

# Parliament as a Space and Place

## 2025

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**Guides on Citizen  
Engagement for Parliaments**

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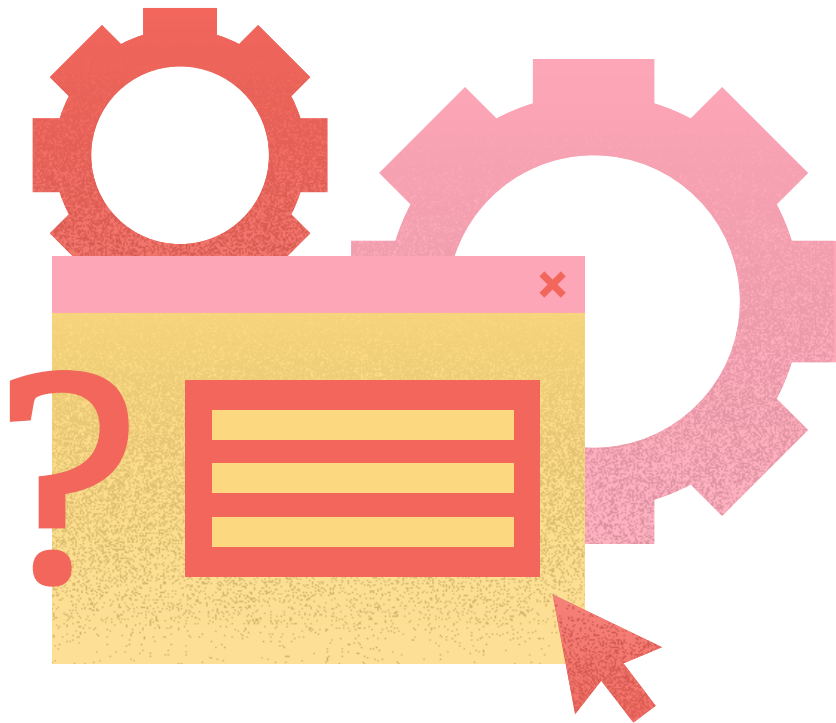
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# How to use this interactive Guide



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# Executive summary

Parliaments are both spaces and places. As **spaces**, they are collections of rooms, halls, offices and grounds that are used for particular purposes. As **places**, they mean something to the people they represent – but they don't mean the same thing, or as much, to everyone, and increasingly people hold negative feelings towards parliaments.

This Guide explores the idea of parliaments as spaces and places and provides guidance for staff and Members of Parliament (MPs) on **using spaces to develop citizens' understanding and positive associations towards their parliament as a place**. We use a wide range of examples from parliaments across the world to demonstrate how this can be done.









The Guide reviews some of the **benefits** and **challenges** presented when using parliamentary spaces for citizen engagement. We present a range of different approaches that parliaments can use to engage citizens across three main types of space:

1. The physical parliament building
2. Online space and virtual reality
3. Spaces beyond the parliamentary estate

The Guide then reviews how to implement these approaches in practice, focusing on the following considerations:

- » **Purpose and strategy**  
What are you trying to achieve and why?
- » **How to improve existing space**  
How can spaces be more welcoming and accessible?
- » **How to create new spaces**  
Who is the space for and how will you/they use it?
- » **How to provide meaningful tours**  
What stories are you telling? How do they make people feel about parliament as a place?
- » **How to make effective use of spaces beyond the parliamentary estate**  
How can you develop spaces elsewhere, and what makes these spaces 'parliamentary'?
- » **Evaluation**  
How effective is your use of space in building citizens' relationship with parliament as a place?

Finally, we provide a checklist for assessing whether your approach reflects our **eight Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement** (see our Guide on Principles of Parliamentary Public Engagement for more detail):

-  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

Parliamentary buildings command great symbolism – they are often representative of a whole political system or even a country. However, while many people in democracies recognise the building of their parliament, they often do not know what goes on inside.

Drawing from a wide range of examples from across the world, this Guide explores how parliamentary space(s) can be used to build understanding and positive associations with parliaments as places. We consider how physical buildings and parliamentary spaces created elsewhere are used to support citizen engagement.

Parliaments around the world use their buildings to encourage citizens to connect with the institution, including through tours and visits, but also using virtual methods and initiatives to take parliament to local communities, and people (virtually) to parliament.

## Space and Place

In geography and related fields, space and place are treated as two distinct concepts. **Space** refers to a specific location, its dimensions and measurable boundaries, while a **place** is a location that holds particular meaning due to what happens there and people's associations with it.

**As spaces**, parliaments exist in a range of forms. One common feature is that parliaments are located in one place (usually the capital city), and therefore not easily accessible to all citizens.

Parliaments may be historical buildings, converted structures or purpose-built constructions that speak to the identity of an independent state or a new constitutional arrangement.

**As places**, parliaments are usually recognisable and provoke emotional responses in citizens. For some, parliaments are a source of inspiration and pride, while for others they hold connotations of elitism and corruption.

Parliaments' colonial or authoritarian legacies – such as in Commonwealth or Francophonie countries and former Soviet states may inspire complex feelings. Across the world, parliament buildings and their surrounding areas are focal points for democratic action such as protest.

Parliaments across the world pursue different ways of presenting themselves to their citizens. **We show how parliaments can utilise their spaces to enhance citizens' relationships with parliaments as places of key importance for democracies.**

## Structure of the Guide

- » **Section 1** of this Guide outlines the potential benefits of utilising parliamentary spaces to enhance citizen engagement
- » **Section 2** presents potential challenges
- » **Section 3** discusses three main types of parliamentary space and examples of how different parliaments use them to support citizen engagement
- » **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 programme or activity is meeting key principles
- » **Section 7** points to other sources of information on the topic of parliaments as spaces and places

The Guide draws on extensive research of parliamentary practice, including desk research and interviews, and feedback from an international Advisory Group established for the development of this suite of Guides on Citizen Engagement (see [Section 7](#) for more details).



## Section 1: Benefits

Using parliamentary spaces to facilitate citizen engagement can lead to closer connections between citizens and parliaments as places.

This section unpacks the various facets of this effect. Table 1 outlines the main benefits that using parliamentary space for citizen engagement, including the creation of spaces online and in the community, can bring for both parliaments and citizens.

**Table 1:** Potential benefits of using parliamentary space for citizen engagement

<b>Shared benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Education and understanding</li> <li>» More meaningful engagement</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits for parliaments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Greater legitimacy</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits for citizens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Emotional attachment/sense of belonging</li> </ul>



### Shared benefits

#### Education and understanding

Parliaments are often seen as distant institutions, both physically and conceptually, and citizens may find them difficult to relate to. By accessing the parliamentary space, an opportunity arises for citizens to develop a sense of connection with the institution and the processes, place(s) and people involved. Suddenly the parliamentary building is not a distant place seen only on the news, where it may be portrayed as a ‘circus’ or a ‘bubble’, but a concrete space that they can access.

By moving through parliamentary space, on a tour for example, citizens can engage in embodied learning<sup>1</sup>, developing strong associations with parliamentary places through the knowledge they develop there. On a basic level, citizens can gain an understanding of how the space fits together and what it might be like to be a parliamentarian using the space every day.

Citizens often comment on how much smaller debating chambers look in real life compared to on television<sup>2</sup>. Being in the space can help to dispel this and other misconceptions about parliament and how it works. This can lay the foundation for greater trust in parliaments and more active engagement in democratic life.

Many parliamentary tours focus on the history of parliamentary democracy and the building, and while this knowledge is important, more focus could be placed on activating citizens’ civic identities – that is, enabling citizens to see a role for themselves in democracy. This can be done by outlining the relevance of parliament (and its history) to people’s daily lives and explaining ways that they can get involved.

<sup>1</sup> Embodied learning is a concept in cognition studies that emphasises the interaction between mind, body and the material environment in how we learn and make meaning. See: Abrahamson D, Lindgren R (2014) Embodiment and embodied design. In: Sawyer RK (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences*, pp. 358–376. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with parliamentary officials as well as authors’ own experience.

## CASE STUDY

**The Lithuanian Seimas: a parliamentary palimpsest<sup>3</sup>**

The structure of the parliamentary building, and the choices made about what to keep, change or remove, help parliaments develop their meaning as places.

The **Lithuanian Seimas** building has undergone several symbolic shifts following its break from Soviet rule in 1990. The Soviet-style Seimas Palace was used for parliamentary sittings from 1980 up until 1990, when in March of that year Lithuania declared independence. The declaration was made in the main hall of the Palace, now called the Hall of the Act of 11 March. The aftermath of this declaration saw Lithuanian citizens defend the Palace against Soviet troops, raising barricades to protect the site of a newfound democracy.

The Palace continued to host the plenary until 2007, when it moved to a newly renovated glass-fronted annex known as II Seimas Palace. As with

several modern parliaments, including the Reichstag building, home of the Bundestag of reunified Germany, and the Welsh Senedd, glass is used to symbolise transparency as a democratic ideal. Similarly, the new plenary chamber adopted the hemicycle layout used in many parliaments, a departure from the previous ‘classroom’ layout (see Images 1 and 2).<sup>4</sup> The connection to the old building and its history is maintained: the old Palace now houses MPs’ offices, with the old plenary hall used for ceremonial purposes, and fragments of the barricades used to defend the building in 1991 are embedded in walls surrounding II Seimas Palace.

Thus, the history of the Seimas as a place is held by the space, offering citizens a unique way to engage with the past while reflecting on the role of the institution in the present.

<sup>3</sup> Referring to the practice in antiquity of reusing manuscript pages by washing or scraping away old text and writing new text on top, the word ‘palimpsest’ is now generally used to mean something that has changed over time and acquired layers of meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Gibson et al. in Psarra, S., Sternberg, C. and Staiger, U. (eds) (2023) *Parliament Buildings: The Architecture of Politics in Europe*, London: UCL Press.



**Image 1:** Lithuania Seimas old plenary chamber

**Credit:** Seimas - photographer Olga Posaškova



**Image 2:** Lithuania Seimas new plenary chamber

**Credit:** Sophie Guruli, Inter Pares



## More meaningful engagement

Parliamentary spaces can be used to make engagement initiatives more meaningful to citizens by stimulating a sense of closeness to the institution of parliament. Many parliaments provide ways for citizens to engage remotely or in their own spaces, such as online petitions systems or educational activities. Engagement can be deepened by finding ways to share parliamentary space with citizens.

In the case of petitions systems, this might mean inviting petitioners to meet parliamentarians or observe a debate, and for educational activities, this might mean bringing key figures or features

of parliamentary space to the classroom. For example, the Community Education and Engagement Team of the Parliament of **South Australia** has created floor mats depicting the plenary chambers, which they then take to schools to recreate this parliamentary space as part of their outreach work. This enhances the education activity by allowing students to ‘step into’ the parliamentary space (see Image 3).

Sharing space can also support instances where parliamentarians wish to gather views and experiences from citizens to inform their work. Consultation and participation opportunities can

be built into the physical space of parliaments, such as at the visitor centre of the **Austrian** parliament, the Demokratikum, where citizens can sign petitions and submit their own at interactive stations and even design their own public square. In this case, the opportunity to actually participate and submit or sign a petition enhances the experience of visiting the parliamentary building. Parliamentary spaces in the community, such as constituency offices or mobile options like parliamentary buses and caravans, can also be effective infrastructure for consultation or participation activities.



**Image 3:** Parliament of South Australia Community Education & Engagement session – demonstrating use of floor mats in outreach sessions  
**Credit:** Parliament of South Australia





## Benefits for parliaments

### Greater legitimacy

When citizens have positive experiences of parliamentary spaces and those whom they encounter there, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards parliament as a place and institution. This, along with increased awareness of what parliamentarians do and how, can have the effect of enhancing parliaments' legitimacy. The act of opening up parliamentary spaces, or creating parliamentary spaces in the community, can be a symbol of transparency and support the building of trust with citizens.



## Benefits for citizens

### Emotional attachment/sense of belonging

Architects and social scientists observe that people's experience of physical space has an emotional impact, and parliamentary spaces are no exception.<sup>5</sup> Creating positive associations with parliament through effective use of space can empower citizens to feel more connected with democracy.

Positive experiences of space should give citizens a sense of their centrality to democracy, counteracting the feelings that many experience of alienation from democratic institutions. This can be developed by sharing information about parliament, what it does, and how they can be a part of it, providing positive and practical examples of citizen influence on parliamentary

activities, and even using physical architecture to promote these feelings of attachment and belonging. For example, the Reichstag building – home to the **German** Bundestag – offers tours which culminate on the dome above the plenary, designed to cultivate the feeling “that the public actually ‘own’ the building” (see Image 4).<sup>6</sup>



**Image 4:** Interior view of the Reichstag dome  
**Credit:** Deutscher Bundestag / Axel Hartmann

<sup>5</sup> Psarra, S., Sternberg, C. and Staiger, U. (eds) (2023) *Parliament Buildings: The Architecture of Politics in Europe*, London: UCL Press.

<sup>6</sup> Psarra, S. and Maldonado Gil, G. The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag building Spatial form and political culture in Psarra, S., Sternberg, C and Staiger, U. (eds) (2023) *Parliament Buildings: The Architecture of Politics in Europe*, London: UCL Press.

# Section 2: Challenges



## Challenges for parliaments

Parliamentary spaces have not always been created with citizen engagement in mind and can often represent values and points of view that are exclusionary to some citizens. This section explores potential challenges of using parliamentary spaces for citizen engagement. The key challenges are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Potential challenges in using parliamentary space for citizen engagement

Challenges for parliaments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Limitations of existing parliamentary space</li><li>» Security and privacy</li></ul>
Challenges for citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Accessibility</li><li>» Inclusion</li></ul>

### Limitations of existing parliamentary space

Parliamentary spaces are often not conducive to engagement opportunities. Most parliamentary spaces have been created to facilitate parliamentary work, not to support citizen engagement or the inclusion of different communities. For example, spaces do not always meet the needs of women, disabled people and religious minorities, either as visitors or as MPs.

**Practical considerations such as appropriate refreshment and bathroom facilities, prayer spaces and routes that can be navigated by a wheelchair user or with a pushchair are fundamental to ensuring inclusion of different users of the space.** Ensuring that different groups are represented in the range of art displayed and the names of rooms within parliament is another way in

which parliaments can enhance inclusion.<sup>7</sup> In a related vein, parliamentary buildings in contexts with colonial histories may provoke feelings of anger and distrust to the extent that people may not want even to step inside. If and when they do, the space may feel strange or even hostile given their cultural background. In many cases this issue extends beyond what existing spaces can achieve. However, the **New Zealand** Parliament has been trying to address this issue in collaboration with the Māori community through its development of the parliamentary forecourt. Māori *taonga* (treasures) have been installed, including three *mouri* (life force) markers in the forecourt paving, two *pou* (carved posts) flanking the steps to the entrance, and a

*pare* (carved archway) above the door itself. The parliament also offers a tour delivered in Māori with traditional prayer and welcome rituals observed. Since parliaments are working buildings, there are many demands on internal spaces such as meeting rooms. This affects availability of spaces for engagement opportunities such as consultation events. While engagement activities might be held separately in a visitor or education centre, the quality of engagement may be reduced by a lack of opportunity to experience the spaces that parliamentarians use every day. Where there are dedicated spaces for public engagement, such as public galleries in the plenary chamber and committee rooms, space can be limited by the physical realities of the building.

<sup>7</sup> International IDEA (2024) *Beyond Numbers: Stories of gender equality in and through parliaments*.



**Parliamentary spaces can therefore have considerable limitations, which need to be either approached in a creative manner or changed.**

Changing parliamentary spaces may however present significant resource implications. For example, the renovation projects of the Parliament of **Canada** and the **UK** Houses of Parliament are each set to cost billions of dollars and take around a decade to complete. Parliament buildings are often centuries old. Their infrastructure – such as water and electrical systems – is often outdated and even unsafe.

Renovating these buildings can require extensive consultation with parliamentary staff and Members, as well as with the public, and attract significant media scrutiny or even controversy. There may also be heritage restrictions limiting how parliamentary buildings can be changed. However, larger renovation projects can make these buildings more suitable for public engagement, for example by creating accessible routes, adequate bathroom facilities, and dedicated visitor centres.

**Alternatives to large renovations that can enhance the use of spaces for public engagement include:** improving public galleries, committee rooms or the surrounding outdoor space; creating online spaces through broadcasting, digital platforms or virtual reality; or launching mobile parliamentary spaces in the form of buses or caravans. These options all demand a level of resource, and a clear purpose will be key for ensuring that such tools are effective.

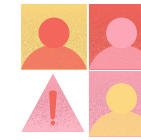
## Security and privacy

Using parliamentary spaces for public engagement needs to be done in a way that meets the claim the public have over parliamentary buildings, while not hampering the work that goes on in parliaments.

The MPs and staff who carry out tasks of legislation, budgeting and oversight are the primary users of parliamentary buildings, and their spaces should remain safe and conducive to productive work. This includes the need for privacy, as some meetings – such as those concerning political party management or the planning of committee work – will need to be held in private.

Parliaments also keep their premises safe to safeguard their workers and visitors, for example through screening for prohibited items upon entry. Parliamentarians visiting locations outside of parliament tend to have personal protection or at least notify law enforcement. Activities that can accommodate both parliamentary workers and the public might involve guided tours or opportunities to meet parliamentarians, as well as negotiating more antagonistic acts of citizenship such as protest. The **Scottish** Parliament, for example, views protests on its grounds in positive terms, as a sign that the parliament is recognised as “a physical focal point for Scottish politics”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Orr, K., & Siebert, S. (2021). *The Scottish Parliament: how the Parliament building shapes the workings of the institution*, report for the Scottish Parliament, p.17.



## Challenges for citizens

### Accessibility

Parliamentary buildings may be inaccessible on a number of fronts. Citizens may struggle to access parliamentary buildings, for example if they live far away from the capital, if they have mobility issues, or if they have learning disabilities or are neurodivergent.<sup>9</sup> On a basic level, parliaments need to ask themselves: who might be excluded from parliamentary space due to an inability to travel because of prohibitive costs or sheer physical distance, and who might be excluded due to an inability to move around the building or navigate it with ease?

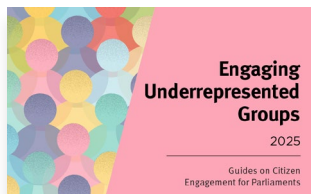
These questions will lead to different solutions for different groups and for different parliaments. Some parliaments might offer travel subsidies for remote communities, while others might develop digital engagement mechanisms. Many parliaments will be subject to legal requirements around the accessibility of buildings, and meeting these requirements is something that will benefit all types of users of parliamentary buildings.

Some parliaments might also create dedicated accessible engagement spaces outside the parliamentary building itself.

<sup>9</sup> Neurodivergence is when a person's brain processes information and/or responds to stimuli in a way that is different to what is considered 'typical'. Neurodivergent conditions include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum condition, dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia.

## Inclusion

Beyond the physical accessibility of spaces, citizens from particular groups may feel excluded from buildings that reinforce traditional notions of who does and doesn't belong. Parliamentary buildings may be grand and imposing. The pictures, statues and plaques they display may fail to reflect the diversity of society or uphold colonial or outdated narratives. Some parliaments may seek to inspire awe, and if not handled carefully this can generate feelings of discomfort and alienation rather than enthusiasm and empowerment. This effect may be felt by parliamentarians and staff from particular backgrounds (e.g., Indigenous groups, ethnic and religious minorities) as well as visitors to parliament.



***See our Guide on 'Engaging Underrepresented Groups' for more detail on how to enhance inclusion***

### CASE STUDY

## The parliament building in the landscape



Parliament buildings often make quite a statement when viewed from the outside or as part of the surrounding area. For historical reasons, many parliaments are housed in palaces and castles, for example. This means that they are often monumental structures located in elevated or otherwise strategically advantageous positions, such as on top of a hill or on a body of water.

For example, the Toompea Castle where the **Estonian** Riigikogu sits is a handsome set of structures built around the original medieval fortress on Toompea Hill (see Image 5). As such, one looking up at the parliament would be separated from it by its glacis (an artificial slope designed to hamper attackers).<sup>10</sup> While no longer a fortress, the outward appearance of the building is certainly impressive. Some purpose-built parliamentary buildings such as Stormont, the home of the **Northern Ireland** Assembly, reflect these principles, located at the top of an extended upward-sloping driveway in the middle of a large estate.

<sup>10</sup> Atkinson, R. Uncanny valleys and network nations: The political economy of the libertarian freespace. Paper presented at University of Leeds Global Political Economy workshop on 15 May 2025

Another striking example is the Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of **Sri Lanka**, which is located on an island on Diyawanna Lake just outside the capital city Colombo. This building was constructed to replace the old colonial building in Colombo (now used as the office of the President). The 'new' parliament building is undeniably stunning, appearing as if floating on top of the water. However, it is literally isolated by design, on an island outside the city, presenting potential practical and conceptual challenges for visitors.

While outward appearance influences how parliament is perceived by the public, and often reflects aims and values of a particular time and place, the architecture and location of a parliament building need not dictate how citizens feel about it. That is the responsibility of those working within parliament walls.



**Image 5:** Toompea Castle, Estonian parliament building  
**Credit:** Erik Peinar



## Section 3:

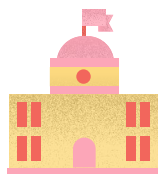
# Range of approaches

This section proposes a range of approaches to using, enhancing or creating parliamentary space for the purposes of citizen engagement.

We look at three main types of space:

1. The physical parliament building
2. Online space and virtual reality
3. Spaces beyond the parliamentary estate

We consider how different parliaments use each type of space to facilitate public engagement.



### 1. The physical parliament building

Public access to certain spaces and proceedings has become standard among parliaments. Most parliaments have **public galleries** in the plenary, and many in committee rooms too, allowing some members of the public to observe proceedings. Many parliaments have developed some level of **tour offer** to showcase their history and/or that of the building itself, and to allow citizens and tourists alike to view the workings of democracy up close.

Some parliaments use dedicated spaces to host **events and exhibitions**. In **Estonia**, the Exhibition Hall within Toompea Castle (home of the Riigikogu) has hosted exhibitions continuously since 2001. A collaboration between the Chancellery of the Riigikogu and the Estonian Artists' Association supports a year-round exhibition programme, with displays changing every six weeks and showcasing a range of art and styles including paintings, photography, video installations, jewellery and sculpture.

In **Argentina**, the Library of Congress sits across the road from the Congress building and offers a range of resources and experiences to visitors. Members of the public can access regular tours

of the archives, reading rooms and multimedia suites, and researchers can make use of the library's collections for their work. A dedicated children's room, named after the children's writer and composer María Elena Walsh, is open every day for preschool and elementary school visits. The library also runs a cultural programme – featuring workshops, theatre, cinema, dance and poetry – in its dedicated onsite space, online and in the community.

Other parliaments make use of existing, multipurpose spaces to create engagement opportunities. For example, the bright, glass-bound, two-tier lobby of the **Welsh** Senedd building is often used for speaker events, musical performances, exhibitions and markets. Parliaments might also commission artwork for placement in significant spaces within the parliament building. For example, the **UK** Parliament often commissions exhibitions and installations in spaces where people gather and are likely to see them as they go about their business, such as in Westminster Hall, the large medieval hall that all visitors pass through when attending a tour or a meeting in the Palace of Westminster.

## CASE STUDY

**Exhibition spaces in parliament**

Instituting exhibition spaces within parliament buildings is one way in which parliaments can present a range of stories and viewpoints without having to make extensive and expensive changes.

The Parliament of **New South Wales (NSW)** in Australia operates a permanent exhibition space within its building. Fountain Court (which takes its name from its centrepiece, a fountain designed by architect Robert Woodward) is a lobby at the heart of the parliamentary estate, linking the original 19th century building with the 20th century extension. The Court is therefore a thoroughfare for those working in parliament as well as those visiting it.

The walls of Fountain Court are dedicated to art displays, which are sponsored by individual MPs based on applications received from artists or collectives and change monthly. One wall is reserved for the display of art by indigenous people as part of the Reconciliation process between the Australian state and Aboriginal people, and in recognition of the fact that the parliament building sits on the land of the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation. In using the space in this way, the busy intersection of Fountain Court becomes a place where those moving through it can engage with different

perspectives and ideas. In its rolling schedule of exhibitions, and the permanent place of indigenous art in the space, Fountain Court allows parliament to represent a diversity of voices, even if just in one part of the building.

The Parliament of **Trinidad and Tobago** has taken a similar approach. During its 2016-2020 renovations, it was decided that the central lobby would also function as an art gallery (see Image 6). The Rotunda Gallery opened in January 2020 and exhibits work submitted by individuals, including children and young people, as well as civil society organisations. The Gallery hosts an International Women's Day exhibition every year and has supported exhibitions focused on natural conservation and the cultural heritage of the country, including a 2025 exhibition celebrating Indian immigration to Trinidad and Tobago.

In both cases, these spaces have been used to mark important events in the respective parliament's history. In 2022, Fountain Court hosted an exhibition focusing on the Legislative Council, the parliament's upper chamber, in anticipation of its 200th anniversary in 2024. The exhibition, *Unlocking the House*, presented 10 stories about the history and function of the Legislative Council, and displayed key objects

from the NSW Parliament Legislative Council collection, NSW Parliament Archives and Historical Collection.

In the same year, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago celebrated 60 years of independence with a special exhibition in the Rotunda Gallery entitled *Diamond Jubilee – A Parliamentary Story*. The call for submissions asked artists to “depict Parliamentary elements within their work, reflect Parliamentary pride and highlight the last sixty years of significant points in our local parliamentary history”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See: [Rotunda Gallery Call for Submissions – The Diamond Jubilee: A Parliamentary Story – Parliament](#)



**Image 6:** Trinidad and Tobago Rotunda Gallery  
**Credit:** Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago



The Parliaments of **Quebec** (Canada) and **Scotland** have developed programmes of community events to engage local people. In Scotland, for example, the visitor experience team has developed an initiative called Crafternoons, inviting visitors and local residents to participate in creative activities in the parliament building. The aim of this initiative is to provide an informal, fun way of encouraging people to visit parliament and develop feelings of belonging.

#### CASE STUDY

### Open Days

Several parliaments hold special open days, giving citizens a closer look at parliamentary spaces than is offered in the usual tour. Open days often mark important moments in the country's democratic history.

Every year, the Riigikogu of **Estonia** celebrates the first sitting of the Constituent Assembly of Estonia following independence from the Russian Empire. The sitting took place on 23 April 1919, and so the Riigikogu holds its Open House Day on the Saturday closest to that date each year. The day takes visitors into the working rooms of the parliament as well as to historical points of interest and combines cultural activities with opportunities to meet elected representatives in the political factions' rooms in Toompea Castle. The event attracts around 5,000 visitors every year. Toompea also hosts well-attended Independence Day celebrations on 24 February each year, when citizens gather in the Governor's Garden and on the surrounding mountain-tops to enjoy the proceedings.

The **Slovenian** parliament holds three open days throughout the year. The first one in March, as an Open Doors Day. The second one in October, to commemorate the adoption of the National Assembly Act in 1991. And the third one in June, when the parliament opens its doors as part of the national Summer Museum Night, which sees Slovenian cultural institutions hold special events.

Parliaments in other contexts link up with city-wide initiatives to maximise engagement. For example, the **French** National Assembly participates in the Nuit Blanche art festival, when the parliament building joins other cultural institutions across Paris in opening to the public for the night and hosting art installations or performances. The **Danish** Folketing similarly takes part in the Culture Night initiative, whereby more than 200 cultural institutions in Copenhagen offer special entertainment on the Friday before the autumn school holidays.



Beyond event spaces, some parliaments have developed dedicated **visitor centres**. Sometimes these spaces are targeted at young people, such as the Education Centre of the **UK** Parliament and the **Norwegian** MiniTing, while others, such as the Parlamentarium by the **European Parliament**, are open to all. These centres offer a range of activities and experiences, from informational displays and workshops to opportunities to submit petitions or citizens' initiatives. These centres can lead to significant visitor numbers. For example, the **US** Capitol Visitor Center welcomed 21 million visitors in its first ten years of operation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See: *By the Numbers: Capitol Visitor Center | Architect of the Capitol*



## CASE STUDY

**Visitor centres**

The creation of dedicated spaces for visitors is an opportunity to tell an engaging and inclusive story about parliament and the work it does, and create a sense of connection to it as a place.

The **Austrian** Parliament opened its visitor centre, the **Demokratikum**, in 2023. The Demokratikum allows visitors of all ages to explore the history of the parliament, its roles and functions, and engage with current parliamentary business. Consisting of three main spaces, the Agora, Auditorium and Forum, the centre uses a range of media to present information, including display walls, video installations and interactive stations including a quiz and a virtual meet-and-greet with politicians (see Image 7).



**Image 7:** The Forum of the Austrian Demokratikum  
**Credit:** Parliament of Austria

The **European** Parliament has a similarly high-production value visitors' centre called the **Parlamentarium**, which is located opposite the plenary building in Brussels (Belgium). The Parlamentarium uses multimedia displays supported by Personal Multimedia Guides available in all 24 official EU languages and featuring sign-language videos, with Braille guides provided for visually impaired visitors. The displays tell the story of European integration and the establishment of the European Union (EU), focusing on the European Parliament as a core institution of the EU, what it does and how it works. As with the Austrian Demokratikum, citizens' roles are emphasised through storytelling, and visitors are able to role play as MPs by casting their votes on key issues.



The **Portuguese** Assembly of the Republic's visitor centre, the **Casa do Parlamento – Centro Interpretativo**, sits opposite the main parliament building. Arranged across four floors according to themes of Citizenship, Parliament, Democracy and Memory, the centre makes use of different media to engage visitors: a timeline of parliamentary history runs along the walls; a photo installation visualises the composition of the parliament and allows visitors to compare it to previous ones; and visitors can engage with a jukebox that plays protest songs from Portugal's history. The centre has an informal and interactive feel, suggesting that the building across the street might have more to offer citizens than its imposing neoclassical façade might suggest (see Image 8).



**Image 8:** Casa do Parlamento - Centro Interpretativo  
**Credit:** Casa do Parlamento – Centro Interpretativo, Photo by Luís Seixas Alves, 2024 © The Photographic Archive of the Portuguese Parliament, PT-AHP/AF/R1768





## 2. Online space and virtual reality

Parliaments can reach citizens outside the physical boundaries of the parliamentary estate in various ways. Some parliaments are employing digital tools to bring “publics to parliament, and parliament to publics”<sup>13</sup>, such as broadcasting proceedings, conducting online consultations and providing virtual tours. These options can help to widen parliament’s reach beyond those who are able to visit physically. However, they should not be seen as a direct alternative, given that some of the groups who are unable to travel to parliament may also experience digital exclusion due to lack of internet access or limited digital skills.<sup>14</sup>

### Website

Along with the physical building, a parliament’s website is a key tool for presenting itself to citizens and thereby cultivating a sense of connection with parliament as a place. The 2020 World e-Parliament Report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that “websites continue to occupy a critical place in the architecture of parliamentary information, education, outreach and engagement; they are both outlets for meaningful and timely parliamentary information and touchpoints for public engagement.”<sup>15</sup> While social media offer institutions opportunities to connect with audiences and attract attention to specific initiatives, it is still important to maintain a website with core information presented in an accessible

yet authoritative way, where citizens can go for more detail and find out how to get involved.

Some parliamentary websites remain very basic and in many cases are geared towards research and policy stakeholders rather than the ‘average’ citizen. However, examples of effective practice do exist. For example, the website of the Parliament of **South Africa** provides extensive information about parliament’s functions and current business, including streaming links, as well as how citizens can get involved. The ‘Have your Say’ button at the top of the website homepage allows citizens to navigate to a single page where various engagement options are outlined, such as making a submission on a bill, launching a petition, or

visiting a local parliamentary democracy office.<sup>16</sup> A small box inviting website users to ‘Visit Parliament’ is visible on the side of most pages of the website, with links to where visitors can arrange a tour, attend a debate, get directions to the parliament and find useful contact details.

The website of the **New Zealand** Parliament has an intentionally “youthful, easy-going persona”.<sup>17</sup> The homepage has an engaging feel, with carousels displaying topics of potential interest to visitors as well as an interactive parliamentary calendar that allows users to add particular sessions either in committees or the plenary to their own calendars.<sup>18</sup> The website can be read in either English or Māori.

<sup>13</sup> Prior and Sivashankar (2023) *Our future in space: the physical and virtual opening-up of parliaments to publics*, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 29:3, p.463

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2020) *World e-Parliament Report*, p.23

<sup>16</sup> See: [Have Your Say - Parliament of South Africa](#)

<sup>17</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022) *Global Parliamentary Report*, p.34.

<sup>18</sup> See: [Home page - New Zealand Parliament](#)

## The physical parliament building

Parliamentary websites can be used to address different needs and preferences across society. For example, parliaments including those of the **Isle of Man, New Zealand** and **Portugal** have published step-by-step guides on their website to help citizens understand and use their petitions system and other engagement opportunities (to reach more people, such guides should also be shared in hard copy, for example with constituency offices, civil society organisations and schools). The website can also be an effective home for educational resources for teachers and parents to use with children and young people.

Some parliaments provide resources on their websites to help different groups prepare for a visit to parliament. For example, the **Irish** Houses of the Oireachtas website includes a dedicated page with support for autistic visitors. The page details the kinds of noises that might be heard during a visit and provides downloadable maps identifying potential sensory issues (e.g., lighting or louder spaces). Information about aids that can be accessed during their visit is also provided here, such as sensory support kits and stickers that signal to others with a traffic-light system how the visitor prefers to communicate during their visit. Similarly, the **Welsh** Senedd provides guides on sensory issues that neurodivergent visitors might encounter, with a version of the guide available in Easy Read for people with learning disabilities.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See: [Neurodivergent People](#), Senedd Cymru

## Online space and virtual reality

### Broadcasting

Increasingly, parliaments are livestreaming proceedings in plenary and committees as a way of enhancing transparency and citizen awareness of parliamentary activity. This live broadcasting of parliamentary spaces can massively expand the number and diversity of people who engage with parliamentary business, since most citizens would not be able to attend parliamentary sessions in person, due to distance, lack of time or resources. This practice can be enhanced by adding a layer of participation. For example, both houses of the **Brazilian** Congress run an initiative called ‘Interactive Event’, whereby citizens submit questions for committees to ask during hearings.

### Online consultation

Many parliaments operate online spaces for gathering citizens’ views on draft legislation or inquiry topics. Many Latin American countries, such as **Chile**, use these platforms to invite comments on draft legislation, and the parliaments of **France**, **Poland** and **Scotland** run online consultation systems. These approaches can involve interaction among citizens and parliamentarians, for example when comment or upvote features are enabled, allowing participants to respond to each other’s points. Sometimes, as in **Poland**, the consultation involves a survey element, allowing parliaments to gather structured data on participating citizens’ attitudes towards an issue or proposal.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, parliaments have accelerated their adoption of web conference tools such as Zoom and MS Teams. In some parliaments, witnesses to committee inquiries can

contribute to hearings via these platforms, and individual MPs and committees can hold online meetings with citizens with increasing ease. This allows parliamentary spaces to be created where citizens can share their views with parliamentarians. Features such as recording functions enable transcripts to be created and (once edited by a human) used as evidence, and accessibility features of these platforms (such as captions and live interpreting) are improving all the time.



***For more details on these approaches, see our Guide on ‘Public Consultations’***

***Continued on next page >>***



## Virtual tours

Many parliaments now offer virtual tours on their websites, so that citizens who cannot attend in person are able to experience parliamentary space and learn about the democratic system in their country. Some virtual tours, such as the one offered by the Parliament of the **Czech Republic**, are a series of panoramic images of key areas of the parliamentary building (such as the façade, plenary chamber and committee rooms). Other virtual tours, such as that of the **Irish** Houses of the Oireachtas, allow virtual visitors to interact with clickable elements like pictures on the wall, and to choose their own route through the building.

### CASE STUDY

## Virtual tours



The parliaments of **Canada** and **New Zealand** each partnered with external organisations to develop high-quality virtual experience apps, enabling citizens to engage with parliamentary spaces on their personal devices or in the classroom.

**Parliament: the Virtual Experience** is a joint production by the **Canadian** Library of Parliament and the National Film Board of Canada's Interactive Studio. It was launched in 2020 to give Canadians a way to experience the parliamentary building during its long-term closure for renovations. The Experience is available online and through virtual reality (VR) headsets. The prime audience of the VR version is school students – schools across Canada can register for free VR kits to be sent to them, along with lesson plans and suggested activities to support students' engagement. The Experience leads the viewer through key spaces such as the two plenary chambers, the Library of Parliament and Peace Tower (constructed at the end of the First World War). Photorealism and audio are used to bring the space and its stories to life.

The **New Zealand** Parliament similarly offers its app, **Parliament XR**, free of charge in recognition of the fact that a visit to parliament in person is not possible for everyone (due to factors such as geography, time and cost). The app provides a 360-degree virtual tour which users can take at their own pace, interacting with information popups, video and augmented reality objects as they 'move' through the parliament building and grounds. Each of the 14 key stops on the tour – including the debating chamber, Speaker's corridor and Māui-Tikitiki-a-Taranga, the Māori Affairs select committee room – can be explored separately as 'scenes', allowing users to interact more closely with parts that particularly capture their interest.



### 3. Spaces beyond the parliamentary estate

Parliaments are increasingly recognising their responsibility to reach out to communities, going to where people are, rather than asking them to come to parliament. This approach is often referred to as ‘Taking Parliament to the People’ and can take many forms: fixed spaces or mobile ones; one-off instances and regular programmes; making use of local offices; conducting Speaker-led tours; or taking parliament on the road in buses or caravans.

While **constituency offices** are primarily political spaces, they can still contribute to parliamentary public engagement efforts. One example is the Aspiration House initiative in **Indonesia**, where MPs convene meetings with their constituents to hear their concerns or discuss particular topics. The **South African** parliament has developed the constituency office network by introducing local Parliamentary Democracy Offices, where citizens can access information about parliamentary activity and participate in consultations (see Image 9).



**Image 9:** Parliament of South Africa, Parliamentary Democracy Office (PDO)

**Credit:** Parliament of South Africa

#### CASE STUDY

### Constituency weeks



Many parliaments build constituency time into the parliamentary calendar. For example, **Chile** and **Peru** have instituted a practice whereby one week per month is dedicated to constituency work, known as ‘*semana de representación*’ or ‘*semana distrital*’. In both countries, legislators are expected to engage directly with local issues and community concerns during this time, with no plenary sessions or committee meetings held.

In Chile, the practice is established in [Article 38](#) of the Regulations of the Chamber of Deputies, which states: “The last week of each month shall be devoted to constituency work, and there shall be no plenary sessions or committee meetings.” In Peru, [Article 23](#) (f) of the Reglamento del Congreso de la República mandates that Members of Congress spend five consecutive working days each month in their electoral districts, maintaining communication with citizens and civil society organisations. Additionally, Peruvian legislators are required to write monthly accountability reports, which are made available to the public on the [Congress website](#).

This type of institutionalised practice can be a great asset for engagement of various kinds, as regular, dedicated time in the constituency could be used to build understanding of parliamentary roles and functions, develop citizens’ skills as campaigners, or enable active engagement in live consultations.



In several contexts, parliaments conduct **annual tours** of specific constituencies or a set of constituencies. These tours are usually led by the Speaker or President of the parliament, who has the advantage of political neutrality: this is the case in **Botswana, New Zealand and Zambia**. In other cases, such as in the **Solomon Islands**, the tours are conducted by the parliament's civic education team. The aim of these tours is to educate citizens about parliament, conduct consultations on live parliamentary business, and cultivate a sense of democratic agency.

Several parliaments such as those in **Ecuador, Fiji, Germany and Zambia** (see Image 10) operate buses or trucks that tour the country, offering remote communities the opportunity to

participate. Some of these, such as in **Ecuador** and **Germany**, are equipped with interactive devices that allow citizens to participate in live parliamentary business. In some cases, this roadshow approach is combined with Speaker/President tours. **Trinidad and Tobago** runs a similar initiative called the Public Outreach with *Parliament Caravan*. The Caravan takes parliamentary staff across the country to speak with local communities and gather their feedback on the work of parliament. The results are then passed on to the relevant committees. The *Bibliomovil* of the Library of Congress of **Argentina** takes a different approach, encouraging reading, writing and cultural production through artistic activities and literary events such as poetry readings.



**Image 10:** Zambian parliament truck  
**Credit:** National Assembly of Zambia

#### CASE STUDY

### Kenya: Senate Mashinani



In 2018, the **Kenyan** Senate held its first 'Senate Mashinani', seeing the House relocate from Nairobi to Uasin Gishu county for a week to conduct its business there. 'Mashinani' means 'at the grassroots level' or 'in the countryside' in Swahili, and the initiative is part of efforts to improve public engagement as well as collaboration between local and national legislatures. To date, Senate Mashinani has been conducted four times, in 2018, 2019, 2023 and 2024 (the initiative was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic).

The Senate conducts its usual programme of plenary debates and committee activity during the week, but efforts are made to connect with issues facing the communities where Senate Mashinani is hosted. For example, in 2019 when Senate Mashinani was held in Kitui county, the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries held several public meetings to hear local people's views on the Mung Bean (Ndengu) Bill. Kitui County is a leading producer of mung beans, and many were keen to benefit from the bill's proposals to promote the crop as a commercial opportunity for Kenya, while others raised concerns about potential licensing burdens to be introduced by the bill.

Senate Mashinani demonstrates that there are meaningful ways of bringing parliament to remote communities that don't involve technology or rely on internet connectivity.

## Section 4: How to put it into practice

There are many potential ways to improve public engagement by using parliamentary spaces effectively. This section outlines how parliaments can better use their spaces to facilitate meaningful engagement.



### Purpose and strategy

Given the wide range of approaches available, it is necessary for parliaments to develop clear rationales for spatial innovations and use this to guide the design of initiatives.

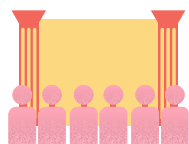
Questions that parliaments may wish to reflect on include:

- » What spaces are available for engagement? How is space currently being used and by whom? Who is currently being excluded?
- » How can you ensure that your approach is informed by the needs and preferences of different communities?
- » What are your key objectives in using parliamentary space for citizen engagement? For example, you might wish to increase visitor numbers and diversity, enable more engagement in specific parliamentary business, enhance public trust, or improve the accessibility of parliamentary space.
- » Who will be responsible for delivering the initiative (e.g., staff, MPs, external partners)?
- » What resources will be needed to ensure success (e.g., funds, time, technology)?
- » How will you build consensus for your project and secure the required resources?

### Top tips

- ✓ Match your use of space to your objectives and the audiences you are trying to engage
- ✓ Gather evidence to support your ideas for new initiatives with parliamentary space





## Improve existing space

There are truly myriad ways in which parliaments can optimise their existing spaces for citizen engagement. These range from approaches with low resource requirements to more intensive options.

One starting point is to make the parliamentary building **more welcoming and accessible**. Many parliaments will be considering how to do this in light of increasing regulation in this area. This might involve measures such as improving signage and introducing accessibility changes such as tactile surfaces,<sup>20</sup> wheelchair ramps and lifts. The first step might be to conduct an accessibility audit of the parliamentary building, and consult specialist organisations and groups (e.g., with a focus on disability and neurodiversity) on the particular needs of the communities they represent. A risk here is that those with additional needs may be provided with a lesser experience of parliament, for example people with mobility issues being

directed through side entrances and back corridors. While amending existing buildings is more difficult than starting from scratch, there are increasing options available for practising ‘inclusive heritage’.<sup>21</sup>

To enhance feelings of inclusion among minority groups who visit parliament, you might consider improving the **diversity of stories and individuals represented in art and other displays, as well as the names of key spaces** like committee rooms. For some parliaments, such as in **Australia** and **New Zealand**, this includes acknowledging the ancestral land on which their parliament buildings now stand. Several parliaments have contended with the fact that many of the stories and celebrated figures in parliamentary spaces have been men. For example, the **Belgian** House of Representatives and **Croatian** Parliament have renamed rooms within parliament buildings so that more references to women were present in

the space. Both the **Swedish** Riksdag and the **Italian** Chamber of Deputies have established ‘Women’s Rooms’ in their buildings where the contributions of women parliamentarians are celebrated.

Depending on the particular location of the parliament building, it may be possible to **make creative use of the surrounding area**, such as gardens and public squares. This can involve sharing the space with organisations and groups who wish to host events or installations. This type of approach can draw attention to parliamentary space as something that can be interactive, alive and ever-changing, rather than formal, traditional and remote.

<sup>20</sup> Tactile flooring is an approach that helps visually impaired people navigate spaces. For example, textured floor tiles are used to let people know when they are approaching the top of a set of stairs. Tactility is increasingly understood to affect neurodivergent people’s experience of space as well, with tactile walls being used to provide sensory grounding.

<sup>21</sup> See: [Improving Access to Historic Buildings and Landscapes | Historic England](#)

## CASE STUDY

**Senate of France: using the Jardin du Luxembourg as an exhibition space**

The upper house of the **French** parliament, the Sénat, is located in the Luxembourg Palace in central Paris, a 57 acre park which is maintained by the Sénat and frequented by locals and tourists alike due to its beautiful formal gardens and areas for playing pétanque, chess or tennis. The gardens also host exhibitions in its orangery and pavilion and on the ‘grilles’, the gold-tipped iron fence that runs around the perimeter of the park.

To mark the 150th anniversary of the Sénat in 2025, the grilles hosted an ‘ABC’ of parliament. Each letter of the alphabet was used to represent a parliamentary term (‘a’ for *amendement*, ‘b’ for *bicamérisme*, etc.) Each term was displayed with an evocative image and short definition on a panel attached to the grilles (see Image 11).

A panel at the start of this parliamentary alphabet provided an introduction from Gérard Larcher, the President of the Sénat. He outlined the intention behind the installation: to celebrate the 150th anniversary by allowing citizens to see the Sénat in a new light while learning about the role of the house and the work that it does. Further engagement

activities were planned on the Sénat’s social media sites and in the Palace itself to accompany the ABC on the grilles.



**Image 11:** France Senat ABC  
**Credit:** Cristina Leston-Bandeira

**Top tips**

- ✓ Work with key audiences such as disabled groups to understand how spaces can be improved – don’t just guess!
- ✓ Consider your visiting hours and the potential need for new rituals such as open days





## Create new spaces

The creation of new spaces is usually extremely resource-intensive, in terms of funds, time and expertise. The following considerations can help ensure that these resources are employed efficiently.

First, decide whether the centre will be for the **general public or a specific group** such as young people. Parliaments such as the **UK** Parliament and the **Norwegian** Storting have had success with their centres targeted to school-aged children and young people: around 60,000 school students visit the UK Parliament Education Centre per year, while the MiniTing at the Storting welcomes around 6,000 a year (from an upper secondary population of around 250,000 students).<sup>22</sup> During the renovation of the **Austrian** parliament building between 2017 and 2023, a new visitors' gallery was developed overlooking the plenary chamber. This area is also used as a site for Democracy Workshops where 8-14 year olds can take part in 4-hour sessions on different topics such as legislation, parliamentary history and how to participate in democracy. Being so close to the plenary chamber and even being able to look down upon it through a pane of glass helps students to engage with workshop content.

Focusing on young people may mean that others are overlooked or excluded. For example, Spanish parliaments have found that the majority of their visitors are school groups and retired people, mainly due to visiting hours coinciding with working hours.<sup>23</sup> While it may make sense to develop dedicated centres for demographics who are most able to visit, this should be counterbalanced with activities designed to cater to working-age adults, such as evening events or activities beyond the parliamentary estate.

Once the audience has been decided, you will need to decide **how you will use the space**. Will it look and feel more like a museum or a classroom – or will it have elements of both? This will affect how participants feel in the space and what they feel is possible for them to do there. Will content focus on educating citizens about the history and function of parliament, or will there be opportunities for citizens to actively participate in legislation, budgeting or oversight? A mixture of these activities is likely to be most effective, as at the **Austrian** Parliament's Demokratikum, and the **Portuguese** Assembly's Casa do Parlamento.

Next, consider how you will **provide assistance to help disadvantaged groups to engage**. This may include measures such as travel subsidies for those travelling from remote parts of the country, presenting information in different languages and formats, or introducing dedicated days for vulnerable groups to enjoy the space in a calm and quiet environment.

Finally, think about how you will know **whether your centre is having an impact**. Tracking visitor numbers offers a simple metric, but you may wish to use feedback forms to help you understand which parts of the experience are most engaging and which might need to be changed.



***See our Guide on 'Education Programmes' for more information on how to engage children and young people.***

<sup>22</sup> [Facts about education in Norway](#)

<sup>23</sup> Internal research by IPEN-Spain.

#### CASE STUDY

### A whole new parliamentary building: Benin



In 2023, construction began on a new building for the National Assembly of **Benin** to replace (and face) the old colonial one where the country declared independence from France in 1960.

Designed by Kéré Architecture, the new building, which is due to be finished in 2025, takes inspiration from the West African tradition of gathering under the palaver tree.<sup>24</sup> The building's top-heavy design represents the canopy of a tree,

while a spiral staircase leading down into a central courtyard evokes a hollow trunk. The plenary chamber will be at ground level, with exposed beams in its ceiling to symbolise branches. The building will be surrounded by a public park which the architects say will provide “generous shaded space where citizens can gather and deliberate, analogous to the assembly hall on the opposite side”.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The image of the tree as a gathering place can also be seen in parliament buildings in European contexts, such as the Welsh Senedd building, and the new visitor centre of the Danish Folketing.

<sup>25</sup> See: [Kéré Architecture models Benin parliament on African palaver tree](#)

### Top tips

- ✓ Define your audience and learn about what they need to engage
- ✓ Use interactive elements to bring content to life
- ✓ Ensure that new spaces link up with old ones in some way





## Make tours meaningful

The tour is a key part of how parliament presents itself to the public. The content of the tour, including which parts of the parliament are accessible to visitors, sends messages to citizens about what parliament thinks is important and the values it upholds. So, think about what you want to communicate through your tour and how.

To cultivate a feeling of democratic agency and empowerment, **pay attention to the stories you are telling** about key events in parliament's history or how it works now. Even the route of a parliamentary tour, what is included, what is left out, which spaces are lingered on, is important.

Too historical an approach runs the risk of presenting parliament as something calcified and irrelevant, rather than dynamic and fundamental. While it is important to communicate a sense of the institution's history, try to strike a balance with recent examples of important legislation and citizen impact on decision-making (while maintaining impartiality). Emphasising citizens' roles in parliamentary life can help to create a sense of belonging and ownership, and address preconceptions that citizens might hold about 'who parliament is for'.

A final consideration is: **who delivers the tour?**

Some parliaments have extensive teams of trained tour guides who work to a common script but are able to tailor tours to different audiences. Others rely on a small number of staff, often from the public relations office, which, of course, limits the number of tours that can be delivered.

### CASE STUDY

#### Cultivating a sense of ownership and belonging



Some parliaments use the space itself to evoke feelings of ownership and belonging in citizens who come to visit. For example, both the **German** Bundestag and **Welsh** Senedd use the glass roofs over their plenary chambers to signal transparency. In both cases, citizens can access a vantage point above the chamber, thereby suggesting that it is citizens who are in charge and to whom representatives must be accountable.

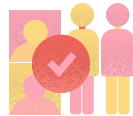
In 2016, the **UK** Parliament installed a large contemporary light sculpture at the top of Westminster Hall, the oldest part of the Palace of Westminster. The sculpture, called 'New Dawn' and created by artist Mary Branson, is the first abstract art piece to be commissioned for the

Palace, and commemorates 150 years since the campaign for women's suffrage in the UK began. The sculpture is made up of 168 hand-blown glass scrolls, each one representing an organisation that campaigned for women's suffrage, which come together into the form of a dawning sun. The sculpture thus recognises the contribution of individual organisations while emphasizing the strength of collective action. New Dawn is connected to place in a special way, too: the scrolls illuminate and change colour on a 12.5-hour cycle to reflect the tide of the River Thames on whose banks the Palace of Westminster sits. The sculpture invites reflection on women's role in democracy, telling a positive story about progress that visitors can be inspired by.

The Parliament of **Canada** operates an innovative scheme whereby university students are appointed as tour guides for a year at a time, and paid for their work. Beyond the tour guide themselves, you might want to think about how MPs can be involved in the experience: will contact with parliamentarians be limited to observing the plenary or committee proceedings, or will visitors have the chance to meet their representatives?

### Top tips

- ✓ Include stories about the life and work of the parliament as it is now, not just its history
- ✓ Emphasise the role and contribution of citizens
- ✓ Tailor tours to audiences' needs and interests



## Use other spaces effectively

Thinking about the two main types of alternative space – online spaces and parliamentary spaces in the community – there are several important considerations.

In the case of **online spaces**, it can be easy to assume that because something is online citizens will find it. Citizens need to be signposted towards opportunities such as online consultations or virtual tours.

While digital tools do allow for mass engagement, consider how you can put in place systems to ensure **quality of engagement**. This might mean allocating the responsibility for moderating online discussions to specific staff to guard against inappropriate use of the tools or hate speech. In the case of virtual tours, the quality can be enhanced by not just providing images of parliamentary space, but information to help users understand what they are looking at and develop a sense of connection to the place. Without this information to bring the experience to life, citizens' sense of distance could be increased if all they are offered is inert images.

When planning to develop **parliamentary spaces in the community**, there is a real range of approaches to take. Finding the right fit will depend on your parliament's particular social, cultural and geographical context. It will be useful to think about what existing infrastructure you have on which to build. Networks of constituency offices may be a good place to start; in other contexts, you could work in partnership with community infrastructure and leadership to ensure that spaces become embedded.

Working with local representatives can be of great value when planning community tours or events. You may wish to **consult community leaders and local organisations** about what approaches will work in their area, and any live issues of which you should be aware. These contacts can also be used to disseminate timely information about upcoming activities, along with channels such as radio, TV and print – it would be unrealistic to expect high-quality engagement from a community which does not know you are coming.

Finally, it can be useful to consider the **different ways in which spaces can be made to feel 'parliamentary'**. For some, this might be through the presence of parliamentarians. For others, physical objects can help to generate the feeling of parliamentary space. For example, the floor mats used by **South Australia's** parliamentary education team allow students to inhabit parliamentary space by standing or sitting on them. The **UK** Parliament invites schools to apply for a 'loan box' containing symbols of parliament such as the ceremonial mace, a mock bill and a Speaker's robe.

### Top tips

- ✓ Build spaces into existing social infrastructure and routines
- ✓ Consider commissioning high-quality virtual experiences if resources allow



## Section 5: Evaluation

This section offers considerations for monitoring and evaluating how well parliaments' use of space is meeting their intended objectives in terms of engaging citizens and improving their relationship to parliament as a place.

It is **important to look at both what is happening** (i.e., what spaces are being used, how and by whom and in what numbers) **as well as the experiences people are having and how this translates into attitudes towards parliament**. The second part is more challenging to achieve and may require collaboration with research partners.

Table 3 outlines key considerations for the evaluation of parliaments' use of space.

**Table 3:** Key evaluation considerations

Evaluation dimension	What to look at/measure
Range of spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What are the different spaces available for public engagement with parliament?</li> <li>» How expansive is the notion of parliamentary space/to what extent are parliamentary spaces only within the building, versus around it and beyond it?</li> </ul>
Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Who is using parliamentary spaces?</li> <li>» Who is not using these spaces, and why?</li> </ul>
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What sorts of experiences are citizens having in parliamentary spaces?</li> <li>» What questions do people ask in parliamentary spaces? How can we use this data to improve experiences?</li> </ul>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How do people relate to the place and how does this affect their attitude towards parliament and those who work there?</li> </ul>

## How evaluation can be incorporated into parliamentary spaces

There are many different tools that can be used to evaluate citizens' engagement and experience in parliamentary spaces. Evaluation can be incorporated into citizens' visits to physical parliamentary spaces in ways that allow parliaments to gather various kinds of data with minimal disruption to citizens' experiences.

For example:



**QR codes** can be used around the parliament building to provide citizens with an easy way to access feedback forms.



Areas for visitors to leave **comments or suggestions**. There are different ways of gathering and displaying citizens' comments. For example, comment books, post-it walls, pinboards or 'washing lines'. Providing simple prompts for these comments will help. For example, asking visitors to complete sentences like "what I enjoyed most about my visit was...", "one thing I learned on my visit was..." or "one thing that could have been improved about my visit was..." For younger visitors, consider asking them to draw pictures in response to the prompts.



Invite **visual evaluation**, such as asking citizens to drop a token into the box that corresponds to the rating they want to give the visit (e.g., green for good, orange for OK, red for bad). Smiley face scales could also be used.



**Observation.** Task staff with observing how citizens behave and respond to the content, recording details such as the questions they ask and the opinions they put forward.

These methods should be used in combination with periodic deeper studies of citizens' engagement and experience, for example through interviews, surveys and focus groups.



## Section 6: Checklist

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



### Purpose

Have you defined the objectives of your initiative in collaboration with the relevant internal and external stakeholders, and on the basis of reliable data?

Are new spaces needed or can you achieve your objectives through use of existing spaces?

Do you have the resources to achieve your objectives?

Are your objectives reflected in your evaluation plans?



### Ethical standards

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

Have you considered how to protect the rights of vulnerable groups in parliamentary spaces and have you consulted with experts where appropriate?



### Openness and transparency

Is there clear and accessible information on how citizens can engage with parliamentary space? Does this information exist in a range of formats and a range of locations e.g., on the website, on social media, in printed materials such as booklets?

Are you open to feedback and challenge about parliamentary spaces and how they are used?

If you are planning a large-scale project such as a renovation or new building, how are you ensuring that citizens are kept informed or even involved in the process?



### Planning and resourcing

Do you have the resources (e.g., funding, time, people, skills) to deliver on your objectives? What resources may have to be brought in from external organisations (e.g., tech support, architecture and design capabilities)?



### Collaboration and empowerment

Are citizens' experiences in parliamentary space designed to build their democratic skills, knowledge and agency?

Are you offering citizens opportunities to get involved with parliamentary business?

Do you have relationships and networks that you can build on to enable greater engagement with particular groups and civil society in general?



### Impact and evaluation

Do you have an evaluation framework based on your objectives?

Does your evaluation framework include ways to understand who is using parliamentary spaces and where there are gaps?

Does your evaluation plan include ways to understand the experience of citizens in parliamentary spaces?

Does your evaluation plan include points for reviewing and discussing data with relevant stakeholders?



### Inclusion

Are you offering a range of ways for people to engage with parliamentary space: in the building, online and in the community?

Have you considered the barriers different groups might face to accessing parliamentary spaces including the parliament building, online and in the community, and how you might address these barriers?

Have you considered ways to ensure that parliamentary spaces reflect a wide range of identities and stories, e.g., through the art presented there, the names of rooms etc.?



### Integration and coordination

Do staff and MPs understand the different ways that parliamentary space is being used and how they can be involved (e.g., through MPs joining tours or visits)?

Are there effective agreements in place about how different spaces on the parliamentary estate can be used for engagement and how this interacts with other business?

## Section 7: Useful materials on spaces and places

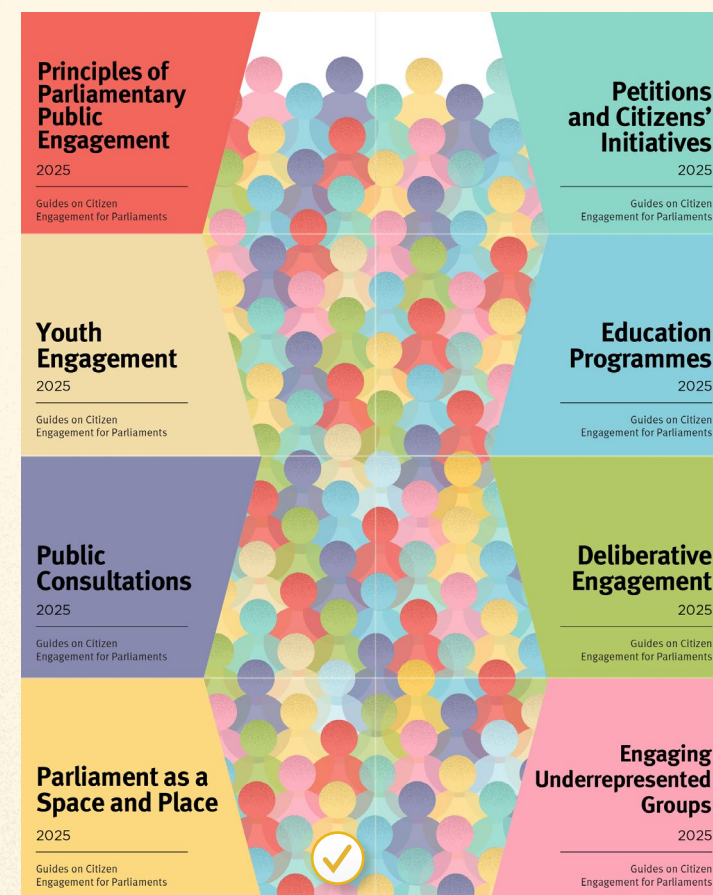
- » Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, [About Universal Design](#)
- » Examples of guides for neurodivergent groups visiting parliament: see the guidance offered to [Neurodivergent People](#) by the Welsh Senedd, and the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas' [Autism-Friendly](#) resources
- » Psarra, S. (30 October 2023), [Parliament Buildings: The Architecture of Politics in Europe](#) (Hansard Society blog)

### 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.



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