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Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

To consider public petitions addressed to the Parliament in accordance with these Rules (and any additional matter added under Rule 6.1.5A) and, in particular, to—

- (a) decide in a case of dispute whether a petition is admissible;
- (b) decide what action should be taken upon an admissible public petition; and
- (c) keep under review the operation of the petitions system.
- (d) consider and report on public policy or undertake post-legislative scrutiny through the use of deliberative democracy, Citizen's Assemblies or other forms of participative engagement.



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Introduction

1. The idea that the people of Scotland can and should play an important role in the work of the Scottish Parliament forms part of the founding principles set out in the report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament, [Shaping the Scottish Parliament](#). This report recommended that one of the key principles should be that:
 - ” the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation ¹

2. Almost two decades later, the 2017 report of the Commission on Parliamentary Reform warned that:
 - ” Failing to engage meaningfully with citizens can lead to dissatisfaction with democracy and a lack of trust in the decision takers. Effective engagement, particularly using more deliberative methods, can improve transparency and policy making by bringing different perspectives, knowledge and skills to the scrutiny process. ²

3. The question of how to enable meaningful engagement and participation is both vital and vast. Since 2022, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has been looking at part of this question with a particular focus on deliberative democracy in the form of People's Panels.

Key terms	
People's Panels, Citizens' Assemblies or Citizens' Panels	Larger or smaller groups of people, selected to be broadly representative of the wider population, who are invited to consider a topic together and come up with recommendations. Also sometimes called mini-publics or Citizens' Juries.
Deliberative democracy	Methods (including People's Panels) that allow participants to contribute to policy-making by discussing a topic in a structured, open and informed way that encourages consensus
Public (or citizen) participation	Any way in which members of the public can play an active part in the Parliament's work.
Participative democracy	The idea that participation by the public should be a routine part of how a Parliament considers issues and reaches decisions (as an alternative to a purely representative democracy).
Representative democracy	The traditional model in which elected members (such as MSPs) deliberate and make decisions as representatives of the public, with little or no direct involvement by the public themselves (other than at elections).

4. This report and the [Blueprint in Annexe A](#) are the culmination of our work this Session looking at citizen participation. We have drawn on our own inquiry work and previous report on [Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament](#) which outlined not only the work of a People's Panel looking at the question “how can the Scottish Parliament ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence our work” but also the additional engagement and inquiry work we undertook as a committee.

5. In addition to our own work, we have considered other work that is underway across the Parliament looking at engagement and participation. This includes the three People's Panels that have taken place this Session, and the evaluation of those panels, four SPICe fellowships, work by officials looking at the Parliament's

approach to participation and engagement and work by the Conveners Group, which identified participation, diversity and inclusion as a strategic priority for this Session.

6. To support the development of the Blueprint and ongoing work to embed deliberative democracy, SPICe has commissioned a series of fellowships, with three to date having concluded and one in progress. These fellowships, alongside independent evaluation of People's Panels, have helped to build a research community which understands the Scottish Parliament context in detail, which is rare in parliamentary study academia.
 - Dr Ruth Lightbody, Glasgow Caledonian University, explored how the Scottish Parliament can use key guiding principles and a practice framework to support it on its journey towards increasing citizen participation in its work through deliberative approaches. [Her guest blog sets out key findings and links to her full report](#), which fed directly into the Blueprint.
 - Dr Adam Chalmers, University of Edinburgh, examined how the Parliament can trace public engagement through the parliamentary process. [His research was published in a blog](#), and Dr Chalmers continues to work closely with SPICe.
 - Dr Cara Broadley, Glasgow School of Art, used [a co-design approach to explore how creative, participatory, and visual approaches can enhance public involvement and the effectiveness of evidence in scrutiny](#).
 - Dr Clementine Hill O'Connor, University of Glasgow, will publish findings of a fellowship looking at how the Scottish Parliament uses lived experience in scrutiny, with suggested principles for practice (including within People's Panels), in September 2025.
7. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments (SPPA) Committee expects to report on its [inquiry into Committee Effectiveness](#) in September 2025. The inquiry has focused on committee structure, elected conveners, and evaluation. A key theme has been culture change in committee practice, and we note that the importance of public participation and support for the Parliament's use of People's Panels has been a theme throughout evidence-taking.

The Blueprint

8. The Blueprint in [Annexe A](#) has been developed for the Committee based on the principles we set out in our earlier report. It allows the Parliament to see what an embedded model for deliberative work, especially the use of People's Panels, would look like in Session 7. The Blueprint will sit alongside, and work in conjunction with, the Parliament's Public Engagement Strategy and any Session 7 Conveners Group priorities relating to engagement and participation. The Blueprint provides clear guidance and criteria for how deliberative approaches can be used, when they are appropriate, what the selection process for People's Panels should be, and how Committees use and respond to the work of Panels. This will allow deliberative work to be supported in a way that is effectively planned, managed and resourced.
9. The Blueprint includes a commitment to evaluating the Panels throughout Session 7 and reviewing their impact and effectiveness before the start of Session 8 to ensure that the Parliament's approach can be updated with learning from Session 7.

What is deliberative democracy and why does it matter?

10. As the [Blueprint](#) explains:

” Deliberative democracy is an approach to democratic participation that allows members of the public to engage in inclusive, respectful, reasoned and informed discussion and debate on significant issues. Decision making is informed by this deliberation.

11. The importance of considering both the range of people and views committees hear and the way that discussions take place has been raised as part of the SPPA Committee's inquiry into committee effectiveness. Dr Marc Geddes, University of Edinburgh, suggested to the SPPA Committee that “the Scottish Parliament could perhaps think about how the wider ecosystem could support effective scrutiny and about making better or more use of external organisations as part of that.”³

12. At the same meeting, journalist Brian Taylor spoke about how MSPs work together and the way that this matters to people. He told the SPPA Committee:

” I agree that the idea of working together appeals to the public. I have lost count of the number of times that members of the public have asked me, “Why don't they all just sit down and sort it out?” and I point out gently to them that politicians do not sit down and sort it out because they have fundamental disagreements. You do not, for example, solve the question of capitalism versus socialism or the union versus independence by a group hug and a rendering of “Kumbaya”; there has to be a degree of give and take. However, as long as you confront these things and as long as the people see their Parliament addressing their concerns, that is more advantageous than a structural reform.”⁴

13. While embedding a deliberative approach in the work of the Parliament through People's Panels is not a solution in and of itself, the Panels can make an important contribution to both the wider scrutiny ecosystem and demonstrate how a deliberative approach can address issues that matter to people.

Trust

14. A number of surveys have shown trust in politics is declining. The National Centre for Social Research [reported](#) that the 2023 British Social Attitudes survey showed “trust and confidence in government are as low as they have ever been”. The 2024 Life in the UK Scotland report gave Scotland a democratic wellbeing score of just 39 out of a 100. The findings included that 63% of people disagreed that they could influence decisions affecting Scotland and 38% of people had low levels of trust in MSPs.⁵

15. The issue of trust in politics has also been raised as part of the SPPA inquiry into Committee Effectiveness. Dr Marc Geddes told the Committee that:

” Building effective committees is fundamentally about rebuilding faith and trust in politics. Some of the other topics that have come up are similarly about that. We talk about media attention, media profile or public participation, and all of that is about rebuilding faith in our democratic process. That is really important.
6

16. As the Blueprint makes clear, People’s Panels are only one of a range of tools available to parliamentarians. They alone will not restore trust in politics. They can, however, play an important role in improving people’s perception of the Parliament. The [evaluation report](#) covering the People’s Panels on the Climate Change (Scotland) Act and reducing drug harm and deaths found that 90% of participants in the climate change panel and 78% of participants in the drug harm and deaths in Scotland panel answered either “Very” or “Extremely” to the statement: “I feel like participating in the People’s Panel has improved the way I feel about the Scottish Parliament and the work it does to hold the Scottish Government to account”.⁷

Developing the Blueprint

17. Since the report, [Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament](#), was published in 2023, two further People's Panels have taken place. These Panels, along with the Panel looking at participation, have all been [independently evaluated](#).
18. As well as the practical learning and external evaluation from these panels, the SPICe fellowships outlined in the introduction to this report have also looked at aspects of engagement, participation and deliberative democracy.
19. As part of developing this blueprint, officials held a consultative workshop with engagement experts from the UK and internationally. Their contributions enabled the Blueprint to be tested against international participation standards. The helpful suggestions which came from the event have been incorporated in the revised draft.

People's Panels – evaluation and feedback

20. Through our work this Session we have come to the view that People's Panels are a valuable tool for the Parliament and should be embedded in the Parliament's working practices.
21. As part of our work on participation we have spoken to experts, officials and MSPs. We value all the evidence and feedback we have received and are grateful to all those who have taken the time to respond to us. While we have heard a lot of enthusiasm for the idea of embedding People's Panels in the work of the Parliament, we have also heard concerns about whether this approach is the right one for the Parliament to pursue. Ultimately, this is a question for the Parliament as a whole to decide but we have outlined some of the key benefits that have been identified both by participants and through the evaluation of Panels along with the most common concerns and our response to them below.

Are Panels effective?

22. The positive impact of People's Panels on participants is undeniable. The evaluation report states that:
 - ” We also asked participants to rate their overall experience and whether they thought that the Scottish Parliament should run more People's Panels. The answers were overwhelmingly and unequivocally positive on both cases.⁸
23. While this is undoubtedly encouraging, it was important to us to also assess the impact on scrutiny. The question of how to assess the impact of scrutiny in the form of committee work has been considered as part of the SPPA Committee's inquiry into Committee Effectiveness. Professor Philip Lord Norton of Louth spoke about the importance of a nuanced approach. He told the SPPA Committee that:
 - ” any such approach has to be nuanced, because things are not always quite that simple, for two reasons. The first is what in Westminster is known as the delayed drop effect. A committee will make a recommendation; the executive will say, “No, that's rubbish. We're not doing that”; and strangely enough, two or three years down the line, it will get carried out. [...] The other element that you need to bear in mind is that sometimes your work and your reports can influence thinking and inform the debate, but not necessarily in any hard, measurable way⁹
24. Professor Lord Norton went on to outline the challenge with assessing impact in terms of public perception of a parliament. He said that:
 - ” Quite often, that is determined by variables that are independent of the legislature and dependent on how people view the political system as a whole and whether it is delivering what the Government is doing.¹⁰
25. The difficulties of assessing committee impact and the challenges that wider social and political circumstances can have on perceptions of effectiveness also apply to

People's Panels. Changes to the policy landscape or public perception of an issue can have an impact of how a Panel's recommendations (and any additional work a committee does on the issue) are viewed in terms of effectiveness. Although it is important to consider these factors in relation to Panel effectiveness, we are confident that Panels still have the ability to make a significant contribution to scrutiny work.

26. [A SPICe spotlight blog considering the impact of the People's Panel on Climate Change](#) highlights that:

” there are different types of impact – from changing how things work and what happens (*instrumental*), how people think (*conceptual*) and what people do (*capacity building*). These different types of impact can take place in different areas – from public policy and political decision-making; public discourse and public, business and civil society engagement; and wider systemic effects on democratic systems.

The blog also goes on to outline the contribution that the work of the People's Panel made to scrutiny of the Scottish Government's policies in this area and, in particular, to the scrutiny of the Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Bill. A recent letter from the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee on the Government's Public Engagement Strategy for Climate Change also included further consideration of, and a more detailed response to, recommendations made by the Climate Change People's Panel showing the ongoing impact that Panels can have.

27. The [report of the most recent People's Panel on reducing drug harm and deaths](#) in Scotland was debated in the Chamber in March 2025. Opening the debate, the convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, Clare Haughey MSP, highlighted the valuable contribution People's Panels can make to scrutiny:

” I believe that it would be remiss of me not to briefly highlight the extensive work of the people's panel. As is explained in the executive summary of the report, people's panels help to empower citizens to actively contribute and deliberate on key issues. The provision by individuals of innovative and informed input enhances Parliament's scrutiny and strengthens inclusive democratic participation.

[...]

I believe that that approach highlights the benefit of people's panels, particularly when scrutinising a topic that covers a number of remits. The recommendations reflect a broad consensus, and I again thank the panel for providing a strong foundation for future policy discussion and scrutiny.¹¹

28. The contribution that the work of the People's Panel made was noted by many members throughout the debate. One example of this was Sharon Dowey MSP reflecting on the work of the panel in her speech which highlighted the unique role People's Panels have in scrutiny. She told the Chamber that:

” I am glad to be able to take part in this debate to examine the findings of the people's panel. We find ourselves in the relatively unique position of debating the views of members of the public, as opposed to the those of the usual experts and professionals, or even of each other. We all know about the desperate drug deaths situation in Scotland. The people's panel does not shy away from the severity and impact of the situation, but its report also provides a useful and productive take on many areas, which I will examine as part of today's debate. ¹²

29. Of the 19 recommendations that were made by the People's Panel on reducing drug harm and deaths, [the Scottish Government accepted \(either in full or in principle\) the 18 recommendations directed at it](#). One recommendation was for further Parliamentary scrutiny focused on drug supply in the prison sector. This recommendation is being taken forward by the Criminal Justice Committee.
30. The positive contribution of People's Panels to scrutiny is not limited to the Panel on drug harm and deaths. Looking at the impact of Panels across Sessions 5 and 6 we can see examples of Panels directly contributing to scrutiny, including:
 - being used to support questions (for example the Session 5 Covid-19 Committee using a Panel's work to directly inform their questioning of the First Minister)
 - informing debates
 - being used by members suggesting amendments to legislation (as seen in Amendment 8 to the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction) Scotland Bill)
 - helping to shape recommendations to the Government (as with the Session 5 Health and Sport Committee's work on the future of primary care.)
31. While we have highlighted some of the positive contributions that Panels have made to scrutiny above, we are aware that tracking impact, both in the long and short term, could be improved. This is one of the areas that the Blueprint identifies for further work in Session 7. The issue of tracking the impact of scrutiny work is not limited to People's Panels. The SPPA Committee inquiry into Committee Effectiveness has also been looking at approaches to defining, monitoring and evaluating effective committee work and we look forward to seeing the report of that Committee. Where possible we would hope that any recommendations that the SPPA report makes for committee practice in this area can also inform any People's Panels that take place in Session 7.

Cost

32. Linked to the question of how effective Panels are is the cost of running Panels. People's Panels are resource intensive. In order to avoid only hearing from those who are already very engaged with issues, and in recognition of the significant time commitment involved, participants are paid. Panels also take staff resource to run, in terms of identifying suitable topics, arranging for the Panel to hear from a good range of witnesses and facilitating the Panel session. Participant costs (travel, food

and accommodation) need to be met to ensure they can take part without cost to themselves. In considering this, we endorse the approach of holding Panels in the Parliament building because of the powerful impact this has for participants feeling part of the Parliament, which many of them will not have previously visited.

33. While Panels need to be resourced properly to be effective, we believe that the Blueprint sets out proposals that are realistic and appropriately scaled for the Scottish Parliament. The Blueprint sets out plans for four Panels in Session 7, in 2027, 2028, 2029 and 2030. These are smaller in scale than many of the Citizens Assemblies, mini-publics, Citizens' Juries or Citizens' Panels that we have looked at when shaping the proposal for the Scottish Parliament's approach. The average cost of a Panel in 2024 was £55,000. This is equivalent to 0.054% of the Parliament's annual running cost for staffing and administration in 2023-24.¹³

How representative are Panels?

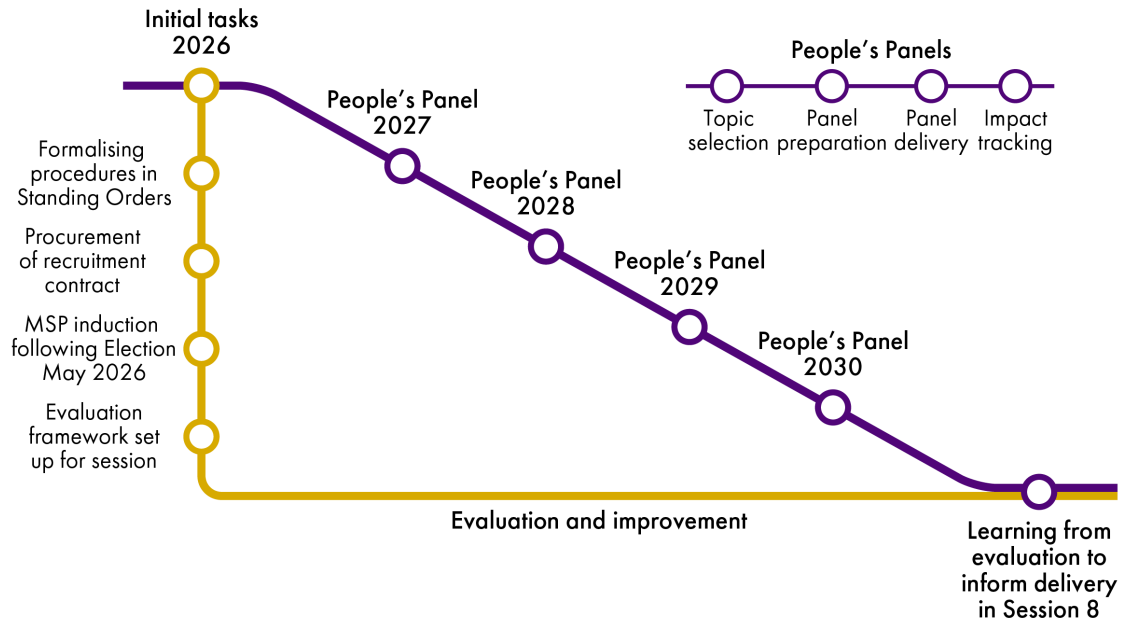
34. We have heard concerns that People's Panels will only attract those already interested in, or engaged with, a particular issue. The selection method used for the Scottish Parliament's People's Panels seeks to minimise this risk. A process called sortition is used to recruit a randomly selected and stratified sample of people, based on Scottish Census data. This process has also been refined in response to feedback. For the Panels on the Climate Change (Scotland) Act and drug harm and deaths a sentiment question was included in the sortition process so that the views of the participants on the issue being considered broadly reflected the views of people in Scotland as a whole.
35. David Harrold, one of the participants in the climate change panel, summed up both concerns about Panels not having enough diversity of thought and his experience having participated in one in evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee:
- ” having been self-employed most of my days, I often think that the best committee is a committee of one, but that was absolutely not the case in the people's panel, so I learned not to be cynical about the process. I must confess that I was fearful of us all eventually adopting a groupthink, nodding-dog mentality. However, my experience could not be further from that. It has been enlightening and fascinating at times but, most of all, it has been a fairly compelling journey through a democratic process, the results of which we hope you will find informative, honest and helpful in your quest to assess the Scottish Government's progress in this most crucial of topics.
36. The evaluation of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act and drug harm and deaths panels also looked at panel composition. When asked, participants expressed a “moderate” to “very” strong (for the climate change panel) or “very” to “extremely” strong (for the drug harm and deaths panel) feeling that the Panel represented the broader population of Scotland.

Should this work be a priority?

37. Our work this session has convinced us that People's Panels have a valuable and important role to play in ensuring high quality Parliamentary scrutiny and positive engagement.
38. If People's Panels are going to continue to be one of the tools available to Committees, then it is important they are properly resourced, effectively managed and robustly facilitated. This will mean the Parliament investing resources in People's Panels at a time when public sector budgets are under pressure. While it is ultimately for the Parliament as a whole to decide if this is an approach it wants to pursue, the costs of running four Panels in Session 7 would represent a small proportion of the Parliament's overall budget. The Blueprint is a relatively modest proposal which will enable the Scottish Parliament to continue its world-leading work in this area.
39. People's Panels are only one part of the overall scrutiny and engagement landscape. We have already highlighted other complementary work such as the SPPA inquiry and the review of the Public Engagement Strategy. All of this work is important to enable the Scottish public to understand, trust and engage with their Parliament.
40. We commend all the work that has been undertaken to develop and strengthen the Parliament's scrutiny and engagement and participation work. We see People's Panels as a complement to some of the ideas that may emerge from both the Committee Effectiveness inquiry and the review of the Public Engagement Strategy.
41. Deliberation is at the heart of effective parliamentary processes. Although People's Panels work with members of the public, a valuable secondary benefit is in building up skills among staff to facilitate and support effective deliberative and collaborative working across the Parliament, for example in Committees.

What's next?

42. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee will be seeking a debate on this report in order to put the Blueprint to the whole Parliament and seek the Parliament's endorsement of this approach for Session 7. Should the Parliament endorse the Blueprint we expect there to be four panels in Session 7, one in 2027, one in 2028, one in 2029 and one in 2030.



43. The Blueprint sets out the key areas to be further developed in Session 7. As well as tracking and measuring impact (covered above) these include increasing public input into and interest in Panels, learning from participatory budgeting approaches and sharing best practice with the Scottish Government, the UK Government and other UK Parliaments.
44. While the evaluation of the Panels to date has provided strong evidence of the impact of Panels on those who participate, finding effective ways to harness the enthusiasm for engaging with the Parliament and increased confidence in and support for democratic processes will be an important part of the ongoing work in Session 7. This will ensure that the resource invested in People's Panels has the greatest possible impact.
45. As the Blueprint makes clear, if the Parliament agrees to the approach set out, we expect that there will continue to be robust evaluation and continuous improvements during Session 7. We would also expect that a review of the Blueprint is conducted before the end of Session 7 to inform the approach in Session 8.
46. Should the Parliament agree to the approach set out in the Blueprint, officials will produce more detailed practical guidance and begin preparations for running Panels in Session 7.

Participation beyond the Parliament

47. While the majority of this report has focused on the Blueprint there are two broader issues from our 2023 report that we wish to cover.

48. The first is to reflect on the Scottish Government's own work on deliberative democracy. Our 2023 report recognised “the significant work and commitment shown by the Scottish Government in exploring the potential of deliberative democracy” and the work of the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy (IPDD) working group.

49. The report went on to state that:

” We support the Government in this work, believing it can use deliberative democracy to address some of the big issues facing the whole country, including at a scale that is beyond the means available to the Parliament. It is clear from what we have learned that executive-led initiatives are well-established in other countries, and have often delivered worthwhile results, and we would not wish to see Scotland falling behind. ¹⁴

50. We returned to this issue as part of our 2024-2025 budget scrutiny, taking evidence from the Minister for Parliamentary Business on progress in implementing the recommendations of the IPDD working group. In a letter to the Committee the Minister stated:

” We recognise the need to build participation skills and capabilities across the public sector and civil society, and that this is required to realise our ambitions for participatory and deliberative democracy in Scotland. It is envisaged that this would be a task for a participation team to explore when resources allow as this will require time and collaboration. ¹⁵

We would welcome an update from the Scottish Government about its plans in this area.

51. The second issue is the interaction between benefits and payments for participation. We have not been able to confirm whether a payment for participating in a People's Panel or any other payment in line with the Scottish Parliament's Payment for Participation policy, would have an impact on someone's benefit entitlement. We urge the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government to clarify this issue.

Conclusion

52. The impact of People's Panels can be profound and there is already encouraging evidence from the evaluation of Panels to date about their positive contribution to both scrutiny and participants' engagement with democracy. It is also true that People's Panels are one of the most resource intensive forms of engagement that the Parliament supports. For this reason, while we strongly believe the Parliament should continue to support People's Panels, as set out in the Blueprint, it is important that the Parliament takes a flexible approach within these parameters that will allow for continuous improvement to develop and refine how Panels are supported and ensure they continue to play an effective part of the Parliament's scrutiny work.

53. The evaluation report for the Panels on the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and reducing drug harm and deaths found that:

” By prioritising learning, experimentation, and responsiveness over replication, the Scottish Parliament sets a valuable precedent for deliberative democracy; one that recognises that the best designs are those that grow and evolve with the workers that put in the effort and with the people they serve. ¹⁶

54. In the spirit of participation, we would like to give the last word to one of the people who took part in a Panel. Their words to the evaluation team encapsulate both the positive impact of Panels both on individuals and more widely.

” I thought it was wonderful, really, really wonderful, a great experience. And something that I can take forward, as well and be quite proud of as well, but the experience was amazing. And I thought that my voice was so relevant because I'm in my 70s now and I thought, well, I've still got a voice, I still get to dream. (...) It was just so, so good. To speak to my daughter and my grandchildren about [her participation in the Panel] just puts a smile on my face. To think that I took part in something that's so important, so relevant, and to pass on to my grandson, (...) it feels really good to have taken part in that. And I think people's panels would be a great thing to do for the future. ¹⁷

Annexe A: Blueprint for embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament

What is deliberative democracy?

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

How does deliberative democracy fit with other public participation approaches?

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

” The benefits of democratic innovation go well beyond one type of process and will be more effectively delivered if this work takes place in a system that values and uses participation as a core part of its operation [...] It is in smaller-scale and local processes that shifts in the way decisions are made can reach larger numbers of people who are currently unheard.

60. Deliberative approaches such as our People's Panels have the potential for very

high impact on policy and on the participants; they are also among our most resource-intensive methods, in terms of financial cost, staff time and the time demands on participants. They therefore need to be reserved for asking the right questions at the right time.

61. Panels also need to be part of a wide-ranging and strategic public engagement approach which makes it easier for even those with limited time or confidence to contribute. The overall approach to increasing participation needs several strands: educating and informing the Scottish public; listening to people to understand how the Parliament can be of value and have impact; and giving people many different ways to have an impact on scrutiny by sharing their opinions and experience.
62. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has commissioned a review of its Public Engagement Strategy in readiness for the next session of Parliament which begins in 2026. This paper does not therefore address the wider participation landscape other than to highlight the recommendations of the [Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's People's Panel on Participation](#) and the [Committee's recommendations drawing on the Panel report](#).

Why should the Scottish Parliament embed deliberative democracy?

63. Every year we are seeing more reports across democracies worldwide of falling trust in political institutions and elected representatives. Trust in the Scottish Parliament used to be significantly higher than in the UK Parliament, but this difference is reducing. One of the key ways to increase trust appears to be by giving people more of a voice in decision making, in partnership with elected representatives. This very much aligns with the Scottish Parliament's founding principle of power sharing. There are many ways to meet the public desire for a greater role in decision making but there are particular characteristics of deliberative approaches which suggest that they should be a core element of our approach to public participation in the scrutiny work of Parliamentary committees.
64. We are continuing to track the impacts on scrutiny of the two pilot Panels run in 2024 on climate change and on drug harm and deaths. So far impacts have included informing questioning of Ministers, encouraging the Scottish Government to review policy and using panel outputs to suggest amendments to legislation. Both were independently evaluated by the University of Edinburgh. The evaluators were extremely positive and commented that “By prioritising learning, experimentation, and responsiveness over replication, the Scottish Parliament sets a valuable precedent for deliberative democracy; one that recognises that the best designs are those that grow and evolve with the workers that put in the effort and with the people they serve.”
65. These are some of the key characteristics which create the potential for a significant impact on the quality of Parliamentary scrutiny:
 - Participants in deliberative processes tend to come out knowing more about the topic and are willing to revise their opinions in light of new information and opportunities to deliberate together. This is in striking contrast to much current

public debate, which tends towards polarisation, fixed opinions and misinformation. Deliberative processes encourage participants with very varied backgrounds and experiences to listen to other people respectfully and with an open mind. Participants draw on information they hear to re-form and justify opinions. There is a lot of evidence that participants change their views through these processes.

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

Principles and standards- embedding best practice

67. Principles for how and when deliberative approaches are used are essential to successfully embed them in the work of the Parliament. These principles should also complement the Parliament's wider participation strategy.
68. Our overarching principles are based on the broad principles set out by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in their 2023 [report on Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament](#). These principles have then been developed based on the evaluation of the Panels and consultation with participation experts. They are that:

- When we create a deliberative group of people who represent the breadth of Scottish society, this should be seen as complementing Parliament's role as a democratically representative and deliberative body.
- Deliberative approaches should be used to support the scrutiny process.
- The way in which deliberative methods are used, from recruitment through to reporting and feedback, should be transparent and subject to a governance and accountability framework.
- The deliberative methods used should be proportionate to the scale of the topic and the potential for impact, with transparency about what it is possible to influence.
- Participants in deliberative democracy should be supported and empowered to address significant topics, and given full feedback on how their recommendations are used.

Principles for the use of Panels in committee work

69. The following principles are about how committees should use People's Panels:
- The primary purpose of People's Panels is to contribute to informed and evidenced scrutiny
 - It should be the responsibility of committees to decide on and put forward topics, taking account of relevant public views. Committees should respond in a timely way to the recommendations of Panels and make the fullest possible use of Panel recommendations in developing legislative or policy recommendations and holding the Government to account
 - In agreeing to a Panel, committees are also committing to give a considered and reasoned response to each of the Panel's recommendations, whether or not they agree with them. Committees should be expected to respond in detail to People's Panel reports and there should be a space in the Parliamentary programme for a debate on any Panel that takes place.
 - Committees should seek a response from the Government to each recommendation in a Panel report that is for the Government to action. It should be clear that the Government is accountable to the committee and not directly to the Panel, although the committee may choose to involve the Panel in considering the Government's response.
70. It is important that these principles are embedded in practice. As well as guidance for committees this should include updating Standing Orders to further embed the process in the Parliament's work, for example an addition to Standing Order 5.6.1 that provides for an additional dedicated Committee debate slot following a People's Panel.

Principles for selecting topics for People's Panels

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

- Topic selection should be the responsibility of Conveners Group, based on an evaluation from SPICe and PACT staff as to which topic best meets the selection criteria.
- Conveners Group should take account of the significance of an issue to the public and should be transparent about its decision making.
- All topics proposed should have the support of the relevant subject committee.
- Selection should be based on clear criteria. We endorse the criteria (developed by Professor Stephen Elstub during his academic fellowship with the Scottish Parliament) which were agreed in 2023 by the Conveners Group:
 - **Problem:** The topic focuses on an issue that needs solved and would benefit from deliberative input. In the context of post-legislative scrutiny this means assessing if a review of the implementation and impact of an Act would benefit from consideration by a panel of informed and broadly representative members of the public.
 - **Scope:** The topic is sufficiently broad in scope; it is an issue that will affect various members of the public and have an impact on broader society .
 - **Framing:** the topic can be posed as a question or in the form of a problem to solve. For example, is an Act achieving its intended purpose? Is it benefiting people in the way originally intended by lawmakers?
 - **Timing:** It is a timely topic - both the public and politicians are still in the process of forming opinions on the issue. In the context of post-legislative scrutiny, it would mean that the Act being scrutinised has the potential to be considered for amendment in the near future.
 - **Impact:** the topic is relevant to a current or forthcoming committee inquiry, committee members and staff see potential benefit from a deliberative panel and there is a commitment to considering and responding to the panel recommendations as part of the Committee's inquiry.
- These criteria should be used to inform the assessment framework for choosing between topics so that there is a demonstrable benefit for scrutiny from a People's Panel.

Principles for delivering People's Panels

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

- The question chosen and evidence given to Panels should meet high standards of transparency and legitimacy. The breadth and balance of

evidence should take account of different kinds of expertise including specialists, advocates and those with lived experience. Independent oversight of the evidence is often achieved through an independent Stewarding Board which includes a variety of stakeholders.

- Recruitment should be by a valid method of random selection, where all Scottish adults (anyone aged 16 or over) have an equal chance of being selected.
- The final sample should be stratified by age, gender, location, education (or other socio-economic indicator), ethnicity, disability and where appropriate using a question to ensure that the panel reflects the range of Scottish public opinion.
- To minimise barriers to participation, participants should be offered a payment for taking part based on the Parliament's payment for participation policy and participants' travel and expenses (hotel, food etc) should be met in full.
- Good practice in safeguarding participants should be built into the design of panels from the beginning.
- Panel design should include opportunities for MSPs to attend, to enhance their understanding and to demonstrate to participants that the Committee is committed to the process.
- Panel design should maximise opportunities for participants to co-design the content and approaches.
- People's Panels should also be underpinned by wider public engagement, with communication campaigns before, during and after events, including as much sharing and publicising of evidence as possible. We should amplify the impact of events, using panel members, panel witnesses and MSP champions as ambassadors for media and social media; incorporating information about Panels in education and parliamentary awareness sessions; and drawing on and connecting with wider policy interests.

Quality of deliberative events

73. As far as we know the Scottish Parliament is unique in having an in-house team of experts in PACT to deliver People's Panels. The quality and flexibility of PACT's delivery has been highlighted by the independent evaluation of our two pilot panels. Delivering events with our own staff also allows us to make use of the prestige of the building and other skilled resources such as our SPICe researchers and our communications team. It also reduces costs. However delivering events in-house makes it particularly important that we measure ourselves against rigorous standards, based on international best practice, to maintain trust in the process among members and the public. This includes ensuring that Panels are inclusive, accessible and transparent and that learning and continuous improvement is built into our approach.
74. This should include guidance and training – for PACT facilitators, clerks, SPICe

researchers and members – to develop skills and understanding and also to expand the pool of skilled facilitators able to support committees. This will benefit all committee participation work, not just Panels. Training should also cover trauma-informed approaches and safeguarding for participants who are vulnerable or are hearing distressing evidence. Again, this will benefit all committee work.

75. All Panels should be rigorously and publicly evaluated and lessons learned to drive future improvement and development. Evaluation should draw on the principles and questions developed by our academic fellow Dr Ruth Lightbody.

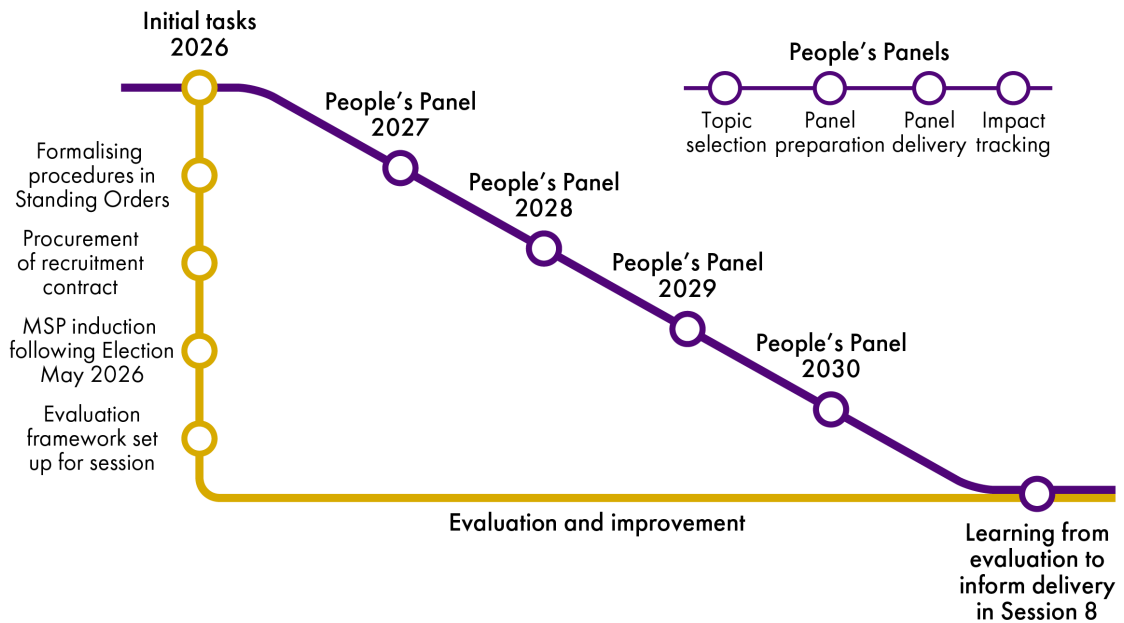
Resourcing

76. It is primarily for the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body to consider what resources are needed to support the delivery of these recommendations. The two pilot People's Panels cost £50-60k each plus staff time (which could otherwise be spent on other activities). This is significantly less than an externally contracted deliberative event would cost.
77. Our guidance on resourcing would be:
- There needs to be sufficient and stable staffing and financial resource earmarked for this work on a year to year basis over the course of session 7. We suggest aiming for 4 Panels across the Parliamentary session. In the first year of a session, committees are establishing themselves and unlikely to have capacity to take on a Panel. Panels could be held each year from 2027-2030.
 - It would be desirable to have flexibility to vary in size from 25-35 participants and 2-3 weekends depending on the scale and significance of the topic. If a topic arises which clearly needs a much larger panel or a lot more time, we consider that this might more appropriately be established by the Scottish Government which can act directly to implement recommendations, with the Parliament having a role in scrutiny of the process and tracking impact.
 - An inflationary assumption should be built in. The majority of panel costs increase with inflation (hotels, travel, food, staff overtime and the recruitment contract).
 - Demand from Committees for PACT's other services is increasing and this is likely to continue, to meet public expectations of participation in the policy process. In deciding on the appropriate level of resource, the SPCB should ensure that the delivery of a People's Panel every year does not jeopardise delivery of PACT's other committee participation activities which, as highlighted above, are also key to improving scrutiny and building public involvement and trust.
 - Because of the factors outlined above, the current level of resource does not allow sustainable delivery of regular annual Panels.
 - The current recruitment contract with Sortition Foundation ends at the end of this session. A flexible contract for the period of session 7 should be in place by summer 2026 – fair recruitment is key to maintain trust in the process.

Beyond Session 7

78. This is a field where innovation and learning can and should continue. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, and PACT, have drawn extensively on academic and practitioner expertise, nationally and internationally. This should continue. We should also collaborate with Scottish Government, local government and other UK Parliaments to share best practice, expertise and training.

People's Panels and evaluation in Session 7



79. One area the Parliament should explore is the scope for increasing public input to generating topic ideas and to contributing evidence to Panels. This would increase the profile of People's Panels and add a further layer of public involvement, as well as potentially generating a wider and more interesting set of ideas and evidence.

80. Other areas for further development include:

- Reviewing the accessibility of deliberative processes to as diverse a range of participants as possible – to access the process in the first place and to take part fully when selected
- Developing deliberative approaches that work well for young people
- Learning from participatory budgeting approaches (where the public can recommend how specific sums of money are spent)
- Tracking the impact and outcomes of Panels over time, both in relation to scrutiny impact and the impact on participants over time

81. Finally, we recommend that there should be a comprehensive review of the Parliament's deliberative work, reporting to Conveners Group towards the end of Session 7. This should cover the effectiveness and impact of the Panels and other activities but also of the embedding process. This would allow the Conveners Group to make recommendations for the use and development of deliberative democracy

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament, 1st Report, 2025
(Session 6)

in the following Parliamentary session.

Annexe B: Extracts of minutes

Extracts from the meeting minutes of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

[6th meeting, Wednesday 17 April 2024](#)

Update on public participation (in private): The Committee considered an update on public participation work.

[3rd meeting, Wednesday 19 February 2025](#)

Citizen Participation (in private): The Committee considered a draft participation blueprint, and agreed the approach for consulting on the draft blueprint.

[8th meeting, Wednesday 7 May 2025](#)

Consideration of report (in private): The Committee agreed to consider a revised draft report: A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament, at a future meeting.

[9th meeting, Wednesday 21 May 2025](#)

Consideration of report (in private): The Committee considered a revised draft report: A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament. The report was agreed for publication. The Committee also agreed to delegate authority to the Convener to finalise arrangements for publication

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament, 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6)

- 1 Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament. (1998) [Shaping the Scottish Parliament](#).
- 2 Commission on Parliamentary Reform. (2017) [Report on the Scottish Parliament](#).
- 3 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Official Report, 20 March 2025, Col 14.
- 4 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Official Report, 20 March 2025, Col 16.
- 5 Carnegie UK. (2024) [Life in the UK: Scotland 2024](#).
- 6 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Official Report, 20 March 2025, Col 35.
- 7 Vives, E. Goñi, I. and Rodrigues E. (2025) Scottish Parliament 2024 People's Panels Evaluation.
- 8 Vives, E. Goñi, I. and Rodrigues E. (2025) Scottish Parliament 2024 People's Panels Evaluation.
- 9 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Official Report, 24 April 2025, Col 5.
- 10 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Official Report, 24 April 2025, Col 5.
- 11 Scottish Parliament, Official Report, 6 March 2025, Col 60-61.
- 12 Scottish Parliament, Official Report, 6 March 2025, Col 87-88.
- 13 Scottish Parliament Corporate Body. (2024) [Annual report and accounts 2023-2024](#).
- 14 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. 2nd Report, 2023 (Session 6). Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament (SP Paper 427).
- 15 Minister for Parliamentary Business. [Written submission](#), 19 December 2023.
- 16 Vives, E. Goñi, I. and Rodrigues E. (2025) Scottish Parliament 2024 People's Panels Evaluation.
- 17 Vives, E. Goñi, I. and Rodrigues E. (2025) Scottish Parliament 2024 People's Panels Evaluation.

