

Deliberative Engagement

2025

Start >>>

Guides on Citizen
Engagement for Parliaments

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union as part of the Inter Pares I Parliaments in Partnership project, implemented by International IDEA. Its contents are the sole responsibility of International IDEA and the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

© 2025 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council members.



With the exception of any third-party images and photos, the electronic version of this publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence. You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the publication as well as to remix and adapt it, provided it is only for non-commercial purposes, that you appropriately attribute the publication, and that you distribute it under an identical licence. For more information visit the Creative Commons website: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN

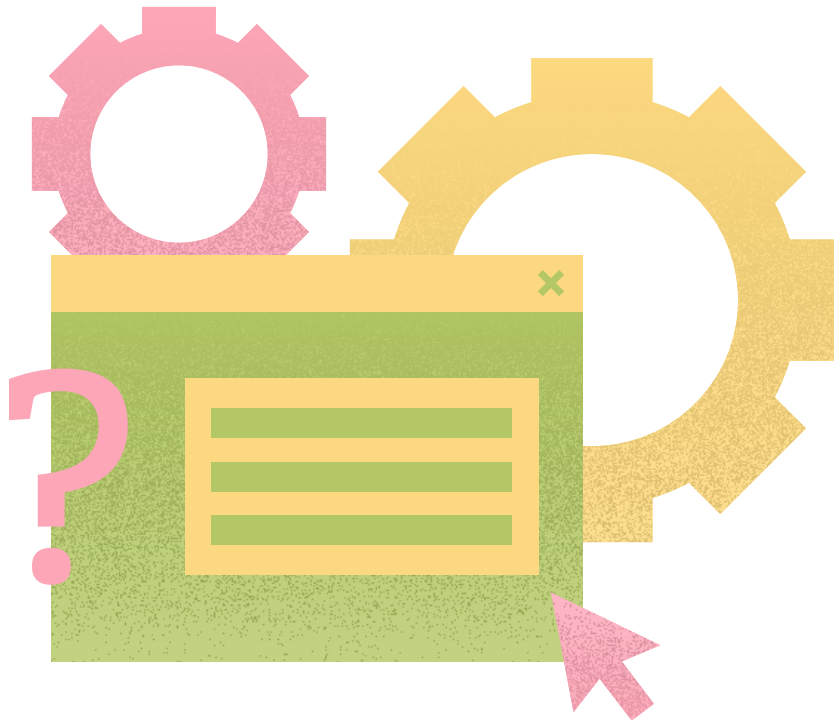
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

Cover illustration, infographic design: Research Retold
Design and layout: Research Retold
Copyeditor: Research Retold

DOI: doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.50
ISBN: 978-91-7671-983-1 (PDF)

Continue >>>

How to use this interactive Guide



This guide includes a clickable, interactive menu at the top of each page

- » Click the left right arrows in the menu to move through the content in order
- » Use the menu to jump directly to the section you want to read
- » The section currently active is highlighted in the top menu so you always know where you are

Executive summary

Deliberative methods are increasingly a source of inspiration for those who seek to redress the global trend of deepening dissatisfaction in democracy. Such methods offer parliaments the opportunity to engage citizens in rigorous in-depth consideration of complex policy problems and through this potentially enhance their own deliberations and democratic wellbeing overall.








Deliberative methods are not yet widespread among parliaments, but there are several contexts where experiments are settling into institutionalised models. In this guide, we explore the different ways in which deliberative democracy can be applied in and by parliaments as another tool in the citizen engagement toolbox.

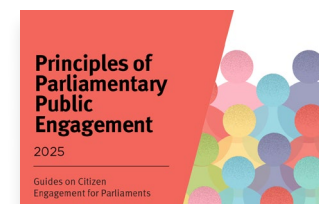
First, we note the potential benefits and challenges that deliberative methods present as approaches that are still fairly novel for parliaments. We then explore the range of approaches that exist, from ad hoc deliberative workshops to permanent structures enabling citizen deliberation. Given the highly procedural nature of deliberative methods, we provide extensive guidance on how to put them into practice.

Key considerations include:

- » **Purpose and planning**
What are you aiming to achieve and what do you need in order to do it?
- » **Integration into parliamentary business**
How will deliberations inform parliamentary processes?
- » **Representation and sampling**
What is the target audience and sample size, and how will you recruit them?
- » **Steering group**
Who can help you ensure that the process is high-quality and robust?
- » **Quality of deliberation: information**
What is the range of relevant evidence on the topic?
- » **Quality of deliberation: facilitation and moderation**
How can you support participants to engage fully and respectfully?
- » **Online deliberation**
What further opportunities and challenges are posed by deliberating online?
- » **Involving the wider public**
How can the wider public be informed, engaged and empowered?
- » **Evaluation**
How effective is the process, and does it produce meaningful outcomes?

Finally, we provide a checklist for assessing whether your approach reflects our **eight Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement**:

-  Purpose
-  Inclusion
-  Openness and transparency
-  Collaboration and empowerment
-  Ethical standards
-  Planning and resourcing
-  Integration and coordination
-  Impact and evaluation



See our Guide on ‘Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement’ for more detail on the principles

Introduction

Parliaments are, almost by definition, deliberative institutions. In representative democracies, citizens have traditionally delegated the responsibility to deliberate on public problems to the elected representatives sitting in parliament. However, in a context of declining public trust in democratic institutions, the persistence of difficult policy problems such as climate change, and increased polarisation in society, some have lost confidence in parliaments' ability to deliberate effectively and on the basis of good information. Simultaneously, citizens' expectations to get involved in decisions between elections have also increased.¹

Deliberative democracy methods have gained momentum in recent decades, offering new models of public decision-making that sees deliberative responsibilities shared with representative groups of citizens. A range of practice exists, with a small but growing stock of case studies from parliaments themselves.

In some cases, parliaments have institutionalised deliberative models within their own procedures following a process of experimentation.

Deliberative democracy approaches stir strong feelings amongst advocates and critics. Some are so focused on deliberative democracy that they don't acknowledge the value and role of other forms of citizen engagement or even of the value altogether of representative institutions like parliaments. Others are suspicious of the feasibility of deliberative approaches resulting in better, more democratic decision-making.

In this Guide, we offer a middle path: we see deliberative democracy as **a tool among a wide portfolio of citizen engagement methods that can be integrated into and enrich the system of parliamentary democracy**. Each of these methods has their own role and value, as covered in our other Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments.

What is deliberative democracy?

Deliberative democracy is a theory of public decision-making that places deliberation – reasoned discussion – at its centre. According to this theory, it is from deliberation that decisions derive their legitimacy.

Fundamental characteristics of deliberative practice are that:

- » participants are provided with a range of information about the topic under consideration;
- » participants engage in evidence-based reasoning;
- » participants are able to deliberate as equals; and that
- » participants represent diverse viewpoints or are representative of the population or a sub-group.²

It is this theory that is applied in the 'mini-public' approach, where a representative sample of the population or a particular group is randomly selected to deliberate on a particular issue and develop a proposal or set of recommendations.

Usually, mini-publics feed into decision-making processes by institutions, including parliaments and governments, rather than taking decisions themselves. Mini-publics can take many forms: common models include citizens' assemblies, juries and panels.

¹Hendriks, C., Regan, S., and Kay, A. (2019) *Participatory Adaptation in Contemporary Parliamentary Committees in Australia*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(2), 267–289

²Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J., Mansbridge, J. and Warren, M.E. (ed.) (2018) *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford University Press.

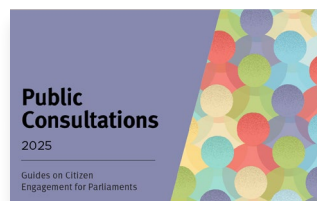
This Guide focuses on how parliaments can use public deliberation to strengthen scrutiny and law-making. We do not focus solely on mini-publics.

We **address a wide range of types of initiatives that have at their core the opportunity to deliberate on issues**, from full-scale citizens' assemblies to ad hoc deliberative discussions.

Please see our Guide on Petitions and Citizens Initiatives and our Guide on Public Consultations, for supplementary methods to enable citizen consultation and participation.



*See our Guide on
**'Petitions and
Citizens' Initiatives'**
for more information*



*See our Guide on
'Public Consultations'
for more information*

Structure of the Guide

- » **Section 1** of this Guide outlines the potential benefits of deliberative engagement programmes for parliaments and citizens
- » **Section 2** presents potential challenges
- » **Section 3** discusses different approaches to applying deliberative engagement in parliaments
- » **Section 4** provides guidance on how to put these approaches into practice
- » **Section 5** suggests key considerations for evaluating the success of these approaches
- » **Section 6** draws on our Guide on Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement, listing a checklist for assessing how well a deliberative engagement exercise meets key principles
- » **Section 7** points to other sources of information on the topic of deliberative engagement in parliaments

The Guide is based on extensive research and incorporates feedback from an international Advisory Group established to develop this suite of Guides on Citizen Engagement (see [Section 7](#)).

Section 1: Benefits

Deliberative engagement offers various potential benefits for parliament and citizens alike owing to its intensive and rigorous quality. The key benefits are outlined in Table 1 and detailed below.

Table 1: Potential benefits of deliberative engagement

Shared benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » In-depth engagement » Better decisions and outcomes » Addressing complex or deadlocked issues
Benefits for parliaments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Greater legitimacy and public trust in decisions » Better understanding of public values and priorities
Benefits for citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Greater political efficacy » Learning about specific policy areas » Developing deliberative skills



**See our Guide on
'Public Consultations'
for more information**



Shared benefits

In-depth engagement

Deliberative models enable discussion on a specific issue or a set of issues, offering parliaments and citizens an opportunity to delve into topics in more depth than is often afforded by other engagement methods. Deliberative discussions are supported by information provided by academic experts, advocates and those with lived experience³ of the issue. This helps participants to engage with the issue on a more granular level and develop considered conclusions and recommendations. Deliberative exercises often take place over multiple sessions, which allows time for reflection between meetings.

Better decisions and outcomes

The deliberative approach creates a space outside of, but related to, other political discussions on the topic, where citizens are brought together as equals to deliberate on an issue based on evidence. In theory, this should allow for decisions to be informed by reasoned decisions beyond vested interests and power dynamics. However, achieving this benefit relies on effective and inclusive design and delivery of a deliberative process.

Addressing complex or deadlocked issues

Deliberative methods can be usefully applied in the case of knotty problems where public and/or political views are divided. By involving citizens in this way, parliaments can share deliberative responsibilities with citizens on these difficult topics, and in so doing generate legitimacy for the decisions they take following deliberative processes.

Individual parliamentarians and political parties may refer to public opinion on issues when developing a policy position on an issue. While polls are useful in providing an indication of public opinion and demonstrate population-level trends across time, deliberative methods allow for reasoned and informed judgements that may offer a more legitimate basis for decisions.

Deliberative methods are sometimes conducted ahead of direct democracy processes such as referenda. In some cases, recommendations from deliberative processes themselves lead to referenda, such as when Irish citizens voted in 2018 to repeal and replace the Eighth Amendment (which banned abortion), in line with recommendations made by the 2016-17 Citizens' Assembly.

³ See discussion of the concept of 'lived experience' p.7 of our Guide on [Public Consultations](#).



Benefits for parliaments

Greater legitimacy and public trust in decisions

Using deliberative methods can help parliaments cultivate trust among citizens from across the political spectrum. When ordinary people can see that those like themselves have been involved in deliberation, they may be more disposed to trust the decisions that are made. Citizens who are concerned about parliaments' basis for decisions may be encouraged by the evidence-based nature of deliberative processes.⁴

Better understanding of public values and priorities

As a method for in-depth engagement with (often) representative samples of the public, deliberative engagement allows parliamentarians to understand where public opinion and values stand on a particular issue, and which trade-offs the public may be happy to accept when faced with evidence on complex matters. This might allow parliamentarians to gain insights into where areas of consensus might be, and which aspects of an issue are most salient for citizens.



Benefits for citizens

“ [I]n terms of the impact it has on participants, it's so far above anything else that we do in terms of how activated they feel and what they feel about the Parliament and what they go away and say to the people that they know.”

– Scottish Parliament ⁵

Greater political efficacy

The knowledge and skills citizens gain through participating in a deliberative process can serve as a basis for further democratic engagement, whether that be submitting a petition, joining a campaign, or simply voting in elections. The effect of being part of a process with other citizens can help develop a sense of civic identity, both as an individual with agency and as part of a larger whole (or demos). Some suggest that these effects can be conferred to some extent onto the wider citizenry as a result of being aware of a deliberative process.⁶

Learning about specific policy areas

Deliberative models involve the provision of high-quality, balanced information as a basis for discussion. This, along with in-depth, structured discussion should allow citizens

to develop knowledge about the issue under consideration. This is a personal benefit for those individuals who take part in deliberations, which can be amplified through citizens bringing their knowledge into interactions they have in their daily lives with family, friends and coworkers. This benefit can also be extended to the wider public through communications efforts (see [Section 4](#)).⁷

Developing deliberative skills

A deliberative process is an opportunity for citizens to develop practical democratic skills such as reason-giving, listening to others, disagreeing constructively, and making compromises. If integrated into parliamentary processes, deliberative processes might have the effect of shifting norms of public discourse and decision-making.

⁴ Setälä, M. and Smith, G. 2018. [Mini-publics and deliberative democracy](#). in: Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J., Mansbridge, J. and Warren, M.E. (ed.) [The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy](#). Oxford University Press.

⁵ Interview (2024)

⁶ Knobloch, K. R., Barthel, M. L., & Gastil, J. (2019). [Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on Voters' Political Efficacy](#). *Political Studies*, 68(2), 426-445.

⁷ Suiter, J., Muradova, L., Gastil, J. and Farrell, D.M. (2020), [Scaling up Deliberation: Testing the Potential of Mini-Publics to Enhance the Deliberative Capacity of Citizens](#). *Swiss Political Science Review*, 26(3), 253-272.

Section 2: Challenges

Despite strong interest in some contexts, notably European countries such as **Belgium** and **Ireland**, deliberative democracy methods remain rare within parliaments. Various challenges may arise, in part due to this relative novelty. Key potential challenges are listed in Table 2 and outlined in this section.

Table 2: Potential challenges of deliberative engagement

Shared challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Time-consuming » Inequalities in society » Lack of confidence in the method
Challenges for parliaments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Limited resources » Limited MP/political group buy-in » Providing ‘balanced’ information » Managing citizens’ expectations’
Challenges for citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Deliberative norms can be exclusionary



Shared challenges

Time-consuming

Deliberative methods require time to plan, set up and deliver. This is because of the participant recruitment methods involved, the need to secure the participation of a range of experts and advocates on the issue, and the fact that many deliberative methods take place over a period of days, weeks or months. This can make deliberative methods quite a large undertaking for parliaments, and citizens may be reluctant to take part due to the time commitment.

Inequalities in society

While deliberative methods emphasise the involvement of a diverse sample of citizens, inequalities between groups can affect the deliberative process itself. Mini-publics may be **descriptively** representative (i.e., include people from the different demographic backgrounds in the wider population), but this does not guarantee **substantive** representation of diverse groups (i.e., the representation of their interests and concerns). Inequalities based on factors such as gender, education level or cultural background can affect who gets heard during deliberation, as participants may have varying levels of confidence and skills, and therefore the decisions made.

Lack of confidence in the method

As mentioned, deliberative methods are fairly new in terms of their application within parliaments. There are concerns in some quarters that the methods are aligned with a particular side of the political spectrum, or that they are deployed by those in power in order to ‘rubberstamp’ decisions. These views, if unaddressed, risk undermining the legitimacy of these methods and decisions made using them.⁸

Doubts about the methods can be assuaged by careful selection of the topics to be deliberated on according to clear rationales, and meticulous transparency about the design of the process, the recruitment method(s) used, and the experts and organisation involved. With regard to recruitment in particular, ensuring that citizens enter the process with a range of attitudes towards the topic under consideration can help to guard against such critiques.

⁸ See for example: [We may have overdone it on citizens’ assemblies – The Irish Times](#)



Challenges for parliaments

Limited resources

Deliberative methods in general, and mini-publics in particular, are expensive to deliver. This is due to two key features of such methods. First, the recruitment of a representative (or at least diverse) sample of the population is not usually something that parliaments have the capacity to do themselves. It is also advisable that this part of the process is conducted by an independent organisation to avoid doubts about the robustness of the process or perception of political involvement.

Second, participants are usually recompensed for their participation in the deliberative exercise, to compensate for loss of time and/or income, but also to ensure equal access of participants, regardless of their socio-economic background. There are also associated costs such as accommodation, travel and subsistence. Further costs may be incurred if parliaments decide to bring in external facilitators to support discussions. Since deliberative processes can take months to deliver, some parliaments may feel that they cannot commit staff time to these projects.

Limited MP/political group buy-in

Deliberative engagement methods exist mainly to feed into decisions. Without buy-in from MPs or political groups, the impact of these approaches will be limited. There is often a perceived tension between deliberative and representative democracy, with politicians being suspicious of citizens discussing policy and making recommendations.

MPs need to be involved throughout the process of developing a deliberative democracy initiative. This will ensure they understand better how these methods can enhance their representative role (rather than threaten it), and that outcomes from deliberative exercises can have an impact on policy.

Providing ‘balanced’ information

The provision of information is fundamental to the deliberative method. The theory holds that citizens should consider the range of relevant information to help them make the best decision (or arrive at the best recommendations). In practice, however, this is not straightforward.

Firstly, the range and types of evidence presented depends on the way the topic or question is framed, which often reflects the values and concerns of those doing the framing. These choices should be made by a diverse group of people to ensure that a wide range of information is included.

Secondly, it is difficult in practice to choose what evidence to use to inform citizen deliberation.

Citizens should not be overloaded with information, but need enough to support their consideration of trade-offs and values-based considerations. It is often useful to have experts on hand throughout the process to enable citizens to ask for further information or clarifications where necessary.

Thirdly, whether deliberation is informed or not depends on the effective communication of the evidence, once selected, to participants. A number of issues arise here, including the fact that people process information differently depending on how it is presented. There is also evidence that demographic characteristics of those presenting the evidence can have an effect.⁹

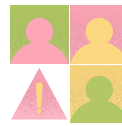
⁹ Müller, S., Kennedy, G., & Maher, T. (2023). *Reactions to experts in deliberative democracy: the 2016–2018 Irish Citizens’ Assembly*. *Irish Political Studies*, 38(4), 467–488. The paper finds that male speakers and non-academics are most influential on deliberations.



Challenges for parliaments (continued)

Managing citizens' expectations

Managing citizens' expectations can be a fine balance to strike in a deliberative engagement initiative. On one hand, citizens are told their views and discussions matter. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that the impact on policy will be exactly in line with citizens' recommendations; or, if it is, this may happen a few years down the line, rather than soon after the deliberative initiative. Clarity in communicating the purposes, process and limitations of the deliberative engagement initiative is therefore important.



Challenges for citizens

Deliberative norms can be exclusionary

Deliberative engagement is highly structured and process-driven, which may not always feel like a natural way to discuss policy matters. Deliberative processes aim to break down complex policy issues so that key arguments and options can be identified and considered. Some people will feel more comfortable with this type of approach than others. Some may feel that such an approach neglects the 'politics' of an issue and overlooks factors such as emotions and lived experience. It is important to include strong background information on deliberation during recruitment and at the start of the process so that participants understand what is expected of them.

While the principle of deliberation aims to be inclusive in both including a diverse range of perspectives and of people, and to provide a process that ensures that diverse voices are heard, this may suppress minority voices coming through. Different participants may not have the same level of agency, confidence and skills, to champion their ideas. Indeed, some people may even refuse an invitation to participate because they don't feel confident enough to deliberate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jacquet, V. (2017) *Explaining non-participation in deliberative mini-publics*. *European Journal of Political Research* 56(3), 640–659

Section 3: Range of approaches

There are various ways in which parliaments can involve citizens in deliberation at different levels of parliamentary activity, from agenda-setting to providing recommendations on legislative issues.

‘Mini-publics’ have become the dominant format for applying deliberative democracy, and a range of examples can be found in databases maintained by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the German Research Foundation-funded project *Doing mini-publics*.¹¹

Mini-publics range in terms of sample size, length of engagement, and the type of output they produce, but share common characteristics in bringing together (near) representative samples of the population to be *informed* about and *deliberate* on a particular issue.

Beyond mini-publics, deliberation can be applied in arrangements that hold true to many of the principles of deliberative democracy while not fulfilling some of the formal characteristics of mini-publics. For example, deliberative workshops may enable reasoned discussion even if the sampling method involves purposive sampling or self-selection rather than random stratified sampling.

Table 3 outlines the main methods for applying deliberative democracy, several of which have been used by parliaments around the world.¹² Terminology differs across organisations and contexts, and there are significant overlaps between methods and how they are used in practice. For example, a ‘citizens’ panel’ is often understood to be a larger body or database that is consulted on a rolling basis. Here, we use the term to reflect its use in practice by multiple parliaments to refer to a smaller deliberative body of 12-50 people.

Table 3: Deliberative democracy methods (*continued on next page*)

Deliberative model	Description	Example of parliamentary practice
Citizens’ jury or panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » A group of citizens selected by random stratified sampling to deliberate on a particular topic across several days. » Participants hear from expert witnesses to inform deliberations. » Can range in size from 12-50 people. » Often supported by a steering group. » Juries may assess existing proposals or specific questions, while panels may have more freedom to define their scope within a given topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » The Parliament of Ostbelgien (German-speaking region of Belgium) has a permanent citizens’ panel (see page 26). » The Participation and Communities Team at the Scottish Parliament runs a programme of People’s Panels as part of its committee engagement work (see page 31).

¹¹ OECD database: [Airtable - OECD Deliberative Democracy Database \(2023\)](#); Doing mini-publics: [Doing mini-publics: the translocalisation of politics \(database\)](#) - SFB 1265 „Re-Figuration von Räumen“

¹² Setälä, M. and Smith, G. (2018) *Mini-publics and deliberative democracy*. in: Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J., Mansbridge, J. and Warren, M.E. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford University Press.

Table 3: Deliberative democracy methods (*continued*)

Deliberative model	Description	Example of parliamentary practice
Citizens' assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » A larger version of a jury or panel, citizens' assemblies bring together 50-250 randomly selected citizens. » Usually produce a set of recommendations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Citizens' assemblies have been used by the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas since 2012 to engage the public in deliberation on constitutional, legal and policy questions (see page 23). » The UK House of Commons conducted two citizens' assemblies on an ad hoc basis between 2019 and 2021: one on adult social care and the other on achieving net zero. » The German Bundestag held a citizens' assembly on nutrition in 2023-24 (see page 19).
Citizens' summit or deliberative town hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Hundreds to thousands of citizens brought together to deliberate, usually for a single meeting, often with the support of technologies such as electronic voting or surveys. » May be open to all or subject to random stratified sampling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Individual members of the US Congress have used this method in partnership with the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA) at Ohio State University. In 2022, IDEA collaborated with the Select Committee on the Modernisation of Congress, bringing together over 1400 citizens to deliberate on six proposals for potential improvements to Congress.¹³
Deliberative committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » An approach that brings together mixed groups of citizens and MPs to conduct deliberation on a topic within the remit of a particular parliamentary committee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » This is the institutionalised model of the French-speaking parliament of the Brussels-Capital region (see page 15).

¹³ See: [SCMC Deliberative Town Hall | Institute for Democratic Engagement & Accountability](#)

Table 3: Deliberative democracy methods (*continued*)

Deliberative model	Description	Example of parliamentary practice
Consensus conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 10-20 citizens recruited through random selection to question experts on a particular topic and develop conclusions and recommendations. » There are three main phases: firstly, the group prepares to question experts by considering available evidence and constructing a set of questions or areas to cover; then, a public conference is held where the group puts their questions to the experts; the group then drafts a report outlining their conclusions and recommendations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » This method has not typically been used directly by parliaments. Consensus conferences have been used extensively by the Danish Board of Technology Foundation, an advisory body to the Danish parliament, to assess issues related to emerging technologies. » In 2017-18, the French Senate held what it called a <u>consensus conference on housing</u>, bringing together parliamentarians, local elected officials and housing stakeholders to consider draft legislation on housing. This example did not apply key elements of the method such as random selection of citizens.
Deliberative poll	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » A (usually) representative group of citizens is brought together to deliberate on an issue, completing opinion polls on the issue prior to and following deliberation. » The method aims to ascertain what the general public would think about an issue if they had the chance to deliberate. The method is most useful for issues that are controversial or where public understanding is low. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » N/A
Public dialogue or deliberative workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Facilitated, informed group discussions that can range in length (from a couple of hours to several days) and depth. » Participants may be self-selected or recruited through random selection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » The committee engagement teams of the UK, Welsh and Scottish parliaments use these more informal methods as part of their work.

There is a range of existing approaches for integrating these models into parliamentary business. Often, it is within the parliamentary committee system that deliberative methods find their home, given committees' existing remit for considering topics in depth and conducting other consultation activities such as hearings, roundtables and calls for views.

In several cases, deliberative bodies have been integrated to the point of institutionalisation. This Guide outlines five different models towards institutionalisation, the case studies of:

- » Brussels (this page)
- » Germany (see [page 19](#))
- » Ireland (see [page 23](#))
- » Ostbelgien (see [page 26](#))
- » Scotland (see [page 31](#))

In **Belgium**, deliberation has been embedded in two sub-national parliaments: the **Brussels**-based parliament of the French-speaking community and the parliament of the German-speaking region, **Ostbelgien** (see [page 26](#)). These two parliaments have taken different approaches to institutionalising deliberation.¹⁴ At the national level, the **Belgian Chamber of Representatives** voted in February 2023 to lay the foundations for mixed committees and citizens' panels by accessing the National Register of citizens for the purposes of sortition.¹⁵ This indicates an intention to adopt a model like the ones used at the regional level.

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising deliberation: Brussels¹⁶



The French-speaking Brussels Parliament and the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital region have developed a joint model of **deliberative committees**. The committees develop recommendations on proposals suggested by parliamentarians or the public (proposals from the public must gather 1,000 signatures before being considered for deliberation). The Conference of the President (equivalent to the Speaker) selects proposals for deliberation which must be approved by parliament before a deliberative committee is formed.

Each committee is made up to 60 people, a third of which are MPs, with the remaining two thirds randomly selected from the Brussels

population. The deliberative committee meets to hear and consider information and agrees a report containing a set of recommendations for the relevant parliamentary committee to consider and respond to within nine months.

Funding for deliberative committees is managed by an internal parliamentary committee and allows for up to three per year. Each committee is supported by a '**scientific committee**' of process and subject experts who ensure the fidelity of the process and communicate with the wider public.

Deliberative committees have been held on topics including the 5G network, biodiversity in the city, homelessness, and the role of citizens in times of crisis.

¹⁴ These models are widely cited in the literature on deliberative models in parliaments. For example, they are outlined in Elstub, S. (2025). Coupling Mini-Publics with Legislatures: A Solution to Parliamentary Decline? In J. Schwarzmantel & H. Beetham (Eds.), *Deformations of Democracy: David Beetham in Contemporary Politics* (1st ed., pp. 169–188). Edinburgh University Press.

¹⁵ Belgian Chamber of Representatives. (2023, February 9). *Compte rendu intégral de la séance plénière* (IP231). 5e session de la 55e législature. p.107

¹⁶ See: [Assemblies - democratie.brussels](#)

The **Irish** Houses of the Oireachtas conducted its first citizens' assembly in 2012 in the form of a Convention on the Constitution. The Irish convention selected 66 participants by sortition to deliberate alongside 33 members of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly on eight different constitutional topics. The Irish citizens' assembly approach has evolved over time. While the first two iterations concerned constitutional change, subsequent assemblies have focused on policy issues such as gender equality, biodiversity loss and drugs use. See [page 23](#) for more details.

The **Scottish** Parliament runs ‘People’s Panels’ on a regular basis to support committees in their scrutiny role. This model had its beginnings in 2019, when the parliament trialled their first mini-public on land management. Panels on Primary Care and COVID-19 followed and led to a committee inquiry in 2022, where the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee investigated how public participation in parliament could be improved. A Citizens’ Panel formed part of the deliberative process of this inquiry, with evidence gathered from experts and the wider public in a range of other ways. People’s Panels are now an embedded function within committee scrutiny at the Scottish Parliament (see [page 31](#)).¹⁷

In some states of the **United States of America**, notably Oregon, deliberative democracy is combined with direct democracy in the form of the Citizens’ Initiative Review. This is a process that is used to inform voters’ decisions on ballot measures (state-level proposals put to a public vote at the same time as elections). 20-24 citizens are

selected by sortition (which includes stratification by age, ethnicity, gender, place of residence, political party and voting history) to consider all ballot measures ahead of the vote and produce a Citizens’ Statement detailing the key facts, arguments for and against, and the voting intention of the panellists. The Statement is then included in the Voters’ Pamphlet, which over 80% of residents use when considering how to vote.¹⁸

In other contexts, such as **Germany**, **Montenegro** and the **UK**, deliberative exercises have been held on a more ad hoc basis and have not yet been institutionalised. The German Bundestag conducted a citizens’ assembly on nutrition in 2023-4, following several civil-society-led deliberative projects, with a view of institutionalising this process (see [page 19](#)). In 2021, the Parliament of Montenegro collaborated with the European Parliament to deliver a citizens’ assembly on corruption. Select committees in the UK Parliament have conducted two citizens’ assembly, one on adult social care and the other on climate change.

CASE STUDY

Decolonising deliberative democracy



Deliberative democracy approaches have been actively applied to a greater extent in Global North parliaments than in Global South ones, as demonstrated in the examples given above. Deliberative democracy programmes have been initiated in Global South contexts in institutions other than parliaments (as is the case in the Global North).

For example, deliberative polling initiatives have been used in **Uganda** to address issues of land management,¹⁹ over 15 citizens’ assemblies have been conducted by Delibera **Brazil**,²⁰ and in **Colombia** the city council of Bogota has developed a model of itinerant citizens’ assemblies (a cumulative method that sees consecutive assemblies build on the work of the previous one; the OECD credits the method as a key deliberative innovation emerging from the Global South).²¹

Some scholars suggest that deliberative methods need to

be ‘decolonised’ in order for them to be implemented with integrity in the Global South. They point to the fact that Global South contexts have deliberative traditions that do not cleave to deliberative democracy ideals but are nonetheless part of what some call ‘deliberative systems’ (where deliberative responsibilities are shared across different institutions).²² Examples cited in the literature include Indian panchayat (deliberative village assemblies) and precolonial African councils.

Scholars do not cite these examples as superior or inferior cases of deliberation, but rather to counter the notion that deliberation itself is somehow a Global North concept (a notion that some believe informs existing best practice standards).²³ The key learning from these examples is that deliberative approaches should be applied in ways that fit with wider cultures and practices.

¹⁷ Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee (2025) *A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament*, 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6)

¹⁸ Knobloch, K. R., Barthel, M. L., & Gastil, J. (2019). *Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review on Voters’ Political Efficacy*. *Political Studies*, 68(2), 426-445.

¹⁹ Deliberative polls have also been used in Ghana, Senegal, and Tanzania (Fishkin, J. S., Mayega, R. W., Atuyambe, L., Tumuhameye, N., Ssentongo, J., Siu, A., & Bazeyo, W. (2017). *Applying Deliberative Democracy in Africa: Uganda’s First Deliberative Polls*. *Daedalus*, 146(3), 140–154).

²⁰ See: [Learn more about the project](#)

²¹ OECD (2021) *Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy*.

²² Mendonça, R. F., & Asenbaum, H. (2025). *Decolonizing deliberative democracy*. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 0(0).

²³ Rey, F. (2022) ‘New frontiers for the deliberative wave’ in *Resisting colonisation, avoiding tropicalisation: Deliberative wave in the Global South*. Edited by N. Curato. *Deliberative Democracy Digest*. 3rd, May.

Section 4: How to put it into practice

This section provides guidance on the key considerations of conducting deliberative engagement in practice.



Purpose and planning

As with any other engagement method, deliberative processes require careful planning. Where they may differ from other practices is in their resource requirements, which can be significant depending on the scale of activity chosen.

Deliberative processes usually focus on a **policy problem** where there may be a range of possible solutions, challenging trade-offs and values-based considerations. For large-scale assemblies in particular, where citizens are being called on to make recommendations, a transparent focus should be followed for selecting the topic. In **Ireland**, for example, the government proposes that a citizens' assembly be established on a particular topic. The proposal is put as a motion to the Houses of the Oireachtas; if approved, the Oireachtas then

develops the Terms of Reference for the assembly. In **Ostbelgien**, topics are chosen by the Citizens' Council based on proposals from MPs, the government, or ordinary citizens. In several contexts, deliberative processes are used to inform committee activities and therefore take their topic from issues under committees' consideration.

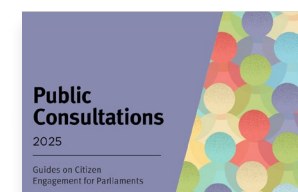
Cross-party support is fundamental to ensuring that parliamentarians and the public are bought into the process and its results. This is partly why committees are often the convening bodies for deliberative exercises. Involving parliamentarians from across the political spectrum in the design, delivery and evaluation of deliberative processes can help to avoid capture by particular interests (or the perception of it) and make the process itself more robust. This can

also help with the institutionalisation of the model in the long term.

When designing a deliberative exercise, there are a number of key considerations. Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that not all decisions require formal deliberative input from the public. There is a wide range of engagement methods that parliaments can use to gather views and experiences from citizens. See examples in our Guide on Public Consultations.

Secondly, some parliaments such as in **Ireland, Scotland** and **Ostbelgien**, have institutionalised deliberation through a particular form of mini-public that they deploy for different topics. In other contexts, different deliberative formats are designed ad hoc.

Deliberative methods all include some level of **learning, discussion and decision-making**.²⁴ For issues that may be localised or where there are existing proposals to weigh up, a smaller or shorter-term model such as a citizens' jury or deliberative town hall may work best. For controversial issues where strong views exist, larger or longer-term models such as citizens' assemblies can bring together more diverse samples which in turn provide a more robust picture of public views.



See our Guide on 'Public Consultations' for more information

²⁴ [Public deliberation | Involve](#)

Purpose and planning

Integration into parliamentary processes

Representation and sampling

Steering group (mini publics)

Quality of deliberation: Information

Quality of deliberation: Facilitation and moderation

Online deliberation

Involving the wider public

A key principle of deliberative processes is that they are **consequential**.²⁵ Parliaments should plan ahead of time for the outputs that will be produced from the process. It should also be agreed, and ideally codified, how deliberative processes and their outputs (in the form of conclusions, recommendations or proposals) will inform parliamentary processes. It is important that this relationship between deliberative processes and parliamentary decision-making is clear, both to ensure that results can helpfully inform parliamentary processes and to allay fears that may exist about potential threats to MPs' representative roles.

Further design questions include:

- » What is the target audience and required sample size?
- » How can barriers to participation be lowered, e.g., through financial incentives and/or the reimbursement of travel expenses, childcare costs etc.?
- » Where will the process take place? Will it be online or in person?
- » How long will it take?
- » How will the wider public be kept informed before, during and after the process?
- » How will the wider public be involved? For example, in topic selection, submitting evidence, inputting on recommendations.

These questions may be somewhat driven by considerations about what **budget** exists, whether for a one-off exercise or the institutionalisation of the method. Key costs include participant recruitment and compensation; venue and catering; and travel and other expenses for participants and experts.²⁶ Parliaments also need to consider **what parts of the method can be delivered in-house and what should or needs to be externally commissioned**.

For example, there are various reasons for participant selection to be carried out by an external organisation. Random stratified sampling is a feature of many mini public approaches and requires specialist quantitative skills, as well as the capacity to send out invitations across the country, or relevant population, and deal with responses (more on sampling below). Participant selection by an external organisation (such as a polling company or specialist sortition agency) may also help build trust in the legitimacy of the process and dispel perceptions of capture by interest groups.

Other parts of the process that parliaments may want or need external support with include participant onboarding (welcoming participants to the process and ensuring that they have all the information they need to participate before the process starts) and the facilitation of discussions.

However, parliaments should consider how they could **build institutional capacity** in the long run, which will enable parliaments to be more agile about delivering further deliberative exercises in the future. A good way to build up in-house capacity is for internal staff to observe deliberative processes and receive training from external organisations that allows them to deliver more aspects of the process the next time. This will also have the effect of reducing the cost of deliberative processes over time.

Top tips

- ✓ Build cross-party support for deliberative exercises
- ✓ Consider the range of models available
- ✓ Develop in-house capacity to deliver deliberative models

²⁵ Curato, N., Farrell, D. M., Geissel, B., Gronlund, K., Mockler, P., Pilet, J.-B., Renwick, A., Rose, J., Setala, M. and Suiter, J. (2021). *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features* (1st ed.). Bristol University Press.

²⁶ Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021) *An introduction to deliberative democracy for members of parliament*

Purpose and planning

Integration into parliamentary processes

Representation and sampling

Steering group (mini publics)

Quality of deliberation: Information

Quality of deliberation: Facilitation and moderation

Online deliberation

Involving the wider public

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising deliberation: Germany



In 2023-4, the Bundestag conducted a **citizens' assembly** on nutrition. This project was intended as a 'proof-of-concept' pilot following civil society-led deliberations that called for deliberation to be institutionalised in parliament. The Bundestag appointed an internal Citizens' Assembly Taskforce to lead institutionalisation efforts.

Members of parliament decided on the topic through a process that involved the different parties represented in the Bundestag. The **Council of Elders** (a group of parliamentarians that assists the President of the Bundestag) appointed a **Citizens' Assembly Rapporteur Group** of MPs from across parliamentary groups. This group reviewed various topic proposals and selected the topic 'Nutrition in Transition: Between Private Affairs and State Tasks'. This topic was put to a plenary vote and received a majority. A motion from the AfD party called for more direct democracy rather than citizens' assemblies but did not receive a majority.

Citizens' assembly participants were selected through a **sortition process**. First, 82 municipalities were drawn by lot from the overall number of 462. Then, invitations were sent out to a random sample of 20,000 people

across the selected municipalities. Of those invited, over 2,000 responded, for a response rate of around 10%. Further information on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education background, as well as attitude towards veganism and vegetarianism, was collected from respondents at this stage. This information was used to create 1,000 potential configurations of 160 participants, all of which met a set of criteria. The President of the Bundestag conducted a final draw to select one of the 1,000 possible configurations, which was then formed as the citizens' assembly. The sortition process was managed by the Nexus Institute and the Sortition Foundation, independent specialist companies.²⁷

The assembly met over the course of three weekends between September 2023 and January 2024. Online meetings were held between attendance weekends.

At the first weekend in September 2023, parliamentarians shared their expectations of the citizens' assembly before participants began their deliberations. Participants interviewed experts (selected by a **Scientific Advisory Board** of academics) and agreed a subset of topics to focus on: animal husbandry and animal welfare,

labels and labelling, and affordability of food. At the second attendance weekend in November 2023, participants narrowed down potential measures that had been discussed at online meetings in the interim. These were further honed and agreed at the final meeting in January 2024.

The final report of the citizens' assembly was submitted to the President of the Bundestag in February 2024. Following a plenary debate, the report was referred to the Committee on Food and Agriculture, with other committees also reviewing the report in an advisory capacity. The Committee concluded its deliberations in January 2025 following several hearings and roundtable discussions on the topic.

Following elections in February 2025, various parliamentary groupings continued to call for the implementation of recommendations, and the Minister of Agriculture committed in June 2025 to review the recommendations and decide on implementation.

At the time of writing, it is unclear if this 'proof-of-concept' pilot will lead to full institutionalisation of the process at the Bundestag.

²⁷ For a description of the lottery process, see: [German Bundestag - First Citizens' Assembly on "Nutrition in Transition" drawn](#)



Integration into parliamentary processes

Arguably the most important consideration when designing a deliberative exercise (or a deliberative institution such as a standing panel or deliberative committee function) is **what parliament does with the results**. Parliaments should develop a clear procedure for responding to the results of deliberative processes and incorporating them into their work.

This may involve recommendations being referred to a committee or being considered by the plenary, or parliament managing a response from the executive. Parliaments should ensure that they commit to a timeline for responding to the results. They should also ensure that timely updates are provided both to the citizens involved and the wider public.

Related to this question of integration with parliamentary processes is the extent to which parliamentarians are involved in the deliberative exercises themselves. It is usual for parliamentarians from the sponsoring body (e.g., a committee or set of committees) to observe the process in part or overall.

Some models, such as in the **French-speaking Brussels Parliament and the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital region**, involve parliamentarians directly in deliberations.

In the **Scottish** and **UK** parliaments, committee have been the sponsoring bodies of deliberative exercises with a clear responsibility to review the outputs and decide on next steps. While the level of involvement will differ across models, it is advisable to engage parliamentarians in the inception stages, so that they develop a sense of ownership over the process and a commitment to use its results.

Beyond individual exercises, **institutionalisation ensures the quality, effectiveness and impact of deliberative processes**. Institutionalisation involves investing in staff, skills and infrastructure, building confidence in the method among MPs, staff and citizens, and establishing procedures for delivering deliberative processes and using their results.

Top tips

- ✓ Involve MPs from the planning stages
- ✓ Ensure that outputs have a route into parliamentary processes
- ✓ Make information about the process publicly available



Representation and sampling

A key feature of deliberative methods is that they bring together diverse groups of people to consider issues of relevance to a wider population. It is partly from the diversity of people, viewpoints and interests represented that decisions derive their legitimacy.

The concept of the ‘mini public’ has become almost synonymous with deliberative methods, referring to a representative sample of the population selected by sortition (or lottery). **Sortition is a sampling method based on random selection followed by stratification by key demographic characteristics.** The most robust sortition processes use household address databases as the starting point.²⁸ A large number of invitations are sent to randomly selected addresses across the relevant geographical area.

Based on the responses received, stratification is then performed to ensure a representative sample. This means using available data on the demographic makeup of the population to ensure that the resulting sample reflects the wider society. Key characteristics include age, educational background, ethnicity, gender and occupation. This stage (and in particular, using the characteristic of educational background or another proxy for socioeconomic status) is crucial in guarding against self-selection into the process by those who are of higher socioeconomic status.²⁹

Why might citizens not want to participate?

Evidence shows that the refusal rate for deliberative processes is high.³⁰ Several reasons for this have been identified, many of which parliaments can aim to address in the way that they design and promote the process. The main reasons for refusing to participate are:

- » Preference for the private sphere (family, friends, coworkers) over public participation
- » Perceived lack of own knowledge on the topic
- » Dislike of group situations or speaking in front of others
- » Being too busy
- » Feelings of alienation from politics, or perception that the process will be elite-driven
- » Low expectations of the potential impact of the process

A strong communications strategy that provides information about the deliberative process, what will be expected of participants, and how results will be used, will help to address some of these barriers.³¹ Part of the challenge is getting the buy-in of the media to cover deliberative processes, which may be achieved by the way the topic is framed or through parliamentarians making a public commitment to the process.

²⁸ Telephone numbers can also be used, but this is less common as a method of first selection.

²⁹ Gąsiorowska, A. (2023). *Sortition and its Principles: Evaluation of the Selection Processes of Citizens' Assemblies*. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 19(1), 1–10.

³⁰ Jacquet, V. (2017) *Explaining non-participation in deliberative mini-publics*. *European Journal of Political Research* 56,(3), 640–659

³¹ See: *Mini-publics and the public: challenges and opportunities* | *Deliberative Democracy Digest*

Some question the theory behind stratifying participants based on demographic characteristics, asserting that we cannot know whether and to what extent people's views on a particular issue derive from a particular characteristic. Some suggest that what should be aimed for from stratification is not a 'representative' sample, but rather a **range of 'social perspectives'**,³² based on the theory that one's position in society affects one's experiences and therefore one's outlook. A representative sample may be most important for methods such as deliberative polling where quantitative outputs are sought.

Mini public sponsors are increasingly looking at **attitudinal representativeness** when stratifying participants. In practice, this means asking potential participants about their views on the topic the mini public is to consider, in

order to ensure that a range of views is represented from the beginning of the process.

Deliberation can also be conducted among groups that are not selected through sortition. Depending on the topic and the affected population, it may be more appropriate to engage a subgroup of the population or those who are most affected by the issue. This is sometimes referred to as 'enclave' or 'sector' deliberation.³³

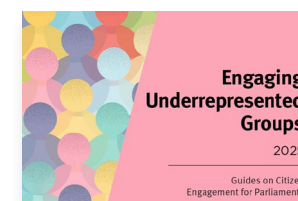
This is an approach that the **Scottish Parliament** has used in its deliberative work. For example, the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee ran a deliberative process in 2023 as part of their pre-budget scrutiny work. For this panel, they focused on people who were from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds. Supported by the Participation and Communities Team (the in-house committee

engagement team) and the parliamentary research service, the committee collaborated with the Whole Family Equality Project (an organisation supporting ethnic minority families with experience of poverty in Edinburgh) to recruit a panel for the project and support them through the deliberative process.

Similarly, for the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Housing (Scotland) Bill in 2025, the Participation and Communities Team supported the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee to hold separate deliberative processes with different audiences: a panel of tenants and one of landlords. The tenants' panel met three times, and the landlord panel met twice, with each panel producing a set of recommendations to support the committee in its scrutiny of the bill.

Top tips

- ✓ Aim for diversity over an ideal of 'representativeness'
- ✓ Consider enclave or sector deliberation
- ✓ Create communications with refusers in mind (see [page 21](#))



See our Guide on 'Underrepresented Groups' for more information

³² Brown, M.B. (2006), *Survey Article: Citizen Panels and the Concept of Representation*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14(2), 203-225.

³³ Abdullah C. & Karpowitz C. & Raphael C., (2016) "Affinity Groups, Enclave Deliberation, and Equity", *Journal of Public Deliberation* 12(2), Art.6; Raiso, H. and Carson, L. (2014) *Deliberation within sectors: making the case for sector mini-publics*, *International Review of Social Research* 4(1), 75-92.

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising deliberation: Ireland³⁴



The Irish Houses of the Oireachtas use citizens' assemblies to involve citizens in decision-making on constitutional, legal or policy questions. There are three main phases to the approach.

- 1. Establishment:** The government proposes that a citizens' assembly be established on a particular topic. This is debated in each House of the Oireachtas, the parliament formally establishes the assembly and sets its Terms of Reference.
- 2. Operation:** Now independent from government and parliament, the citizens' assembly is administered by a Secretariat. The Secretariat manages the recruitment of citizens by random stratified sampling. The assembly meets over the course of several

weekends to hear evidence, examine submissions, deliberate and vote on recommendations.

- 3. Reporting:** The Secretariat drafts a report based on the assembly's recommendations. This report is submitted to the Oireachtas and to the Taoiseach (prime minister). A joint committee in the Oireachtas is tasked with responding to the recommendations. Following this, the government must provide a response outlining which recommendations it will accept and how it will go about implementing them.

A **Steering Committee** of MPs, and **advisory groups** of subject and process experts provide further support to the citizens' assembly and to the Secretariat.

Six citizens' assemblies were conducted between 2012 and 2023. The first was a Convention on the Constitution, established to deliberate on eight proposed changes to the constitution. Sixty-six citizens were selected to participate along with 33 members of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The second citizens' assembly amended the approach to no longer include MPs as participants. Subsequent assemblies have continued with this approach and focused on policy issues such as gender equality, biodiversity loss and drugs use, rather than constitutional change.

³⁴ [Home | Citizens' Assembly](#)



Steering group (mini publics)

Institutional sponsors of mini-publics (in this case parliaments or parliamentary bodies such as committees) usually appoint an external, **independent steering group to advise on process design and delivery**. These groups usually consist of deliberative process experts and those with expertise on the topic to be considered by the mini-public (either as academics or those with lived experience).

Considerations for steering groups include:

- » The sampling and recruitment strategy
- » The range of information and evidence to be presented to the mini-public
- » The duration and format of deliberations
- » Fairness and inclusion during the process
- » Follow-up on mini-public recommendations

In the case of the **Irish** Citizens' Assemblies, these responsibilities are distributed across two groups: the Expert Advisory Group and the Steering Group. The former is a group of process and topic experts who manage the presentation of evidence to the citizens' assembly, while the latter is made up of a subgroup of assembly members and the government-appointed assembly chairperson who are responsible for ensuring the quality and fidelity of the process.

Top tips

- ✓ Include subject experts as well as those who can advise on the process
- ✓ Include civil society organisations and lived experience advocates
- ✓ Publish information about who the members of the steering group are and what their role is



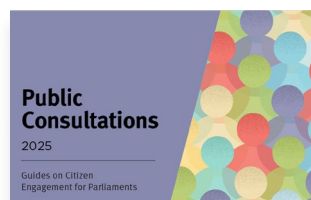
Quality of deliberation: Information³⁵

For deliberation to be legitimate and high-quality, it must be **informed by relevant data and evidence from a range of sources on the topic**. This information stage of deliberative processes should take up a substantial amount of time and allow for review, discussion and interrogation of the information. It is often the primary focus of the first meeting of a citizens' assembly, for example, and for some models the information may be provided in advance of participants meeting. Along with information on the topic, **participants should also be briefed on what deliberation itself is and what will be expected of them during the process**.

Academic evidence and administrative data are usually a large part of the information provided to participants. Increasingly, contributions from advocacy groups or individuals with lived experience of the issue are included in this stage to enable participants to gain a broad and deep understanding of the topic.

The decision about what information will be considered is not a trivial one. In the case of issues such as climate change and vaccination, for example, scientific consensus is not always reflected in the range of views among the wider public.

This means that decisions about how to define the 'range' of evidence should be made in a diverse forum, and supplemented by the attitudinal representativeness of the deliberating group. Enabling submissions from the wider public can also help to include a wider range of evidence.³⁶



See our Guide on 'Public Consultations' for more information

Key considerations at this stage include:

- » What is the range of relevant data, evidence or legitimate views?
- » What are the main sources of data to include?
- » Who are the key academic experts on this issue?
- » How will advocate or lived experience contributions be included?
- » How much time will be allocated to reviewing relevant information?
- » How can participants be supported to review, discuss and interrogate the evidence provided? For example, will experts and/or advocates be present to answer follow-up questions?

³⁵ The first of Fishkin's five characteristics of legitimate deliberation: information, substantive balance, diversity, conscientiousness, equal consideration. See: Fishkin, J.S. (2009) *When the people speak*. Oxford University Press.

³⁶ See our Guide on Public Consultations for more information on how to run a public consultation. See also [this guide](#) from Involve, which contains specific ideas on managing submissions from the wider public (Section: Before the Assembly).

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising deliberation: Ostbelgien³⁷

The ‘Ostbelgien model’ is a structured mini-public model consisting of a Citizens’ Council of 24 members that manages the delivery of up to three citizens’ panels per parliamentary term. The citizens’ panels deliberate and formulate recommendations on topics selected by the Council from proposals from parliamentarians, government and the public.

The citizens’ panels are made up of 25-50 people selected through random stratified sampling. An advisory group of relevant experts and advocates supports each panel, and a secretariat of parliamentary staff administers the overall programme including the selection of Council members.

Each panel’s recommendations are considered by a joint committee of parliamentarians, the relevant government minister, and members of the panel. The relevant parliamentary committee or government department is then instructed to follow up on the recommendations and must report on their progress within a year.

Panels have been conducted on topics such as inclusive education, affordable housing and digital skills.

Top tips

- ✓ Provide adequate time for participants to review, discuss and interrogate evidence
- ✓ Interrogate assumptions about what ideas are legitimate or not
- ✓ Provide a combination of academic and lived experience expertise
- ✓ Be clear about the status of evidence: what is fact and what is argument or opinion

³⁷ See: [Shortcut 7 - The Ostbelgien Model](#)



Quality of deliberation: Facilitation and moderation

For legitimate and high-quality deliberation to take place, participants need to engage with each other's viewpoints and with the evidence presented. Certain **norms** should be established from the beginning of the process to ensure that discussions are inclusive, respectful and productive. It is best practice for discussions to be facilitated by trained individuals who can ensure that participants get an equal opportunity to participate and that the group stays 'on task'.

Establishing **ground rules** at the beginning of a deliberative exercise can help on both counts. This may include cocreating a 'charter' or agreement for how discussions will run and the goals of the session. This should include agreement around norms such as respect and listening to others (and examples of behaviours that do and do not fulfil these principles). Displaying these agreements clearly in the room where deliberations are happening (whether physical or virtual) can help to reinforce them.

Examples of exercises used as part of a deliberative assembly/workshop

Deliberation needs to be structured to be effective. There is a range of activities that can be used at various points in the learning, discussion and decision-making phases of the deliberation process.

Learning

- » Presentations or panel discussions
- » Q&A with experts – or speed dialogue, where experts rotate between different groups and answer their questions
- » Library time or thinking time – individual exploration of information
- » Mind-mapping (can be done using digital tools as well as on paper) – visually establishing the issue and what is known

Discussion

- » Brainstorming and developing ideas. Methods such as Think Pair Share can be used to ensure everyone has a chance to share their ideas³⁸
- » Visualising and clustering ideas
- » Drafting recommendations in small groups – dividing themes between groups is an efficient approach

Decision-making

- » Reviewing or ranking recommendations through dot voting³⁹ or rating (including ideas for how to improve recommendations)

Throughout the process, facilitators should use a range of activities to help participants get to know each other and understand each other's views. Early on in the process, activities may focus on learning about each other's backgrounds and 'social styles',⁴⁰ while during discussion and decision-making phases, these activities may focus on sharing ideas, preferences and questions.

Personal reflection tools can be helpful for participants in keeping track of their thoughts and ideas throughout the process. Participants may keep diaries or write 'postcards' to themselves recording their reflections on the topic or process at a particular point in time. These tools may then create data sources for facilitators and evaluators to assess how views developed across the process and participants' reflections on the process itself.

³⁸ This method allows participants to think about a question or issue individually first, before discussing it with a partner, and then sharing combined ideas with the wider group.

³⁹ This method allows participants to indicate their support for an idea by putting a sticker on it. The more stickers, the more popular the idea. This method can be used to narrow down options to those that have most support from the group.

⁴⁰ This approach gets participants to self-identify with one of four social styles (driver, expressive, analytical or amiable) based on their preference for either 'asking' or 'telling', and either 'people' or 'task'. Originally from Merrill, D. W. and Reid, R. (1999) *Personal Styles and Effective Performance* (New York: CRC Press). Outlined in Appendix 2 of MosaicLab's [Facilitating Deliberation: A practical guide](#).

Facilitators may use a number of strategies for ensuring that participants are able to **contribute equally and meaningfully**, bearing in mind that some participants will be more confident speakers than others due to factors such as educational and linguistic background. Monitoring dominant voices and stepping in to invite others to speak is a fundamental duty of any facilitator. Using a range of activities other than open discussion can help to encourage collaboration and build participants' willingness to share thoughts with one another.

Deliberative exercises usually aim towards a set of recommendations or a judgement by participants. It is therefore important that deliberations maintain a **"productive group atmosphere"**⁴¹ where participants are comfortable working together, focused on a goal, and feel they are making progress towards that goal. Providing time and space for informal socialisation (such as during coffee breaks or an introductory dinner) can help to build this comfort.

However, facilitators should foster a sense of seriousness around the deliberative sessions themselves to ensure that they are productive and reflect participants' reasoned opinions.

There is a further set of considerations around how the **space(s) chosen for deliberation can enhance or limit the quality of deliberation**. Practical considerations include the accessibility of venues for those with physical and sensory impairments, as well as the lighting and acoustics of the space.

Other considerations that should play into decisions around venue include the extent to which the space can be reconfigured for different activities and phases (such as small group discussions) and the symbolic nature of the space that is chosen. For example, choosing a grand parliamentary room may help to convey the importance of the process and parliament's buy-in to it, but it may present trade-offs with lighting, acoustics or the adaptability of the space, and may even be off-putting for some participants.⁴² See our Guide on Parliament as a Space and Place for broader considerations around the significance of parliamentary spaces.

Top tips

- ✓ Co-create ground rules with participants
- ✓ Structure sessions through group activities that are engaging and move the deliberations forward
- ✓ Strike a balance between comfort and seriousness



See our Guide on 'Parliament as a Space and Place' for more information

⁴¹ Mansbridge J. & Hartz-Karp J. & Amengual M. & Gastil J., (2006) *Norms of deliberation: an inductive study*, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2(1), Art 7.

⁴² Nielsen, Gustav Kjær Vad and McDonald-Nelson, James (2025). *"Spaces for deliberation: Eight spatial qualities for designing deliberative assemblies"*, DemocracyNext.



Online deliberation

In some cases, deliberative processes may be held online in order to allow people from different parts of the country to participate or to facilitate the participation of very large numbers. Online deliberation is also generally a low-cost option. However, online deliberation should not be used as a direct alternative given that it could exclude those lacking digital skills or access to the internet.

There is a range of formats for online deliberation. These include **conference calls with breakout rooms** where participants can engage in discussion, as well as **message boards or forums** that allow participants to write contributions and respond to those of others. Considerations for facilitators include all those for in-person meetings.

However, fostering a comfortable atmosphere among participants may be harder due to the lack of time and space for informal socialisation. Structured activities (with regular breaks) are important for keeping online discussion on task, and facilitators may make use of a range of online tools such as virtual whiteboards and interactive presentation software. When using tools, facilitators should

demonstrate them before asking participants to use them. Facilitators or other support staff should also be on hand to troubleshoot technology issues and assist participants to participate fully.

Message boards and forums may be **synchronous** (participants respond to one another in real time) or **asynchronous** (participants can post contributions in their own time). Research findings indicate that asynchronous online deliberation facilitates higher-quality deliberation, since participants have time to reflect and look up further information before formulating a response.⁴³

As with in-person discussions, facilitators will need to ensure that **participants endorse and follow certain ground rules**. In cases where online deliberations involve many people or where people are participating anonymously, this may include moderating offensive or inappropriate comments. While anonymity may make participants less accountable for their words, it can also lower the barriers to participation for some, and even support equality through increasing the focus on what is said rather than by whom.⁴⁴

Top tips

- ✓ Go online with a purpose, not just out of convenience
- ✓ Consider adjustments that need to be made in the online environment (such as extra breaks and content moderation)

⁴³ Strandberg, K. and Grönlund, K. (2018). *Online Deliberation: – An overview of the central aspects of a growing research field*. In A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, & M. E. Warren (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, pp. 365–377. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Ibid



Involving the wider public

The impact of deliberative exercises can be enhanced by engaging the wider public (i.e., those not selected as part of the deliberating group). This can be done in a number of ways, from providing regular updates on the progress of deliberations and their outcomes, to opening channels for the wider public to submit evidence to deliberative processes.

The **Irish** Citizens' Assembly invites the wider public to submit views, ideas and recommendations through the dedicated assembly website or via post.

Models such as consensus conferences are designed to be held in public, with ordinary citizens able to watch along. Members of the **Scottish** Parliament's People's Panels have appeared at public committee hearings, which is another way to build public awareness.

The more embedded deliberative models are within parliaments, the better able parliaments are to cultivate this engagement proactively and consistently, through the deployment of existing communications resources for example.

Incorporating information about deliberative processes and opportunities to participate into education and outreach sessions will also allow parliaments to maximise public engagement with deliberative exercises.

Engaging the wider public offers several potential benefits:

- » Allowing citizens to join in, whether through formally submitting evidence or engaging with the topic in their own communities or in online discourse
- » Raising the profile of the process and increasing expectations on parliament and government to use the results
- » Encouraging participation in future deliberative processes and possibly other public engagement methods

Top tips

- ✓ Keep citizens informed
- ✓ Enable citizens to participate if possible
- ✓ Develop citizen's awareness and understanding of deliberation

CASE STUDY

Institutionalising deliberation: Scotland



The Scottish Parliament's deliberative work is managed by the Participation and Communities Team (PACT), an in-house engagement team that supports committee scrutiny. PACT's flagship approach is **'People's Panels'**, whereby groups of 12-25 citizens are selected by sortition to deliberate on a matter related to committee work.

PACT first trialled the approach through two pilots in 2019: a citizens' jury on land management sponsored by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, and three regional citizens' panels on primary care sponsored by the Health and Sport Committee.⁴⁵

Following these pilots, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee conducted an **inquiry on improving public participation in**

parliament. A Panel formed part of the deliberative process of this inquiry, with evidence gathered from experts and the wider public in a range of other ways. This would eventually lead to a 'blueprint' report outlining principles and arrangements for deliberative democracy initiatives for the subsequent parliamentary session. This report was formally approved by a parliamentary vote in June 2025, in this way institutionalising the practice of deliberative democracy as a regular feature of committee scrutiny at the Scottish Parliament.⁴⁶

Alongside People's Panels, PACT conducts deliberative work to inform committee scrutiny, including enclave or sector deliberation, which focuses on specific target audiences (see [page 22](#) for more detail on this concept). For example the work of the Equality, Human Rights and

Civil Justice committee to consult people from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds in their 2023 pre-budget scrutiny, and the deliberative processes held in 2025 by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee as part of its pre-legislative scrutiny of the Housing (Scotland) Bill (see [page 22](#) for more information on these projects).

The Scottish Parliament's approach to deliberative democracy is characterised by iterative processes of experimentation and evaluation, institutionalisation through in-house teams and MP support, and the use of different deliberative methods to meet scrutiny needs.

⁴⁵ Elstob, S. & Carrick, J. (2020) *Comparing Mini-Publics in the Scottish Parliament*, Newcastle: Newcastle University

⁴⁶ Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee (2025) *A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament*, 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6)

Section 5: Evaluation

Deliberative exercises can be large undertakings for parliaments, which makes it all the more important that proper evaluation is conducted. The **Scottish** Parliament, for example, works closely with academics to ensure that its deliberative processes are effective and making valuable contributions to committee scrutiny.

Table 4 outlines key considerations for evaluating deliberative processes. Some of these are simple questions that parliaments can answer by collecting data from participants and on the process itself; other considerations, particularly those around impact, may require support from academic partners.

Data sources may include:

- » Invitation data
- » Participant questionnaires: demographics and attitudes
- » Transcripts of deliberations
- » Participant polls
- » Feedback questionnaires from participants, MPs, staff, external groups
- » Interviews with participants, MPs, staff, external groups
- » Parliamentary reports and decisions
- » Media discourse (including social media)

Table 4: Key evaluation considerations

Evaluation dimension	What to look at/measure
Numbers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » What is the acceptance rate for invitations? How does this differ across different demographic and attitudinal groups? » How many people participate, i.e., what is the sample size? » How many people change their minds following deliberation?
Representation and diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Descriptive representation: Who participates? How representative are they of the population/target audience(s)? » Substantive representation: Do people from different backgrounds participate equally?
Outcomes and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » What is the feedback from citizens, MPs, staff and external groups involved in the process? » Quality of deliberation: do people consider others' arguments? Do participants consider the range of evidence provided? Do participants change their minds with reference to evidence provided? » What is the impact on people's skills, knowledge and political engagement? Do people change their minds and/or behaviour (e.g., voting and other political participation) following deliberation? » What influence does the activity have on parliamentary processes and decisions? » What influence does the activity have on wider society? (e.g., discourse, public opinion)

Section 6: Checklist

The questions in this section are designed to help parliaments assess the extent to which their (planned or existing) deliberative engagement meets the eight principles outlined in our Guide on Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement.



Purpose

Is there a clear purpose for deliberative engagement, on which stakeholders are agreed?
Is there a clear rationale for using a deliberative method over other approaches?

Does the process have the support of political leadership in parliament?

Does the process have the support of parliament's administrative leadership?



Collaboration and empowerment

Are participants able to ask questions about or challenge the evidence they hear?

Are recommendations drafted in a collaborative fashion, with all participants able to shape and develop recommendations?



Inclusion

Have you taken steps to mitigate refusals?

Have you taken measures to ensure that participants from different backgrounds are able to deliberate on an equal basis?



Openness and transparency

Is the public aware of the deliberative engagement process?

Is information about funding sources made public?

Is information about process design (e.g., topic selection, experts involved, outputs) publicly available?

Is there access to the information being considered by the mini public?

Is the process open to a range of evidence, including advocacy groups and lived experience?

Are non-participating citizens able to make submissions?



Planning and resourcing

Are appropriate resources available for your chosen model? What can be delivered in-house and what will be done by external partners?

Do you have a clear plan for participant recruitment?

Have you identified appropriate spaces for deliberation?

Have you agreed a plan for how the deliberative process will inform parliamentary work?



Integration and coordination

How will recommendations be used and what parliamentary process will they inform?

What is the timeframe for responding to recommendations?



Ethical standards

Have you considered the impact of the topic on participants and witnesses?
Are you taking a trauma-informed approach?

Are all staff and parliamentarians involved aware of their responsibilities under key policies such as safeguarding and data protection?



Impact and evaluation

How will the implementation of recommendations be monitored?

How will feedback be collected from participants, MPs, staff and other stakeholders? How will this data be used?

How will the long-term impact of deliberation be monitored and analysed?

Section 7: Useful materials on deliberative engagement

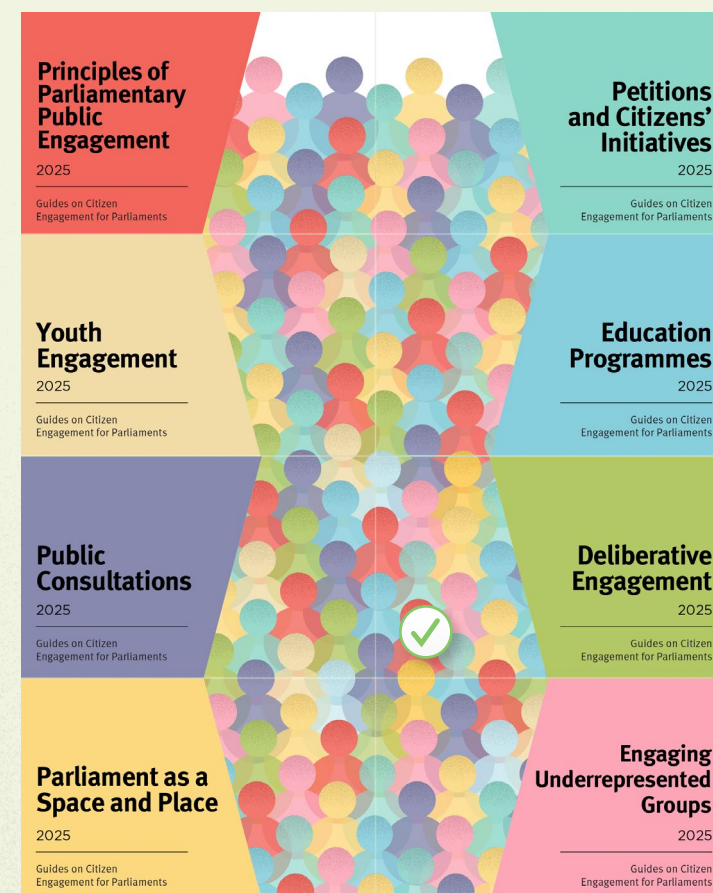
- » Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee (2025) [A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament](#), 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6)
- » DemocracyNext, [Assembling an Assembly Guide](#)
- » Elstub, S. & Carrick, J. (2020) [Comparing Mini-Publics in the Scottish Parliament](#), Newcastle: Newcastle University
- » [The Journal of Deliberative Democracy](#)
- » MosaicLab, [Facilitating Deliberation: A Practical Guide](#)
- » newDemocracy Foundation podcast series: [Facilitating public deliberations](#)
- » OECD (2021) [Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy](#)
- » Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021) [An introduction to deliberative democracy for members of parliament](#)

See our other **Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments**

This Guide was developed by Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Juliet Ollard at the International Parliament Engagement Network (IPEN) in collaboration with Inter Pares I Parliaments in Partnership – the EU’s Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments.

The Guide draws from extensive research carried out in 2024 and 2025, including: a review of relevant academic research; interviews with academics and parliamentary officials from across the world; analysis of relevant practitioner reports and parliamentary documentation; testimonies from members of IPEN; and relevant seminars and workshops organised by Inter Pares and/or IPEN.

The Guide also incorporates feedback from an international Advisory Group established to develop this suite of Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments, as well as from the IPEN Executive Team. The authors are very grateful to all those who shared their knowledge and expertise as part of this project.



Explore all our guides by clicking on the image