



FUTURE GOVERNANCE OF THE UK

Evidence to the Lords Constitutional Committee

01. INTRODUCTION

Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity. We develop, support and campaign for new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives.

Since 2003, we have been working with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and the public to create and deliver new forms of public participation that re-vitalise democracy and improve decision-making.

We are realistic about the challenges faced by democracy, but optimistic about how to overcome them. We are committed to ensuring our democracies are vibrant and fit for the future by putting people at the heart of decision-making. We work across the UK and internationally, with offices in Belfast, Edinburgh and London.

We welcome the House of Lords Constitution Committee's inquiry into the governance of the United Kingdom. It's important that we regularly review how our democracy is functioning, and make changes to its structures and systems that promote the public interest. However, in our evidence we want to make the case that how our democracy functions – the "rules of the game" – should be opened up to the public to consider and decide upon.

02. DECIDING THE FUTURE GOVERNANCE OF THE UK

Democratic institutions in the UK – as well as around the world – are struggling to respond to profound changes in our society. In return, the public are feeling disconnected from decision-making and cynical about the values and motivations of decision-makers.

The Hansard Society's 2019 Audit of Political Engagement found that public opinions of the system of governing were at their lowest point since the audit began in 2004; feelings of

powerlessness and disengagement were intensifying; and sizable numbers were willing to entertain radical political changes.¹ The same survey also found that 72% say the system of governing needs ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ of improvement; and 63% think Britain’s system of government is rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful. A more recent study by Pew Research Center found about half the UK population think the political system needs major changes.²

This is a dangerous position for democracy. If our political institutions lose their authority, people will cease engaging with them and/or seek answers elsewhere. We have already seen a worrying rise in populist and extremist ideologies. Without a change that can inspire and engage large numbers of people across the country, this will only continue.

Coupled with this, it is important that the “rules of the game” by which our democracy functions work in the public interest, and are decided outside of the influence of party-political and other vested interests. These rules must be broadly supported and agreed across society.

In short, our democratic system should be decided by those that it is intended to serve – the UK public. We recommend the establishment of a citizen-led constitutional convention with real powers to decide the future shape of the UK. We believe that deciding on constitutional questions, such as those outlined in the call for evidence, requires a combination of:

- A broad participatory democracy process for hearing values, hopes, concerns and priorities from across society;
- A deep deliberative democracy process for engaging with different points of view, considering trade-offs, developing proposals and reaching agreement;
- A collective direct democracy process for making decisions on proposals.

There is significant precedent for this from around the world. Decision-makers in Canada, Iceland, Ireland and the Netherlands, among others, have all put important constitutional questions to citizens through a combination of participatory, deliberative and direct democracy processes.³ The OECD has tracked a deliberative wave that has been building around the globe over the past decade.⁴

Here in the UK, there is significant practice and experience of involving the public in decision-making on a wide range of issues. For example, over 30 deliberative processes have been held across the UK in the past three years – covering topics including climate change, health and social care, hate crime, assisted dying and the future of Scotland – commissioned by institutions including UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Parliament.⁵

¹ <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16>

²

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/31/many-in-us-western-europe-say-their-political-system-needs-major-reform/>

³ <https://consoc.org.uk/publications/after-the-referendum/>

⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

⁵ <https://www.involve.org.uk/citizens-assembly-tracker>

We know from extensive evidence and experience that citizens are more than capable of being involved in decision-making on complex and contested issues when given the opportunity, time and support. In fact, much more than this, they are able to arrive at rigorous, fair and broadly supported recommendations and/or decisions.

A citizen-led constitutional convention would help to:

1. Develop a widespread public conversation about the changes needed, which is facilitated in a respectful and deliberative way, making use of evidence, listening to and uniting the differing interests and perspectives in our society; and,
2. Develop a set of recommendations for reform, reached through a fair and rigorous process, which have widespread support from both the public and elected representatives.

The Citizens' Convention User Manual – which we developed with Graham Allen, King's College London and the Democratic Society during 2019 – sets out one possible process for involving the public in constitutional reform through a combination of participatory and deliberative methods.⁶

03. CONCLUSION

As you conduct your inquiry into the governance of the UK, we would encourage you to consider how the public can be involved in a meaningful way in exploring and making decisions on these issues.

There are a wide variety of methods that can be drawn on to involve the public in reviewing and shaping our democratic system.⁷ We are at your disposal to offer our knowledge, experience and learning.

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The Involve Foundation (known as Involve) is a registered charity: 1130568 (England & Wales) and SC047314 (Scotland)

⁶ <https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/making-case/how-can-citizens-drive-reform-our-democracy>

⁷ <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods>