more interesting set of ideas and evidence.
25. Other areas for further development include:
 - Reviewing the accessibility of deliberative processes to as diverse a range of participants as possible – to access the process in the first place and to take part fully when selected
 - Developing deliberative approaches that work well for young people
 - Tracking the impact and outcomes of Panels over time, both in relation to scrutiny impact and the impact on participants over time
26. Finally, we recommend that there should be a comprehensive review of the Parliament's deliberative work, reporting to Conveners' Group towards the end of session 7. This should cover the effectiveness and impact of the Panels and other activities but also of the embedding process. This would allow Conveners' Group to make recommendations for the use and development of deliberative democracy in the following Parliamentary session.