



# Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK

Second Report of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project



DEMOCRACY IN THE  
UK AFTER BREXIT

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April 2022

The Constitution Unit

involve

people at the heart  
of decision-making

ISBN: 978-1-903903-94-0

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Published by:

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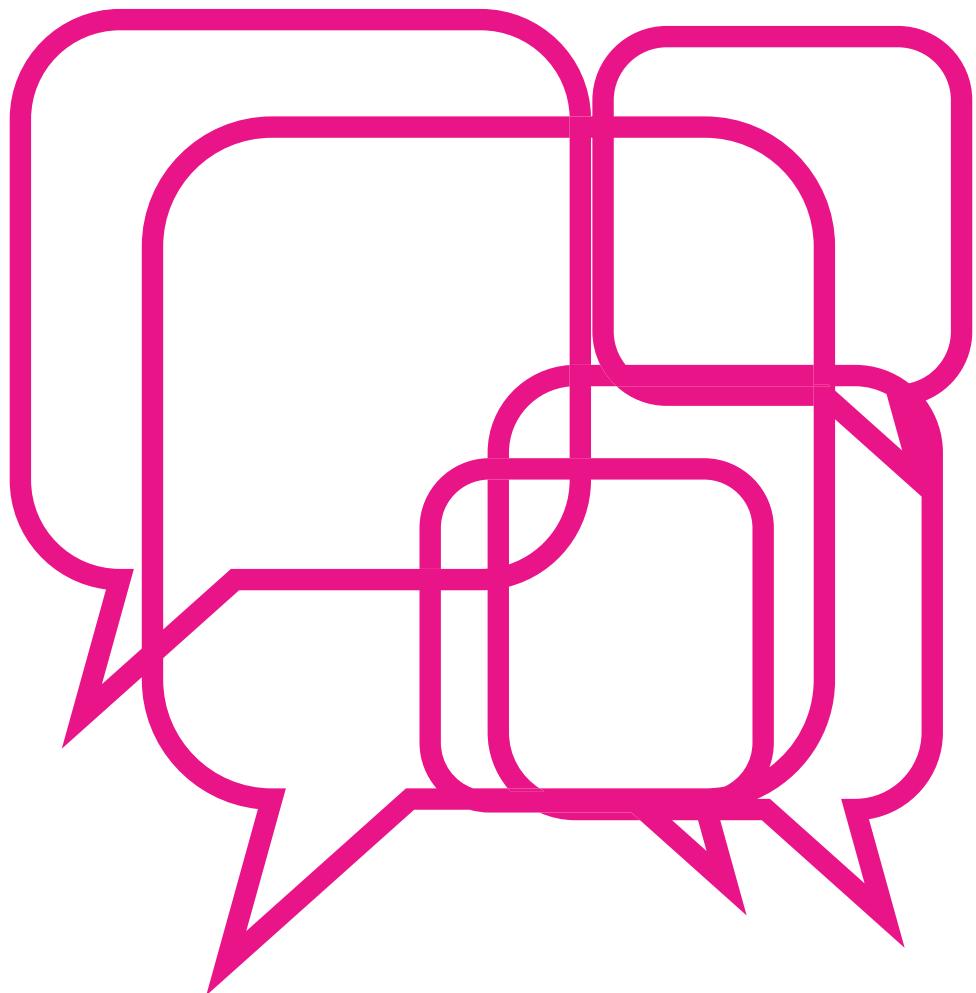
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First published April 2022



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in the UK after Brexit Project

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# Foreword

Many questions have been raised in recent years about how well democracy is functioning in the UK. Public satisfaction with politicians is low, and a sense of alienation from politics is widespread. Those in public life are often seen as dishonest and self-serving, and the systems that are intended to check such behaviour are perceived as inadequate. Events such as the referendums on Scottish independence and Brexit have fed polarisation. The proper roles of parliament, government, the courts, and the general public in shaping outcomes are contested. Governments and opposition parties throughout the UK have proposed changes.

In this context, it is important to know what the public think. How do people in the UK want our democracy to work? In particular, where do they want power to lie? We can approach these questions partly through opinion surveys – and have done so through a major survey of attitudes to democracy conducted in the summer of 2021.<sup>1</sup> But a citizens' assembly allows us to gain a deeper understanding. Most people care about the state of our democracy, but do not spend much of their time pondering its details. To find out what people really think, it is important to give them a chance to learn and reflect before asking them to express a view.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK was set up to do that. Its 67 members – carefully recruited to be representative of the UK adult population – met online over six weekends in the final months of 2021 to learn from each other and from a diverse array of experts, to reflect and deliberate, and to come to conclusions. Specifically, it was established to examine the question, 'How should democracy in the UK work?'.

This is the report of the Citizens' Assembly. It is in two parts.

- Part 1 describes the Assembly itself. It explains why and how it was created, what its focus was, who ran it, how its members were recruited, who its members were, how it operated, and how it reached conclusions.
- Part 2 sets out the members' conclusions. These include 16 core democratic principles, which the Assembly members used to frame their thinking; 8 broad resolutions about aspects of the democratic system; 51 recommendations on specific features of that system; and 20 statements of what the members felt about how democracy is working in the UK today.

The report was written by the Assembly's organisers: the research team at the UCL Constitution Unit and the delivery team at Involve (see page 11 for further details). But its conclusions are those of the Assembly members themselves, written in their own words. Members had a chance to review a draft of the report before the text was finalised, and some small changes were made in response.

This is the second of four reports that will be published by the UCL Constitution Unit in 2022 as part of its Democracy in the UK after Brexit project. The project is examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today. The first report, published in January, set out the findings of a survey of public opinion conducted in July 2021. The third report, in late summer, will give the results of a further survey. The final report will present an overarching analysis of public attitudes to democracy across the UK today.

The conclusions of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK deserve to be heard. The Assembly members reached them through intense discussion and hard work. They are relevant to every part of the UK. They demonstrate with sharp clarity that all of us – but particularly those in positions of power – need to do better at running our democracy well.

We hope that policymakers and others will now take up the ideas expressed in this report. The conversation about our democratic future needs to continue.

Alan Renwick, Kaela Scott, Meg Russell, James Cleaver, and Frances Osborne  
April 2022

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Renwick, Ben Lauderdale, Meg Russell, and James Cleaver, *What Kind of Democracy Do People Want? Results of a Survey of the UK Population: First Report of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project* (London: UCL Constitution Unit, 2022).



# Executive Summary

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK comprised 67 people from all walks of life across the UK. Its members were carefully recruited to be broadly representative of the UK adult population in their backgrounds and political perspectives. They met online over six weekends between September and December 2021 to consider the question:

## How should democracy in the UK work?

The Assembly was convened by the UCL Constitution Unit as part of its research on attitudes to democracy in the UK today. It was organised by the Constitution Unit and Involve, who designed and facilitated the Assembly sessions to enable members to participate confidently and effectively.

The Assembly focused on three aspects of democracy in the UK today:

- the balance of power between **government and parliament**
- the **roles of the public** – both within the traditional representative system, and through processes such as petitions, referendums, and citizens' assemblies
- ways of **upholding rules and standards** – covering ethical standards of behaviour from those in public life, and the role of the courts.

It produced four kinds of outputs:

- a set of 16 **core principles** that members thought would characterise a good democracy in the UK
- 8 **resolutions** summing up members' conclusions in the three areas of democracy that they focused on
- 51 specific **recommendations** fleshing out the resolutions in detail
- 20 overarching **statements** summing up members' feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today.

All of these are set out and explained in the body of this report. The remainder of this Executive Summary lists the resolutions and summarises the recommendations.

## The Relationship between Government and Parliament

### Resolution 1

We believe that parliament needs to be able to play a stronger role in scrutinising the actions of government. Collectively, it represents the voice of the electorate as a whole, whereas not everyone voted for the government.

Supported by 92%

Members produced 12 specific recommendations relating to Resolution 1. They wanted to strengthen parliament while also allowing governments to deliver on their election promises. Recommendations called for:

- overall, greater transparency and parliamentary scrutiny
- governments to be able to implement their manifesto pledges without undue delay
- limits on the use of secondary legislation, which receives less scrutiny by parliament
- MPs to have more say over what parliament debates and votes on, with more time devoted to backbench concerns
- a greater role for cross-party committees, including in prioritising private members' bills, to ensure that the most widely supported are voted upon
- MPs to have more power over when parliament sits, including decisions on recess and recall
- MPs to retain control over when general elections are called.



## The Roles of the Public

### Supporting Public Involvement in the Representative System

#### Resolution 2a

We believe that the UK public as a whole has to become more engaged with the existing opportunities to influence our representative system (voting, contacting MPs, supporting/joining political parties or campaign groups etc.) but we don't think that will happen unless people have more reason to believe that they can make a difference.

Supported by 98%

#### Resolution 2b

We believe that a good democracy in the UK needs voters who are engaged, well-informed and able to consider other points of view and opposing arguments in a constructive way.

Supported by 97%

Members considered both how the public should be supported to participate in democracy and how they could support the system. Recommendations called for:

- greater engagement by MPs with their constituents
- better education on how people can influence politics
- people taking responsibility to educate themselves about their vote
- accessible, high-quality, and unbiased information about all aspects of our democracy
- protecting freedom of speech and the right to protest.

## The Role of Petitions to Parliament

#### Resolution 3

We believe that petitions are an important way for the public to influence government policy and what is debated in parliament, and that the use of petitions should be extended.

Supported by 83%

Recommendations made to support this resolution called for:

- improved public awareness of the petitions process
- ensuring that debates on petitions in parliament lead to an actionable vote
- requiring a minimum number of MPs to attend debates on petitions
- allowing petitions to demand either a citizens' assembly or a public inquiry.



## The Role of Referendums

### Resolution 4

We believe that referendums are an important tool for direct democracy that can add to a good democracy in the UK by handing important decisions back to the people.

Supported by 83%

Members saw an important role for referendums, but wanted improvements in their operation. Their recommendations called for:

- limiting the use of referendums primarily to major constitutional issues
- holding referendums only where there is a choice between two clearly defined options
- provision of unbiased and trusted information during any referendum campaign
- requiring a supermajority for results to be binding.

## The Role of Deliberative Processes

### Resolution 5

We believe that deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies should be used more often by governments and parliaments throughout the UK to understand the views of the public.

Supported by 90%

Members thought that deliberative processes could strengthen democracy. They should complement, not supplant, the representative system. Recommendations said that:

- deliberative processes should be held on important but divisive issues, on new proposals that were not in the government's manifesto, and to help understand local perspectives
- they should make advisory recommendations rather than binding decisions
- when established by either parliament or government, they should receive a meaningful response from that body and their results should be published.



# Upholding Rules and Standards

## Upholding Ethical Standards

### Resolution 6

We believe that the public should be able to trust their elected representative to behave honestly and selflessly. While the political system is intended to have mechanisms in place to police this, we believe that they are not working well and that greater involvement of independent regulators is needed.

Supported by 95%

Members saw existing political and regulatory mechanisms for upholding high ethical standards in public life as inadequate, and therefore advocated stronger independent regulators. Their recommendations called for:

- high standards of behaviour from MPs and ministers
- a greater role for independent regulators, with courts involved only if illegality is suspected
- greater clarity and consistency of sanctions for breaching a code of conduct, and implementation of sanctions proposed by an independent regulator
- introducing appropriate sanctions for lying to parliament.

## The Role of the Courts

### Resolution 7

We believe that there is an important role for the courts to play in limiting the laws that can be passed by government when they are seen to challenge basic rights and core democratic principles.

Supported by 92%

Members advocated expanded powers for the courts, but also cautioned against excessive use of these powers. Recommendations said that:

- courts should gain the power to overturn laws that threaten human rights or basic democratic features
- basic features of democracy should be difficult to alter
- courts should not overuse their powers to challenge laws passed by parliament
- the courts' ability to scrutinise secondary legislation should be maintained
- there should be no fast-track procedure to overturn how courts interpret the law.



# Part 1: About the Assembly

# Introduction to Part 1: Purpose and Focus of the Assembly

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK was established as part of the *Democracy in the UK after Brexit* research project.<sup>2</sup> This project, conducted by the UCL Constitution Unit, is examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its Governance after Brexit programme.<sup>3</sup>

UK democracy has been under great strain in recent years. Polarisation has risen. Dissatisfaction is high. Major questions have been raised about just how the system should work. How powerful should government be *vis-à-vis* parliament? To what extent should judges and other regulators be involved in protecting basic standards and human rights, versus these things being left to the politicians? Should referendums become more frequent events in the democratic process, or should the range of issues they are used for be kept narrow? How can the alienation that most people feel from those in power be addressed?

Recent events – including the referendums in 2014 and 2016 on Scottish independence and Brexit, the Brexit process itself, and the Covid-19 pandemic – have exposed competing answers to these fundamental questions. At the 2019 general election, all of the major political parties put forward proposals for changes to our democracy, including a commitment in the Conservative Party manifesto to review ‘the relationship between Government, Parliament and the courts’.<sup>4</sup> Similar issues have been raised at Holyrood, Cardiff Bay, and Stormont too. Interest in these and related questions, particularly by the UK’s governing party, lay behind the decision to run the Assembly.

The overarching question that Assembly members were asked to consider was, ‘How should democracy in the UK work?’. That is a broad question, and even a six-weekend assembly could not hope to give all the issues within it detailed attention. In particular, the Assembly did not consider the distribution of powers between different levels of government, or the structure of the Union of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, or the nature of local democracy. These are matters that a single UK-wide assembly is not best placed to address. Nor did the Assembly consider particular questions such as the best electoral system for choosing MPs or the future of the House of Lords. If significant reform of these aspects of the system becomes likely, a future assembly could usefully examine them and develop proposals.

Rather, the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK focused on three issues, all rooted fundamentally in the question of where power should lie:

- What should the balance of power be between government and parliament?
- What roles should members of the public play in formal democratic processes?
- How should basic rules and standards be upheld?

In approaching these matters, Assembly members also developed a set of core principles to guide their thinking. And, at the Assembly's final meeting, they developed statements summing up their feelings about the state of democracy in the UK today.

The Assembly's conclusions on all of these matters are set out in Part 2 of this report. Part 2 also includes observations made by members about aspects of democracy that lay beyond the Assembly's areas of focus.

<sup>2</sup> See the [Democracy in the UK after Brexit](#) webpages on the Constitution Unit website.

<sup>3</sup> See the [Governance after Brexit](#) webpages on the UK in a Changing Europe website.

<sup>4</sup> Conservative Party, [‘Get Brexit Done, Unleash Britain’s Potential: The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019’](#), (London: Conservative and Unionist Party, 2019), 48.

# Roles and Responsibilities

As already noted, the Assembly is part of a research project run by the UCL Constitution Unit and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The Constitution Unit team was responsible for the conception of the Assembly, for developing the focus of each weekend, and for putting together the programme of speakers and other learning materials available to Assembly members.

The Assembly sessions were designed and delivered by Involve, a UK-based charity specialising in public participation. The Involve team also prepared Assembly members for taking part and liaised with members throughout the Assembly. They designed the processes through which members reached conclusions, and they processed the Assembly's results.

The Sortition Foundation conducted the process of recruiting Assembly members, sending out invitation letters to randomly chosen addresses, selecting a representative sample from those who replied, and making initial telephone contact with potential recruits.

The project's Advisory Board provided invaluable advice and feedback at all stages of the project, but bear no responsibility for any of the decisions made by the organisers.

## Constitution Unit team:

- Professor Alan Renwick (Project Lead and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit)
- Professor Meg Russell (Director of the Constitution Unit)
- James Cleaver (Research Assistant)
- Charlotte Kincaid (Impact Lead)

## Involve team:

- Kaela Scott (Design and Lead Facilitation)
- Rebekah McCabe (Project Management)
- Charlotte Obijiaku (Member Liaison and Support)
- Edd Rowe (Member Liaison and Support)
- Juliet Swann (Production)
- Frances Osborne (Production & Research)
- Louise McAllister (Production)
- Lucy Keown (Production)

A team of professional facilitators, recruited by Involve, provided group facilitation across the six weekends.

## Sortition Foundation team:

- Tom Lord (Director)
- Rich Rippin (Project Manager)
- Dr Brett Hennig (Director)



## Advisory Board:

- Professor Catherine Barnard (Professor of European & Employment Law, University of Cambridge; Deputy Director, UK in a Changing Europe)
- Baroness (Shami) Chakrabarti (Labour peer; former Shadow Attorney General; former Director of Liberty)
- Joanna Cherry QC MP (SNP MP for Edinburgh South West; former SNP Shadow Home Secretary)
- Professor Sir John Curtice (Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde; Senior Research Fellow, NatCen; Senior Fellow, UK in a Changing Europe)
- Frances Foley (Deputy Director, Compass)
- Doreen Grove (Head of Open Government, Scottish Government)
- Isabel Hardman (Assistant Editor, the *Spectator*; author, *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians*)
- Professor Katy Hayward (Professor of Political Sociology, Queen's University Belfast; Senior Fellow, UK in a Changing Europe)
- Murray Hunt (Director, Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law; Visiting Professor in Human Rights Law, University of Oxford)
- David Jones MP (Conservative MP for Clwyd West; member, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee; former Secretary of State for Wales)
- Sir Stephen Laws QC (Senior Research Fellow, Judicial Power Project, Policy Exchange; former First Parliamentary Counsel)
- Professor Laura McAllister (Professor of Public Policy and the Governance of Wales, Cardiff University; co-chair of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales)
- Professor Anand Menon (Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs, King's College London; Director of UK in a Changing Europe)
- Cat Smith MP (Labour MP for Lancaster and Fleetwood; former Shadow Secretary of State for Young People and Democracy)
- Professor Graham Smith (Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster)
- Lord (Jonathan) Sumption QC (former barrister; former Justice of the Supreme Court; 2019 BBC Reith lecturer)
- Dr Patrick Thomas (Constitution Specialist, House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee)
- Fiona Weir (Chief Executive, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust)
- Dr Hannah White (Deputy Director, Institute for Government; former Secretary to the Committee on Standards in Public Life; former clerk, House of Commons)
- Jeremy Wright QC MP (Conservative MP for Kenilworth and Southam; member, Committee on Standards in Public Life; former Attorney General for England and Wales)



# Citizens' Assembly: Design Principles and Core Features

A citizens' assembly is a process through which a representative sample of the population can come together and develop a set of informed and considered conclusions about a particular matter. The design of citizens' assemblies is based on several core principles:<sup>5</sup>

**The participants should be representative of the wider population.** They should resemble the population in terms of demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnic background. They should also reflect the spread of views across the population – including past voting behaviour and attitudes.

**Discussions within the assembly should be open and inclusive.** A representative sample of participants is not enough to ensure that an assembly's conclusions reflect the views of all – it is important that everyone should be able to participate confidently as well, and express themselves freely. Members should feel able to change their minds as they reflect on their own views and hear different perspectives.

**Assembly members should be able to learn from each other and from people with relevant expertise and experience.** A citizens' assembly seeks informed conclusions. One way to become more informed is to listen to one's peers within the assembly and understand why they have views different from one's own. Another is to hear from people with relevant expertise and experience. Witnesses may be people who have researched the issues, such as academics, or practitioners who have worked in relevant areas – such as, in this case, politicians, civil servants, lawyers, and democracy campaigners. Where appropriate to the topic, some assemblies bring in members of the public with direct lived experience of the matters in hand. In other cases – as here – all assembly members have relevant experiences.

**Information that is provided should be accurate, balanced, and accessible.** The conclusions of a citizens' assembly should reflect the considered views of the members themselves. The information provided therefore should not be misleading or skew the discussion – whether intentionally or unintentionally – in any particular direction. Information should also be presented in ways that are accessible to the broadest possible range of assembly members.

**Discussions within the assembly should be deliberative.** The goal is not that one or other side of an argument should win, but rather than members should have a chance to weigh different considerations in order to reach overall conclusions.

How a representative sample of participants were recruited for the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK is set out in the following section.

To enable open and inclusive discussion, the Assembly meetings were designed and led by Involve, the UK's leading public participation experts. The meetings alternated between plenary sessions and small-group discussions led by professional facilitators.

Expert witnesses came from a range of different personal and professional backgrounds and had a range of views. Balance in the design of the Assembly and the provision of information was also promoted through the project's Advisory Board, whose members gave detailed feedback on draft plans for every part of the process.

Further information on the form and content of the Assembly's meetings is given on pp.18–27.

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5 For more on the principles underlying the design of citizens' assemblies, see, e.g., Nicole Curato, David M. Farrell, Brigitte Geissel, Kimmo Grönlund, Patricia Mockler, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Alan Renwick, Jonathan Rose, Maija Setälä and Jane Suiter, *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

# Recruiting Assembly Members

Assembly members were recruited in partnership with the Sortition Foundation, the industry leader in randomly selecting representative members of the public. The Sortition Foundation sent invitation letters to 20,000 addresses in the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File in August 2021. Of these addresses, 80% were randomly selected from across the whole of the UK, while the remaining 20% were randomly selected from more deprived areas (in the three most deprived deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation). This was done because response rates are typically higher from people with professional backgrounds and higher levels of formal education. By delivering proportionally more invitations to the most deprived areas, we sought to reduce the effects of the potential skew in responses.

Almost anyone aged 18 or over on 18 September 2021 (the first day of the Assembly) who could vote in UK general elections was eligible. We excluded only elected representatives, paid employees of a political party, and employees working in a politically restricted post.

The letter explained what taking part in the Assembly would involve, including the subject matter, the nature of the process, and the need to be able to attend all six weekends. It also explained that members would receive a gift of £100 for each weekend that they attended, in recognition of the time that they devoted to the project. This is standard practice for citizens' assemblies.

The letter then invited recipients who were interested in taking part to register their interest through a website or phone line. When registering, they were asked to provide information about themselves that would allow us to bring together a representative sample, relating to:

- gender
- age
- ethnicity
- disability status
- level of formal education
- which region of the UK they lived in
- how they voted in the 2016 European Union referendum
- how they voted in the 2019 general election
- their views on the role of citizens in a democracy.

From 20,000 invitations, we received 345 responses, a response rate of 1.7%. This is a slightly lower rate than the norm for deliberative processes, which ranges between 2 and 5%.<sup>6</sup> We cannot know the reasons with certainty, but there are several possibilities: the topic was relatively abstract; the project was not formally part of the policymaking process; the time commitment required was greater than for many assemblies; we sent invitations during the summer holidays; and pandemic restrictions had just been eased, with people keen to get out and about again.

Using their StratifySelect software, the Sortition Foundation team carried out a second, stratified random selection across the nine criteria listed above. They called each selected participant, to confirm that they still wished to take part, to reiterate what participation would involve, and to answer any questions. The target number of members was 70–75. They initially secured 74 confirmed individuals, whose details were passed to Involve to complete the recruitment process.

The Involve team spoke with each person again to explore any needs they had in relation to taking part. As a result, some recruits were sent equipment to help them participate online, including laptops, webcams, and wi-fi dongles. Recruits also attended an 'onboarding' session, which was an opportunity to meet members of the team and some other Assembly members, and, where needed, gain experience of the web platforms used by the Assembly.

<sup>6</sup> Bailey Flanigan, Paul Götz, Anupam Gupta, Brett Hennig, and Ariel D. Procaccia, '[Fair Algorithms for Selecting Citizens' Assemblies](#)', *Nature* 596 (2021), 548–52.



Several of the recruited participants dropped out and were replaced shortly before or immediately after the Assembly's first weekend. A further seven dropped out subsequently. This meant that there were 67 members by the final weekend. These are the people described throughout this report as the members of the Citizens' Assembly.

The number of participants who dropped out was unusually high. We know some of the reasons for these departures: several participants fell ill, with Covid-19 or otherwise; at least one felt that the level of financial compensation provided did not match the time commitment. Drop-out rates are also likely to be higher for an online than a face-to-face assembly, particularly outside lockdown. In addition, some participants may have found the subject matter relatively dry. The research team will reflect further on lessons that can be learned in the research project's final report.



# The Make-Up of the Assembly

The table below shows the make-up of the Assembly in comparison with the UK voting age population as a whole. It shows data both for the Assembly's original 74 members and for the final 67 who completed the sixth weekend.

The Assembly was closely representative of the population across all criteria. It can therefore meaningfully be treated as a microcosm of the UK as a whole.

Some groups were, however, somewhat underrepresented, and several discrepancies were accentuated when some members had to drop out. Notably, people with least formal education, non-voters, and those who did not agree that 'citizens should follow political debates closely themselves' were initially slightly underrepresented, and subsequently more likely to drop out. The deviations were not large. Still, it will be useful to consider further how deliberative processes can best recruit and retain individuals from these groups. These groups are, of course, even more underrepresented in elected institutions than in the Assembly: this is a problem that is far from affecting deliberative processes alone.

Criteria	Categories	Target (%)	Original 74 members (%)	Final 67 members (%)	Final 67 members (no.)
Gender	Male	49.4	47.3	49.3	33
	Female	50.6	51.3	49.3	33
	Non-binary/Other*	-	1.4	1.5	1
Age	18-29	19.3	16.2	14.9	10
	30-44	24.5	27.0	28.4	19
	45-64	32.7	35.1	34.3	23
	65+	23.5	21.6	22.4	15
Ethnicity	Asian or Asian British	7.2	6.8	9.0	6
	Black or African or Caribbean or Black British	3.2	5.4	4.5	3
	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1.6	1.4	1.5	1
	White British	80.0	79.7	80.6	54
	White other	6.4	5.4	3.0	2
	Other	1.7	1.4	1.5	1
Disability	No	81.4	81.1	76.1	51
	Yes	18.6	18.9	23.9	16
Level of formal education	No qualification, none yet, & Level 1	36.3	35.1	29.9	20
	Level 2, Level 3, Apprenticeship, & Other	36.5	37.8	38.8	26
	Level 4 and above	27.2	27.0	31.3	21
Region	North East	4.0	2.7	1.5	1
	North West	11.0	10.8	10.4	7
	Yorkshire and the Humber	8.2	8.1	7.5	5
	East Midlands	7.2	6.8	9.0	6
	West Midlands	8.9	10.8	7.5	5
	East	9.3	8.1	10.4	7
	London	13.4	13.5	10.4	7
	South East	13.7	12.2	16.4	11
	South West	8.4	9.5	9.0	6
	Wales	4.7	4.1	4.5	3
	Scotland	8.2	9.5	9.0	6
	Northern Ireland	2.8	4.1	4.5	3



Criteria	Categories	Target (%)	Original 74 members (%)	Final 67 members (%)	Final 67 members (no.)
2016 EU referendum vote	I wasn't eligible to vote	9.1	9.5	10.4	7
	I didn't manage to vote, or I chose not to	28	24.3	19.4	13
	Voted to leave the EU	32.7	36.5	37.3	25
	Voted to remain in the EU	30.3	29.7	32.8	22
2019 general election vote	I wasn't eligible to vote	3.0	2.7	1.5	1
	I didn't manage to vote, or I chose not to	32.2	28.4	25.4	17
	Conservative	28.3	29.7	25.4	17
	Labour	20.8	21.6	25.4	17
	Scottish National Party (SNP)	2.5	2.7	3.0	2
	NI unionist party	0.7	1.4	1.5	1
	NI nationalist party	0.6	1.4	3.0	2
	Other	11.9	12.2	14.9	10
Attitudes to the role of citizens in a democracy: prospective members were asked, 'Which comes closer to your view?'	In a democracy, citizens should follow political debates closely themselves, rather than leaving it to politicians	47.9	48.6	52.2	35
	In a democracy, citizens should not have to follow political debates very much – they should be able to leave it to politicians	16.8	16.2	13.4	9
	I agree/disagree with both equally	22.1	24.3	28.4	19
	Don't know	13.2	10.8	6.0	4

\* We did not have a recruitment target for people with non-binary gender identities, but the recruitment process ensured that they had the same probability of selection as others.



# Overview of Assembly Meetings

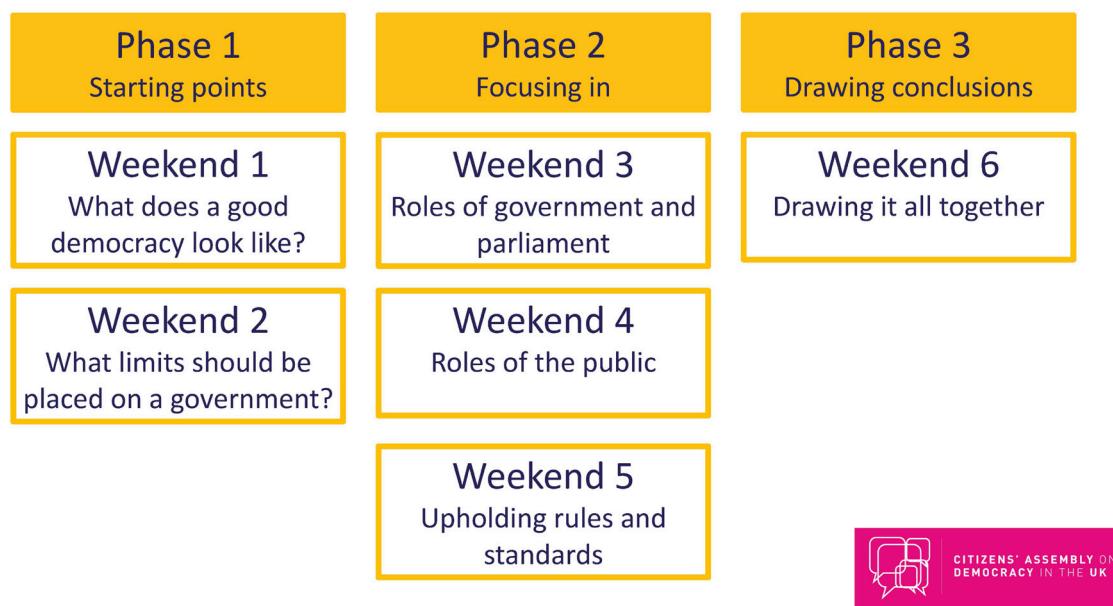
## How the Assembly Worked

The Assembly met over six weekends between September and December 2021.

The meetings took place online, via the video conferencing platform Zoom. Though public health measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic did not at the time prevent in-person meetings, a face-to-face assembly was not feasible. Many potential participants would not have been willing to travel across the country and gather for long periods in a room with dozens of others, so recruiting a representative sample would likely have been impossible. Furthermore, changes to the Covid situation might at any time have necessitated a shift online – as indeed would have been required for the final weekend, following the rise of the Omicron variant.

This was not the first citizens' assembly to meet online. When the Covid pandemic first hit, two major ongoing assemblies – Climate Assembly UK and the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland – had to switch to online operation. Since then, many assemblies and other deliberative processes have unfolded wholly online. There are undoubtedly downsides to online meetings: social time during breaks and meals is lost; connection problems can hamper conversation; and people become tired more quickly. There are also advantages: some who would not join an in-person assembly do take part; travel time for members and witnesses is reduced or eliminated.

The six weekends were structured into three phases, as outlined in the diagram below. Over the first two weekends, members explored their initial ideas and heard a range of introductory talks. In the middle three weekends, members examined in turn the three areas of democracy in the UK that the Assembly focused on. Finally, at Weekend 6, members drew their thoughts together and finalised the resolutions and recommendations that they would vote on. Voting took place online in the week following the final weekend, and members gathered again just before Christmas 2021 to hear the results.



*The general outline of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK.*



The Assembly met for three sessions over each weekend:

- Saturday morning: 10:00–12:30
- Saturday afternoon: 14:00–16:30
- Sunday: 10:00–12:30

Each weekend began with introductions from the Lead Facilitator, Kaela Scott, and the Project Lead, Alan Renwick. Members moved to facilitated Zoom breakout rooms to meet the others in the group they would be working with that day or that weekend. There were 10 breakout groups at each weekend, each with 6–7 participants. Members were allocated to breakout groups to ensure a distribution of age, gender, and political attitudes within each group. Over the course of the Assembly, rotation of groups enabled most members to meet and interact with each other.

Saturday sessions typically consisted of talks from expert witnesses interspersed with small-group discussions when members could reflect on what they had heard and put questions to the speakers. Some talks, particularly in the mornings, sought to set out in balanced terms how the system works and what questions are raised about it. In other talks, particularly in the afternoons, speakers advocated specific points of view. Sunday sessions were mostly devoted to deliberation among the members themselves.

Emerging ideas were fed back from the breakout groups throughout the process. These included ideas on basic principles and specific recommendations. During phase 2, preliminary polls were also conducted to gauge how members' thinking was developing in response to a variety of questions. As further explained below, between Weekends 5 and 6, the Assembly organisers collated the draft recommendations and merged similar recommendations. For each area of recommendations, an overarching resolution was drafted. Members were polled on which of the draft resolutions and recommendations they wanted to go forward for final refinement and voting. Final refinement took place at Weekend 6, where members also developed statements summing up their feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today.

## The Political Context

It is useful to reflect on the context within which the Assembly took place. The most significant events in the backdrop to the Assembly were Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Though the Assembly was held as part of a research project called *Democracy in the UK after Brexit*, we as organisers did not emphasise Brexit in presentations to members. That was because we wanted members to be able to evaluate options on their own merits, not through the lens of their side of the Brexit debate. Members were, of course, welcome to draw on Brexit in their own contributions, and many often did so.

In terms of immediate context, the Assembly began with limited Covid-19 restrictions in place across the UK, but the spread of the Omicron variant meant that measures were being put in place again as the Assembly concluded.<sup>7</sup> Members drew on their experiences of the pandemic throughout, commenting on topics such as the relationship between the government and its scientific advisers, the need to quickly impose laws during an emergency, and the extent to which limits on rights in this period had been justified.

Tragically, the Conservative MP Sir David Amess was murdered while carrying out his duties at a constituency surgery on 15 October, between Weekends 2 and 3 of the Assembly.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of Weekend 3, members were invited to reflect briefly on the work of MPs such as Sir David.

Members were especially exercised by the Owen Paterson scandal, which unfolded between Weekends 3 and 4. Conservative MP Mr Paterson was found guilty of breaching paid advocacy rules by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Fellow Conservatives, at the suggestion of the government, blocked his proposed 30-day suspension from parliament and pledged to review the standards system.

<sup>7</sup> ['Covid: UK alert level raised to four due to Omicron spread'](#), BBC News, 12 December 2021.

<sup>8</sup> ['Sir David Amess: Conservative MP stabbed to death'](#), BBC News, 15 October 2021.



Following a public backlash, Mr Paterson resigned as an MP.<sup>9</sup> This scandal was frequently mentioned by members during Weekend 5 of the Assembly, where they discussed upholding rules and standards.

Finally, Weekend 6 was preceded by stories in the press that Downing Street had hosted a Christmas party during lockdown in December 2020, including footage of senior officials in Downing Street seemingly joking about that party.<sup>10</sup> How much impact this had on the Assembly is unclear: its resolutions and recommendations had by this stage already been drafted.

The following sections outline the six weekends in turn. Recordings of all plenary sessions, including all witness presentations, are available on the Assembly's website (see the 'Further Information' section at the end of this report). Part 2 of the report sets out the Assembly's conclusions.

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9 ['Owen Paterson resigns: Conservative ex-minister quits as MP after row over House of Commons suspension'](#), *Sky News*, 5 November 2021.

10 ['Downing Street staff shown joking in leaked recording about Christmas party they later denied'](#), *ITV News*, 10 December 2021.



# Weekend 1: Introduction to the Assembly

18–19 September

Weekend 1 focused on introducing members to the Assembly process and exploring the concept of democracy. Members also developed conversation guidelines setting out how they wanted to treat each other in the assembly.

## Saturday morning

- Welcome and introductions
- Development of conversation guidelines (see Further Information, p. 83)
- ‘What is democracy?’ – talk by **Parmjeet Plummer** (Victoria College, Jersey)
- ‘What do we like and dislike about how democracy works in the UK?’ – small-group discussion, followed by plenary feedback

## Saturday afternoon

- ‘What would a good democracy look like?’ – initial small-group discussion
- ‘What’s so good about democracy?’ – talk by **Prof. Albert Weale** (UCL)
- ‘What would a good democracy look like?’ – talks by **Dr Hannah White** (Institute for Government), **Gráinne Walsh** (Stratagem), and **Prof. Anand Menon** (King’s College London and UK in a Changing Europe), followed by small-group discussion

## What would a good democracy look like?

A. Those in power can be voted out if they do a poor job.	D. Issues are given serious consideration before decisions are made.	G. People in public life are honest and trustworthy.	J. People are willing to listen to other points of view and to respect election results, even when they lose.
B. Decision-making is transparent and it’s possible to find accurate information.	E. People have the same influence on decision-making whatever their background.	H. People’s right to express their views is protected.	K. All people are treated equally.
C. Those in power are able to deliver on their manifesto pledges.	F. People take part actively.	I. Who holds power is decided by free and fair elections.	

*The ideas in this image provided the starting point for discussions in the afternoon session.*

## Sunday

- Plenary feedback from Saturday’s discussions
- ‘What should our democracy be like?’ – pre-recorded talks by **Baroness (Shami) Chakrabarti** (Labour former Shadow Cabinet member), **Baroness (Claire) Fox** (Crossbench peer), **Willie Sullivan** (Electoral Reform Society), **Lord (Jonathan) Sumption** (former Supreme Court judge), and **Jeremy Wright QC MP** (Conservative former Cabinet minister), followed by small-group discussion
- Development in groups of key principles underpinning a ‘good’ democracy



# Weekend 2: Introduction to Democracy in the UK

9–10 October

Weekend 2 gave an introduction to how the UK's democratic system works. Members then explored the question, 'What limits, if any, should be placed on what a democratically elected government can do?'.

## Saturday morning

- Introduction to how the UK's democracy works – talks by **Prof. Alan Renwick** (Constitution Unit, UCL), **Prof. Meg Russell** (Constitution Unit, UCL), **Prof. Anand Menon** (King's College London and UK in a Changing Europe), and **Abiodun Michael Olatokun** (Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law), interspersed with small-group discussions

## Saturday afternoon

- Q&A session: **Prof. Alan Renwick** and **Prof. Meg Russell**
- 'What limits, if any, should be placed on what a democratically elected government can do?' – initial small-group discussion
- 'What limits, if any, should be placed on what a democratically elected government can do?' – talks by **Prof. Meg Russell**, **Prof. Nicola McEwen** (University of Edinburgh and Centre for Constitutional Change), **Jill Rutter** (Institute for Government and UK in a Changing Europe), and **Abiodun Michael Olatokun**, interspersed with small-group discussions

What limits, if any, should be placed on what a democratically elected government can do?

A. Decisions should have to be publicly explained and justified.	C. Politicians should have to fulfil their manifesto commitments.	E. Certain basic rights should be protected.	G. Some basic features of the democratic system should be difficult for governments to change.
B. There should be space for public comment and criticism of changes before they happen.	D. Big issues should be decided by broad agreement, not just one side imposing its will.	F. Policymakers should have to operate within agreed standards of good behaviour.	H. Some basic questions should be decided directly by the people, rather than by government and parliament.



*Each of the afternoon speakers focused on a separate pair of potential limits, pointing out why they might or might not be valuable, and highlighting trade-offs among them.*

## Sunday

- The importance, or not, of additional limits on governments in a good democracy – initial small-group discussion
- Ways of introducing limits on governments – talk by **Prof. Alan Renwick**, followed by small-group discussion
- Small-group discussion refining of key principles for a 'good' democracy



# Weekend 3: Government and Parliament

23–24 October

Weekend 3 examined the question, ‘Where should the balance of power lie between government and parliament?’.

## Saturday morning

- Introduction to how government and parliament work – talks by **Sir Paul Silk** (former senior parliamentary official in the House of Commons and Senedd), **Dr Farrah Bhatti** (senior official in the House of Commons), **Jill Rutter** (Institute for Government and UK in a Changing Europe), and **Prof. Meg Russell** (Constitution Unit, UCL), interspersed with small-group discussions

## Saturday afternoon

- Outline of key trade-offs in the relationship between government and parliament – talk by **Prof. Meg Russell**

## Where should the balance of power lie between government and parliament?

- A. What’s the right balance between parliament’s ability to publicly scrutinise government decisions and government getting things done?
- B. To what extent should government be able to make laws without full parliamentary oversight?
- C. To what extent should parliament be able to make laws independently of government?
- D. Who should decide what parliament gets to discuss?
- E. Who should decide when parliament goes on a break, and when it’s recalled from one?
- F. Who should decide when general elections are held?



CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON  
DEMOCRACY IN THE UK

*The six questions that were the main areas of focus for Weekend 3.*

- ‘Where should the balance of power lie between government and parliament?’ – panel discussion with **Sir Stephen Laws** (former First Parliamentary Counsel) and **Dr Hannah White** (Institute for Government), chaired by **Prof. Meg Russell**, followed by small-group discussion
- Q&A with **Sir Stephen Laws** and **Dr Hannah White**, followed by small-group discussion

## Sunday

- Small-group discussion, followed by plenary feedback, on arguments for and against a strong government or strong parliament
- Preliminary polling on each of questions A–F above; members placed themselves on a scale from 1 (the strongest government) to 7 (the strongest parliament) when answering each question
- Formulation in groups of initial recommendations in response to the results of the poll



DEMOCRACY IN THE  
UK AFTER BREXIT

# Weekend 4: The Roles of the Public

13–14 November

Weekend 4 examined the question, ‘How should members of the public be involved in decision-making?’.

## Questions for this weekend

What's needed for the representative system to work well?

What, if anything, do people need from the system?

What, if anything, do people need to do themselves?

What role, if any, should be played by:

referendums?

petitions?

CAs and the like?

What's needed for these mechanisms to work well?



*The main questions under consideration at Weekend 4.*

### Saturday morning

- Introduction to the roles of the public through the representative system, referendums, petitions, and deliberative and participatory democracy – talks by **Prof. Alan Renwick** (Constitution Unit, UCL), **Paula Surridge** (University of Bristol and UK in a Changing Europe), **Jess Sargeant** (Institute for Government), and **Dr Jamie Pow** (Queen's University Belfast), interspersed with small-group discussions

### Saturday afternoon

- ‘What's needed for the representative system to work well?’ – small-group discussion
- ‘How should the public be involved in decision-making?’ – panel discussion with **Frances Foley** (Compass), **Jess Sargeant**, and **Dr Jamie Pow**, chaired by **Prof. Alan Renwick**
- Small-group discussion, followed by plenary feedback on how referendums, petitions, and deliberative processes could add value to the UK's democracy, and the risks associated with the use of each

### Sunday

- Preliminary polling on attitudes towards the representative system, referendums, petitions, and deliberative processes
- Development in groups of key principles (see Weekend 1) most relevant to Weekend 4's topic
- Presentation of polling results, and formulation in groups of draft recommendations



# Weekend 5: Upholding Rules and Standards

27–28 November

Weekend 5 focused on upholding rules and standards through political, regulatory, and legal mechanisms. It had two core questions: ‘How should standards of ethical behaviour be upheld?’ and ‘To what extent should government and parliament be subject to legal limits?’.

## Saturday morning

- Introduction to mechanisms of scrutiny and accountability – talks by **Prof. Meg Russell** (Constitution Unit, UCL), **Dr Jane Martin** (Committee on Standards in Public Life), and **Dr Chris McCorkindale** (University of Strathclyde), interspersed with small-group discussions

## Saturday afternoon

- ‘What do you see as the key benefits and risks of governments and parliaments being subject to regulatory or legal limits?’ – initial small-group discussion
- ‘How should rules and standards be upheld?’ – panel discussion with **Prof. Richard Ekins** (University of Oxford and Judicial Power Project), **Prof. Catherine Barnard** (University of Cambridge and UK in a Changing Europe), and **Jill Rutter** (Institute for Government and UK in a Changing Europe), chaired by **Prof. Meg Russell**
- Small-group discussion, followed by plenary feedback, on whether government, parliament, independent regulators, or the courts should decide outcomes, in three examples

## How should rules and standards be upheld?

- Imagine there is clear evidence that a minister in government has behaved corruptly and/or lied to parliament. Which of the following SHOULD have the power to decide whether they should be removed from office?
- Imagine that the government has proposed a new law, and parliament has approved it, that some people believe violates human rights (e.g. the right that women have to equal treatment in the workforce or the right that people have to a fair trial). Which of the following SHOULD have the power to decide that people’s rights have been violated and whether the new law should stand?
- Imagine there is a dispute over whether a democratically elected government has the authority to decide a new law on its own, or whether it needs parliamentary approval (e.g. an increase in state pensions or an increase in the tax on alcoholic drinks). Which of the following SHOULD have the power to decide whether the government can act?

For each scenario, members can choose:

- Government
- Parliament
- Independent regulators
- Judges



*The three examples members examined in the Saturday afternoon session.*

## Sunday

- Development in groups of key principles (see Weekend 1) most relevant to Weekend 5’s topic
- Presentation of the Seven Principles of Public Life (‘Nolan Principles’), followed by formulation in groups of recommendations to uphold standards
- ‘To protect democracy and basic rights, should there be limits on the laws that parliament can pass? And who should enforce them?’ – formulation in groups of recommendations on protecting democracy and basic rights

# Weekend 6: Conclusions

11–12 December

Weekend 6 focused on finalising the recommendations that had been drafted over Weekends 3–5.

Between Weekends 5 and 6, the team from the Constitution Unit and Involve pulled emerging conclusions together from Weekends 3, 4 and 5 to enable members to prioritise where they wanted to focus through an online poll. A draft overall resolution was proposed for each topic, drawn from the results of the preliminary polling and the outputs of the small-group discussions. The emerging recommendations from the group discussions in Weekends 3–5 were consolidated. Where several groups had developed similar recommendations, these were combined. Where groups had proposed contradictory recommendations, this interim poll asked members to choose, with the majority opinion proceeding into Weekend 6 for further consideration.

During Weekend 6, members discussed the draft resolutions and recommendations further, reviewing all the considerations that they had heard and making final adjustments to the wording. They also stepped back to consider their feelings about how democracy in the UK is working overall. They did this first by choosing words that summed up their feelings, and then by creating statements that explained their thinking.



*Assembly members and staff say goodbye at the end of Weekend 6 of the Assembly.*

## Saturday morning

- Presentation of principles developed from Weekend 1 onwards, followed by small-group discussion of whether these needed revision
- Small-group discussion of adjectives that best described members' feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today
- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding the relationship between government and parliament, followed by finalisation of wording in small groups and plenary presentation of proposed changes



### Saturday afternoon

- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding the role of petitions, followed by finalisation of wording in small groups
- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding the role of referendums, followed by finalisation of wording in small groups
- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding deliberative processes and the role of the public in the representative system, followed by finalisation of wording in small groups

### Sunday

- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding upholding ethical standards, with the opportunity for members to revise them in small groups<sup>11</sup>
- Presentation of draft recommendations regarding the role of the courts, followed by finalisation of wording in small groups
- Presentation of adjectives chosen on Saturday morning, followed by small-group drafting of statements summarising members' feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today; presentation of these statements in plenary feedback

Following Weekend 6, members voted on the resolutions and recommendations that had been finalised. The results were presented to members in an additional meeting, on the evening of Monday 20 December, and can be found in Part 2 of this report.

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<sup>11</sup> Given the overwhelming support in preliminary voting for the recommendations surrounding ethical standards, less time was assigned for their refinement. Nonetheless, members were still able to propose changes to them before the final vote if they wished.



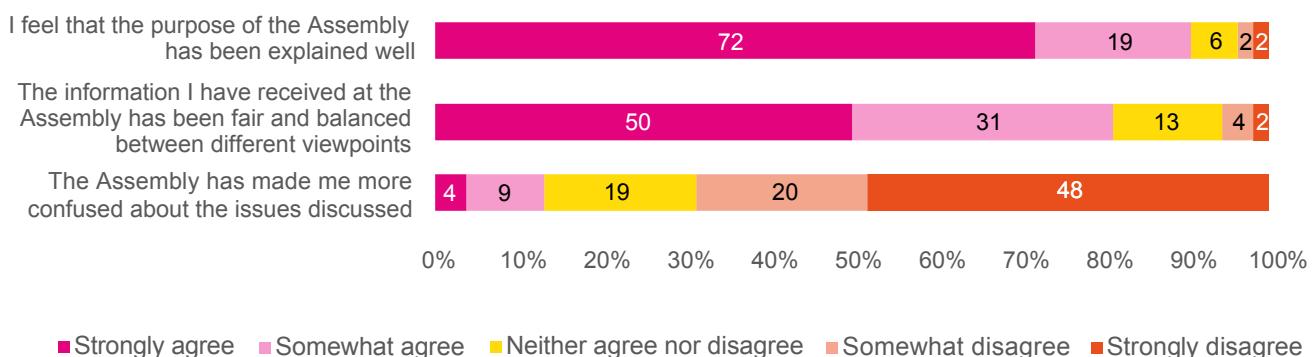
# How Did the Process Go?

A full analysis of the Assembly process will be presented in a later report. Assembly members were asked to complete a survey after each weekend. Here we briefly present answers to questions about the Assembly process as a whole, asked after Weekend 5.

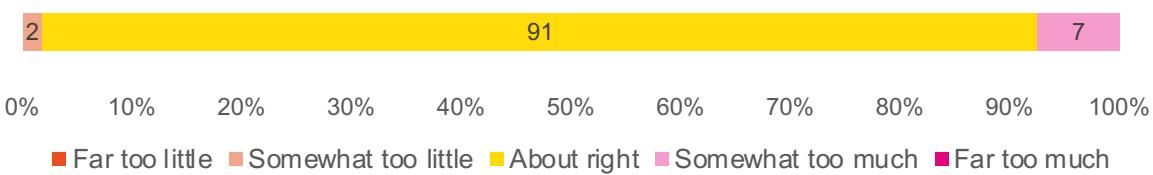
The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 54 members who completed the survey, 91% said they felt the purpose of the Assembly had been explained well, and 81% that the information received had been fair and balanced. Only two members who completed the survey disagreed with the former statement, and three with the latter. In addition, 91% of respondents thought the amount of information they had received during the Assembly had been about right. One thought it had been somewhat too little and three somewhat too much. Most members disagreed with the statement that the Assembly had made them more confused about the issues discussed.

With regard to the balance question, we were keen to see whether members' perceptions suggested that any systematic biases had emerged, but found no evidence that they had. Of the three members who thought information had not been balanced, one voted Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum, one voted Leave, and one did not vote. In the 2019 general election, one of these three members voted Labour and two voted for parties other than Labour or Conservative.

## Thinking about the Assembly as a whole, how much would you agree or disagree with the following statement?



## Thinking about the information you have received over the course of the Assembly, do you think it was...



# Part 2: The Assembly's Conclusions

# Introduction to Part 2: Overview of Conclusions

The central question put to Assembly members was:

## How should democracy in the UK work?

This part of the report presents the conclusions that members developed in response to that question. These conclusions come in four forms:

- **Principles for democracy in the UK:** Starting in Weekend 1, and returning to them throughout the Assembly, members considered the basic principles that they thought would characterise a good democracy in the UK.
- **Resolutions:** Within the three core areas of democracy that the Assembly focused on in Weekends 3–5, members agreed eight overarching resolutions that summed up their main conclusions.
- **Recommendations:** Under each of these resolutions, members developed a number of specific recommendations. These recommendations are presented here in members' own words.
- **Statements about democracy in the UK today:** At Weekend 6, alongside final consideration of their resolutions and recommendations, members co-wrote statements that sum up their feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today.

The first section below sets out the principles that members identified. The three sections that follow then set out the resolutions and, within each of these, members' specific recommendations. The resolutions are nested within the three core aspects of democracy that the Assembly focused on:

- The balance of power between government and parliament:
  - Resolution 1, on the respective roles of government and parliament
- The roles of the public:
  - Resolutions 2a and 2b, on supporting public involvement in the representative system
  - Resolution 3, on the role of petitions
  - Resolution 4, on the role of referendums
  - Resolution 5, on the role of deliberative processes, such as citizens' assemblies
- Ways of upholding rules and standards:
  - Resolution 6, on upholding ethical standards of behaviour in public life
  - Resolution 7, on the role of the courts.

For each of the principles, resolutions and recommendations, we include explanatory narratives giving context. These have been written by the facilitation team, drawing upon the notes recorded throughout the members' deliberations and the members' individual contributions as recorded on virtual whiteboards. Where quotations have been included in the findings, they have been selected to exemplify and amplify the themes evident in the discussions, and as such should only be considered as illustrative.

After the resolutions and recommendations, we list the members' closing statements on their feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today.

Finally, we include a short note on other aspects of democracy that were not focused on in this Assembly, but that some members said they felt also needed attention. The absence of these matters from the recommendations reflects the decisions of the organisers in crafting the Assembly's agenda. At the same time, it cannot be concluded that, because some members thought these further issues were important, others would have felt the same.



# Principles for Democracy in the UK

During their first weekend together, Assembly members began to consider the principles that should underpin a ‘good’ UK democracy. Eleven aspects of what might be valued in a democracy were initially presented to members (see p. 21). Through their deliberations, and drawing on their earlier consideration of what they liked and disliked about democracy in the UK, members prioritised and added to these, identifying 16 areas for focus. These were further refined over the subsequent weekends, yielding the principles presented below. Members reflected on these principles when preparing recommendations for each of the aspects of the democratic system that they were invited to consider.

Towards the end of the Assembly, members were polled to identify the importance they attached to each principle. For each one, they were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale – from ‘Strongly agree’ to ‘Strongly disagree’ – whether they believed it was important for shaping a good democracy. The principles are presented below in the order determined in this poll – by the level of overall agreement and, in case of a tie, by the level of strong agreement. For each principle, a small amount of explanatory text, drawn from the notes of the members’ discussions throughout the meetings, has been added to provide context and indicate where members focused when considering what implementing the principle should look like.

## 1. Honesty in politics

... so that the public can trust their elected representatives and have confidence and faith in the democratic system

Agreed by 98%

Assembly members prioritised honesty as most important because they believed it has a knock-on effect for all of the other principles. Beyond an almost-universal call for politicians to ‘not lie’, members identified key features of what honesty in politics would look like that they felt were lacking at present. These included: apologising for mistakes; declaring conflicts of interest; admitting when they don’t know the facts; not relying on optimistic spin; and dealing truthfully with the public even when the news is bad (e.g., taxes going up).

## 2. Freedom of thought and speech

... so that divergent views are welcomed and recognised in the public domain and there is an ability to question and protest to drive change.

Agreed by 98%

At the time members were developing this principle there was widespread coverage and public concern about moves, or potential moves, towards censoring speech and limiting protest. Members considered this principle particularly important for a good democracy as it allows for open dialogue between those in power and the public. They also focused specifically on the importance of everyone feeling welcomed to engage with questions of democracy, including those with minority views. Overall, they believed a good democracy should welcome different views in a culture of mutual respect.

## 3. Rules of law that apply equally

... so that there are clear lines between the church, state and judiciary, opportunities to abuse power are curtailed, and corrupt or dishonest practices are penalised.

Agreed by 96%

Many members expressed a concern that it had become a norm in politics to break rules, and that this has resulted in an unfair situation of ‘one rule for them and another for everybody else’. Here members focused on the idea that, in a good democracy, there should be ‘proper’ penalties for dishonest or corrupt behaviour by politicians that are enforced equally and consistently, and are not open to influence by powerful institutions.

#### 4. Systems of accountability and redress

... so that politicians who are seen as doing a poor job can be challenged and, ultimately, replaced outside of the election cycle with representatives the public have confidence in.

Agreed by 96%

Building on the call for more honesty in politics, members focused on the need for mechanisms to investigate and act on dishonest or unethical practices, or on behaviours that breach codes of practice in government or parliament. There was also a clear focus here on making penalties harsher and more enforceable through the involvement of independent regulators.

#### 5. Transparency in decision-making

... so that, even if they don’t agree, the public can see and understand how decisions that affect them are made.

Agreed by 95%

This principle was primarily a response to members’ sense that too many decisions were being made ‘behind closed doors’, with little rationale or explanation given to the public, by people who the public, generally, already didn’t trust. Easier access to reliable information, with independent fact-checking and more balanced media would, members believed, make it easier to trust that decision-makers were acting legitimately. Further, members noted that such transparency would make it easier for the public to hold politicians to account for badly made decisions.

#### 6. Fair representation

... so that the people who are elected are actually representing the views of their electorate and decisions are driven by ‘we the people’.

Agreed by 95%

Members developed this principle to emphasise their view that representing their constituents should be a priority for politicians and is central to what democracy means. In their discussions, members also strongly expressed the view that this representation should be for all constituents, including those who did not vote for the MP. In practice, members wanted a situation where people could know that their elected representatives were listening to them (rather than just to their party or other powerful interests) and meeting promises to the electorate, and that constituents would be able to give them feedback on their performance.

#### 7. Free and inclusive elections

... so that everyone can participate – regardless of profession, background, gender, race or religion – and have their vote count equally.

Agreed by 94%



Members felt that many people don't vote because they do not trust the democratic system – particularly politicians and the media – and see little point in making the effort. Many also thought that people don't vote because they don't think they know enough, or can't trust the information they have. Members felt that one way to realise this principle would be by making non-partisan and unbiased information available and easily accessible, in the clearest language possible, in English and other languages. Members also supported the idea that the act of voting should be as physically easy as possible, with online and postal options available. Some of the discussions on this principle also focused on expanding who was eligible to vote in UK elections, and on electoral reform designed to ensure all votes cast count equally (both points that were beyond the Assembly's scope).

## 8. Limits on the influence of the already powerful

*... so that the monied lobbyists, the press and the 'habitually' powerful are not unduly able to influence government decisions.*

Agreed by 94%

Members' discussions when developing this principle linked strongly to those regarding Principle 5, on transparency in decision-making. Here members went further to assert their belief that powerful lobbyists, organisations, and the media regularly use their power and financial resources to 'buy' influence within government. Members thought that delivering this principle in practice would involve, among other things, greater transparency about whom MPs meet and what advice they receive, limits on financial contributions to parties and campaigns, and robust auditing of MPs' incomes and outside jobs, to identify where 'benefits' may have been provided.

## 9. A respect for the fundamental human rights of all people

*... so that governments cannot wilfully discriminate or create rules that are systematically prejudiced against sections of society.*

Agreed by 93%

While there was some disagreement among members about what should be considered a human right when discussing this principle, there was general agreement that the rights of minorities needed to be protected. The key focus when considering this principle was on the idea of wilful discrimination. While acknowledging that almost all laws will have greater impacts on some sections of society than others, this principle was about asserting that such unequal treatment is not something the government should be able to engage in easily.

## 10. Ministers who are knowledgeable in their policy area

*... so that the public can have faith that their recommendations / decisions are evidence-based.*

Agreed by 93%

In developing this principle, members noted that government ministers often lack specialised knowledge about the portfolios they hold. Members felt that ministers without such knowledge would have to rely too much on advisers, often behind closed doors, or on lobbyists (as highlighted in Principles 5 and 8). Making appointments based on expertise was identified by members as a practical way of boosting public confidence that decisions were based on evidence.



## 11. An informed and educated voter base

... so that voters' choices are based on clear, verifiable, honest, and accessible information.

Agreed by 87%

This principle emerged from a perception that good democracy also requires an informed and active electorate, so that people understand politics, the consequences of their vote, and how to hold the government to account. Members said that there would be a role for schools, community organisations like libraries, the media, and political parties to provide the information required for this change. They also noted people's responsibility to engage actively, fact-check information, and explore key issues in society.

## 12. Respect for the results of a vote

... so that, even if they lose, democratically made decisions are clear and enforceable.

Agreed by 85%

Voting was highlighted in the discussions as a core feature of our democratic system. Some members questioned whether the UK's electoral system necessarily represents the 'people's voice' on key issues or produces governments based on what people want. But the system was acknowledged as an established and widely respected way of making decisions. The core of this principle therefore focused on the need for the public, and politicians, to respect the result of a vote and move on from the issue. The specific examples of the referendums on Brexit and Scottish independence were highlighted as cases where many members thought this principle had not been lived up to.

## 13. Power sharing

... so that the interests of all are taken into account and decisions are made for the 'good of the people' as a whole.

Agreed by 82%

This principle emerged from discussions focused on the culture of 'us and them' that members saw as characterising debates in parliament. Members felt that this was not conducive to a good, well-functioning democracy. They wanted more co-operation between government and opposition, greater willingness to learn from the perspectives of others, and greater use of the model of select committees to make better, more considered decisions.

## 14. Diversity in our elected representatives

... so that our parliaments and governments are representative of the electorate as a whole.

Agreed by 81%

Many members perceived a lack of diversity in parliament and were concerned that the demographics and backgrounds of current MPs are not representative of the wider public. They focused on the need to remove barriers to ensure equal opportunities for all to enter parliament, regardless of background, profession, gender, or ethnicity. They felt that informing and educating voters could encourage more people to consider standing and that other barriers, such as financial costs, needed to be removed.



**15. A commitment from elected governments to deliver on their manifesto**

... so that the promises made to those that voted for them are delivered.

Agreed by 80%

Many members expressed the view that, once elected, governments often appear to neglect promises made in their manifestos and fail to deliver on the things that the public elected them to do. This was seen as not only disappointing voters, but also undermining trust in the democratic system. In some discussions relating to this principle in later meetings, members also said that the need for scrutiny and debate should not be used as a stalling tactic to prevent government delivering on its programme of work.

**16. No unelected bodies making political / policy decisions**

... so that decisions are made by representatives appointed by the people to enact their views (e.g., not officials or the House of Lords), but acknowledging there is a role for the courts to keep them in check.

Agreed by 70%

Overall, and particularly at the outset of the meetings, members expressed a strong sense that decisions in a representative democracy should be made by elected MPs, who are delegated that authority by the public. There was a clear view that unelected bodies that may be unrepresentative or biased towards the views of the already powerful (the House of Lords was specifically mentioned) lack the legitimacy to make political decisions. Support for this principle weakened as the Assembly continued, however, as members considered the importance of expert advice, direct citizen participation, independent regulators, and judges. The text of the original principle was amended by members in Weekend 5 to that displayed above, to acknowledge specifically the role of the courts. In the final vote, the principle was still backed by a substantial majority of Assembly members, but the level of support was much the lowest across all the principles.



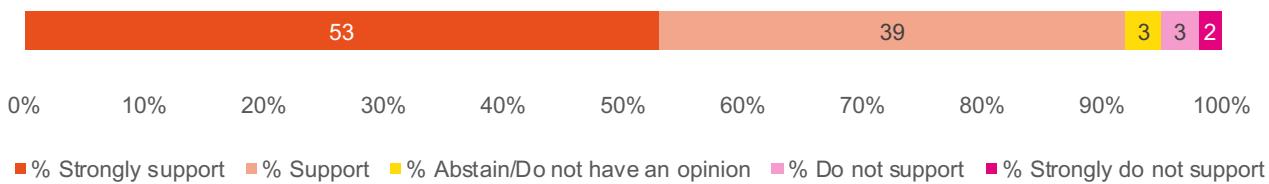
# The Relationship between Government and Parliament

The first concrete theme explored by the Assembly focused on where the balance of power should lie between government and parliament. The following resolution was agreed:

## Resolution 1

We believe that parliament needs to be able to play a stronger role in scrutinising the actions of government. Collectively, it represents the voice of the electorate as a whole, whereas not everyone voted for the government.

Supported by 92%



In choosing to support a stronger parliament, members focused on the perceived need to limit the ability of governments, particularly those elected with a large majority, to act without regard to public opinion. Members did believe that governments should be able to deliver on their manifesto promises, as this is what they had been elected on. Beyond this, however, many members felt that, without strong public scrutiny in parliament, government could rush through poor policy or ill-considered legislation. Parliament, they believed, was there to counter this and be a voice for the people:

*A road block to government taking absolute power.*

Members also highlighted positives of scrutiny, which provides broader, more representative legislative input and allows minority views to be aired and considered:

*Informed contributions can help to improve proposals – it's important that a range of voices are heard.*

To explore this balance further, six specific questions regarding the relationship between government and parliament were introduced:

1. What is the right balance between parliament's ability to publicly scrutinise government decisions and government getting things done?
2. To what extent should government be able to make laws without full parliamentary oversight?
3. To what extent should parliament be able to make laws independently of government?
4. Who should decide what parliament gets to discuss?
5. Who should decide when parliament goes on a break, and when it's recalled from one?
6. Who should decide when general elections are held?

In responding to these questions – and fleshing out Resolution 1 – members developed 12 specific recommendations. These are set out below under four headings, relating to scrutiny of policymaking, scrutiny of government legislation, MPs' own ability to put forward proposals, and the rules around parliamentary recess and the calling of elections.



## Scrutinising Policymaking

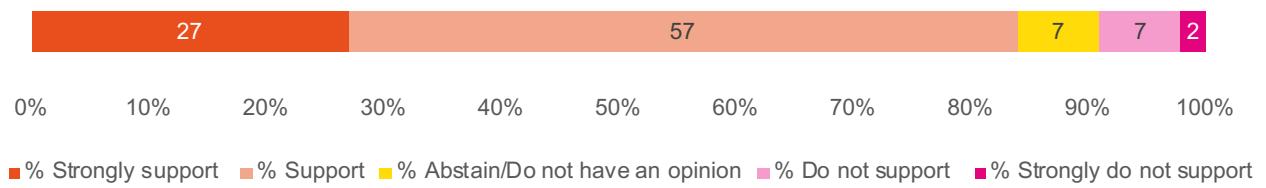
**Recommendation 1.1:** When significant new policies are announced by the government there should be an opportunity for full parliamentary scrutiny before decisions are made.

Supported by 96%



**Recommendation 1.2:** While there needs to be scope for the opposition to question policies proposed by a democratically elected government, and for MPs to scrutinise details, when a policy was clearly laid out in their manifesto the government should not be unduly blocked or delayed in implementing it.

Supported by 84%



In developing Recommendations 1.1 and 1.2, members sought to balance the need for governments to get the things they have promised done with the opportunity for parliament to question new proposals. Together, they maintained, this would provide effective public accountability for policymaking: accountability to supporters through delivery and accountability to the electorate as a whole through scrutiny.

Recommendation 1.1 expresses members' desire for parliament to have a stronger role in scrutinising the whole process of government policymaking. Recommendation 1.2 articulates members' belief that an elected government should have the power to deliver on its manifesto pledges. Many members were firm in their view that electoral success gave ministers the mandate to implement the policies they had campaigned on and that this is what their voters would expect. Nevertheless, Recommendation 1.2 attracted a notably lower level of 'strong' support than did other recommendations in this section.

*If it's in your manifesto then that's what you said you intended to do. We can't have political game-playing blocking what voters have voted in and voters getting what they asked for.*



**Recommendation 1.3:** In the interest of transparency, but subject to the need to maintain security, there should be a public record of the expert advice given to the government to inform their policy decisions so that members of the public can understand the basis of the decision, even if they don't agree with it.

Supported by 96%



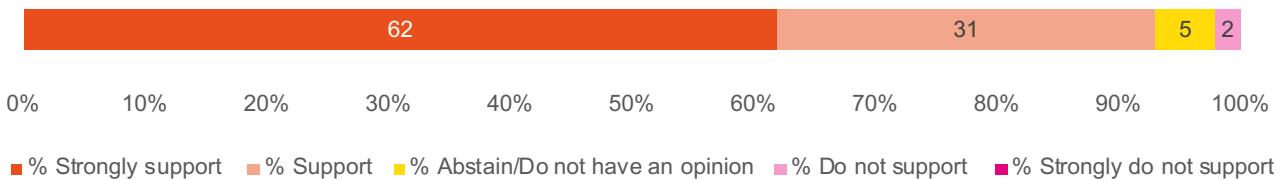
Recommendation 1.3 emerged in response to members' overall lack of confidence that policy decisions made by government were necessarily evidence-based. Members expressed considerable suspicion over whether government sought or listened to the advice of independent and trustworthy experts when formulating policy, and were concerned that ministers relied too much on the opinions of those with a vested interest in certain outcomes. Changes in Covid-19 restrictions were cited as an example. By calling for the publication of the expert advice given to government, members wanted both parliament and the public to be better able to scrutinise decisions.

## Scrutinising Government Legislation

**Recommendation 1.4:** Government should not be able to make significant legal changes\* – whether through primary or secondary legislation – without proper scrutiny.

\*A cross-party parliamentary committee – not the government – should decide which laws are judged 'significant'.

Supported by 93%



While recognising that governments should, for practical reasons, be able to make small adjustments through secondary legislation, which achieves less parliamentary scrutiny, members were concerned that this provision may be overused, allowing contentious, unfair or ill-considered measures to be introduced 'on the sly' by intentionally bypassing the full parliamentary process.<sup>12</sup> They were also concerned that it was a tool that governments with large majorities in parliament could use to push through changes that would not receive popular support, even from among their own voter base.

Members further highlighted the harm that such opaque rule-making causes to public trust. They argued that parliamentary scrutiny is central to transparency, by creating public awareness of proposed legislative changes, and public accountability through debate among MPs.

In developing the wording of this recommendation, members wanted to ensure that government could not bypass parliamentary scrutiny simply by using its current powers to decide what parliament can discuss.

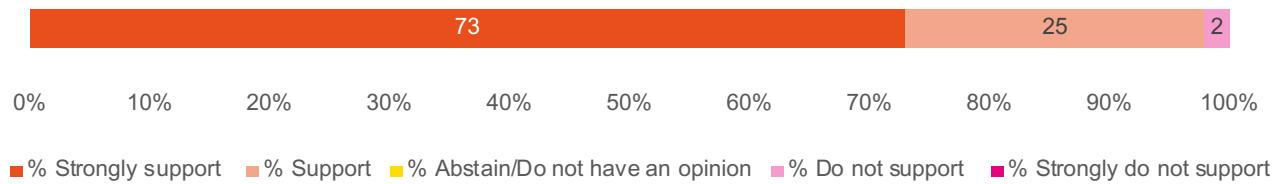
<sup>12</sup> For more information about secondary legislation, see, Richard Kelly, *Statutory Instruments* (London: House of Commons Library, 2016).



So they wanted decisions about whether a change counts as ‘significant’ enough to be dealt with via primary rather than secondary legislation to be taken not by government, or a single office-holder, but by a cross-party committee representing a diversity of views. At present, recommendations on the extent of future policymaking to be delegated to the government are made by a committee in the House of Lords. It has recently complained that the government is seeking increasing levels of power without adequate consideration of parliamentarians’ concerns.<sup>13</sup>

**Recommendation 1.5:** In cases of emergency when there is a need to introduce new laws quickly without allowing for full scrutiny and debate, these should be clearly identified as temporary laws, with a scheduled review date as early as possible, at which point parliament should have the opportunity to debate the law, and to amend it or repeal it.

Supported by 98%

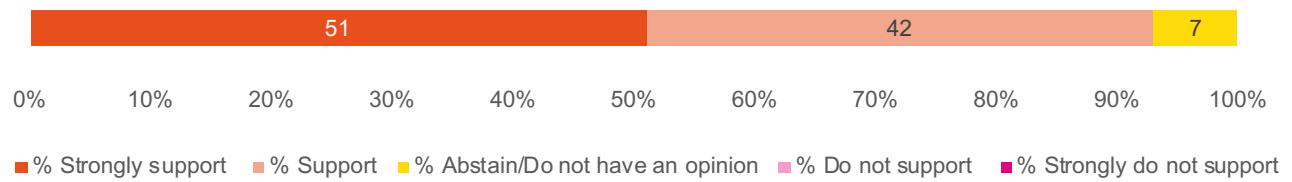


Particularly given that the Assembly was meeting during the time of Covid restrictions and amidst the discovery of new variants of the virus, members recognised that there are, in practice, situations in which governments need to be able to enact legislation quickly to protect the public and/or safeguard the UK (as also in times of war or an immediate terrorist threat). While agreeing that governments must retain the ability to react to emergencies at speed, there was near-universal agreement that laws enacted without the opportunity for scrutiny must be considered temporary. While acknowledging that this was already sometimes the case, as with the Coronavirus Act 2020, members felt that governments should be subject to regular parliamentary oversight in such cases.

*We do need leadership – but the checks and balances are important and prevent abuses of power. Knowing that they would have to defend their actions in the future would lead to better decision-making in the first place.*

**Recommendation 1.6:** When voting on new laws that were not key manifesto pledges, MPs should have permission to vote in a way that represents the views of their constituents without penalty, particularly on issues that directly affect their constituency even if that is against the position of their party.

Supported by 93%



Members recognised that the party system is central to our representative democracy and that, for the most part, it enables effective government. But most members consistently expressed the view that MPs elected to represent constituencies had to do better – and be seen to be doing better – in representing

13 House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, *Democracy Denied? The Urgent Need to Rebalance Power between Parliament and the Executive* (London: House of Lords: 2021).

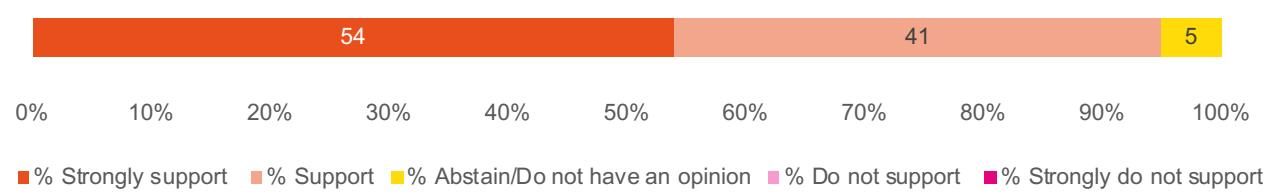
the interests of the people who elected them. Members expressed frustration that the current system, by expecting MPs to vote on party lines, seemed to force MPs sometimes to ‘let down’ or ‘betray’ their voters. They sought through this recommendation to address the sentiments expressed earlier in Principle 6 around ‘fair representation’.

Members’ sense of disappointment with the whipping system was strongest in relation to matters with disproportionate impacts on some regions of the country or some segments of the population, such as ethnic minorities or the working poor. As a parliamentary term progresses, and new legislative proposals are developed and debated, members felt that MPs needed to be able to register their constituents’ feelings, without being penalised by their party. They saw this as an important feature of a mature democracy which could also help to realise the ideal of ‘power-sharing’ they had identified in Principle 13, and enable decisions to be made that considered the good of the wider electorate.

## MPs’ Power to Make Proposals

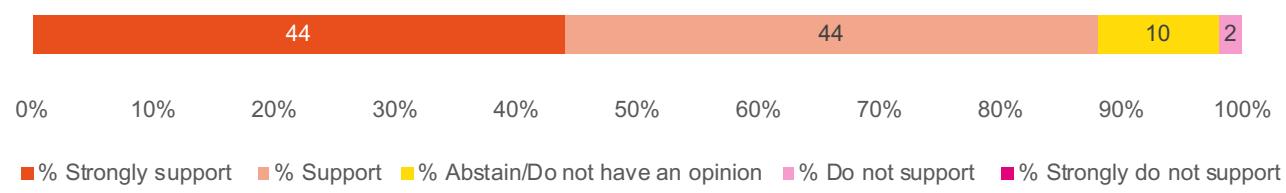
**Recommendation 1.7: MPs must be able to ensure that issues that are important to the public and/or have significant public support are raised in parliament, debated publicly and decided, even if they are not part of the government’s programme or are something that the government actively disagrees with.**

Supported by 95%



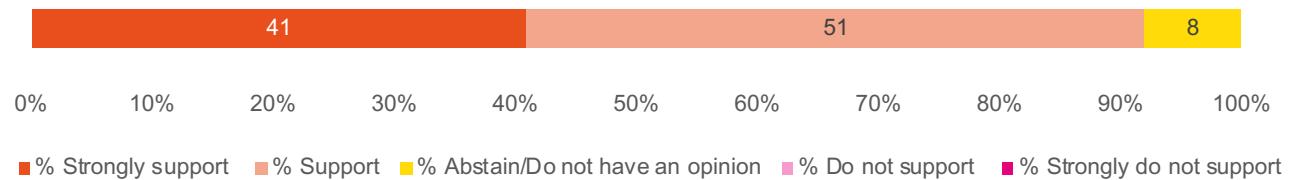
**Recommendation 1.8: The right of all elected MPs to propose a bill should be protected. A cross-party committee should decide which bills are debated in parliament. Where there is substantial support for a bill, time should be available to scrutinise it and decide on it properly.**

Supported by 88%



**Recommendation 1.9: More fixed time needs to be reserved in the parliamentary schedule to ensure that matters such as private members' bills and public petitions can be debated and decided, without being 'talked out'. But this should be balanced against the right of government to have the time to deliver on what they were elected to do.**

Supported by 92%



Recommendations 1.7, 1.8, and 1.9 all relate to the importance the members placed on backbench and opposition MPs being able to get issues onto the parliamentary agenda for debate and decision. Members overwhelmingly agreed that this was necessary to enable matters that may be important to the public, or particular MPs or constituencies, to receive meaningful parliamentary attention.

*Every MP should be heard as they have been selected by their constituency – they represent people so they need to be listened to.*

Recommendation 1.7 focuses on the general principle that the House of Commons as a whole should influence what it discusses, and goes further, to demand that debates are resolved with a decision that can be acted on. Members were concerned that government exerts too much control at present, and that other ways for backbench and opposition MPs to influence what is discussed are either too limited or lacking in force.

Many members were disappointed and bewildered in particular at the random way that decisions are made regarding which private members' bills are allocated time for debate. They were widely appalled at the seemingly all-too-common practice of intentionally 'talking out' these proposals, leaving no time for a vote or decision. Recommendation 1.8 seeks to address this, while recognising the need to avoid 'time-wasting' debates on trivial or irrelevant proposals, by calling for the decision on which bills are debated to be made by a cross-party parliamentary committee.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned by one of the expert witnesses, a similar recommendation had previously been made by the House of Commons Procedure Committee, though never acted upon.<sup>15</sup> In their discussions, members further noted that these decisions should be made on the basis of the merit of the proposal, public interest and investment in the issue, and the likelihood of impact.

Over the course of the Assembly, members learned that, at present, limited time is allocated in parliament for non-government business. This, combined with the practice of 'talking out' and debates not resulting in an outcome, left many deeply dissatisfied with the current situation. Recommendation 1.9 therefore builds on their ambition that matters introduced to the parliamentary agenda from outside government should be given due consideration.<sup>16</sup> There were also suggestions made by members that it should be the Speaker's role to ensure that any additional time is managed effectively, to make the best use of this limited parliamentary opportunity.

<sup>14</sup> In the early stages of their deliberations, many members argued that a representative panel of citizens (like a citizens' jury) should fulfil this role. Ultimately, however, members concluded that this was not particularly viable given the number of bills initiated, and also because this should be a responsibility for parliament itself. Members therefore decided not to put this proposal to a vote.

<sup>15</sup> House of Commons Procedure Committee, *Private Members' Bills: Third Report of Session 2015-16* (London: House of Commons, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Members also included reference to debates initiated by petitions in this recommendation, to support their further recommendations regarding the petitions process, presented below in association with Resolution 3.

*Currently 13 Fridays a year for private members bills, and it's easy to defeat them – 13 Fridays is not enough.*

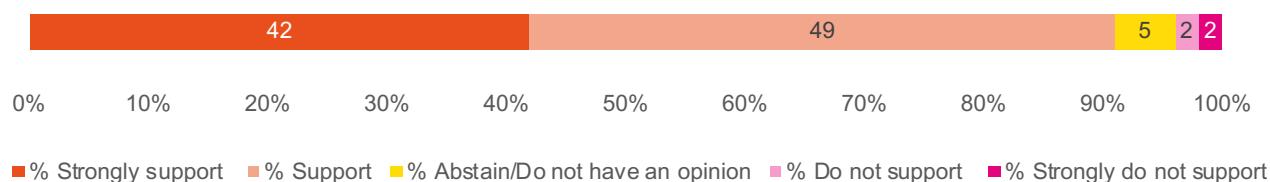
*The Speaker should have powers to contain the debate and block individuals who attempt to hijack it and run down the clock.*

## Parliamentary Recess and Elections

Recommendation 1.10: The government should propose when parliament goes into recess, but MPs should be able to debate and amend the proposal before a vote in parliament.

Government can however recall parliament in the case of exceptional circumstance / emergency.

Supported by 91%

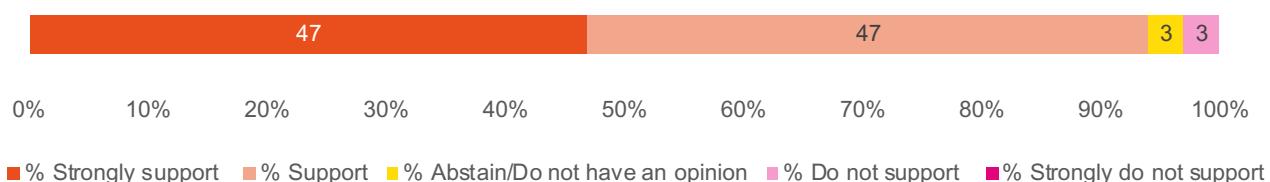


Members believed that, unlike at present, MPs should be able to debate and amend a government proposal to call a parliamentary recess – for example, if they believe that important and urgent matters remain to be resolved. While they recognised that amendments to the government's preferred timetable might be unlikely to pass in times of majority government, members felt this recommendation would contribute to their overall goal of strengthening parliament's role in scrutinising government and publicly challenging decisions that might undermine the principles of good democracy.

*This would be important because it is about sending a message that government cannot just come and go as it pleases and shut down debate on a sticky topic.*

Recommendation 1.11: A petition signed by half of the elected MPs should be able to demand that parliament is recalled from recess to debate important decisions.

Supported by 94%



Members learned that, at present, the House of Commons can be recalled from recess only by the government. Many members expressed concern that, combined with the tactical use of existing powers to determine when parliament goes into recess, this was a tool that a government could use to restrict parliamentary scrutiny on important, and potentially contentious, matters.

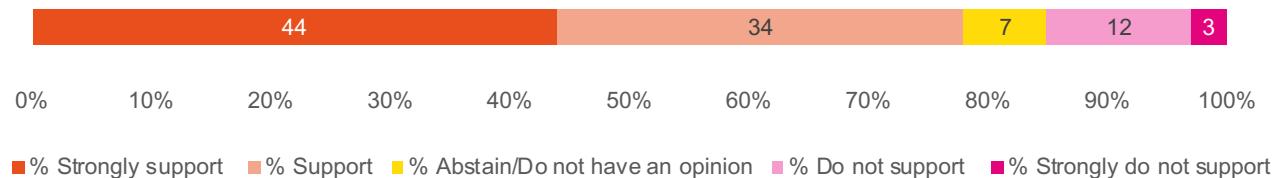


*The people we elected need to be able to have an input into important decisions, otherwise government becomes a dictatorship.*

On consideration, and recognising that demanding a 50% threshold would in most cases require support from some government backbenchers, Assembly members developed Recommendation 1.11. They argued that this was an important tool to empower parliament as a whole, while ensuring that a recall would only happen when support for the need to debate an issue in a timely way cut across party lines.

**Recommendation 1.12: The Prime Minister should only be able to call an early general election if it is supported by a vote in the House of Commons.**

Supported by 78%



Members recognised that, under the 2011 Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the Prime Minister cannot call an election unilaterally. But they heard during the evidence sessions that there was a government bill passing through parliament that proposed to return the power to call an early election to the Prime Minister, as before 2011.<sup>17</sup> Members expressed considerable concern that this power should not be held by a single person because it could be used tactically to their own advantage. While recognising that, in most circumstances, a parliamentary vote would likely support the Prime Minister's decision, the clear majority of members felt that decisions of this nature should be made openly by the House of Commons as a whole.

# The Roles of the Public

The Assembly's second area of focus related to the roles that members of the public can play to ensure that the UK's representative system delivers 'good' democracy for people in the UK.

Members began by examining the public's roles and responsibilities in the traditional representative democratic system. They considered a variety of ways in which people's ability to participate effectively in that system could be strengthened.

Members also examined the roles that a variety of alternative mechanisms could, or should, play:

1. Public petitions to parliament, enabling the public to influence the parliamentary agenda
2. Referendums, giving decision-making powers on specific issues directly to voters
3. Deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies, creating a formal route for members of the public to participate in policymaking.

Overall, there was significant support for strengthening the public's role, particularly to influence policy and decisions between elections. The members' conclusions and recommendations regarding these approaches are presented below.

## Supporting Public Involvement in the Representative System

Following discussions about opportunities for and barriers to public involvement with the main institutions of the representative system, members voted on two resolutions to encapsulate their emerging conclusions:

### Resolution 2a

We believe that the UK public as a whole has to become more engaged with the existing opportunities to influence our representative system (voting, contacting MPs, supporting/joining political parties or campaign groups etc.) but we don't think that will happen unless people have more reason to believe that they can make a difference.

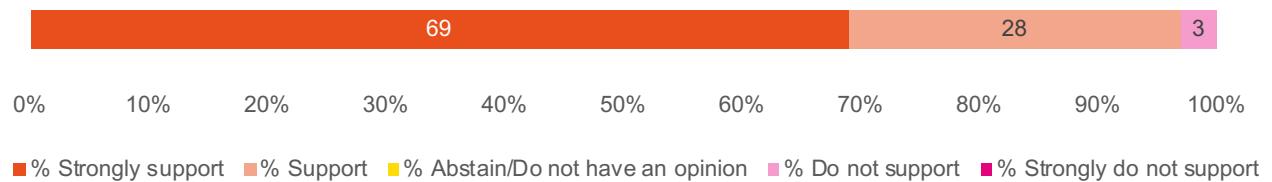
Supported by 98%



## Resolution 2b

We believe that a good democracy in the UK needs voters who are engaged, well-informed and able to consider other points of view and opposing arguments in a constructive way.

Supported by 97%



Members engaged with two key questions when considering what was needed to ensure that the formal representative system works well and enables people to engage with and influence policymaking:

- What, if anything, do people need from the system?
- What, if anything, do people need to do themselves?

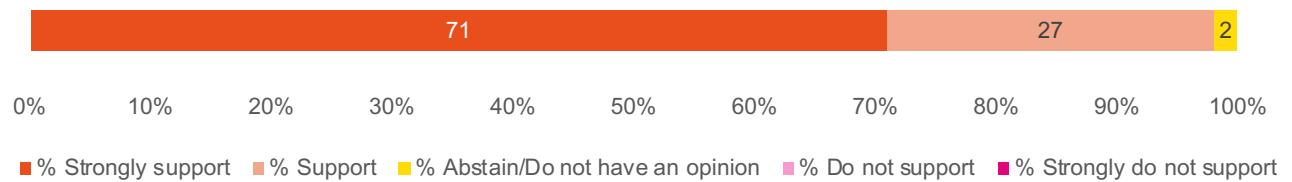
Central to members' response to the first of these questions was that, in order for people to more actively engage with the systems and institutions that drive and scrutinise our democracy (including elections, parties, media, pressure groups, etc.), 'the system' as a whole needs to give them confidence that their participation matters. Currently, however, they believed that most people feel this is not the case. Many reported feeling that they were quite disconnected from existing systems of governance and unable to influence them, and they thought that most people around them felt similarly. Resolution 2a therefore calls for cultural change within the system to motivate people to become more actively involved.

Members also concluded that, if more people could be persuaded that their votes and other political actions would be impactful, it would be equally important for individuals themselves to take responsibility for making informed and considered choices. This included developing the capacity to engage in considered and mature discussions about the issues they believed were important in the UK, as called for in Resolution 2b. Further, as the recommendations below demonstrate, members wanted to see similar behaviours modelled by those elected to represent them.

The following recommendations were proposed and voted on by members to deliver the culture change called for in Resolutions 2a and 2b. They are presented in members' own words.

**Recommendation 2.1: The public need to see honest and transparent politics taking place on a day-to-day basis. All politicians should be close to and visible in the communities they represent, in order to help build connections and trust. That should include through in-person and online surgeries, and other events such as 'town hall' meetings, coffee mornings, etc.**

Supported by 98%



At the core of Recommendation 2.1 is an underlying perception by members that MPs are disconnected from their constituents, and that the representative system currently lacks transparency and honesty. Despite the increased efforts of many MPs to be visible and accessible to their constituents, which



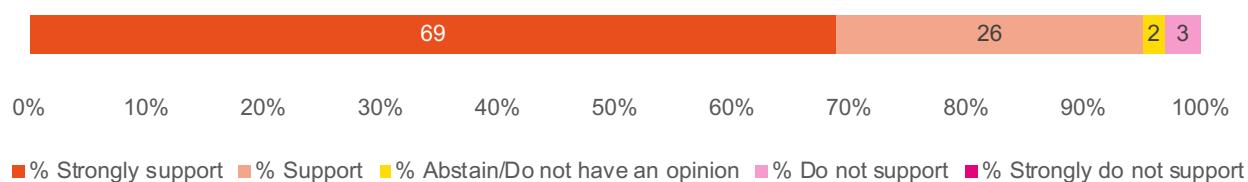
members particularly saw in their use of social media, most members argued that they needed to go further. They called on MPs to play more active roles in their local communities and to reach out to their constituents in the spaces where people are already engaged, rather than expecting the public to come to them. They believed that this would make MPs appear more interested in the people that they represent and would increase trust that they were acting in the public's interest.

*They are out door-knocking and talking to people on the streets at election times, when they want something from you, but where are they when you want something from them?*

Yet members also acknowledged that, for this to affect people's trust and confidence in politicians, members of the public would have to change their own attitudes towards participating in politics.

**Recommendation 2.2: The education systems across the UK need to give more focus to educating young people and life-long learners to be 'political citizens' – ensuring they understand the system and the opportunities they have to influence decision-making.**

Supported by 95%



Building on the belief – expressed in Principle 11 – that an informed and educated voter base was vital to a good democracy, members felt strongly that improved education was key. Many members said they personally felt ill-prepared by their formal education to engage with politics and the workings of the democratic system. Although schools in all parts of the UK now provide teaching on democracy and citizenship, even members who had experienced this said that their education and the wider public discourse about democracy failed to emphasise their rights and responsibilities, and the opportunities available for wider participation.

*Young people shouldn't be brought up thinking politics is a dirty word.*

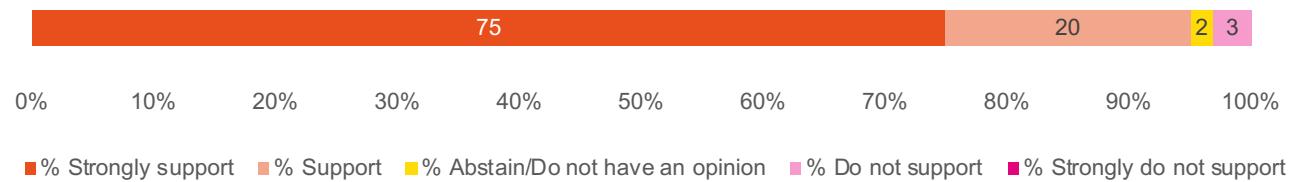
**Recommendation 2.3: To make democracy in the UK the best it can be, members of the public need to take responsibility for ensuring that they educate themselves to make an informed choice when they cast their vote, but to support this they need to be able to easily access clear, unbiased information about the political process, political parties and individual candidates.**

Supported by 96%



**Recommendation 2.4: Information on what is happening in parliament and government should be freely available to all in a form that is concise, factual, accessible, and unbiased. More work is needed so that people know where to look, and can quickly find the information they want.**

Supported by 95%



**Recommendation 2.5: We need a strong, independent media, supported by enhanced regulation, to ensure the fair and balanced reporting of political issues and increased public access to reliable fact-checking services.**

Supported by 97%



Members identified a perceived lack of trustworthy and unbiased information about politics and the workings of the political process as a significant barrier to motivating wider public involvement. They also focused on the need for information to be accessible – i.e., both easily found and easily understood.

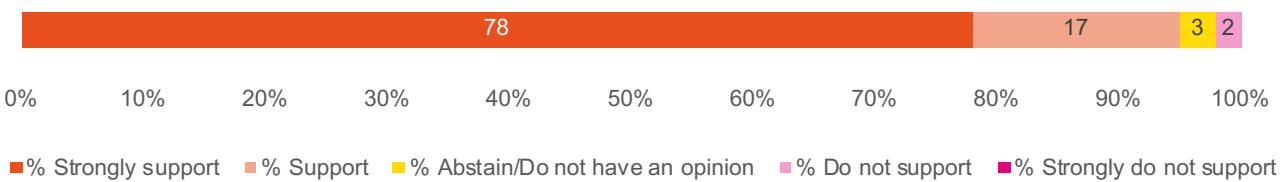
Many members expressed considerable concern throughout the process about media bias, a lack of trust in the media, and the growing prevalence of disinformation on social media. Although some members retained the view that increased regulation of media (and particularly social media) undermined the principles of free speech that they had previously endorsed, the majority strongly supported this recommendation.

Members' recommendations attempted to balance the public's responsibility to educate themselves about the matters being proposed and debated in parliament with their expectation that the system should support them to do this. They called for better information provision and stronger regulation of traditional and social media than currently exists. Members argued that, when taken together, these recommendations would deliver on Principle 5's call for greater transparency in political decision-making. This would encourage more trust in, and wider public engagement with, politics.

*We need to get access to facts of what is going on rather than reading two different interpretations from different media. We need a Hansard Lite – but not jargon and spin.*

**Recommendation 2.6: To allow for effective public participation in political debate and scrutiny, freedom of speech and the right to protest need to be protected.**

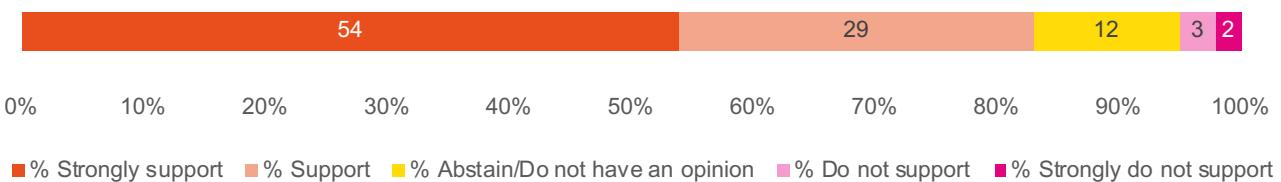
Supported by 95%



Recommendation 2.6 reflects concerns raised by members repeatedly throughout the process, that the current government was seeking to constrain certain basic democratic rights. It ties back to the importance members placed on freedom of thought and speech in Principle 2. Members argued that the ability to freely express political views and demonstrate against ‘bad’ decisions was essential to a good democratic system, and was a route for people to have influence and hold governments to account. Despite calling for greater media regulation in Recommendation 2.5, members were also explicit in their discussion that this freedom of speech should be extended to media commentary, though not to articles or broadcasts purporting to present facts but publishing ‘fake news’. They did, however, reluctantly, acknowledge that this balance would be difficult to establish in practice.

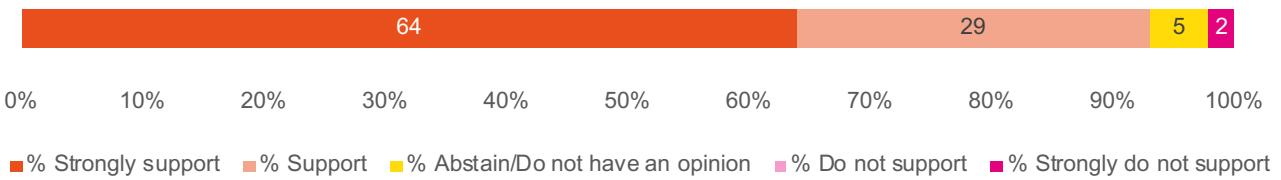
**Recommendation 2.7: The people elected to represent the public in parliament need to be more diverse and more closely represent the make-up of the UK population so that people can recognise themselves and their interests within the representative system.**

Supported by 83%



**Recommendation 2.8: Ministers need to be knowledgeable in the field they are appointed to so that the public can be confident that the decisions they are recommending are responsible and evidence-based.**

Supported by 93%



The final set of recommendations that members developed to improve the likelihood and quality of public engagement with the existing institutions of representative democracy related specifically to the diversity and skills of MPs. Despite acknowledging considerable change in recent years in the demographic profile of members of the House of Commons, Assembly members still felt that parliament was dominated by an

unrepresentative group of older, upper-class men. They believed that this was a barrier to many believing that parliament was a place they might either influence or belong in.

While recognising that standing for election to parliament was not something that the majority of the population would wish to do, members also felt that not enough was being done, by parties and the institution itself, to make standing for election a viable option for a wider range of people – particularly people from working-class backgrounds, with disabilities, or those whose first language may not be English. This, they felt, was part of the reason why parliament is not currently as representative of the country as it could be. These sentiments reflected those expressed in the formulation of Principle 14, which called for diversity in our elected representatives.

Members also questioned the competencies of many MPs to lead on portfolios as ministers if their previous education and professional experience had not given them specialist subject knowledge – a point that closely mirrors Principle 10. (Similar concerns also relate to Recommendation 1.3, which calls for the publication of the advice given to ministers to enhance public confidence that policy decisions are evidence-based.)

## The Role of Petitions to Parliament

In considering how the public could influence policymaking between elections, members focused on the petitions system as one way of pushing issues up the agenda. During the evidence sessions, members learned that the required response to a petition to the UK parliament is currently limited to:

- a government response where a petition receives 10,000 signatures
- consideration for a debate in parliament (which does usually take place in some form) where a petition receives 100,000 signatures.

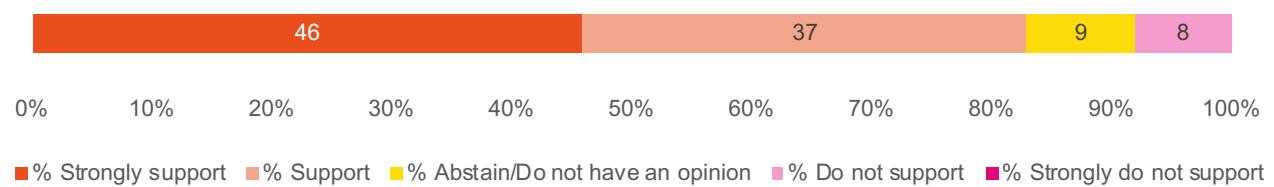
Members also heard about the similar systems in the Scottish Parliament and in the Senedd.

Members agreed the following overarching resolution:

### Resolution 3

We believe that petitions are an important way for the public to influence government policy and what is debated in parliament, and that the use of petitions should be extended.

Supported by 83%

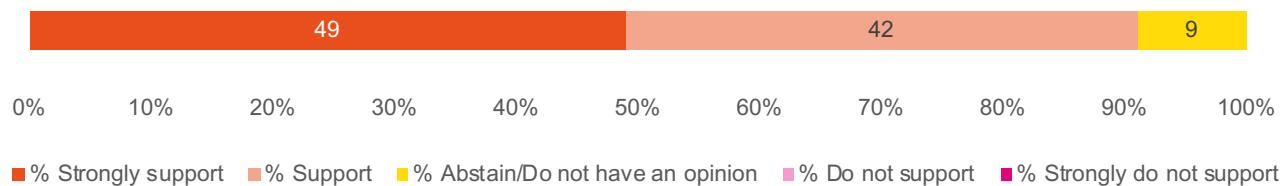


Assembly members felt the current petitions system was under-utilised, and that the public's right to influence the parliamentary agenda was undervalued if debates on petitions went unresolved. Members therefore favoured an extension of the petitions process as a way to reconnect the public to democracy. The further recommendations below, presented in their own words, flesh this principle out. They cover both the frequency of petitions and the range of outcomes that the petitions process can deliver.



**Recommendation 3.1: To encourage more participation, and to give people a practical experience of involvement in the political process without being connected to any political party position, there needs to be much wider public awareness of the petitions process, the petitions that are 'live' and what they can deliver as an outcome.**

Supported by 91%

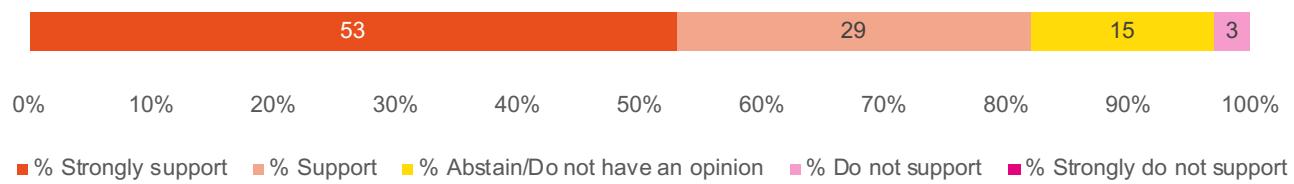


Increasing public awareness of the ability to initiate a petition to parliament was seen as an important first step. Unlike party political campaigns, members viewed the petitions process as a largely non-party political way for people to engage with and support initiatives they care about. Several members further noted that signing a petition and monitoring its progress could be an effective way of increasing political awareness and understanding among those who have not previously actively engaged with the political system.

However, members did caution that simply signing a petition was a rather shallow level of engagement that could have many motivations, and this may have contributed to this recommendation receiving strong support from only 49% of members. It was also stressed that, unless petitions became more impactful, public expectations would need to be well managed in any drive to promote their wider use.

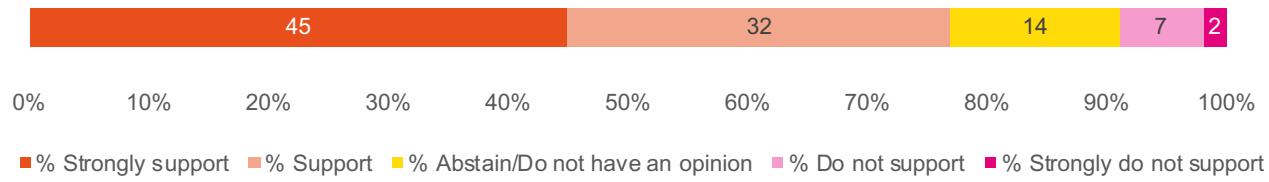
**Recommendation 3.2: The powers of the petitions system should be extended to ensure that when a petition is debated in parliament it leads to a vote that can be acted on.**

Supported by 82%



**Recommendation 3.3: Any parliamentary debate initiated through the petitions process should be meaningful, with government and parliament engaging seriously with the issues. One way to achieve that might be to require a minimum number of MPs to attend (perhaps a percentage of the number of seats held by a party).**

Supported by 77%



At the heart of Recommendations 3.2 and 3.3 is a demand from Assembly members to change the current system so that, if a petition is debated in parliament, that debate is meaningful and results in a

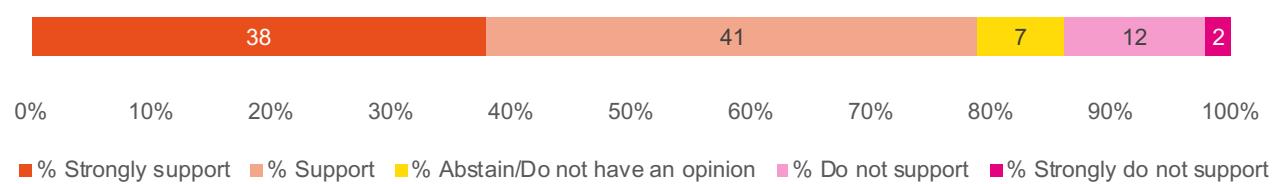
vote that can be acted on. Members also expected that, if a proposition was rejected following the debate, the government should have to make a further statement explaining its position.

When members learned from questioning the expert presenters that the minimum number of MPs required for a debate was three, they were alternatively shocked or dismayed. Recommendation 3.3 explicitly seeks a guarantee that, when a promised parliamentary debate occurs, a substantial number of MPs should attend and participate. Members felt that this heightened engagement with debates initiated via petitions would signal greater respect for the public and increase people's trust that their MPs were listening to them.

Recognising the demands that more debate on petitions would place on parliamentary time, there were further suggestions by members that the effective implementation of these recommendations may require the threshold of support to be increased from 100,000 signatures.<sup>18</sup> There were also calls from members for stronger verification methods for eligibility to sign a petition if the impact of petitions was increased. Suggestions included requiring signatories to include their National Insurance number or their Government Gateway unique identifier code.

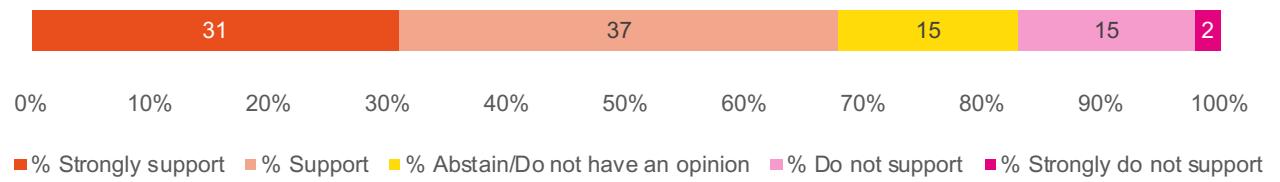
**Recommendation 3.4: The powers of the petitions system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a citizens' assembly be convened to provide advice to ministers on the considered view of a representative group of the public on an issue.**

Supported by 79%



**Recommendation 3.5: The powers of the petitions system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a public inquiry into an issue.**

Supported by 68%



In considering what, if anything, a petition should be able to require beyond a parliamentary debate, members focused on three options: a citizens' assembly, a public inquiry, or a referendum. As Recommendations 3.4 and 3.5 show, they decided to focus on citizens' assemblies and public inquiries, and chose not to propose that a petition should be able to demand a referendum. This was primarily because they felt that, while referendums were important tools for direct democracy, small sections of the population should not be able to trigger them. They were well aware that petitions can be driven by interest groups or small segments of the population with interests in a specific outcome:

*In giving more power to petitions we need to manage the over-amplification of niche voices that can't speak for what is important to the public as a whole.*

<sup>18</sup> Despite engaging with the question of what this number should be, the Assembly did not make a recommendation. There were, however, suggestions made that it should be a percentage of the population eligible, or registered, to vote.

They also recognised that people may sometimes put their name to a petition without much consideration or understanding of the wider issues involved. Furthermore, as picked up in the recommendations supporting Resolution 4, they considered that referendums in the UK should be reserved only for issues of significant national or regional importance.

For all these reasons, members wanted petitions to lead initially to further deliberation, not directly to decision-making in a referendum. That can already happen if a petition leads to a parliamentary debate. But the recommendations that members supported – on petitions leading to citizens' assemblies and to public inquiries – reflected their desire for greater public influence.

Members backed these two recommendations on the basis that the number of signatures required in each case was still to be determined. They did not feel best placed to judge what that number should be, but felt that the UK should learn from other countries' experiences. They recognised this as an important matter that would require careful consideration before implementing their proposals.

A petition leading to a citizens' assembly (Recommendation 3.4) would allow MPs to hear the considered views of a cross-section of the population about the petitioners' proposal. Compared to a referendum, this had the potential to give decision-makers a more nuanced understanding of the public's response to a proposal.

*Holding a CA is like a great straw-poll on what the public is thinking. It's better than a referendum (too yes/no) as a CA brings more to the table, more overarching thinking and provides more food for thought for parliament/government.*

Recommendation 3.5 called for a petition to be able to instigate a public inquiry. While this was backed in the final vote by members, it had the lowest support of all the recommendations passed. Many members were concerned about the time commitment and cost required to launch a public inquiry, and a key reason given for not supporting it was that this level of investment needed to be decided by parliament as a whole. Most members felt, however, that provision should be built into the petitions system to ensure that government and parliament could not ignore situations where things had gone catastrophically wrong, repeatedly referring to the Hillsborough Inquiry as a case where public pressure had led to a thorough investigation. Nevertheless, there was also a clear indication in members' discussions that the number of signatures required for a petition to trigger a public inquiry should be very high.

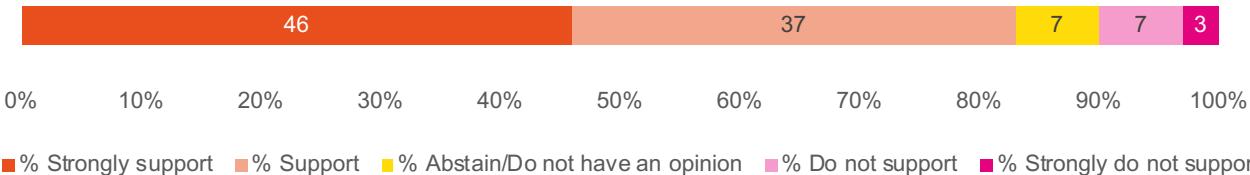
## The Role of Referendums

In exploring how the public can be directly involved in decision-making between elections, members considered, and broadly supported, the use of referendums. They agreed the following resolution:

### Resolution 4

We believe that referendums are an important tool for direct democracy that can add to a good democracy in the UK by handing important decisions back to the people.

Supported by 83%



Members generally supported the use of referendums to enable the public to make decisions about significant policy and/or constitutional changes between elections. This aligns with the Assembly's overall view that limits are needed on what a democratically elected government can do on its own. Members



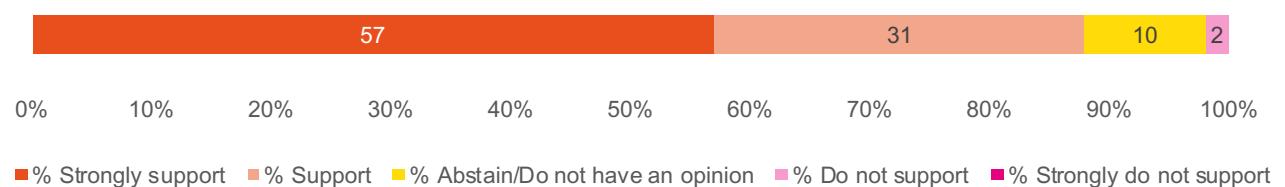
wanted the public to have more power to determine the outcome when substantial changes are proposed that would impact the whole of society. They also believed that the opportunity to directly effect change would enhance people's engagement with our democratic system.

*The public may feel re-invigorated that they can have a 'voice' on major government decisions that impact on their day to day lives and not feel marginalised and encourage those not normally interested in politics to participate.*

Despite the overall support expressed by members for the use of referendums, they were also keen to avoid overuse, and their recommendations below introduce a range of caveats for when and how referendums should be employed.

**Recommendation 4.1: Referendums should be used sparingly and predominantly for constitutional issues of significant national (or regional) importance.**

Supported by 88%



Members gave considerable attention to the types of issues or questions that should be decided by referendum, arguing that such votes were too important a tool to be used for trivial matters. This and concerns about cost were also the main reasons they decided not to proceed to voting on a draft recommendation saying that petitions should be able to trigger a referendum (see pp. 51–2).

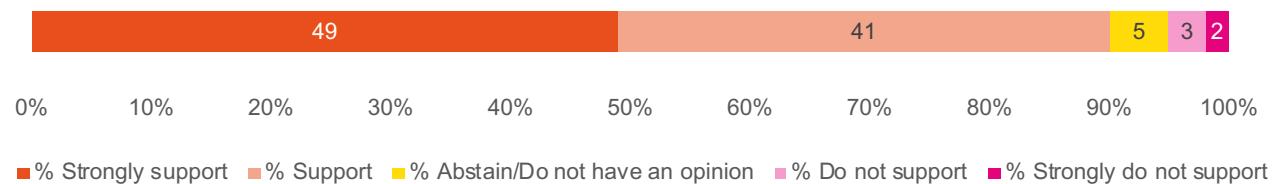
In developing Recommendation 4.1, members also considered whether contentious social, ethical or rights-based issues should be the topic of referendums in the UK, drawing on the Irish referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion to inform their discussions. Ultimately, they concluded that these were not the types of issues that should be decided by a popular vote unless revising an existing position would require constitutional change (as was the case in Ireland, but is not the case in the UK).

*Some issues feel suitable for Referendum, but some don't, so important to choose the right ones. The system of majority wins does not mean that the majority will be right? It may serve the interests of the majority but not be fair or favourable for everybody else.*

Members also expressed the concern that holding referendums too often might foster voter apathy and thus low turnout, which would diminish the legitimacy of the decisions.

**Recommendation 4.2: The use of referendums should be restricted to when there are clearly defined, but contentious, choices where the consequences of the decision can be accurately set out in advance.**

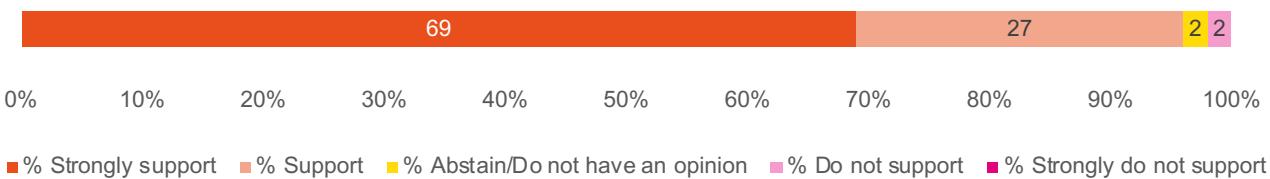
Supported by 90%



The referendums on European Union membership and Scottish independence were clearly at the forefront of members' minds when developing this recommendation. Notes from their discussions highlight the frustrations felt by those on both sides of these debates that there were too many unanswered and unanswerable questions about the processes and their consequences when they were asked to vote. The Assembly concluded that referendums are most valuable when the impacts of a decision are clear and set out in advance, so people can make a better informed choice, as was the case in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum.

**Recommendation 4.3:** In order to generate the trust needed for genuine, free and authentic conversations, involvement and outcomes, when a referendum is called there should be an impartial, non-political body (like the Electoral Commission) that is responsible for providing the public with clear, unbiased, factual information that they can use to understand the issues involved.

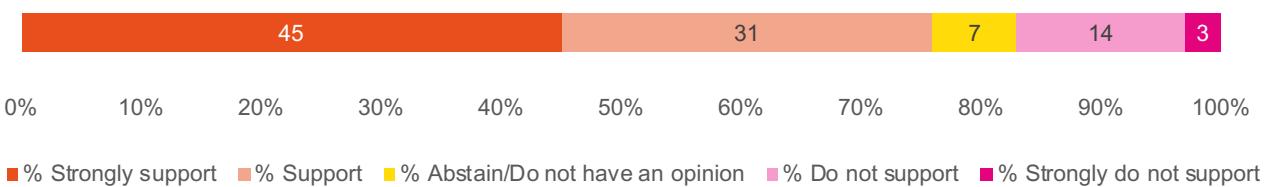
Supported by 96%



Related to the concerns highlighted above in regard to Recommendation 4.2, members focused on what they saw as a need for officially produced factual information about what a decision either way would mean. Reflecting again on their own experiences of the Brexit and Scottish independence referendum campaigns, members expressed concerns about how much 'spin' and misinformation was produced by campaigners on each side, and the challenges that many people faced in finding a trusted source. They heard that, at present, the Electoral Commission is able to provide only the most basic information. Members' concern about this issue was reflected in the fact that this recommendation was the most strongly supported of those about the use of referendums. Despite this, members did acknowledge that it would be very hard to implement this recommendation in practice without the adoption of Recommendation 4.2.

**Recommendation 4.4:** Referendums should only be considered as binding instructions to government if there is a supermajority result. 50% +1 support is not enough to be considered a mandate from society.

Supported by 76%



Again drawing on recent experiences of referendums in the UK, members spent considerable time debating whether the outcome of a referendum should be binding if the margin of the vote was narrow.

*Referendums that are close are contentious and divisive and [this] means it's not possible to move forward with the referendum result productively and with confidence that it really is what the population wants.*

Despite recognising, and broadly accepting, that the UK's representative system is designed to decide most political questions by majority, many members felt that referendums should require greater support than a simple majority in order to be considered binding. They argued that it was important the results were clear and well supported, particularly in matters of significant constitutional change. As the quotation above indicates, one argument in favour of this recommendation was that it would best enable stable, long-term implementation of decisions reached in this way. Recommendation 4.4 was, however, one of the Assembly's least-supported recommendations.

Members engaged with the question of what level of supermajority should be required, but did not feel sufficiently informed to make a determination. They did, however, note that the UK should learn from countries that have introduced supermajority requirements.

In their deliberations, the members also considered whether a certain level of voter turnout should be required to make a referendum binding. They thought that this could be an important way of ensuring that decisions made in this way really did represent the views of the public.

*When there is a low turnout, it only shows the view of a small number of people engaging and means that 'interested' parties can unfairly steer policy and laws in their favour over everybody else.*

Ultimately, however, they decided not to put a recommendation on this topic to a vote. On reflection, they concluded that such an arrangement would not be viable, as, particularly if referendums were held more often or on a wider range of questions, the high turnout rates seen in 2014 and 2016 would not be sustained. They feared that such a requirement could, in practice, simply result in holding costly ballots that were not conclusive.

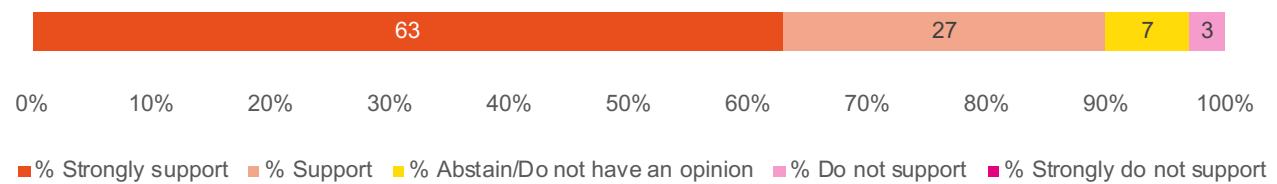
## The Role of Deliberative Processes

One non-traditional option considered for involving the public more formally in policymaking was the use of deliberative forums like citizens' assemblies. There was strong interest in seeing these types of processes used more broadly, leading to the following overall resolution:

### Resolution 5

We believe that deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies should be used more often by governments and parliaments throughout the UK to understand the views of the public.

Supported by 90%



It is no surprise that, at the conclusion of a successful deliberative exercise, members supported the use of deliberative processes to involve the public in policymaking between elections. Nonetheless, the arguments put forward by members about why they considered this an important tool for a good democracy in the UK deserve attention. Further, this resolution and the recommendations accompanying it clearly reflect the principles that members identified in the early stages of their deliberations as being important for the workings of a good UK democracy. These principles include fair representation (Principle 6), an informed and educated voter base (Principle 11), and power sharing (Principle 13).

The first positive aspect of processes like citizens' assemblies that the members highlighted was the requirement for participants to be broadly representative of the wider population. They recognised this diversity in the assembly that they were part of and valued what it added to their own deliberations. By contrast, they reflected that most other existing avenues for direct public voice – such as consultations, public meetings, and demonstrations – typically give government the perspectives for the most part only of already engaged segments of the population.

*We are all so different and coming from different places – but all focused on how to make things better once we got into it. It made it hard but exciting. This way you get a real range of the population involved and people learn from each other.*

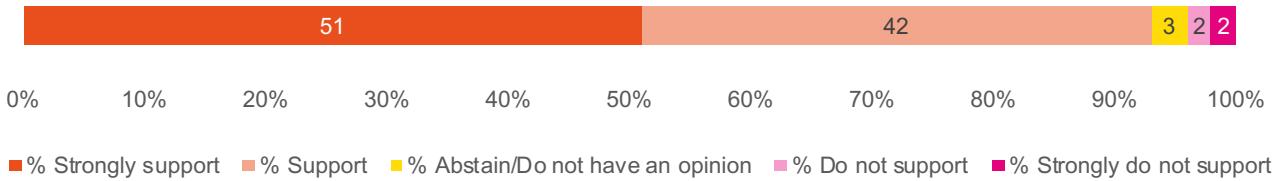
Members also noted that representative polling data is often used to give decision-makers information on public attitudes. Members were keen to see deliberative processes used to replace or complement such evidence because of the different type of insight that they can offer.

*In a deliberative process it is not just about the yes or no but about the thinking behind it. If MPs really understood where people were coming from it could help avoid costly mistakes and badly conceived proposals.*

Support for deliberative processes was not, however, unconditional. Members developed recommendations both to promote these processes and to limit their use to situations where they felt they would be most effective within the wider representative system. These are set out below, in members' own words.

**Recommendation 5.1: Deliberative processes should be used on divisive issues that are really important to people, either locally or nationally, and widely publicised and scrutinised so that they become trusted by the public and politicians.**

Supported by 93%



Assembly members initially focused on the types of topics that a deliberative process should be convened to address. Understanding that, in a truly representative process, members would be recruited to participate who had no pre-existing view on the issue in question, they prioritised using deliberative processes to explore questions that had wide-ranging implications for the public at large and for which public support for a way forward was not already clear. They argued that deliberative processes could give decision-makers valuable information on public preferences as they would report views that were developed 'in the room' in response to evidence, rather than entrenched positions.

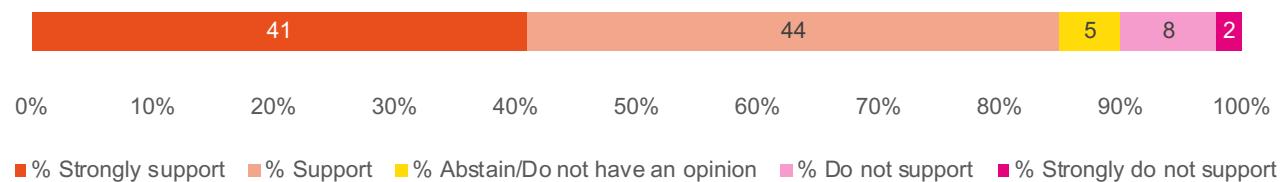
The second aspect of this recommendation focused on members' concern that processes like citizens' assemblies are not widely known, understood or trusted – by decision-makers and the wider public. They argued that the best way to promote growing understanding of the method and its potential contribution was through demonstrations of its value. They felt that if the public and politicians became more familiar with such processes, and saw considered, evidence-based recommendations emerge that were useful to decision-makers, then trust in their legitimacy would then increase.

*If people, in all parts of society, see assemblies happening more and producing good results then there is more chance that the answers they come up with are going to get believed and relied on.*



**Recommendation 5.2: The results of a deliberative process like a citizens' assembly should provide advice to decision makers but should not be binding, as that would be undemocratic since the members are not elected.**

Supported by 85%



**Recommendation 5.3: The results of deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies that are initiated by government or parliament need to have an impact. When they are convened, there should be a guarantee that their results will be made public, their recommendations will receive a detailed response from the convening body, and they will be debated in parliament.**

Supported by 93%



In Recommendations 5.2 and 5.3, members made two points. First, they thought that the conclusions of an initiative like a citizens' assembly should not be binding:

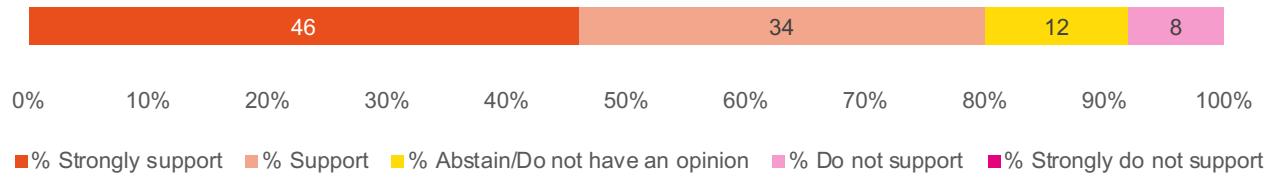
*Deliberative processes can clarify the viewpoint of the public, to inform decisions and to 'educate' the public and decision makers but anything more would risk undermining basic features of our democracy with things that are not enough proven and tested – yet!*

Second, they nevertheless expected the findings of an officially commissioned deliberative process to be considered seriously and to affect decision-making – indeed, Recommendation 5.3, making this point, received particularly high support.

In developing these recommendations, members built on the rationale underpinning Principle 16, that it is central to representative democracy that those elected to represent us must ultimately be responsible for the decisions taken. But they also wanted decisions to be taken on the basis of the best evidence and advice possible, including the considered views of the public.

**Recommendation 5.4: Citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries should be convened to advise on and sense-check new laws proposed by the government that are outside their manifesto commitments, as a formal mechanism of public scrutiny of new proposals. Their findings should be published.**

Supported by 80%



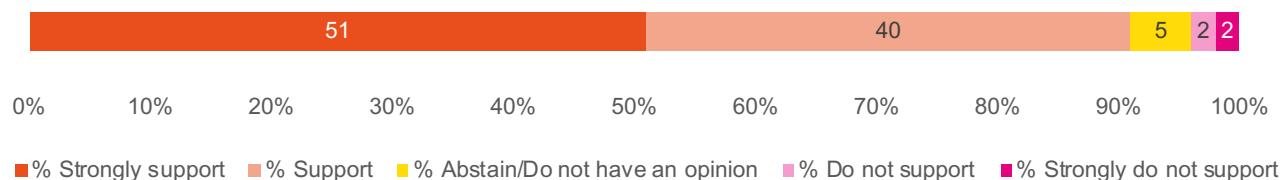
One specific use of deliberative processes that members prioritised in their recommendations was to provide a formal mechanism of direct public scrutiny for new laws proposed by governments that were outside the platform on which they were elected. This recommendation aligns closely with the scrutiny called for in Recommendation 1.6 and members' broader view that there should be limits on what an elected government can do without wider engagement and consultation.

In calling for deliberative processes to be convened in such cases, members were keen to ensure that governments were provided with a robust public assessment of proposals, alongside greater parliamentary scrutiny than at present.

*A great way of involving people in an ongoing way in the formal political structure. Bringing in a group like this one [would be a] great way of sense checking before new laws are made that impact people at a local or personal level that no one has realised before.*

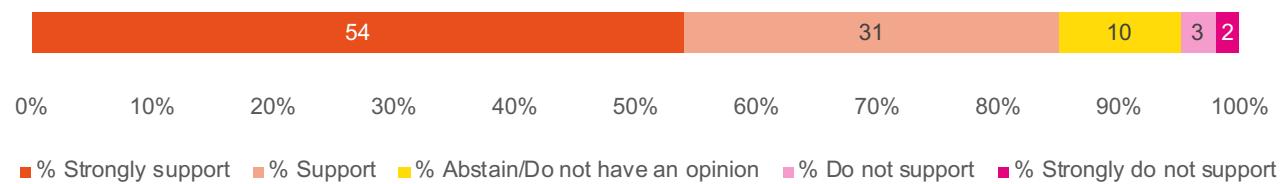
**Recommendation 5.5: Deliberative processes should be used to enhance local as well as national decision-making, so that decisions are made that are informed by what local people want.**

Supported by 91%



**Recommendation 5.6: MPs should hold locally based deliberative processes with a cross-section of their constituency before voting on controversial policy issues so that they can better understand the concerns of their electorate.**

Supported by 85%



Recommendations 5.5 and 5.6 focus on increasing the use of deliberative processes in both local and national decision-making. This ties back to the expectations expressed in the recommendations associated with Resolution 1, that MPs should more actively and visibly represent the views of their constituencies. These recommendations advocate a vehicle to help them achieve this.

*Regeneration projects, socially impactful issues that affect the community are the types of issues that should be discussed and decided upon through these types of processes [because] govt doesn't always understand local areas and is very London-centric.*

Both recommendations emphasise the need for a local focus, as members tended to believe that this was where the impacts of government policies were most felt. They called for greater use of local deliberative processes to enable decision-makers to better understand the local impacts and implications of national policies.

While valuing the demographic representativeness of a citizens' assembly, members recognised that this would not be practical in all circumstances. They thus considered the wording in Recommendation 5.6 carefully. The notes from members' discussions show that, in referring to a 'cross-section' of the constituency, they wanted to prioritise the active engagement of a wider demographic than may typically approach an MP, while recognising practical limitations. Therefore, the intention behind this recommendation was twofold: to encourage active outreach to expose MPs to a wider range of their constituents' views than might normally occur, helping to realise Principle 6 about fair representation; and to promote a deliberative culture within local communities that prioritised problem-solving and finding common ground, as called for in Principle 13.

*It's a way to make sure it's not the same people all the time making decisions! Open things up to make sure it's not just the same people taking part over many years. Otherwise they are open to manipulation and just accepting the way things are are the way they have to be.*

# Upholding Rules and Standards

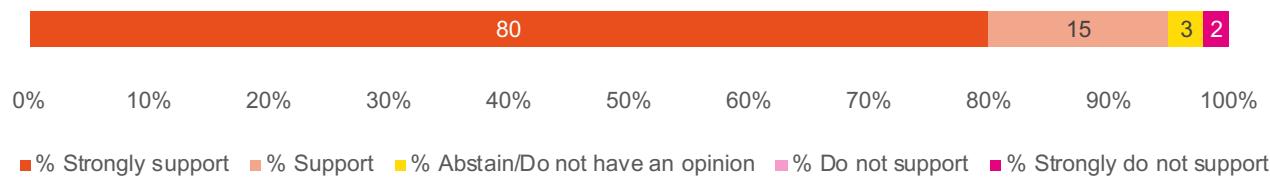
## Upholding Ethical Standards

Members of the Assembly expected high ethical standards of behaviour to be maintained by their elected representatives. After consideration of what the Nolan Principles<sup>19</sup> should demonstrate in practice, there was broad agreement that existing regulatory arrangements were insufficient. That led to the following resolution, which received the highest level of 'strong' support of all the Assembly's eight resolutions:

### Resolution 6

We believe that the public should be able to trust their elected representative to behave honestly and selflessly. While the political system is intended to have mechanisms in place to police this, we believe that they are not working well and that greater involvement of independent regulators is needed.

Supported by 95%



*You are serving the citizens – your own needs have to be set aside and you need to act on behalf of those who have given their voices to you.*

The Assembly met at a time of widespread concerns over insufficient responsibility, integrity and honesty among politicians, arising from allegations that ministers or other MPs had broken Covid-19 restrictions, lied in parliament, or bullied staff. As presented above, the need for more honesty in politics was the most widely agreed principle among members. There was also a perception that politicians were able to 'get away' with these behaviours, despite conclusions from regulatory bodies that their actions had overstepped the boundaries of what should be expected from those in public life. Members therefore felt that upholding appropriate standards of behaviour required stronger powers for regulators.

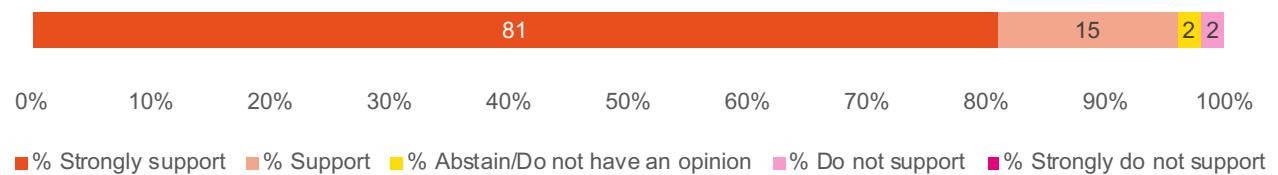
*Peer pressure and the 'culture' of parliamentary processes, along with pressure from and the expectations of the public, should act to increase accountability – but it is not.*

Members developed the following recommendations to deliver on the ambitions set out in Resolution 6. The recommendations presented below, which were the most strongly supported set of the whole Assembly, are in their own words and require little further interpretation.

<sup>19</sup> Presented here as the Seven Principles of Public Life in the UK, which are the basis of the ethical standards expected of public office-holders: Committee on Standards in Public Life, [The Seven Principles of Public Life](#) (31 May 1995).

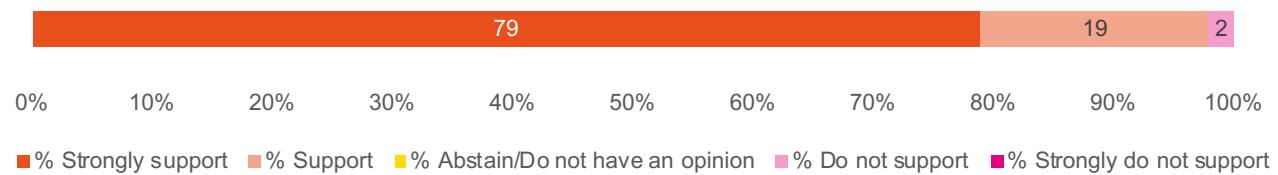
**Recommendation 6.1: The public should be able to expect members of parliament to conduct themselves ethically in their work and that regulators will investigate conduct that appears dishonest or self-interested, or lacks integrity.**

Supported by 96%



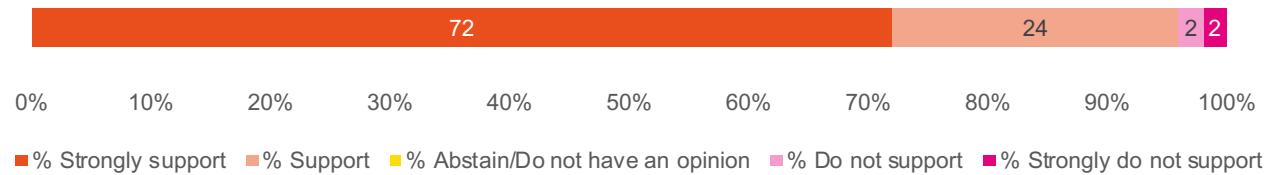
**Recommendation 6.2: The Code of Conduct for MPs, peers and government ministers needs to be strengthened to give clear guidance on what a breach will result in. Regulators need to recommend consistent sanctions to all parties and levels of office, and the public should be able to expect these to be imposed.**

Supported by 98%



**Recommendation 6.3: The public needs to be able to trust that the recommendations made after an investigation into ministerial conduct by an independent regulator appointed to do this will be respected and implemented by government. If this cannot be guaranteed through the political process then it may require regulators to be given greater powers.**

Supported by 96%



At the heart of Recommendations 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 is the expectation that improprieties and accusations that codes of conduct have been broken should be investigated by independent regulators, rather than at the discretion of the Prime Minister or by politicians, and that any sanctions proposed as the result of an independent investigation should be implemented. While members were clear in Principle 16 that they wanted elected representatives to have the responsibility for making policy decisions, they did not think those representatives should also have sole responsibility for policing their own conduct.

At present, within government, the Prime Minister decides whether allegations of ministerial misconduct will be investigated, and what the consequences will be if any breaches are found. In contrast, within parliament, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards can launch inquiries independently; the Standards Committee receives her reports and recommends any sanctions, but, as was seen in the Owen Paterson case (see p. 19–20), MPs can potentially overturn those conclusions. The Assembly's

recommendations closely align with the wishes of members set out in Principles 3 and 4, which together emphasise the need for more consistently applied penalties and greater accountability.

*Parliament needs to demonstrate leadership by enacting rules to close ‘loopholes’ that allow the privileged and rich to ‘game the system’ and avoid what the ‘ordinary person’ can’t avoid - needs legislative change and enforcement.*

**Recommendation 6.4:** Lying or intentionally misleading parliament should be able to be identified as ‘contempt of parliament’. As well as being made to give a public apology, MPs who break this rule should be fined or otherwise punished.

Supported by 98%



Members were also clear that stronger sanctions are needed when MPs knowingly act dishonestly. Lying to parliament received particular attention, although members recognised the potential difficulties in determining whether some statements were ‘true’ or not. When it could be proved that an MP had knowingly lied, members felt that an additional formal sanction was needed. They did not feel that the current system, relying primarily on the Prime Minister’s discretion and the expectation that MPs will behave with honour in the House, was enough to assure the public that they could trust what they were being told.

*MPs need stiffer penalties than others because if they lie, they are misleading millions of people who may vote based on wrong information. They can have a much bigger impact than if an ordinary person lies to the public.*

Reflecting these thoughts, Recommendation 6.4 received stronger support from Assembly members than any other recommendation.

**Recommendation 6.5:** In matters concerning the conduct of MPs we need to be able to rely on the political process, supported by independent regulators, to result in action by parliament. Matters relating to ethical behaviour should only be a matter for the courts if there is evidence of illegal activity, like fraud or theft.

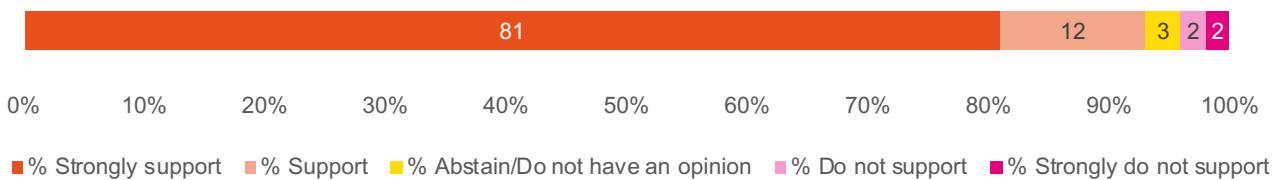
Supported by 93%



Despite the call for tougher, and more consistently imposed sanctions than at present, members were also clear that this should primarily remain a parliamentary and regulatory responsibility. They argued that this function should be a core part of the political system within a strong and healthy democracy, embodying the qualities of leadership, accountability and integrity that they expect from their elected representatives. They therefore concluded that any involvement of the judiciary should be reserved for when there was evidence of criminal activity.

**Recommendation 6.6:** In the workplace MPs should be subject to the same sanctions as other employees regarding the treatment of staff. Bullying or harassment should not be tolerated.

Supported by 93%



In their last recommendation relating to their expectations for the behaviour of elected representatives, members focused on a matter of recent concern. They felt very strongly that staff working within parliament or government should have the same protections from abuse as anyone else. They emphasised in their discussions relating to this recommendation their belief that, despite MPs' and ministers' unique and privileged positions, they operate in a workplace, and the rules that apply in other workplaces should be applied equally in parliament and government. In this, members were reinforcing the idea set out in Principle 3, that rules should apply equally to everyone in a good UK democracy.

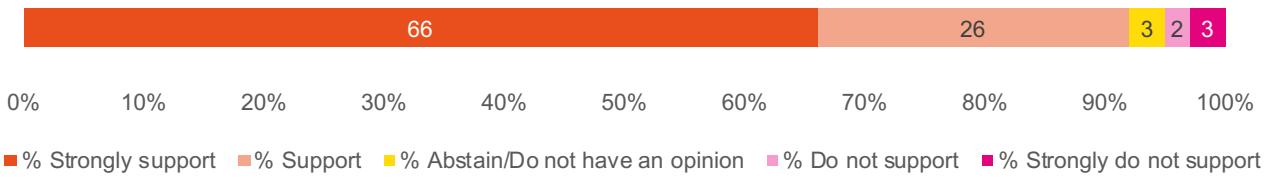
## The Role of the Courts

Throughout their deliberations, members saw value in the judiciary having an enhanced role in reviewing laws that were seen to impinge on basic human rights and the fundamental features of our democratic system. They agreed the following resolution:

### Resolution 7

We believe that there is an important role for the courts to play in limiting the laws that can be passed by government when they are seen to challenge basic rights and core democratic principles.

Supported by 92%



Members particularly focused on a perceived need to protect the public from potentially extreme acts by government that would limit people's expected rights and freedoms. They were also very concerned that, particularly when a government held a large majority, traditional parliamentary mechanisms were not enough to prevent these excesses. As demonstrated by the level of support given to Resolution 7, the existing power of the courts to refer a matter back to parliament for reconsideration in some circumstances was not considered protection enough.

Members developed a series of recommendations designed to realise the ambitions of Resolution 7.



**Recommendation 7.1: Courts should be able to overturn laws that are judged as violating legally recognised human rights. Otherwise, they should not have the power to override the sovereignty of parliament.**

Supported by 86%



In saying that courts should have the power to overturn laws that are ruled as breaching the rights recognised in the Human Rights Act, members were calling for significantly strengthened judicial review. At present, courts can rule that a law is ‘incompatible’ with protected rights, but it is for parliament then to decide whether that law will be changed. While the evidence presented to members suggested that laws have almost always been changed in response to such rulings, members remained dissatisfied that this could be relied on. Many of the arguments raised in the members’ discussions related to a lack of trust in government to protect the rights of the public at large. Concerns were also raised that, even if government and parliament could claim majority support in the public for new laws, an independent body was needed to protect minorities, and defend what was ‘right’ over what may be popular.

*Human Rights Laws should help the government to govern by giving a strong steer about what is acceptable, but they are also a ‘line that can’t be crossed’.*

*When human rights are violated then the courts have to be able to intervene hard to prevent this.*

It should be noted that several members who did not support this recommendation stated that their concern related to the clause limiting the courts’ strike-down powers to violations of the Human Rights Act. They wanted the courts to be able to intervene more widely where laws were deemed discriminatory or contrary to the freedoms of sectors of the population.

**Recommendation 7.2: The basic features of our democracy that protect the public’s constitutional rights to participate and be represented should be hard for any government or parliament to change, and courts should be able to overturn, or require modifications to, laws that challenge these basic democratic rights.**

Supported by 90%



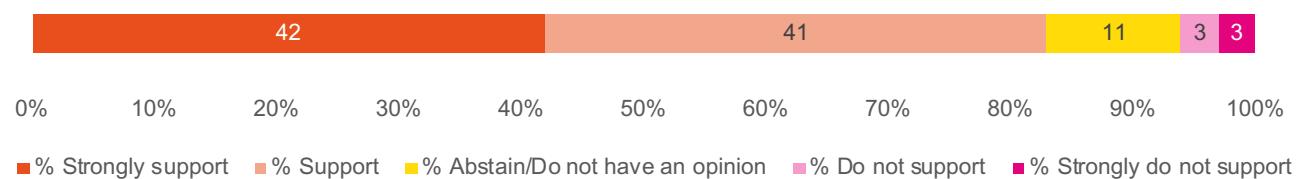
Individual democratic rights have some protection under the Human Rights Act. But members were keen to emphasise core features of our democracy, such as the right to vote in regular elections and to speak out and protest against government actions. Members wanted these to be not only protected by courts, but also ‘hard to change’ without significant scrutiny, debate and challenge, so that a majority government could not readily undermine democracy.



*A majority government can't just put a law through saying no more democracy and end up in a dictatorship. When a government has a large majority in Parliament, and can get most measures through the house, the courts should be used to restrain and modify any extreme proposed laws that shift the basis of our democracy. E.g. the present proposals to introduce voter ID.*

**Recommendation 7.3:** If the courts were to be given wider scope to challenge unfair laws and ask parliament to think again (beyond legally protected human rights) that power should be used sparingly. If overused it could mean we lose important features of our democracy and be governed by the courts rather than the people we elect to represent us.

Supported by 83%



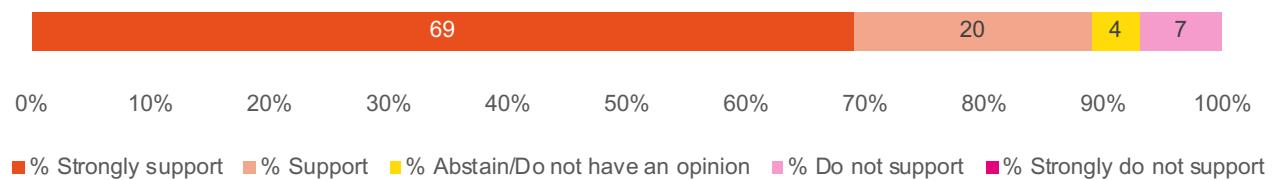
Recommendation 7.3 is grounded in a hypothetical future, in which the changes in powers called for in Recommendations 7.1 and 7.2 have been made. Although the courts do not choose which matters come before them, there was a strong hope expressed by members that reliance on judicial interventions should be limited, and used as a last resort when other forms of challenge and scrutiny had failed. Members expressed concerns that, if courts overturned decisions frequently, that would undermine the government's ability to govern and implement the programme it had been elected to deliver. This recommendation therefore supports Principle 15, that governments should be able to deliver on their manifesto pledges.

*Everyone has to abide by the same rule of law, checks and balances are important, but the courts should be there as a last resort, providing security that there is a line that can't be crossed.*

Members recognised that the recommendations above would significantly increase the powers of the courts. They therefore also voted on three specific recommendations that, if the wider powers they called for were not forthcoming, would be their priority areas for change.

**Recommendation 7.4:** In particular, the courts should have more powers to challenge laws that restrict basic democratic freedoms such as the public's right to protest and freedom of speech, which are currently under threat.

Supported by 89%



Recommendation 7.4 reflected a fundamental concern that members often raised throughout the Assembly meetings. It can reasonably be attributed to discussions within parliament at the time about measures that were perceived as restricting the right to protest. There was a clear view expressed by members (and attested to in the support for this recommendation) that preserving these rights was



important if government and the public were to be able to engage in a mature debate about policy and the future of democracy in this country.

*Government has pushed through a lot of laws under the terrorism act and COVID rules, that will have an impact on people and their right to speak out and protest freely, and do we even know what those laws are? It's important that [the] public should have these rights, without an over-zealous government pushing through laws with no challenge.*

**Recommendation 7.5: The government should not be able to limit the ability of the courts to scrutinise secondary legislation.**

Supported by 93%

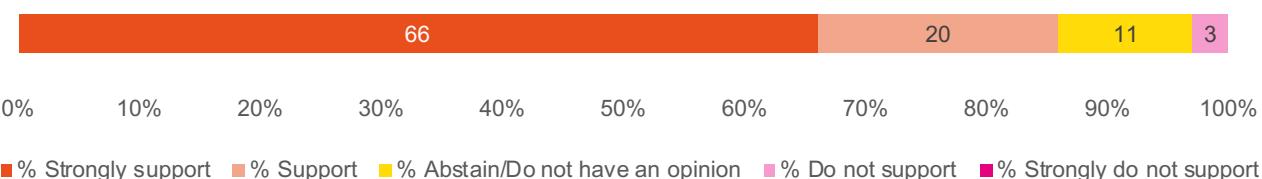


At the time Recommendation 7.5 was developed, there were reports that the government was investigating options to limit the power of the courts to challenge secondary legislation (although there was no firm proposal available for consideration).<sup>20</sup> In alignment with their earlier Recommendation 1.4, members were clear in their discussions relating to the role of the courts that secondary legislation should not be a route to allow a government to introduce significant changes without effective scrutiny and challenge. In developing this recommendation, therefore, the members were making a statement in support of the current situation.

*This is just the status quo - but it's the minimum standard. Secondary legislation already misses scrutiny from Parliament, so has to have scrutiny from somewhere. Having more people look at something can only be a good thing – otherwise legitimate concerns or unfairnesses get missed.*

**Recommendation 7.6: There should be no fast-track procedure available to government to override how courts interpret laws. Any such action should require parliament's explicit consent.**

Supported by 86%



At the time the Assembly met, there were suggestions that the government wanted to make it easier to override court rulings – though plans remained unclear and there were no specific proposals for the Assembly to consider.<sup>21</sup> In line with their recommendations associated with Resolution 1, members opposed

<sup>20</sup> The government published its proposals shortly afterwards: see Ministry of Justice, *Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights: A Consultation to Reform the Human Rights Act 1998* (December 2021), pp. 71–2.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Cross, 'HR reform: Raab plans mechanism to correct "incorrect" judgments', *Law Society Gazette*, 17 October 2021.



a potential ‘fast track’ procedure to overrule court decisions, which could potentially limit the role of parliament. While recognising that a majority government could still ‘push through’ its preferred outcome, members argued that it was important, in the interest of transparency, that the issues were fully aired in public.

*[It's important] so that we still have a democracy at all - otherwise a majority could essentially end this and pass any law it wants and render the courts powerless.... To lose our ability to question what happens in a democracy would be a dangerous thing as those in power could choose what they want and not what the people need.*



# Statements about Democracy in the UK Today

At the Assembly's final weekend, after considering the interplay and responsibilities of different institutions of governance in the UK, members were invited to 'step back' and consider their wider feelings about how democracy is working in the UK today.

Members were first given a list of words to consider, balanced between positive and negative options, with the option to add their own words. They were asked to choose the words that best expressed how they felt about the workings of democracy in the UK today. The frequency with which the words were chosen can be seen in the word cloud below. The most commonly selected were 'dissatisfied' and 'frustrated', followed by 'concerned', then 'hopeful' and 'disappointed'. The array of additional words that members added ranged from 'proud' to 'embarrassed' and 'redundant' to 'delighted'.



Building on this exercise, members then worked in small groups to develop statements elaborating on the most frequently chosen words. Each group was assigned one of the words they had focused on in their earlier discussions and asked to craft a statement saying why they felt that way and what a 'good' democracy in the UK would look like. Groups could develop further statements on other words if they wished. They developed 20 statements in all. These are presented below in the members' own words, without further comment, starting with the most popular words.

We feel **dissatisfied** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a lack of honesty and integrity in politics, combined with a lack of clear and unbiased information from both the government and the media.

In a 'good' UK democracy, we would want evidence of honesty and integrity in politics, backed up by investigative journalism and a balanced media that is able to challenge and scrutinise government and ensure the public are well informed.

We feel **dissatisfied** with how democracy is working in the UK today because the current system does not incentivise politicians to govern for all.

In a 'good' UK democracy those we elect to represent us would prioritise representing the people that voted for them and the issues that are important to their constituency.

We feel **frustrated** about how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a disconnect between people and the system. We do not feel listened to and there is no clear way to have influence. We need to feel that change can happen and that different voices are taken into account.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy citizens and politicians would be open minded, and minority opinions listened to and acknowledged. There would be a stronger relationship between elected representatives and their constituents – with both being responsible for this!

We feel **frustrated** by a sense of British complacency that just accepts the idea that our system of democracy is the best and does not need to evolve.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy we would learn from best practice in democracies around the world and ensure we have better educated voters. This will help us to better safeguard basic rights, protect the weakest in society, limit the power of the elites, distribute work more fairly and reduce homelessness and poverty.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because, while most MPs are honest and trying their best, they are overshadowed by the sleaze, scandal and incompetence of a few politicians which give government and parliament a bad name. This breeds unfairness and allows systems of regulation to be overridden.

But in a ‘good’ UK democracy there would be more inclusivity, honesty, and integrity. There would be a parliament that truly represents the people of the country, and did not simply act as a cheerleader for the government.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because of disappointing behaviour from politicians (especially those holding positions of power), an embarrassing political culture of dishonesty and lack of serious consequences for bad behaviours.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy politicians, and politics overall, would be interested in the greater good and be public service-minded.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because we feel it is spiralling downwards and getting worse. It doesn’t feel like there is much hope in sight, as there is no real accountability or redress.

But in a ‘good’ UK democracy the people in power would be held accountable for their actions and there would be clear sanctions in place if they breach, or break, their responsibilities to the electorate.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK because there is not enough diversity in the elected representatives in our current government.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy there would be fair, equal and proportionate representation in government, so that it represents the public as a whole. We should all experience the same version of democracy and be able to see ourselves within it.

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK because there are laws that protect our rights to vote and be represented.

But in a ‘good’ UK democracy there would be better connection and engagement between people and their elected representatives, and governments would be brave enough to listen to the recommendations of a Citizens’ Assembly.

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK because there’ll be another General Election soon.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy the people in power would have integrity.

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK today because it is a democracy and we do have a vote. Because of this governments do change and come to an end.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy however it is important that everyone should educate themselves about their vote and our democratic system, appreciate having a vote and a voice, and value that everyone is able to participate and has an equal right to be heard.

We feel **disappointed** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there are not enough ‘ordinary people’ in parliament and government.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy people wouldn’t feel inhibited to stand for election to represent their communities and the barriers that stop ordinary people being elected would be removed.

We feel **disappointed** about how democracy is working in the UK today because the agenda is too often party political, rather than being about working for us.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy the people, and their welfare, would be at the forefront of all policy, laws and decision making.

We feel **disappointed** in how democracy is working in the UK right now because, no matter which party is in power, a big part of the population is likely to be dissatisfied due to the nature of the current voting system.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy there would be new political parties which are changing with the times, a spending cap on campaign funding, and an opportunity to explore proportional representation to enable the better inclusion of everyone’s views in parliament.



We feel **let down** by how democracy is working in the UK today because our politicians often show a lack of honesty, openness and integrity. We expect more from them because of their position of power and authority, but currently it feels like '*do as I say, rather than do as I do*'.

In a 'good' UK democracy the system would be open, honest and transparent and there would be a culture of respect. Politicians would lead by example and be accountable for their actions.

We feel **let down** about how democracy is working in the UK today because we feel disconnected, not listened to and not represented.

In a 'good' UK democracy politics, parties and the government would be about public service, not self-service.

We feel **angry** about how democracy is working in the UK today because the electoral system is not representative. Within government there is a culture of nepotism and cronyism and an overall lack of respect for the public's right to challenge policy decisions.

But in a 'good' UK democracy, where the system is working as it should, we the public would have better mechanisms to allow our voices to count. We would also be well informed and better able to identify what issues to push forward and confident in the belief that, by acting, we could get change to happen.

We feel **optimistic** about how democracy is working in the UK today because our democratic system is better than in many other countries. Here we can all participate in, and talk freely about, our democracy without fear of facing consequences. Also, everyone can influence change via voting, standing for parliament, joining a political party of their choice, initiating petitions etc.

But in a 'good' UK democracy these mechanisms would work better. We still need to 'iron out the creases' and we hope some of the issues that have come to light during the Citizens' Assembly will help make a difference. We can't keep everybody happy, but we can maintain fairness through applying processes well.

We feel **distrustful** of how democracy is working in the UK today because of the blatant hypocrisy of the '*one rule for them and one rule for us*' situation that appears to be the norm in current UK politics.

In a 'good' UK democracy we would see integrity and accountability demonstrated at all levels of political office, with clear and trusted procedures and sanctions that require politicians to uphold the highest levels of conduct and don't just rely on people in power choosing to '*do the right thing*'.



We feel **insecure** about the way democracy the UK is working at the moment and question the strength of our democratic system to withstand attempts to rewrite fundamental principles of the British constitution without consultation with the people.

In a ‘good’ UK democracy we would have a representative system where elected members display respect for the core elements of our democracy and the people’s right to choose.



## Other Matters Raised by Assembly Members

With the Assembly lasting only six weekends, some elements of democracy inevitably received little attention, and members understandably sometimes found that frustrating. When they were surveyed at the end of the Assembly, members were asked whether there were any aspects of democracy they would have liked to discuss more. Four aspects were mentioned by multiple members:

- The electoral system/electoral reform (mentioned by 10 members)
- House of Lords/Lords reform (5)
- Education about politics and democracy in schools (3)
- A written constitution (2)

Given that these matters were not discussed by the Assembly as a whole, it is not possible to make any statements as to the balance of opinion on them. All of them could, however, be considered by further deliberative processes in the future.



# Concluding Remarks

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK is the first UK-wide deliberative exercise to have asked citizens how they think democracy in the UK should work. The Assembly has produced a raft of carefully considered conclusions, including eight broad resolutions and 51 detailed recommendations about key aspects of the democratic system.

Throughout their time working together, Assembly members were keen to hear how their recommendations would influence debates about the operation of democracy in all parts of the UK. It was their fervent wish that their labours should not go unheeded, and that politicians, officials, commentators, campaigners, and others who can shape our politics should play close attention.

We, the organisers of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, share that hope. The Assembly's members were a joy to work with. In their manifold diversity, they provided a microcosm of the UK's population, sharing both its frustrations with how our democracy works and its hopes that improvements could be made. Through six weekends of intense learning, discussion, and deliberation, they demonstrated that, given proper space and support, people can engage with complex topics and come to conclusions that are reasoned and consistent. It is not necessary to agree with every one of those conclusions to recognise that they deserve careful further scrutiny and reflection.

The conclusions of this Citizens' Assembly now lie in the hands of policymakers in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast. It is for them to take this conversation forward.



# List of Resolutions and Recommendations

The following is a complete list of the resolutions and recommendations agreed by Assembly members.

## The Relationship between Government and Parliament

### **Resolution 1**

We believe that parliament needs to be able to play a stronger role in scrutinising the actions of government. Collectively, it represents the voice of the electorate as a whole, whereas not everyone voted for the government.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 1.1: When significant new policies are announced by the government there should be an opportunity for full parliamentary scrutiny before decisions are made.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 1.2: While there needs to be scope for the opposition to question policies proposed by a democratically elected government, and for MPs to scrutinise details, when a policy was clearly laid out in their manifesto the government should not be unduly blocked or delayed in implementing it.

Supported by 84%

Recommendation 1.3: In the interest of transparency, but subject to the need to maintain security, there should be a public record of the expert advice given to the government to inform their policy decisions so that members of the public can understand the basis of the decision, even if they don't agree with it.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 1.4: Government should not be able to make significant legal changes – whether through primary or secondary legislation – without proper scrutiny. A cross-party parliamentary committee – not the government – should decide which laws are judged ‘significant’.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 1.5: In cases of emergency when there is a need to introduce new laws quickly without allowing for full scrutiny and debate, these should be clearly identified as temporary laws, with a scheduled review date as early as possible, at which point parliament should have the opportunity to debate the law, and to amend it or repeal it.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 1.6: When voting on new laws that were not key manifesto pledges, MPs should have permission to vote in a way that represents the views of their constituents without penalty, particularly on issues that directly affect their constituency even if that is against the position of their party.

Supported by 93%



Recommendation 1.7: MPs must be able to ensure that issues that are important to the public and/or have significant public support are raised in parliament, debated publicly and decided, even if they are not part of the government's programme or are something that the government actively disagrees with.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 1.8: The right of all elected MPs to propose a bill should be protected. A cross-party committee should decide which bills are debated in parliament. Where there is substantial support for a bill, time should be available to scrutinise it and decide on it properly.

Supported by 88%

Recommendation 1.9: More fixed time needs to be reserved in the parliamentary schedule to ensure that matters such as private members' bills and public petitions can be debated and decided, without being 'talked out'. But this should be balanced against the right of government to have the time to deliver on what they were elected to do.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 1.10: The government should propose when parliament goes into recess, but MPs should be able to debate and amend the proposal before a vote in parliament. Government can however recall parliament in the case of exceptional circumstance / emergency.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 1.11: A petition signed by half of the elected MPs should be able to demand that parliament is recalled from recess to debate important decisions.

Supported by 94%

Recommendation 1.12: The Prime Minister should only be able to call an early general election if it is supported by a vote in the House of Commons.

Supported by 78%



## The Roles of the Public

### Supporting Public Involvement in the Representative System

#### Resolution 2a

We believe that the UK public as a whole has to become more engaged with the existing opportunities to influence our representative system (voting, contacting MPs, supporting/joining political parties or campaign groups etc.) but we don't think that will happen unless people have more reason to believe that they can make a difference.

Supported by 98%

#### Resolution 2b

We believe that a good democracy in the UK needs voters who are engaged, well-informed and able to consider other points of view and opposing arguments in a constructive way.

Supported by 97%

Recommendation 2.1: The public need to see honest and transparent politics taking place on a day-to-day basis. All politicians should be close to and visible in the communities they represent, in order to help build connections and trust. That should include through in-person and online surgeries, and other events such as 'town hall' meetings, coffee mornings, etc.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 2.2: The education systems across the UK need to give more focus to educating young people and life-long learners to be 'political citizens' – ensuring they understand the system and the opportunities they have to influence decision-making.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 2.3: To make democracy in the UK the best it can be, members of the public need to take responsibility for ensuring that they educate themselves to make an informed choice when they cast their vote, but to support this they need to be able to easily access clear, unbiased information about the political process, political parties and individual candidates.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 2.4: Information on what is happening in parliament and government should be freely available to all in a form that is concise, factual, accessible, and unbiased. More work is needed so that people know where to look, and can quickly find the information they want.

Supported by 95%



Recommendation 2.5: We need a strong, independent media, supported by enhanced regulation, to ensure the fair and balanced reporting of political issues and increased public access to reliable fact-checking services.

Supported by 97%

Recommendation 2.6: To allow for effective public participation in political debate and scrutiny, freedom of speech and the right to protest need to be protected.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 2.7: The people elected to represent the public in parliament need to be more diverse and more closely represent the make-up of the UK population so that people can recognise themselves and their interests within the representative system.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 2.8: Ministers need to be knowledgeable in the field they are appointed to so that the public can be confident that the decisions they are recommending are responsible and evidence-based.

Supported by 93%

## The Role of Petitions to Parliament

### Resolution 3

We believe that petitions are an important way for the public to influence government policy and what is debated in parliament, and that the use of petitions should be extended.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 3.1: To encourage more participation, and to give people a practical experience of involvement in the political process without being connected to any political party position, there needs to be much wider public awareness of the petitions process, the petitions that are 'live' and what they can deliver as an outcome.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 3.2: The powers of the petitions system should be extended to ensure that when a petition is debated in parliament it leads to a vote that can be acted on.

Supported by 82%

Recommendation 3.3: Any parliamentary debate initiated through the petitions process should be meaningful, with government and parliament engaging seriously with the issues. One way to achieve that might be to require a minimum number of MPs to attend (perhaps a percentage of the number of seats held by a party).

Supported by 77%



Recommendation 3.4: The powers of the petitions system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a citizens' assembly be convened to provide advice to ministers on the considered view of a representative group of the public on an issue.

Supported by 79%

Recommendation 3.5: The powers of the petitions system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a public inquiry into an issue.

Supported by 68%

## The Role of Referendums

### Resolution 4

We believe that referendums are an important tool for direct democracy that can add to a good democracy in the UK by handing important decisions back to the people.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 4.1: Referendums should be used sparingly and predominantly for constitutional issues of significant national (or regional) importance.

Supported by 88%

Recommendation 4.2: The use of referendums should be restricted to when there are clearly defined, but contentious, choices where the consequences of the decision can be accurately set out in advance.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 4.3: In order to generate the trust needed for genuine, free and authentic conversations, involvement and outcomes, when a referendum is called there should be an impartial, non-political body (like the Electoral Commission) that is responsible for providing the public with clear, unbiased, factual information that they can use to understand the issues involved.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 4.4: Referendums should only be considered as binding instructions to government if there is a supermajority result. 50% +1 support is not enough to be considered a mandate from society.

Supported by 76%



## The Role of Deliberative Processes

### Resolution 5

We believe that deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies should be used more often by governments and parliaments throughout the UK to understand the views of the public.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 5.1: Deliberative processes should be used on divisive issues that are really important to people, either locally or nationally, and widely publicised and scrutinised so that they become trusted by the public and politicians.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 5.2: The results of a deliberative process like a citizens' assembly should provide advice to decision makers but should not be binding, as that would be undemocratic since the members are not elected.

Supported by 85%

Recommendation 5.3: The results of deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies that are initiated by government or parliament need to have an impact. When they are convened, there should be a guarantee that their results will be made public, their recommendations will receive a detailed response from the convening body, and they will be debated in parliament.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 5.4: Citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries should be convened to advise on and sense-check new laws proposed by the government that are outside their manifesto commitments, as a formal mechanism of public scrutiny of new proposals. Their findings should be published.

Supported by 80%

Recommendation 5.5: Deliberative processes should be used to enhance local as well as national decision-making, so that decisions are made that are informed by what local people want.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 5.6: MPs should hold locally based deliberative processes with a cross-section of their constituency before voting on controversial policy issues so that they can better understand the concerns of their electorate.

Supported by 85%



# Upholding Rules and Standards

## Upholding Ethical Standards

### Resolution 6

We believe that the public should be able to trust their elected representative to behave honestly and selflessly. While the political system is intended to have mechanisms in place to police this, we believe that they are not working well and that greater involvement of independent regulators is needed.

Supported by 95%

**Recommendation 6.1:** The public should be able to expect members of parliament to conduct themselves ethically in their work and that regulators will investigate conduct that appears dishonest or self-interested, or lacks integrity.

Supported by 96%

**Recommendation 6.2:** The Code of Conduct for MPs, peers and government ministers needs to be strengthened to give clear guidance on what a breach will result in. Regulators need to recommend consistent sanctions to all parties and levels of office, and the public should be able to expect these to be imposed.

Supported by 98%

**Recommendation 6.3:** The public needs to be able to trust that the recommendations made after an investigation into ministerial conduct by an independent regulator appointed to do this will be respected and implemented by government. If this cannot be guaranteed through the political process then it may require regulators to be given greater powers.

Supported by 96%

**Recommendation 6.4:** Lying or intentionally misleading parliament should be able to be identified as ‘contempt of parliament’. As well as being made to give a public apology, MPs who break this rule should be fined or otherwise punished.

Supported by 98%

**Recommendation 6.5:** In matters concerning the conduct of MPs we need to be able to rely on the political process, supported by independent regulators, to result in action by parliament. Matters relating to ethical behaviour should only be a matter for the courts if there is evidence of illegal activity, like fraud or theft.

Supported by 93%

**Recommendation 6.6:** In the workplace MPs should be subject to the same sanctions as other employees regarding the treatment of staff. Bullying or harassment should not be tolerated.

Supported by 93%



## The Role of the Courts

### Resolution 7

We believe that there is an important role for the courts to play in limiting the laws that can be passed by government when they are seen to challenge basic rights and core democratic principles.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 7.1: Courts should be able to overturn laws that are judged as violating legally recognised human rights. Otherwise they should not have the power to override the sovereignty of parliament.

Supported by 86%

Recommendation 7.2: The basic features of our democracy that protect the public's constitutional rights to participate and be represented should be hard for any government or parliament to change, and courts should be able to overturn, or require modifications to, laws that challenge these basic democratic rights.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 7.3: If the courts were to be given wider scope to challenge unfair laws and ask parliament to think again (beyond legally protected human rights) that power should be used sparingly. If overused it could mean we lose important features of our democracy and be governed by the courts rather than the people we elect to represent us.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 7.4: In particular, the courts should have more powers to challenge laws that restrict basic democratic freedoms such as the public's right to protest and freedom of speech, which are currently under threat.

Supported by 89%

Recommendation 7.5: The government should not be able to limit the ability of the courts to scrutinise secondary legislation.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 7.6: There should be no fast-track procedure available to government to override how courts interpret laws. Any such action should require parliament's explicit consent.

Supported by 86%



## Further Information

Extensive further information on the operation of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK is available on the [Assembly's website](#). This includes:

- the invitation letter used during member recruitment
- the conversation guidelines developed for how members would interact with each other
- recordings of the plenary sessions at each weekend
- biographies of speakers at each weekend
- briefing papers sent to members in advance of some weekends
- the list of adjectives presented at Weekend 6.

# Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the ESRC for providing the funding that has made this research possible (grant number ES/V00462X/1), to Professor Dan Wincott at Governance after Brexit for his thoughtful shepherding of the programme, and to the wider UK in a Changing Europe team for their unending enthusiasm and support.

We have benefited greatly from detailed and insightful feedback from the members of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Advisory Board in shaping the design and delivery of the Citizens' Assembly. We are immensely grateful for the generosity they have shown the project in their time and consideration.

We would also like to thank the members of the Constitution Unit and Involve teams who assisted in delivering the Assembly, including Ben Lauderdale, Charlotte Kincaid, Tom Fieldhouse, Rachel Cronkshaw, Alejandro Castillo-Powell, Ioana Maxineanu, Rebekah McCabe, Charlotte Obijiaku, Edd Rowe, Juliet Swann, Lucy Keown, and Louise McAllister. We are deeply grateful to Tim Hughes, the former Director of Involve, who was part of this project at its inception and skilfully led initial design work before his departure to pastures new. We thank the facilitators, who did brilliant work in guiding the Assembly's discussions at each weekend: Sarah Allan, Gary Austin, Janet Biggar, Michael Donnelly, David Gardiner, Liz Goold, Emily Graham, Hally Ingram, Darren Ivey, LaToyah McAllister-Jones, Andy Paice, Carl Reynolds, Anita Shervington, and Remco van der Stoep. And we thank the Sortition Foundation team for recruiting the Assembly's members, and Janine Clayton for her work on designing this report.

We are especially grateful to all of the expert witnesses who spoke to the Assembly: Professor Catherine Barnard, Dr Farrah Bhatti, Baroness (Shami) Chakrabarti, Professor Richard Ekins, Frances Foley, Baroness (Claire) Fox, Sir Stephen Laws QC, Dr Jane Martin, Dr Chris McCorkindale, Professor Nicola McEwen, Professor Anand Menon, Abiodun Michael Olatokun, Parmjeet Plummer, Dr Jamie Pow, Jill Rutter, Jess Sargeant, Sir Paul Silk, Willie Sullivan, Lord (Jonathan) Sumption, Paula Surridge, Gráinne Walsh, Professor Albert Weale, Dr Hannah White, and Jeremy Wright QC MP. They gave their time – often at weekends – entirely selflessly. They were remarkably forgiving of our requests to condense their years of learning and experience into talks of just a few minutes, and they gave Assembly members a depth of perspective and range of viewpoints.

Above all, we, the organisers of the Assembly, thank all of the individual members of the Assembly for their hard work, curiosity, and good humour throughout the project. This is their report.





Many questions have been raised in recent years about how well democracy is functioning in the UK. The proper roles of the different parts of the system – including parliament, government, the courts, and the general public – are contested. Governments, opposition parties, and campaigners throughout the UK have proposed changes. Understanding what the public think on these matters is vital.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK was formed so that a representative cross-section of the public could come together, learn about and talk through the issues with each other and with experts, reflect, and make recommendations. The Assembly had 67 members, who were carefully recruited to be representative of the UK's adult population. Over six weekends together, members examined the overarching question, 'How should democracy in the UK work?'. They focused on three main areas: the relationship between government and parliament; the roles of the public; and ways of upholding rules and standards.

Part 1 of this report outlines the organisation and operation of the Assembly. Part 2 sets out its conclusions. These include core principles that members think should underpin democracy in the UK, broad resolutions about how different parts of the democratic system should work, over 50 specific recommendations about particular aspects of the system, and statements summing up what members feel about how democracy is working in the UK today.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK is part of the UCL Constitution Unit's research project on attitudes to democracy in the UK, *Democracy in the UK after Brexit*. The Assembly was delivered by the Constitution Unit and Involve, the UK's leading public participation charity. This report was written by the Constitution Unit and Involve teams. But the conclusions are those of the members of the Citizens' Assembly. This is their report.

## About the Constitution Unit

The Constitution Unit is a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. It conducts timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Since its foundation in 1995, the Unit's research has had significant real-world impact, informing policy-makers engaged in such changes – both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

## About Involve

Involve is the UK's leading public participation charity. It develops, supports and campaigns for new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives. Since 2003, it has 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.

**The Constitution Unit**



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