Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Evidence Review: Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy in Wales

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report assesses the state of democratic innovation in Wales and provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen participatory and deliberative governance.

Drawing on a systematic review of international literature and comparative analysis of four cases – Scotland, the Basque Country, Ostbelgien, and Tuscany – the study identifies the conditions under which participatory practices transition from experimental pilots to durable, embedded features of democratic systems.

Mainstreaming is found to depend not on single factors but on the alignment of the Democratic Social Infrastructure: Political commitment, Supportive legal frameworks, Administrative capacity, Civic infrastructure and Coherent narrative strategies.

The Welsh baseline reveals a mixed picture:

▶ **Strengths:** Statutory participation strategies and citizens' assemblies demonstrate emerging institutionalisation.

▶ **Weaknesses:** Stakeholders report fragmentation, resource constraints, and varied mental models across government related to participatory and deliberative democratic practices.

The impending Senedd expansion presents a critical window for embedding participatory reforms alongside structural change. The report proposes five strategic recommendations:

1. Institutionalise mandate for participation in strategic documents. Formalise political commitment by developing a national Participation Strategy and embedding participation requirements into all relevant legislation and government strategies.

2. Ensure legal frameworks are enforced and tied to resource allocation. Strengthen existing legislation to mandate quality control and link funding to effective participation, while creating "legal hooks" in new laws to secure resources for democratic engagement.

3. Enhance and spread participatory and deliberative capability. Establish a central Participation and Deliberation Team to set standards and provide support, complemented by a systematic learning programme to build skills across government, public institutions, and civil society.

4. Enhance capacities of civil society. Expand the Democratic Engagement Grant beyond electoral participation to fund long-term democratic literacy, community deliberation, and co-design projects, with flexible design to reach marginalised groups.

5. Building a "Democracy for Wales" narrative. Create a shared brand or identity for participatory opportunities to build momentum, sustain legitimacy, and foster a sense of collective democratic progress.

Introduction

This report is based on research designed to inform practical steps for mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy in Wales. We aim to answer the call's core questions by analysing what approaches have been effective internationally in creating the conditions[1] for mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy, and the impacts observed where these efforts have been successful. Drawing on comparative case studies, our findings will provide actionable insights to help Wales foster a political culture that supports participation and deliberation.

The report is organised in five phases. It begins by synthesising the academic literature on institutionalisation and embeddedness, establishing a conceptual framework centred on democratic infrastructure and the systemic conditions that enable participatory practices to take root[2]. It then provides a baseline assessment of Wales' existing participation landscape, drawing on documentary analysis and stakeholder interviews to identify current strengths, gaps, and strategic opportunities. Four international cases — selected for their reputation, varied institutional designs and developmental trajectories, and similarities in context and scale — are examined in depth to extract transferable insights about enabling conditions, implementation pathways, and evaluation practice. An impact evidence-mapping exercise consolidates learning about how the effects of democratic innovation are understood and evaluated. Finally, the report presents a set of actionable recommendations tailored to the Welsh political and administrative context, alongside an assessment of feasibility, dependencies, and implementation considerations. In doing so, it aims to support Wales in transforming its emerging participatory infrastructure into a coherent, resilient, and internationally distinctive model of deliberative and participatory democracy.

» Glossary of terms

To improve readability for readers with varying levels of familiarity with the subject matter, the key terms that are used throughout the document are defined below:

> **Democratic innovation** *refers to the practices, processes, and institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance by expanding meaningful opportunities for participation, deliberation, and public influence. Although their formats vary widely — from participatory budgeting and civic forums to citizens' assemblies — these initiatives share a common goal: enabling citizens to play a more substantive role in shaping public decisions.[3]*

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1   By conditions, we mean this in the broad, non-causal sense, referring to the political, administrative, legal, cultural, and civic factors that research suggests may enable — or hinder — the durability of democratic innovations.

2   We acknowledge that our focus is mainly informed by the democratic-innovations literature, and that time and scope constraints prevented us from engaging with adjacent fields such as co-production, which could have offered additional insights.

3   Escobar, Oliver, and Stephen Elstub. 2019. 'Defining and Typologising Democratic Innovations'. In Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance, Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 11–31.

Deliberative democracy *focuses on how citizens reason together about public problems – placing reciprocal justification, informed discussion, and collective judgement at the centre of legitimate decision-making. Practices that are deliberative create structured, informed and inclusive discussions that support reasoning towards high-quality collective recommendations.*[4]

Participatory democracy *emphasises direct citizen involvement in shaping policy. The core idea is that citizens should engage with the substance of law and policy, rather than delegating responsibility entirely to representatives. Participatory approaches aim to widen public involvement and often emphasise empowerment and inclusion.*[5]

4   Cohen, Joshua. 2009. 'Reflections on Deliberative Democracy'. In Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy, eds Thomas Christiano and John Christman. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 247–63.
5   Cohen 2009.

Phase 01: Targeted literature and evidence review

One of democratic innovations' overarching aims is to strengthen citizen engagement between elections, expand inclusion, and enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of public decision-making. As these innovations have become more commonplace, the literature increasingly focuses on a key challenge: how to move these practices beyond experimental or pilot phases to ensure sustained influence within democratic systems over time. This concern has become especially salient as scholars seek to understand not only whether democratic innovations *"work"*, but under which conditions they can become durable features of governance.

A central question in this debate, identified by Graham Smith, is "how best to institutionalise or 'couple' participatory institutions with centres of power and other parts of the democratic system?".[6] This question has become foundational for discussions about transforming participatory and deliberative processes into stable and routine governance components, rather than temporary or peripheral interventions.[7]

» 1.1 Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy

In analysing how participatory and deliberative practices become established within government, the literature commonly employs two related concepts: institutionalisation and embeddedness.[8] Although often discussed together, they capture different aspects of how participatory processes take hold.

Institutionalisation refers to the formal integration of participatory processes into organisational or political structures – for instance through permanent citizens' assemblies, policy-mandated participation rights, or dedicated resources for engagement work. This dimension concerns the development of stable procedures and predictable routines that enable participation to occur regularly as a regular part of government/institutional process.

Embeddedness, however, refers to the extent to which participatory practices become recognised as legitimate, consequential, and normatively expected within the broader political and administrative culture. Embedded practices shape real decisions, resist removal, and are taken seriously by both institutional actors and the wider public. Whereas institutionalisation concerns the existence of mechanisms, embeddedness concerns their uptake and meaning within the system.

Consequently, mainstreaming participatory and deliberative processes in governance is understood to involve both the establishment of formal structures that support participation (institutionalisation) and the deeper integration of these practices into political culture, decision-making, and legitimacy

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6   Smith, Graham. 2019. 'Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Democratic Innovations'. In eds Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 572–81. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433862.00052 (January 23, 2025).

7   Fiket, Irena, Gazela Pudar Drasko, and Giovanni Allegretti. 2026. 'Towards an Innovative Democracy: institutionalising Participation in Challenging Times'. Politics and Governance 14(0). doi:10.17645/pag.11861.

8   Bussu, Sonia, Adrian Bua, Rikki Dean, and Graham Smith. 2022. 'Introduction: Embedding Participatory Governance'. Critical Policy Studies 16(2): 133–45. doi:10.1080/19460171.2022.2053179.

(embeddedness). In other words, mainstreaming refers not only to the creation of participatory mechanisms but also to ensuring that these mechanisms become resilient, influential, and recognised as a normal and trusted part of governance.

Across the literature, a consistent pattern emerges: the long-term impact of democratic innovations depends less on the specific method employed than on the broader systemic environment in which that method operates. Democratic innovations frequently struggle when there is lacking connection to wider institutional relationships, organisational cultures, or channels of political influence.[9]

As a result, successful mainstreaming requires political, organisational, cultural, and civic foundations that allow participatory practices to take root, evolve, and endure. To analyse these foundations, we rely on the concept of **democratic infrastructure** (see annex for explanation). By democratic infrastructure, we mean the constellation of relationships, capacities, norms, resources, and organisational arrangements that support participatory and deliberative practices to become routine, consequential, and resilient. This system-level perspective directs attention beyond individual mechanisms and toward the enabling environment that supports democratic innovations as ongoing governance tools.[10] This systemic understanding is further supported by Smith, who emphasises that the durability of democratic innovations depends not only on formal structures, but also on administrative routines, political leadership, and the narratives that shape how participation is understood within a political system.[11] These dynamics highlight that mainstreaming is not simply a technical exercise of institutional design, but a broader cultural and organisational process through which participatory practices become normalised.

» 1.2 Conditions for mainstreaming

Research on the mainstreaming of democratic innovations remains uneven. Participatory budgeting (PB) has been the principal site of large-scale comparative studies since its emergence in Porto Alegre in 1989, producing a relatively mature evidence base. By contrast, the mainstreaming of deliberative processes – such as Citizens' Assemblies and Citizens' Juries – has been examined far less systematically, in part because the number of long-standing, deeply embedded cases remains limited. As a result, generalisable insights about how deliberative processes become durable components of governance are still scarce.

Nevertheless, drawing on comparative PB research, emerging case studies of deliberative processes, and practical experience in design and implementation, it is possible to identify a set of recurring conditions that appear to support the mainstreaming of participatory and deliberative practices.

Here the term "conditions" is used in a broad, non-causal sense, referring to the political, administrative, legal, cultural, and civic factors that research suggests may enable – or hinder – the durability of democratic innovations.

9   Dean, Rikki, John Boswell, and Graham Smith. 2019. 'Designing Democratic Innovations as Deliberative Systems: The Ambitious Case of NHS Citizen'. Political Studies 68(3): 689–709. doi:10.1177/0032321719866002.

10   Amann, Daniela, Arild Ohren, Max Stearns, and Ilaria Mariani. 2025. 'Activating Ecosystems for Change by Enriching the Civic "Soil" for Social Innovation. The Wiener Klimateam Project as a Case Study'. In Social Innovation Projects for Climate Neutral Cities: Making Municipalities Sustainable with People-Based Solutions, ed. Sabrina Bresciani. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 75–89. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-87726-1_6.

11   Smith, Graham. 2025. 'Mainstreaming Participatory Climate Governance: Towards a Potential ECF Work Programme'. . Draft Advisory Note.

Condition 1: Political commitment and mandates

Comparative PB research consistently identifies political commitment as one of the strongest predictors of long-term institutionalisation. Matt Ryan shows that no PB process achieves durable success without some level of sustained political will.[12] Schiuma similarly identifies "explicit political commitment" as a necessary condition for PB institutionalisation.[13] Political leaders must not only endorse participatory practices rhetorically, but also support them through concrete decisions, resource allocation, and institutional protection. Clear mandates for follow-through, cross-party backing, and a willingness to grant participatory processes real authority all increase the likelihood that innovations persist rather than remain symbolic or episodic. Where political commitment is weak or absent, processes routinely struggle or collapse — even when other enabling factors are in place.

Condition 2: Supportive legal frameworks

Political will is closely tied to the legal and regulatory frameworks that provide stability for long-term institutionalisation. Regional or national legislation can mandate or promote participation, protect participatory rights from political turnover, and create room for experimentation. Schiuma's analysis suggests that supportive legal frameworks can help stabilise PB, but they do not determine institutionalisation. Political will can reinforce PB even when legal support is weak — or absent. Legal structures, therefore, can perform a dual role: they both enable participatory practices and shield them from vulnerability to shifting political priorities.[14]

Condition 3: Administrative capacity and capabilities

Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative practices requires both organisational capacity and professional capabilities. Capacity refers to the availability of staff time, budgetary flexibility, and institutional space to embed participation in everyday workflows, as well as the ability to absorb and implement the volume of work generated by participatory processes. Capabilities refer to the skills needed to design participatory processes, facilitate deliberation, ensure inclusion, and translate public input into policy.

Research on PB and deliberative processes demonstrates that meaningful administrative support — consisting of adequate capacity combined with committed, skilled staff — is often decisive for long-term success.[15] Evidence from Helsinki further illustrates this point: participatory processes, including PB, proved resource-intensive and required stable staffing and sustained organisational bandwidth, while improvements in service-design competence, interaction skills, and co-creation practices strengthened the quality and uptake of participation across the city's divisions.[16] Smith likewise emphasises the role of administrative actors, showing that bureaucratic will among senior officials, cross-government working practices, and the presence of "activist" public administrators are often crucial for embedding participatory approaches within everyday governance.[17]

12 Ryan, Matthew. 2021. Why Citizen Participation Succeeds or Fails: A Comparative Analysis of Participatory Budgeting. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

13 Schiuma, Domenico Andrea. 2025. 'What Factors Explain institutionalisation? A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Participatory Budgeting in Italian Big Cities'. Italian Political Science: 1–36.

14 Schiuma 2025.

15 Ryan 2021.

16 City of Helsinki. 2021. Assessment of the City of Helsinki's Participation Work in the Strategy Period of 2017–2021. Publications of The City of Helsinki.

17 Smith 2025.

Condition 4: Civic infrastructure and democratic networks

Civil society capacity and broader civic ecosystems also play an important role in strengthening democratic innovations. Active civil society organisations can mobilise participants, maintain engagement, and provide legitimacy and scrutiny. In Barcelona, for example, civil society actors helped sustain participatory structures during political shifts and experimented with new community-based practices that later shaped institutional reforms.[18] Civil society also often contributes to capacity building within public institutions, transferring knowledge and practical know-how that support the institutionalisation of participatory approaches. However, PB research consistently shows that civil society alone cannot compensate for weak political or administrative commitment; its influence is greatest when embedded within a supportive institutional environment.[19] Under such alignment, civil society becomes a reinforcing element that helps anchor democratic practices within local contexts.

Condition 5: Vision and narrative

Finally, democratic innovations tend to endure when institutions share an overarching democratic purpose — a clear sense of why participation matters and what it is intended to achieve. This involves long-term orientation, normative alignment across political and administrative actors, and the development of evolving democratic narratives that define participation as a legitimate and valued aspect of governance. Smith highlights the critical importance of narrative alignment, showing that participatory governance becomes more deeply embedded when political leaders articulate a coherent storyline linking participation to organisational purpose — and that mainstreaming falters when such narratives erode or lose resonance.[20]

Taken together, these conditions suggest that mainstreaming does not arise from any single factor. Rather, it emerges from the alignment of political, legal, administrative, civic, and narrative elements that collectively support participatory and deliberative practices to become stable, embedded features of democratic systems.

» 1.3 Strategies

Because political, administrative, and civic contexts vary widely, mainstreaming participatory and deliberative processes can take very different forms. However, several broad approaches can still be identified. Tim Hughes at the Open Government Partnership outlines a set of common mainstreaming strategies that governments use when attempting to integrate participatory practices more fully into democratic systems, and this section draws on that framework while supplementing it with additional illustrative cases from recent research and practice.[21]

18   Blanco, Ismael, Vivien Lowndes, and Yunailis Salazar. 2022. 'Understanding Institutional Dynamics in Participatory Governance: How Rules, Practices and Narratives Combine to Produce Stability or Diverge to Create Conditions for Change'. Critical Policy Studies 16(2): 204–23. doi:10.1080/19460171.2021.1984265.

19   Ryan 2021.

20   Smith 2025.

21   Hughes, Tim. 2024. 'What Does It Mean to Mainstream Participation in Decision-Making?' Open Government Partnership. www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/what-does-it-mean-to-mainstream-participation-in-decision-making/ (February 17, 2026).

Develop frameworks, minimum standards and guidance for the conduct of public participation:
The United States is developing a Federal Framework for Public Participation and Community
Engagement (PPCE) and a Federal PPCE Toolkit of leading practices, guidance and case studies.
Recent research also suggests that such rules of procedure can play a central role in mainstreaming
deliberative innovations by providing standardised frameworks and aligning local practice with
international good-practice principles.[22]

Institutionalise specific methods or mechanisms of participation: This could include constituting
a standing citizens' assembly or implementing a centralised digital participation platform. Finland has
developed a model of National Dialogues, which is continuing to be strengthened to improve inclusion,
expand use, and utilise their results. Ostbelgien's Permanent Citizens' Assembly and Paris's Citizens'
Assembly are often referenced as prominent examples of permanent institutionalised deliberative bodies
that illustrate this approach.

Introduce new or enhanced rights and requirements for participation: An example is the passing
of laws that require public involvement in certain decisions. Croatia introduced amendments to the
Rules of Procedure to require proposals of draft laws to undergo a consultative process (aligned
with the Code of Practice on Consultation). Proposals must also include a report on the outcomes
of consultations together with the relevant draft law. Norway offers an additional example of this
category: the Planning and Building Act legally mandates public participation in all municipal planning
processes, ensuring that citizens have enforceable rights to be involved in decisions related to land
use and building.[23]

Establish participation teams, centres of good practice, or independent participation bodies:
Armenia is establishing a Participatory Governance Unit within the Prime Minister's Office to
build institutional capacity for inclusive public participation.[24] Additional cases identified include
Baden-Württemberg's (Germany) Agency for Citizen Participation and Vorarlberg's (Austria) Office
for Voluntary Engagement and Participation, each operated as a centralised hub for designing,
coordinating, and guaranteeing the quality of participation processes across levels of government.[25]

Create dedicated budgets and resources to support public participation processes: Estonia has
developed a co-creation accelerator to support government ministries' engagement activities related
to EU structural funds by awarding grants of up to €50,000 and a three-day development programme.[26]

**Promote an institutional culture of openness and collaboration compatible with public participation
in decision-making:** The Netherlands is professionalising participation by establishing a knowledge
network of public participation professionals from within and outside government, supporting
interdepartmental collaboration on participation, and designing an online participation guide for
participation. A similar approach is visible in Helsinki, which has built a city-wide participation and
interaction model, established cross-departmental participation structures, and invested in digital tools
and liaison roles to cultivate an open, collaborative participation culture.[27]

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22 Pospieszna, Paulina, and Marta Hoffmann. 2026. 'institutionalising Democratic Innovations in Poland: Mapping the Evolution of Citizens'
     Assemblies Through Rules of Procedure'. Politics and Governance 14(0). doi:10.17645/pag.10596.
23 Ringholm, Toril, Torill Nyseth, and Gro Sandkjær Hanssen. 2018. 'Participation According to the Law? The Research-Based Knowledge
     on Citizen Participation in Norwegian Municipal Planning'. European Journal of Spatial Development 16(1): 1–20.
24 www.opengovpartnership.org/members/armenia/commitments/AM0047/
25 Smith 2025.
26 www.riigikantselei.ee/koosloome-arengukiirendi
27 City of Helsinki 2021.

Remove structural barriers to public participation: France is defining a Citizen Participant Status Framework to support people involved in long-term deliberative initiatives, potentially through payments or special work leave allowances, enabling greater accessibility and inclusivity. Simon Fraser University's Beyond Inclusion Guide[28] identifies a range of barriers to participation for various groups and strategies to address them. Strategies include developing tailored communication and outreach strategies for different communities, conducting engagement activities in formats, times and locations that enable participants of varying backgrounds to feel comfortable, and working with community members to frame and design engagement to ensure sensitivity and awareness to diverse norms and worldviews.

Some of these different approaches will be explored in the case studies below. As will become clear, governments rarely rely on a single pathway to mainstream participatory or deliberative processes. Instead, these approaches are typically combined, adapted, and sequenced in ways that respond to local political, administrative, and civic contexts.[29]

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28 Simon Fraser University 2020.
29 Smith 2025.

Phase 02: Welsh context baseline

This section provides a non-evaluative baseline overview of the existing landscape for democratic participation and innovation in Wales. It draws on publicly available documentation and interviews with two key agents[30] regarding participation in a democratic Wales.[31]

» 2.1 Existing participation initiatives and infrastructure

Wales has established several statutory and non-statutory initiatives to enhance public involvement.

▶ **Local Authority Public Participation Strategies:** Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, all local authorities are required to prepare and publish a public participation strategy. These strategies must outline measures to promote awareness of council functions, facilitate public access to information about decision-making, and encourage local participation. Authorities are legally obliged to consult people who live, work, or study in their area during the development or review of the strategy.

▶ **Citizens' Assemblies:** In recent years, citizens' assemblies have been used on national issues. In 2019, a Citizens' Assembly was convened to examine how people in Wales could shape their future through the work of the then National Assembly and it recommended making citizen deliberation part of how the Senedd works. In early 2023, Natural Resources Wales convened a 50-person Citizens' Assembly to develop a shared vision for the future of the natural environment. This deliberative process, informed by expert evidence and public research, produced a final set of recommendations intended to guide collaborative action.

▶ **Funding:** The Welsh Government administers a Democratic Engagement Grant. This fund provides approximately £400,000 annually over a three-year period to support innovative projects that increase democratic participation among underrepresented groups (e.g., young people, disabled people, minority-ethnic groups). The grant is open to local authorities, charities, and non-profit organisations, with explicit exclusions for party-political groups or straightforward communication campaigns.

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30 The two agents interviewed are a member of a democratic rights organisation with a background in Welsh think tanks and parliamentary work and a public worker specialising in public engagement in the Senedd.

31 'Building Culture for Co-Production'. 2025. Welsh Government. www.gov.wales/building-culture-for-co-production-html (February 17, 2026).

'Citizens' Assembly'. Welsh Parliament. www.senedd.wales/how-we-work/devolution-20/citizens-assembly/ (February 17, 2026).

'Democratic Engagement Grant: Guidance'. 2025. Welsh Government. www.gov.wales/democratic-engagement-grant-guidance (February 17, 2026).

'Nature and Us — a National Initiative on the Future of the Welsh Natural Environment'. 2023. Natural Resources Wales. www.naturalresources.wales/about-us/what-we-do/our-projects/our-nature-projects/nature-and-us-natur-a-ni-1/?lang=en (February 17, 2026).

'Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance on Democracy within Principal Councils'. 2023. Welsh Government. www.gov.wales/statutory-and-non-statutory-guidance-democracy-within-principal-councils (February 17, 2026).

'The Future Generations Policy Leader Toolkit'. Foundations for Tomorrow. www.foundations-for-tomorrow.thinkific.com/courses/the-future-generations-policy-leader-toolkit (February 17, 2026).

'Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: The Essentials'. 2025. Welsh Government. www.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-act-essentials-html (February 17, 2026).

► **Institutional Units:** Within the Senedd, a dedicated Citizen Engagement Team supports parliamentary committees. Its work includes conducting public surveys and focus groups, and arranging public meetings to gather input on committee inquiries.

► **The Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015** established five Ways of Working that the public bodies must demonstrate in their decision making in order to show that they are taking into account the impact that they could have on people living their lives in Wales in the future as well as in the present: one of the five Ways of Working is involvement of citizens. Also, the Act established Public Services Boards (PSBs) in each local authority area. These are statutory partnerships of key public service providers with a legal duty to improve the economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being of their area. PSBs are required to: analyse local well-being needs; set well-being objectives; prepare and publish a five-year Local Well-being Plan; and report annually on progress.

» 2.2 Stakeholder perspectives on the current state of democratic innovation

Interviews with informed stakeholders from civil society and the Senedd identified several cross-cutting themes regarding the Welsh context.

► **Fragmentation and resource constraints:** Democratic innovation is described as occurring in isolated pockets without a coherent national strategy or dedicated scaling pathway. Stakeholders note a lack of central funding, dedicated civil service roles, and strategic coordination, which is perceived to leave Wales behind comparable international systems.

► **Institutionalised but limited consultation:** The Senedd's Citizen Engagement Team provides a mainstream channel for public consultation. However, this work is reported to be almost exclusively consultative, with no formal co-production of reports or high-level deliberative engagement integrated into policy formation. Committees retain full agenda control. Interviews also highlighted a limited internal understanding of advanced participatory methods.

► **Strategic gap between electoral and participatory reform:** The dominant political discourse is reported to be focused on electoral or constitutional reform (e.g., Senedd enlargement, voting systems), while broader participation in decision-making is often sidelined. There is a perception that existing legal frameworks (such as the Well-Being of Future Generations Act or local participation strategies) create a false sense that participation is comprehensively addressed, whereas in practice, implementation may be technocratic and siloed. Stakeholders identified the impending expansion of the Senedd (from 60 to 96 Members) as a critical, one-time opportunity to embed new democratic practices alongside structural change.

Phase 03: Comparative Case Synthesis

To provide a focused and practical foundation for the Welsh Government's work, we have examined four distinct cases in which attempts have been made to embed participatory and deliberative practices within the permanent governance architecture. These cases — Scotland, the Basque Country, Ostbelgien, and Tuscany — were selected based on three criteria:

▶ each represent different approaches and starting points towards institutionalisation and embeddedness;

▶ each attained relative success and reputation for their efforts; and

▶ each are distinct regional cultures set within a broader state.

In developing these summaries, we relied on academic research, government and parliamentary documentation, independent evaluations, practitioner reports, and analyses produced by international organisations working in the field of participation. This was complemented by interviews with two key individuals who have contributed to shaping Scotland's participation strategy, providing firsthand insight into the development and implementation of their approach.

Each case study is examined through the Democratic Social Infrastructure framework. For each example, we begin by outlining the core governance structures and participatory mechanisms established, providing a clear picture of the innovation in practice. We then analyse the enabling conditions that facilitated its development, exploring the interplay of factors such as supportive legal frameworks, political momentum, and deep-seated cultural narratives. Finally, we review how the impact of these efforts has been evaluated, summarising both the reported outcomes and the limitations identified in assessing their long-term effects on governance and democracy.

A necessary limitation of this approach is the concise nature of these summaries. Each case represents a deep and complex history of political evolution, social context, and institutional change. Synthesising these experiences into a brief overview necessitates simplifying many nuances, specific challenges, and detailed chronological developments. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive history of each case, but to extract the most salient lessons, transferable insights, and common challenges to inform strategic thinking in Wales.

» 3.1 Scotland case

Case description

Scotland represents a long-running and multi-layered attempt to institutionalise public participation in government decision-making, combining legislative mandates, national-level coordination, and local experimentation. Participatory practices predate recent reforms, emerging from social movements in the 1960s, but became more visible and politically salient following the 2014 independence referendum, widely described as a watershed moment for public engagement. Following the referendum, a series of reforms institutionalised participatory budgeting and several citizens' assemblies and citizen juries

were implemented. However, momentum has stalled in subsequent years, with democratic innovations suffering from diminishing resources and political leadership. Currently, several key governance arrangements remain:[32]

▶ At the national level, participation is primarily the remit of two teams: the Participation and Communities Team (PACT) of the Scottish Parliament and the Open Government team of the Scottish Government. The PACT works to embed public participation into parliamentary decision-making processes and support Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and Scottish Parliament staff in delivering participation processes and developing their engagement capabilities. The Open Government team of the Scottish Government works internally with the Scottish Government, and in partnership with Scottish Parliament, public bodies, third sector, academia and civil society to make government more open, transparent and accountable. An important element of their role is shifting internal narratives and securing buy-in for a more participatory way of doing government.

▶ At a local level, a key feature of Scotland's participatory governance architecture is the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) model. CPPs consist of public service bodies, such as local councils, police and fire services with an explicit remit to support cross-sector collaboration, public participation, and improvement of public services. The CPPs embody an institutionalised avenue for policy and programme-influencing public participation. The CPPs were enabled by the passing of the Community Empowerment Act (2015), which mandated one CPP per local authority. However, the effectiveness of CPPs has been constrained by several structural weaknesses: officers responsible for the operations of CPPs often do not sit neatly within existing institutional hierarchies; they frequently lack formal authority over decision-making; their development has been uneven and, in many cases, under-resourced; the skills and expertise of CPPs are uneven, resulting in mixed results.[33]

How they achieved it (enabling conditions)

Scotland's achievements towards institutionalising and embedding democratic innovation can be attributed to several enabling factors:

▶ **Legal frameworks:** Participation reforms were reinforced by a sequence of commissions and reviews (public service reform in 2011; local democracy in 2014), whose recommendations were endorsed by both the Scottish Government and local authorities. Further momentum came from:

— Community Empowerment Act (2015) paved the way for the institutionalisation of many participatory practices, including enabling community groups to request changes to public services, and enabling Ministers to require Scottish authorities to facilitate participation of members of the public in matters of authority, including budgets.

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32   This case study draws on the following sources:

-   'Progress to October 2023'. 2025. www.gov.scot/publications/open-government-action-plan-2021-to-2025-participation-commitment/pages/progress-to-october-2023/ (February 17, 2026).

-   Scottish Parliament, Participation and Communities Team. 2025. PACT Annual Report 2024–25. The Scottish Government.

-   Team, Digital Engagement. 2024. 'Meet the Open Government Team'. Participation. www.blogs.gov.scot/participation/2024/10/02/meet-the-open-government-team/ (February 17, 2026).

-   The Scottish Government. 2016. Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Part 2 Community Planning: Plain English Guide. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.

-   The Scottish Government. 2025. Public participation in policymaking: exploring and understanding impact. January 2025.

33   Escobar, Oliver. 2022. 'Between Radical Aspirations and Pragmatic Challenges: institutionalising Participatory Governance in Scotland'. Critical Policy Studies 16(2): 146–61. doi:10.1080/19460171.2021.1993290.

— The Commission on Parliamentary Reforms (2016-17), leading to a team focused on digital and deliberative innovations, and six people's panels organised to date, which formed the basis for institutionalisation formalised in 2025 and expected for the next parliamentary term.

— Agreement between national and local government to dedicate at least 1% of budgets to participatory budgeting (from 2018).

— The Scotland Open Government Action Plan (2021 – 2025) and a national Participation Framework guiding best practice.

▶ **Narratives and political momentum:** The Scottish referendum was a watershed moment for participatory reform. In the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum, Scotland had a high-quality and sustained public debate on their constitutional future. This created a democratic energy in the public sphere, which was supported publicly by prominent politicians, and helped drive the Community Empowerment Act, growth of participatory budgeting and general interest in deliberative democracy.

How impact was evaluated

Impact assessment in Scotland has relied primarily on:

▶ official audits, commissions, and reviews

▶ attitudinal surveys, particularly around trust in government and institutions

▶ process indicators, such as the adoption of participatory budgeting or the continued use of participatory mechanisms.

Reported impacts include:

▶ increased political openness to participatory processes

▶ influence on future government-led engagement processes.

Some evidence of influence on policy, though often indirect and mediated through feedback loops rather than clear causal links. However, the limitations are significant:

▶ evidence on social outcomes (e.g. equity, service improvements) is mixed or unclear

▶ attribution remains difficult in complex, multi-level governance systems.

Overall, Scotland demonstrated clear progress toward mainstreaming public participation during a period of sustained institutional and political commitment. However, in the absence of consistent strategic support and resourcing, participatory and deliberative processes have become uneven and fragmented. This agenda is still recovering from the disruptions caused by COVID-19, and upcoming elections will determine whether there will be efforts to revitalise participatory initiatives or further diminish its role. The case also highlights the difficulty of measuring deeper democratic impacts.

» 3.2 Basque Country case

Case description

The Basque Country represents a unique case of institutionalising democratic innovations from decades of multi-actor collaboration within and between public, private and citizen-led organisations that is anchored in a strong cooperative movement tradition with foundations in a communitarian tradition of participatory economic development. Characterised by co-creation, experimentation and partnerships with civil society and external governance expertise, the Basque government, along with its provincial and municipal counterparts have engaged in many pilot programmes to institutionalise participation from citizens, civil society and businesses. These include, but are not limited to:[34]

▶ the Basque Government created iLab, a public innovation lab on citizen participation, which also analysed the impact of citizen participation on the internal administration structure (2018 – 2020)

▶ the Basque Government's Open Eskola aimed to implement an open school for citizens as a space for meeting and learning to promote a more active citizenry in public affairs (2018 – 2020)

▶ the Province of Gipuzkoa has a General Directorate for Citizen Participation, which has the role of coordinating and promoting participatory practices across the province. The Directorate is responsible for implementing "Provincial Citizen Participation Programme"

▶ since 2016, the Province of Gipuzkoa has stewarded an innovation programme centred on deliberation. Named Etorkizuna Eraikiz (Building our Future), the experimentation and co-creation programme connects public authorities with 900 organisations, 50,000 citizens

▶ the City of Tolosa appointed participatory officers responsible for participation at city level and coordinates with Provincial level.

Some of these structures and innovations remain, while for others, their current status is unclear based on the literature and internet searches.

How they achieved it (enabling conditions)

Several factors enabled public institutions in the Basque Country to attain the level of collaboration and democratic participation amongst civil society organisations and citizens:

▶ **Cultural narratives:** Cultural narratives around collaborative community work are linked to the Basque's economic transformation and play an important role in legitimising collaboration in government. In the Basque country, the concept of "Auzolan" – collaborative community work (OECD, 2024) – is deeply embedded into the cultural and social fabric. The concept implies joining forces with others to do what one cannot do oneself (Basque.eus, 2026). Examples of Auzolan

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34   This case study draws on the following sources:

-   Barandiaran, Xabier, María José Canel, and Geert Bouckaert, eds. 2023. Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province. Leuven University Press. doi:10.11116/9789461665058.

-   'Home – Etorkizuna Eraikiz – Gipuzkoa'. Etorkizuna Eraikiz. www.etorkizunaeraikiz.eus/eu/ (February 17, 2026).
    OECD. 2024. 'Promoting Deliberative Democracy in the Basque Country in Spain: Lessons from the Tolosa Citizens' Assembly'. OECD Public Governance Reviews. doi:10.1787/544f7514-en.

-   'OPEN ESKOLA Development and Strengthening of Citizenship. (ESPV0003) | Commitment from Basque-Country-Spain'. Open Government Partnership. www.opengovpartnership.org/members/basque-country-spain/commitments/ESPV0003/ (February 17, 2026).

-   Pagola, Jon. 2024. 'From Auzolan to Cooperativism (and Vice Versa): A Very Basque Way of Showing Ourselves to the World'. www.basqueculture.eus/en/stories (February 17, 2026).

can include *baserris*, the communal organisation of families in farmsteads, industrial cooperatives, and *ikastolas*, cooperative schools using Basque pedagogy with direct participation of parents.

▶ **Government strategies and policy frameworks:** Official plans and strategies refer to the Auzolan concept and historical traditions and serve to formalise narratives on multi-actor cooperation and participatory forms of governance (see *Collaborative Governance Framework for the Basque Country*, 2025). These strategies provide legitimacy to visions for democratic participation and enable mandate, legal statues and budgets and resources to be allocated towards the purposes of democratic participation.

▶ **Legal frameworks:** Collaborative community work has been codified into legal frameworks, enabling further accountability and funding for participatory efforts. Examples of legal statutes include:

— Province of Gipuzkoa – Provincial Law 5/2018 on Citizen Participation: participatory processes, promotes public engagement, and gives a basis for deliberative processes.

— "Decrees 1/2017 on the Interinstitutional Centre for Citizen Participation, 25/2017 on the Social Council for Citizen Participation, and R- 3/2011 on the registration in the Provincial Register of Citizen Entities for Participation further institutionalise these practices by establishing structures for coordination, support, and evaluation (The Gipuzkoa Provincial Council, 2017[4]; 2017[5]; 2011[6]).

— Tolosa City Council – includes legal basis for civic lotteries, the mandate and provisions to ensure inclusion.

▶ **Partnerships with external expertise:** Much of the structures, pilots and legal statues described above have been only made possible through partnerships with external expertise. Two partnerships are important to highlight:

— Since 2014, the Basque Country, and some of its provincial and municipal counterparts, have worked with Open Government Partnership to make successive 4-year action plans with the goal of ensuring greater openness and dialogue in public institutions.

— Arantzazulab is a laboratory for democratic innovation. Now under the framework of Etorkizuna Eraiki as a reference centre, the lab is a nonprofit, non-partisan foundation set up with the support of key Basque Institutions, including various provincial governments, foundations and Mondragon cooperative. Since 2022, Arantzazulab has helped deliver two citizens' assemblies (Province of Gipuzkoa and the City of Tolosa), is currently co-designing plans for permanent citizens' assemblies across different levels of government, and has collaborated with local and international actors promoting democracy and collaborative governance. Having not only a dedicated collaboration with a physical space has supported systematising democratic innovations in the Basque country.

How impact was evaluated

While programmes and actions delivered as part of the Open Government Partnership action plans were evaluated, given current research limitations, we have been unable to ascertain how they were evaluated and by whom.

» 3.3 Ostbelgien case

Description of the case

The Ostbelgien model is a globally recognised benchmark for the structural and permanent institutionalisation of citizen deliberation within a parliamentary democracy. Established in 2019 in the German-speaking community of Belgium (population ~80,000), it embeds ongoing citizen deliberation directly into the legislative process through a three-part system, moving decisively beyond short-term, ad-hoc experiments.[35]

The model operates via three core components with clear governance:

▶ A permanent Citizens' Council of 24 randomly selected citizens serving staggered 18-month terms. Its formal mandate is to set the agenda (initiating topics for deliberation) and to oversee the political response to recommendations.

▶ Topic-specific Citizens' Assemblies of 25—50 randomly selected citizens, which deliberate over several months to develop detailed policy proposals on topics set by the Council.

▶ A dedicated Secretariat of full-time officials responsible for impartial administration, civic lottery recruitment, and process facilitation.

The system is financed by a dedicated parliamentary budget and was formalised by a unanimous parliamentary decree in 2019, giving it the same legal standing as any other fundamental governmental process.

How they achieved it (enabling conditions)

The successful creation and durability of the model resulted from several key enabling conditions:

▶ **Political Commitment and Mandates:** The model was initiated following a successful one-off citizen dialogue on early childhood policy in 2017, which built cross-party consensus on the need for deeper participation. Parliament then cooperated with the G1000 platform to convene an international group of deliberative democracy experts. These experts were briefed on the community's specific context and met with all political leaders before crafting a model that blended global best practices with local political realities.

▶ **Supportive Legal Framework:** Critical to its permanence was the formalisation of the model via a unanimous parliamentary decree. This provided a stable legal foundation, equivalent to other core governmental processes, ensuring institutional continuity independent of political cycles.

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35 This case study draws on the following sources:

- Dejaeghere, Yves, Anna Rankamp, and Dominik Hierlemann. 2022. Shortcut 7: The Ostbelgien Model – Institutionalising Deliberative Democracy. Bertelsmann Stiftung.

- OECD. 2021. 'Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy'. OECD Public Governance Policy Papers. doi:10.1787/4fcf1da5-en.

- Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens, ed. 2024. Bürgerdialog in Ostbelgien: Übersicht Der Prozessoptimierungen in Der Legislaturperiode 2019–2024. Eupen: Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens.

- Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens., ed. 2025. Der permanente Bürgerdialog in der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens: Auswertung (2019-2024). Eupen: Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens.

- 'Permanent Sortition in Eupen, Belgium'. 2019. Participedia. www.participedia.net/case/permanent-sortition-in-belgiumongoing (February 17, 2026).

- Velghe, Pieter, Jehan Bottin, Christoph Niessen, Rebecca Gebauer, Ann-Mireille Sautter, and Min Reuchamps. 2025. 'The Ostbelgien Model: Five Years On'. Deliberative Democracy Digest. www.publicdeliberation.net/the-ostbelgien-model-five-years-on/ (February 17, 2026).

▶ **Administrative Capacity and Capabilities:** Parliament allocated secure, multi-year funding (initially €140,000 per year), thereby insulating the process from budgetary fluctuations. The establishment of an independent, professional Secretariat ensured methodological rigour, administrative continuity, and impartiality.

▶ **Built-in Mandates and Feedback Loops:** The model's design includes mechanisms that mandate political responses. Parliament is legally required to debate the Assemblies' recommendations and publicly justify its actions. Furthermore, the permanent Citizens' Council has proactively moved beyond its formal written-update mandate to initiate regular informal meetings with ministers and attend committee meetings, fostering direct dialogue and oversight of implementation.

How impact was evaluated

An evaluation by researchers at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL), analysing the first three citizens' assemblies (2020–2022), highlighted both strengths and a critical challenge:

▶ **Stability and Deliberative Quality:** The evaluation confirmed that the stable legal foundation and permanent structures provide essential institutional stability, continuity, and legitimacy. The quality of deliberative debate was found to be high, with a noted balance needed in topic selection between citizens' interests, the topic's suitability for deliberation, and the political mandate of the responsible institutions.

▶ **Critical Gap in Implementation & Accountability:** Researchers identified the implementation phase as the model's weakest link. They concluded that robust, public monitoring mechanisms to objectively track the adoption of recommendations are lacking. Beyond political assurances, such transparent tracking is critical for ensuring political accountability and preventing the process from being perceived as merely symbolic. The current system relies heavily on the Citizens' Council's proactive but informal oversight, rather than on formal, transparent reporting.

» 3.4 Tuscany case

Description of the case

In 2007, the Italian region of Tuscany created the "Authority for the Promotion of Participation" (APP): an independent body charged with the advancement of participatory culture. Established by law, the APP is granted approximately €750,000 per year. Its primary work involves the annual selection of local and regional participatory projects, proposed by Tuscan municipalities and regional civil society organisations. These projects differ in scope, issue or topic, as well as methods of deliberation, decisions, and public interaction. The APP also promotes Public Debates (inspired by the French model of débat public and the Commission Nationale pour le Débat Publique) on large public works within the regional territory. Public Debates are mandatory on public projects valued above 50 million euros but can also be activated for smaller works if requested by other parties and approved by the APP.[36]

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36 This case study draws on the following sources:

- Lewanski, Rodolfo. 2013. 'institutionalising Deliberative Democracy: The "Tuscany Laboratory"'. Journal of Deliberative Democracy 9(1). doi:10.16997/jdd.155.

- 'The Tuscany Regional Participation Policy, Italy'. 2019. Participedia. www.participedia.net/method/the-tuscany-regional-participation-policy-italy (February 17, 2026).

How they achieved it (enabling conditions)

The successful creation and durability of the model resulted from several key enabling conditions:

▶ **Political Commitment and Mandates:** Tuscany had a strong history of political activism and local-level participatory experiments, which provided a fertile ground for institutionalisation. The initial political push originated with Governor Claudio Martini, who was inspired by global forums. Although his successor was initially sceptical, the policy ultimately gained bipartisan support, leading to the permanent law.

▶ **Supportive Legal Framework:** The policy is anchored in Law 69/2007 (the pioneering law with a sunset clause) and its permanent successor, Law 46/2013. These laws mandate the integration of participatory democracy into governance. Crucially, the law itself was created through a two-year participatory process (2005-2007), engaging the public, NGOs, and local governments, which built ownership and legitimacy from the outset.

▶ **Administrative Capacity and Capabilities:** The establishment of the independent Authority for the Promotion of Participation (APP) created a central governance system with dedicated administrative capacity. The APP is granted approximately €750,000 per year to select and fund participatory projects and to manage Public Debates on major public works. This permanent, well-resourced structure enables the consistent implementation of the policy. Becoming a reference model in Italy and Europe further increased its political legitimacy and durability.

» 3.5 Insights from the case studies

The case studies highlighted several key insights for the Welsh context:

▶ The conditions for mainstreaming participation described in Section 1.2 were present in varying combinations in all of the case studies. Each condition, however, did not have success on its own; rather participatory successes were achieved through interaction and presence of multiple conditions working together.

▶ The experiences of Scotland, Basque Country and Tuscany demonstrated the important role of political activism and participatory experiments prior to formalisation through legal frameworks. On-the-ground experiments served as proof-of-concepts while political activism pushed concepts of deliberative and participatory democracy into legitimacy for decisions-makers.

▶ The Scottish and Basque case highlighted the important role of cultural narratives to build political momentum and eventually mandate, followed by formalisation through law. In both contexts, participation was embedded in broader narratives about national and cultural identity and democratic renewal, which were subsequently formalised through legislation.

▶ In Ostbelgien and Tuscany, strong political support translated more directly into legal institutionalisation, with political endorsement serving as a key enabling factor for embedding participatory mechanisms in formal governance arrangements.

▶ The Scottish and Basque cases show that while dedicated funding can resource citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting processes and other democratic innovations, financial resources alone are insufficient to guarantee effectiveness or quality. High-quality participatory and deliberative processes require specialised expertise and training in facilitation skills, process design, and evaluation capacity amongst others. Funding must be accompanied by appropriate capacity-building (via institutional design), and capability-building (leadership, participatory and deliberative skills and mindsets) across levels of government to ensure legitimacy, inclusiveness, and meaningful impact.

▶ Across the cases examined, there are notable challenges in identifying robust evaluations of the broader systemic impacts of participatory and deliberative democratic processes. Only one case (Ostbelgien) included an independent external research team tasked with evaluating outcomes, limiting the availability of comparative evidence on long-term democratic, policy, and institutional effects.

Phase 04: Impact evidence mapping

Across both the academic and applied literatures, there is broad agreement that the impact of public participation is multi-dimensional and occurs across multiple levels of the democratic system. Rather than being reducible to the question of whether recommendations lead directly to policy change, impact is understood to encompass a wider set of effects, including shifts in public debate, changes in institutional cultures and administrative behaviour, and the various cognitive, attitudinal, and civic outcomes experienced by participating citizens.

» 4.1 Areas of impact commonly evaluated

From literature, we can see that there are four broad areas of impact recur in analyses of participatory and deliberative processes:[37]

First, research examines **impacts on policy and decision-making**, including agenda-setting effects, influence on strategic priorities, incorporation of recommendations, and adjustments in policy implementation or organisational learning. While direct policy change is possible, it is widely regarded as difficult to attribute and only one part of a broader constellation of impact.

Second, evaluations consider **impacts on actors**, from participants themselves – such as changes in knowledge, confidence, trust, or civic agency – to policymakers and civil servants, who may develop improved understanding of public priorities or adopt new ways of engaging with evidence. Impacts on the wider public, including shifts in awareness, legitimacy perceptions, or discourse, are also commonly identified. These actor-level effects are often interdependent and play an important role in longer-term cultural change.

Third, studies document **impacts on institutions and systems**, including changes in administrative norms, policy routines, leadership practices, and the degree to which participatory governance becomes embedded rather than episodic. This literature stresses the value of treating participation as part of a broader policymaking system, rather than as a standalone intervention.

Finally, research highlights **impacts on wider democratic and societal outcomes**, such as increased transparency, strengthened trust, reductions in polarisation, enhanced public understanding of policymaking processes, and – where relevant – contributions to social or environmental objectives.

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37   Geissel, Brigitte, and Ank Michels. 2023. 'Conclusion: Democratic Innovations and Impact: Reflections and an Agenda for the Future'. In The Impacts of Democratic Innovations, eds Vincent Jacquet, Ramon van der Does, and Matt Ryan. ECPR Press, 285–97.

» 4.2 How impact was evaluated

Given the multi-dimensional nature of impacts, evaluations draw on a range of methodological approaches. The methods below illustrate common strategies used in both academic research and practice; they are not exhaustive but demonstrate the types of evidence typically mobilised to assess different layers of impact.[38]

Impacts on policy and decision-making are often examined through document analysis and policy-tracing, for example by linking assembly recommendations to subsequent decisions, policy documents, public statements, or implementation practices.

Impacts on actors – including participants, policymakers, civil servants, and sometimes the wider public – can be explored through surveys and behavioural measures. These methods allow evaluators to capture shifts in knowledge, confidence, trust, civic engagement, or attitudes toward democratic institutions and processes.

Impacts on institutions and systems are frequently assessed through interviews and ethnographic approaches, which help reveal cultural and procedural changes within organisations. This may include new administrative routines, altered interdepartmental relationships, or the normalisation of participatory practices within policymaking structures.

Impacts on wider democratic and societal outcomes can be investigated using media and social-media analysis, discourse analysis, and public opinion tracking. These techniques help identify changes in public debate, visibility, legitimacy, or broader democratic understandings associated with participatory and deliberative processes.

It is important to acknowledge that evaluating impact is difficult. As the Scottish Government report "Public participation in policymaking: exploring and understanding impact" notes, "It's bloody difficult."[39] Yet the same report also stresses why this work matters. As it argues:

> *"Whilst the challenge of charting, investigating and better understanding the ways that public participation processes impact on policy decision-making is not to be underestimated, stakeholder reflections and academic literature also clearly detail the risks associated with not resourcing this work. Public participation processes which are poorly designed and lacking in real pathways to impact… contribute towards further erosion of trust in public administrations and their political representatives as well as weakening the relationships between institutions and the citizens they serve."[40]*

Taken together, these insights underscore an important point: although evaluating impact is complex, failing to do so carries its own democratic risks. Without systematic attention to impact, participatory and deliberative processes may remain symbolic, fail to generate learning, or inadvertently undermine trust.

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38   Demski, Christina, and Stuart Capstick. 2022. Impact Evaluation Framework for Climate Assemblies. KNOCA.
     www.knoca.eu/app/uploads/2022/11/Impact-evaluation-framework-for-climate-assemblies-1.pdf.
39   The Scottish Government. 2025. Public participation in policymaking: exploring and understanding impact. January 2025.
40   The Scottish Government 2025: 65.

Given the methodological and practical difficulties associated with impact evaluation, one feasible and widely used approach is to collaborate with an independent academic partner. Academic research teams, if funded, are well positioned to apply rigorous methods, ensure impartiality, and dedicate the necessary time to track impact trajectories that unfold over longer periods — often well beyond the lifespan of individual projects.

Providing space and resources for researchers to study participatory processes can also contribute to building internal capability within government. Such collaborations can deepen understanding of the conditions that enable impact, foster reflective practice, and help ensure that participatory and deliberative approaches become increasingly embedded within organisational routines rather than remaining isolated or episodic. In this way, independent evaluation serves both an accountability function and a developmental one, supporting the long-term institutionalisation of participatory and deliberative governance.

Phase 05: Recommendations

Following the literature review of academic research and review of four case studies, we have developed five key recommendations to improve the mainstreaming of participatory and deliberative practices in the Welsh context.

» Recommendation 1: Institutionalise mandate for participation in strategic documents

International experience and research indicates that political commitment is one of the strongest predictors of long-term institutionalisation. Formalising this commitment in official strategies and action plans is a widely-used method towards mainstreaming participatory and deliberative democracy. Wales can:

▶ Develop a national Participation Strategy that sets a clear vision, action plan and responsibilities for implementation, and that demonstrates how local participation strategies will be supported.

▶ Build participation in legislation and action, ensuring that each strategy has a participation and engagement section, unless clearly not appropriate.

» Recommendation 2: Ensure legal frameworks are enforced and tied to resource allocation

Academic research and international case studies have demonstrated the role of legislation to promote participation, protect participatory rights from political turnover, and create room for experimentation. Legal structures enable participatory practices, directing resources and funding, and shield them from vulnerability to shifting political priorities. Wales can:

▶ Drive quality implementation of Local Authority Public Participation strategies. Enhance this legislation to mandate quality control and resource allocation tied to each local authority's public participation strategy.

▶ Create legal hooks for participation in new laws by seeking advice from Participation Team (see Recommendation 3) on forthcoming legislation to ensure opportunities for democratic participation are embedded in new laws, where possible linking resource allocation to effective participation.

» Recommendation 3: Enhance and spread participatory and deliberative capability

International experience and research demonstrates that the effectiveness and durability of participatory and deliberative governance depend heavily on the presence of stable, skilled, and distributed capacity.

To support the mainstreaming of participatory and deliberative democracy in Wales, capacity must therefore be developed at multiple levels of government, accompanied by clear standards, coordination structures, and long-term resource commitments.

We therefore recommend that Wales:

▶ Establish a core Participation and Deliberation Team within the Welsh Government, with links to the Senedd and resources to build relationships with civil society and participation experts. This should be a dedicated central team responsible for enabling, coordinating, and supporting participatory and deliberative processes across government (and local authorities).

   This central unit would act as the standards-setting authority, ensuring methodological consistency, quality assurance, ethical practice, and institutional learning.

▶ Develop and systematise an onboarding and continual learning programme on participatory and deliberative mindsets, skills and practices targeting politicians, staff at public institutions at all levels of government, and civil society organisations. Such a programme can be a task of the dedicated Participation and Deliberation Team or a separate "Participation Academy Programme".

» Recommendation 4: Enhance capacities of civil society

International experience and research has demonstrated the critical role of civil society in bridging the gap between governments and citizens, and acting as a counterweight and thought partner to enhance and spread participatory and deliberative practices. To enhance the role of civil society, Wales can:

▶ Extend the scope of its Democratic Engagement Grant programme beyond electoral participation to support the broader promotion of democracy. While increasing voter turnout among underrepresented groups remains important, a healthy democratic system also requires sustained civic engagement between elections. This broader remit could fund initiatives by Welsh charities and nonprofits that build long-term democratic literacy, facilitate community deliberation on local issues, and empower citizens to co-design public services. Crucially, this extended programme must be designed with flexibility and proactive outreach to groups that are marginalised within the current political system — those with the least trust, capacity, or know-how — are precisely the ones least likely to navigate a technocratic grant application process. Such an evolution would transform the grant from a short-term electoral tool into a permanent pillar of Wales' democratic infrastructure.

» Recommendation 5: Building a "Democracy for Wales" narrative

Experience has shown that achievements in embedding and institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy have capitalised on political momentum, but have also stalled when the political support goes away.

Building a clear narrative can support mainstreaming within institutions and increase public recognition, reinforcing trust. This is dependent on the communications and public perception around individual initiatives being good. Where this works, it creates a virtuous cycle, where success supports success, and this maintains interest and enthusiasm amongst decision-makers.

▶ Work with civil society and other institutions to build a strong shared narrative around "Democracy for Wales" (or a similar term), that can connect thinking and initiatives

▶ Explore a shared brand or terminology with shared oversight that connect opportunities to participate and build a sense of forward motion. Ensure that this is used by the government alone and in collaboration with an extended range of public service stakeholders, to demonstrate government-level engagement, and work with civil society and experts to provide quality assurance.

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Annex

In this deliverable, we use democratic infrastructure as an analytical framework for understanding the system-level supports that enable participatory and deliberative practices to become routine and durable within government. Democratic infrastructure refers to the political, administrative, legal, organisational, and civic elements that together create an environment in which democratic innovations can be sustained over time.

It comprises six interconnected components:

— **Political Commitment & Mandates** – the authorising environment created by sustained political will, public endorsement, and clear mandates for follow-through.

— **Administrative Capacity & Capabilities** – the organisational resources, time, staffing, and professional competencies required to design, deliver, and integrate participation into everyday workflows.

— **Governance Systems** – the structures, routines, accountability mechanisms, and coordination arrangements that embed participation in decision-making.

— **Supportive Legal Frameworks** – the laws, regulations, and formal procedures that stabilise participatory practices and protect them from political or organisational volatility.

— **Civic Infrastructure & Democratic Networks** – the civil society organisations, intermediary actors, networks, and wider public expectations that mobilise engagement and sustain democratic participation.

— **Vision & Democratic Purpose** – the shared democratic goals, values, and narratives that give coherence and direction to participatory and deliberative work.