Assessing the #DelibWave in the UK: a report on the impact of Citizens’ Assemblies in British Government

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Executive Summary

Citizens’ Assemblies (CAs) are groups of 40-150 randomly selected citizens, representing a cross-section of the community, who come together to discuss a complex and contested political issue. CAs have emerged as a new and exciting innovation within British politics. They offer the opportunity to engage citizens and create solutions to some of the most challenging policy issues. This report outlines key findings from a comprehensive audit of the recent proliferation of these events across the UK and their impacts on politics and policy.

* **A distinct UK blueprint for democratic innovation has emerged:** CAs operate within a consistent framework, cemented by the support of charities that help to organise many of the events across the UK. These charities ensure that a clear organisational blueprint of CAs is achieved whilst similarly enabling academics and experts to adapt each event to facilitate the various demands of each unique issue.
* **The #Delibwave has had significant impact on public debate about British democracy:** The unmistakable increase in the use of CAs in Britain has led key actors in Parliament and the media to take notice of the effects that these participatory processes can have. The number of mentions of CAs within Parliament has dramatically risen since 2015. A similar pattern can also be identified from the number of mentions of CAs in the news and media. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis initially halted some of this momentum, but innovative champions in the democratic sector have successfully moved many activities online.
* **Tangible impact on policy outcomes remains piecemeal and partial:** Despite the contributions which CAs have made towards public debate, the impact on public policy has been limited. The recommendations of CAs that are delivered to government commissioning bodies are not yet reflected in policy action.

In response to these findings, we recommend taking several steps to consolidate the progress made in the #Delibwave and to enhance capacity for tangible impact on policy outcomes.

1. **Increased attention requires continued investment in robust methods:** To maintain that the rigorous processes are upheld, CAs must continue to receive investment and commitment. This ensures that the processes remain robust to outside challenges or influence – something that only increases as they gain visibility in public debate.
2. **CAs need buy-in from a diversity of stakeholders:** Support from across the political spectrum, and from key stakeholders on the relevant issue, are crucial.
3. **There is a need to clarify the goals of CAs in advance, and connect them to deeper and broader forms of democratic participation:** To create a wholly successful CAs, the event must be provided with a clear remit in which its recommendations can lead to concrete action. Without this, the work and outcomes of an assembly can fall upon deaf ears.
4. **Evaluating long-term impacts on policy development will help to stave off criticisms about tokenistic engagement:** The structural processes of the assembly should also be tracked, with the outcomes and actions of commissioning bodies being followed to ensure accountability after the event. This success will be seen to empower their citizens, giving them clear channels of political engagement in which they can make real political changes for the future.

**Introduction: Where the Deliberative Wave has come from**

The recent explosion in interest in deliberative innovations – especially CAs in the UK – represents a rare good news story for democracy at the moment (Landemore 2020; OECD 2020). Moving from academic theory into practical reality, we have seen CAs held at different levels of governance in the UK - from local authorities to devolved administrations, and national level. These CAs have been designed to tackle a range of issues - including climate change, adult social care, Brexit, hate crime, urban regeneration, and rural land management. In this introductory section, we trace the origins of this development.

Perhaps the obvious starting point is growing popular disaffection with established democratic institutions and practices in the heartland of advanced liberal democracies. Today’s political context can be broadly characterised by political polarisation, mistrust, and voter apathy. The extent of the problem is highlighted in the ‘Global Satisfaction in Democracy Report’ of 2020, whose headline finding was that dissatisfaction in democracy has risen globally from 47.9% in the mid-1990s to 57.5% in 2020 – and that 2019 registered the highest levels of democratic discontent on record (Foa et al. 2020). Therefore, it should not be surprising that there has been a proactive response to tackle this across several western democracies. Looking specifically at the context of the United Kingdom, satisfaction in democracy has plummeted throughout the Brexit stalemate that has followed the decision to leave the European Union in 2016 (Gaskel et al. 2020). Disillusionment is especially targeted at ‘high politics’ in Westminster – but evidence suggests that the corrosive impact of declining trust in politicians bleeds into and impacts on levels of political engagement more broadly. There is documented decline in interest in the British population towards local government. In 2019, it was found that 32% of British adults did not want to be involved at all in local decision making - an increase in 10% from the year before (Hansard Society 2019).[[1]](#footnote-1)

To address these worrying trends, political actors across liberal democracies have sought to reverse these damages by reimagining how collective decisions are made (Chwalisz 2019).[[2]](#footnote-2) This has led to an exponential growth in support of Citizens’ Assemblies and deliberative processes across the world, in what has become known as a ‘Deliberative Wave’ (OECD 2020).[[3]](#footnote-3) The Deliberative Wave refers to the proliferation of novel processes of citizen engagement that reach out directly to members of the public. In general, these innovations are founded on the normative theory of deliberative democracy – the ideal that political decisions should be reached through a process of discussion that is inclusive, respectful and reflective. They typically entail a commitment to: establishing a cross-section of the public via random selection; provision of facilities and resources for extensive learning and discussion on thorny public problems; and development of some sort of outcome for policymakers or the public, either as a justified verdict on a proposition or a set of recommendations. They are associated with an increasingly established ‘toolkit’ of deliberative innovation, with a specialist sector of experts in prompting, designing and facilitating events.

Though there has been a history of piecemeal and occasional interest in deliberative experimentation since the 2000s, Britain has generally been a late adaptor of these ideas compared to countries like Australia, Canada, the US, and many parts of Western Europe (albeit see McLaverty 2009 for accounts of fore-running efforts to support deliberative innovation). The vigorous, coordinated promotion of deliberative innovation in the UK emerged largely from civil society in the middle of last decade. The groundwork was laid with research-led processes on local governance and Brexit in 2015 and 2016 (Renwick et al. 2017). Drawing on this evidence base, there have subsequently been calls for greater investment in deliberative innovation from social movements like Extinction Rebellion. There have also been key champions in political institutions such as Parliament and in Government. In the very recent past, Select Committees in the UK Parliament have commissioned CAs on Adult Social Care and Climate Change. At the national and local level, there has been even more action, with 18 processes commissioned in the last 3 years, including 3 via the UK government-backed the Innovation in Democracy Programme (IiDP). Full details are available in Appendix A.

**Methodology: A comprehensive audit of CAs in the UK**

The report builds on a comprehensive documentary analysis. Two researchers were involved in identifying deliberative innovations and analysing all key documentation associated with these events on the public record. We limited our search to innovations that self-labelled as Citizens’ Assemblies (usually), Citizens’ Juries or Citizens’ Panels (sometimes substituting People for Citizens’ in the title), and which avowedly followed the principles of deliberative innovation outlined above. Where no detailed information was available on an event (or when an event seemed to have been postponed due to the COVID pandemic), we reached out to local councils for confirmation. Documentary data was analysed according to a coding scheme developed from close engagement with the relevant academic literature. One set of codes related to the event itself: its remit, its scale, its methods of recruitment, and so on. The other set of codes was about the impact on participants, political actors, and policy outcomes. The dimensions of this analysis are clearly spelled out in Appendix A.

Documentary data was supplemented by other forms of qualitative data. One was ‘helicopter interviews’ with organisations and charities involved in running and supporting the events, to provide more comprehensive background and contextual information. We spoke with 8 such individuals in a purposive sample, some ‘on the record’ and some ‘off’. In a fortunate piece of happenstance, Boswell was also ‘randomly selected’ to participate in one of the local council Citizens’ Assemblies (see Boswell forthcoming), and we were able to draw on this unique insight as participant-observer to provide greater nuance to our findings and recommendations.

In addition to analysis of qualitative data directly linked to each innovation, we also undertook a content analysis of settings of public debate. The purpose was to identify broad trends across the UK in political attention for deliberative innovation. We drew on the Lexis Nexis (media coverage) and Hansard (Parliamentary debate) databases. Using specified search terms calibrated over several iterations, we were able to identify clear trends in the frequency with which deliberative innovation attracted attention in these high-profile settings of public debate. We read a sub-sample in-depth to ensure that increases in word frequency we found (in broad terms) matched the apparent good news story of proliferation across media outlets and in Parliament.

Overall, the method represents a mix of sources and approaches to provide the most comprehensive audit of deliberative innovations undertaken in the UK ever produced. In writing this report, our efforts link to and support a recent effort to review deliberative innovation across the OECD more generally (OECD 2020). This OECD report represents an extremely useful survey of historical trends across advanced liberal democracies. However, our report is both more up-to-date for the UK context (in fact, most such innovations in the UK take place after the census date on the OECD report) and more comprehensive, in that we focus in much more detail on the impacts of deliberative innovation on politics and policy. The audit also provides a more comprehensive account than the recent evaluation of the IiDP (Brammall and Sisya 2020). Finally, the audit also dovetails with recent work analysis by environmental groups to analyse the impact of climate-oriented Citizens’ Assemblies in the UK, which are an important subset of the broader class. Overall, it is timely and thorough, providing valuable new insight into an emergent phenomenon.

**Development of Distinct Blueprint and engagement of Key Actors**

There are many varieties of deliberative innovation (see OECD 2020). The particular model that has taken hold in the UK is the Citizens’ Assembly, inspired by the success of experiments in neighbouring Ireland and by research-led pilots in the UK (see Prosser et al. 2018). Throughout the proliferated use of CAs in the UK, a collective of charities and organisations have consistently supported the events, providing expertise and guidance as to how they should run. The outcome of this has been a visible consistency of methods and outcomes in CAs across the country – something that field leaders Involve have moved to systematize and proliferate. The IiDP is an example of this. The IiDP is supported by ‘the Democratic Support Contractor Consortium’. This is a collaborative group made up of; Involve, the Democratic Society, the RSA and MySociety, all of whom are heavily dedicated to improving democratic processes and democratic satisfaction in the UK. These groups, and others such as the Sortition Foundation, have supported Citizens Assemblies since their emergence into UK politics. The Sortition Foundation advocates for sortition and random selection methods of recruitment in Citizens’ Assemblies. Out of the twenty-one Citizens’ Assemblies focussed upon in this project, nineteen have used the stratified random sampling method. With the work of these groups maintaining this consistency, the CAs remove ideological or political bias whilst also ensuring their samples are representative of the demographics of local populations. Ultimately, with support from these organisations, CAs have become a reproducible ‘blueprint’, capable of offering recommendations that guide government policy on a broad spectrum of local issues.

Before the Coronavirus Pandemic and national lockdown, it is well noted that there was a deliberative wave spreading across global and UK politics. In 2019 alone, 10 CAs were held by councils in the UK (Lansdell 2020). Although CAs in the UK are traditionally expected to be held through face-to-face meetings, councils and other key actors are working hard to ensure that the events can be moved online. Since COVID-19 hit, there has been ongoing workshops for over thirty local authorities to provide a space to share learning and to explore how the pandemic has affected deliberative democracy (Lansdell 2020). Following the lead of the high-profile CA on Climate Change commissioned by multiple Select Committees in the House of Commons, CAs such as the ‘Lancaster District People’s Jury’ have successfully moved their deliberative processes online. However, despite the events overcoming these hurdles, the uncertainty of government planning and the economy has limited the immediate response to CA recommendations. This is shown by the ‘Greater Cambridge Citizens’ Assembly’. Even though the recommendations of this CAs noted both long, and short-term targets for Cambridge, in this current climate the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) have been limited to a short-term response. This highlights the fact that even with CAs moving onto online platforms, the influence and responses made from them will continue to be limited by the conditions of the pandemic.

**The impact of Citizens’ Assemblies on Political Participation and Public Debate**

This audit has recorded the details of CAs that have occurred in the UK over the past few years. The increased use of CAs has made significant impacts in British politics. These are notably among participants themselves, in parliamentary debate, and in media coverage. This section will look to build on this, highlighting more specifically the impacts that have been made in these areas.

Impacts on Participants

Consistent with evidence gathered in other countries (see Dryzek et al. 2019), it is clear that CAs often have a transformative impact on the participants involved. Often the major achievement of an assembly is the process itself in bridging the gap between citizens, experts and the policy-making process. When asked to evaluate assemblies they have taken part in, many citizens highlight this as a key highlight of their participation. In some communities with a history of division, assemblies can also perhaps help bridge the gap between the citizens themselves. In the case of Northern Ireland, the citizens assembly was set up with this as one of its goals, with the topic – social care reform – only selected later.

With the use of direct quotes and feedback from those involved in the processes, it is not only clear that new methods of participation are enjoyed, but that they also learn and benefit from them. This is highlighted in the feedback from the Waltham Forest CA on Hate Crime. In this, a participant named Keyne states that “Citizens Assemblies are a way for politicians to gauge what is actually useful and acceptable and what would be trusted by the publics that they are serving. And you don’t get that through most of our current forms of democracy" (quoted in Waltham Forest Council 2020). In a similar light, a participant named Sandra in the CA for Northern Ireland noted that “The assembly was a tangible and meaningful opportunity to participate in decision making on issues affecting all our lives. For me it was also a fresh way of looking at how to participate on a democratic society” (quoted in Involve 2019). These responses highlight not only the enjoyment of participation in CAs, but an obvious understanding that these deliberative processes should be welcomed further into the political processes of the UK.

Participants often highlight the educational impacts of CAs. This is expressed by a participant of the Camden CA on the Climate Crisis. They note that the Assembly, “Improved understanding of both the topic and what our local authority is doing about it”. Whilst also building “More confidence to speak about it to those around me” (quoted in Cain and Moore 2019). This sense of positivity and personal improvement is a theme which is encountered frequently across many CAs. This is continued by a participant of the CA for Brexit, who details that the Assembly “has been an excellent exercise and the information presented has given me a clearer perspective on the issues" (quoted in Renwick et al. 2017). These participant quotations highlight the several benefits that CAs offer. This demonstrates that not only do participants personally gain from the events by learning about different topics and gaining the confidence to speak about them but that the use of CAs is welcomed widely across the UK.

Impacts of Parliamentary Debate

With the deliberative wave coming to fruition in the last few years, this has nudged UK parliamentarians to sit up and take notice. This is a trend that can be identified when analysing Hansard data. Figure 1 illustrates the growing impact that CAs are having on Parliamentary debate in recent years. Members of Parliament are now mentioning CAs more frequently than ever. This growth in mentions can be largely accredited to the consistent and positive work that has been made by the several charities and organisations that ensure the successes of CAs across the UK.

Despite the increase in mentions of CAs and deliberative practices within Parliament, this does not necessarily suggest that the mentions of the events are positive. Therefore, it is important to have a closer inspection of the reactions of Parliamentarians. With this, it becomes clear that Parliamentarians opinions of CAs are shaped by a similar positivity that is displayed by the participants of the events. This was shown by Stephen Twigg MP, who, in Parliament on the 1st of May endorsed the Climate Assembly UK. He stated that “Such an assembly would present us with a real opportunity to put aside party politics and deliver a real mandate for action on climate change”. Adding to this, strong support of the use of CAs was demonstrated by Michael Russell MSP on the 26th June 2019 in which he recognized that "Citizens assemblies are becoming an established way for mature democracies to engage with complex and contested issues on an inclusive, informed and respectful basis”. Consequently, by using both quantitative and qualitative data, this presents a positive response towards the increased use of CAs in the UK. With this, it demonstrates the clear message of support to the government whilst also suggesting that there is a growing desire for CAs to be used more widely.

Figure 1.

Impacts on Media Coverage

When analysing the impacts of CAs in the UK, signs of the deliberative wave become most clear when using data from media coverage. Figure 2 highlights the dramatic increase of media exposure that CAs have felt in recent years.

Figure 2.

This data demonstrates that CAs have begun to make a real impact within the entirety of the UK. This is supported by the fact that CAs are being covered increasingly by two major institutions UK politics (Parliament and the media). This growth in recognition can be seen in parallel with the growing concerns of a lack of trust in Government within the UK. As the Conservative party devotes more effort into resolving these deep-lying issues, the political agenda has begun to shift, focussing more on the tools that can fix the growing democratic malaise.

It is worth noting that the momentum behind CAs in public debate has somewhat dissipated with the impact of COVID-19. As discussed in an earlier section, the agile organizations involved in delivering these events have found creative ways to continue deliberations online. Nevertheless, deliberative innovation has understandably been crowded out of news coverage and Parliamentary debate by other events.

In the midst of this crisis, then, the cause of deliberative innovation in the UK is at something of a fork in the road. Advocates have suggested that the challenges ahead require a re-doubling of commitment to engaging with citizens and co-designing a new future. Whether this comes to pass, or whether alternative priorities take precedence, remains unclear.

**Recommendations for future attention**

In response to the findings of this comprehensive audit, we recommend taking several steps to consolidate the progress made in the #Delibwave and to enhance capacity for tangible impact on policy outcomes.

1. Increased attention requires continued investment in robust methods.

As media coverage has grown, and the range of topics discussed by assemblies has broadened – sometimes into controversial subjects – the necessity of a robust method for designing and conducting citizens’ assemblies has become increasingly important. For example, the CAs of Scotland is looking at contentious issues including how to deal with the consequences of Brexit and future constitutional arrangements for Scotland. Understandably, some commentators may be concerned that such CAs are manipulated by political actors keen to see certain recommendations emerge, thereby undermining their legitimacy and credibility.

The way that participants are recruited is particularly important to create trust. A Freedom of Information request made into the recruitment for the Citizens’ Assembly of Scotland highlighted concern that participants of a particular political persuasion or membership of a particular organisation could be over-represented in assemblies. Researchers at the University of Southampton has pioneered a method of stratified random selection which ought to allay such concerns, by not only ensuring that a participant sample is representative of the demographic make-up of a city, region, or country, but is also representative in terms of political attitudes, where controlling for these is appropriate. This could mean stratifying a sample in terms of voting preferences in recent elections, attitudes to climate change, or more locally-relevant variables – like support for independence in Scotland, or community background in Northern Ireland.

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***The view from the inside: How robust methods keep Citizens’ Assemblies credible***

One thing clear from our interviews with practitioners at the coalface of deliberative innovation in the UK is that Citizens’ Assemblies depend on methodological rigour. Experimentation driven by respected political scientists – especially the Democracy Matters and Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit projects funded by the ESRC – has ensured that their credibility as a social technology for change.

*The pioneering [Democracy Matters and Citizens Assembly on Brexit] projects helped show that innovative forms of democratic participation were possible in the UK – and have proven to be been vital resources of learning and promotional tools since*. (Darren Hughes, Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society).

Expert insiders noted that the Deliberative Wave was made possible because this credible background gave advocates something to allay concerns expressed by commissioners and to

*the Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit… was incredibly helpful in having conversations with first the Clerks and then the Chairs of the Committees in Parliament… it helped to give them confidence that this has been done before, that there is a clear process that is tried and tested on the most contested topic of the time.…. It was very important for us in the advocacy sense and very important for the development of Citizens’ Assemblies in the UK… it has helped us set the agenda in a way that would have been much harder without doing it.* (Tim Hughes, Chief Executive at Involve).

Some noted especially that a technically robust recruitment process was essential. They noted that getting random selection right–achieving a demographically and ideologically diverse sample of participants through random selection—is key to allaying concerns from political actors that a Citizens’ Assembly might have a partisan or campaign bias. It also pre-empts criticisms in the broader public sphere. They reflected that continuous connection to researchers and a robust evidence was a vital enabler:

*We consulted Will Jennings on the recruitment processes for both the Citizens' Assembly on Social Care and the Climate Assembly UK, in particular in relation to questions of stratification which helped us ensure the assemblies were representative of the general public - and the groups where we might suffer from low acceptance and/or attendance. Our collaboration on the previous Citizens' Assembly on Brexit, and insights it gave us on the issues we needed to address during recruitment, was essential to the success of the assemblies we ran for the parliamentary select committees.*  (Rebecca McKee, Associate at Involve).

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2. Citizen’s Assemblies need buy-in from a diversity of stakeholders

Another clear message from the research is that stakeholder buy-in matters in order to have a realistic chance of acting on the outputs of a CA. Thus far, there is strong evidence that the social technology itself enjoys broad political support in the UK, with prominent proponents of CAs across all major parties and on different sides of divisive debates such as Brexit.

However, it is equally clear that buy-in can be dependent on the micro-politics of the issue and the local environment. For example, over half of the 8 projects initially short-listed for funding via the IiDP were rejected on the basis that their remit was too controversial or perceived as too locally partisan. Likewise, some of the local authority run CAs lacked obvious buy-in from key stakeholders, inevitably rendering outputs from the CA more aspirational than genuinely implementable.

These insights suggest that building support with key stakeholders from the outset is essential. To be clear, the standard model that has been rolled out across the UK entails the development of a Steering Committee or Advisory Board comprised of key members of the community – government actors, academic experts, civil society representatives, business interests. The point is that in practice this board, especially in the context of complex issues with overlapping sectoral and jurisdictional boundaries, can fail to align with the likely targets of citizen recommendations. It is essential that commissioners and designers do more to anticipate and offset the ‘wrong door’ problem, or the outputs of deliberation will not gain traction in the real world of policymaking.

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***A tale of two Citizen’s Assemblies: The importance of Stakeholder buy-in***

The contrast between two of the recent Citizens’ Assemblies run by Local Authorities is enlightening.

In Kingston upon Thames, the Borough Council commissioned and ran a Citizens’ Assembly on improving air quality. The exact remit was: How do we collectively improve air quality in the borough? Participants were repeatedly reminded that ‘collective’ did not mean solely the borough council, but the population itself along with key stakeholders in the private, third and public sectors with whom the council interacts to influence the local environment. While organisers were successful in having representatives with overlapping jurisdictional authority (from eg. Transport for London) come along to address participants as experts, there was a distinct lack of meaningful buy-in from these external organisations, who had not commissioned the event and had played no role in steering the process. Many of the recommendations from the event have thus ended up stuck at the ‘wrong door’ – concerning matters the borough council has no authority over or no resource to command. The borough council has gone above and beyond in following through with CA participants in the development of its Clean Air Strategy – but many of the recommendations have been deemed low priority/impact because they are simply not within the borough’s command.

In Greater Cambridge, however, there was buy-in from across intersecting Local Authorities and from key stakeholders (eg. the University) within the region. The remit – improving the transport network – was something largely within the gift of these combined stakeholders. It stands to reason – albeit that the pandemic has seemingly slowed progress – that there is a much greater likelihood of these recommendations feeding into decisions about the future of the transport network in the area.

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3. There is a need to clarify the goals of deliberative innovation in advance.

Another key observation concerns the goals of a given Citizens’ Assembly. Understandably, policymakers are keen to avoid ceding control to randomly selected citizens, and so such innovations usually have only an advisory function. Nevertheless, the abundance of ‘wriggle room’ that leaves policymakers can undermine the potentially positive impact on public debate and policymaking. The literature suggests that there are two potential avenues out of this conundrum in practice, in order to better connected and embed deliberative innovations in the political context.

One is to be more upfront with participating citizens – and in public commentary about Citizens’ Assemblies – about how the outputs from the event will be used. The logic is that making the political context clearer, and outlining the mechanisms through which outputs will feed into the overall ‘system’ of public and elite deliberation on the issue, will ensure there is less ambiguity and confusion as to the purpose of getting citizens together.

Two – and more radical still – is to depart from the open-ended logic of the Citizens’ Assembly format that has taken off in the UK. The appeal of open-endedness is clear. However, in practice, many participants struggle to come to grips with a complex issue and provide useful recommendations given the time and recourse constraints involved. The risk is that recommendations are too vague or not easily implementable. Deliberating on a specific for/against proposition - as applied in the highly successful Citizens’ Initiative Review processes in Oregon – mitigates the risk. It can help to concentrate discussion and ensure a more concrete and political efficacious output from citizen deliberations.

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***Connecting and Embedding Assemblies in the Political System: Lessons from the ambitious NHS Citizen initiative***

It is worth considering a development that happened in parallel to the rollout of Citizens’ Assemblies through Parliament and Local Authorities – the NHS Citizen initiative undertaken through NHS England. Leading a newly minted executive agency after the Coalition health reforms in 2012, the board of directors sought to reach out and engage better with service users and citizens. The vehicle for doing so was the NHS Citizen initiative. NHS Citizen contained elements that were somewhat similar to the Citizens’ Assembly format that has come to dominate the Deliberative Wave in the UK. However, the intention was that they would only be one element of a much broader ‘system’ of deliberation and engagement, linked to online forums, workshops with civil society groups and patient activists, and filtered through to an accountability mechanism with the board (Dean et al. 2020).

The hugely ambitious design was not without its problems – eventually its funding was choked off as key champions on the board moved on from their tenures. Nevertheless, there were important lessons learned by key organisations and charities in the democratic sector in the UK about how (and how not) to better connect deliberative innovation to broad and deep participation, and how (and how not) to embed it in existing institutions and practices of decision-making. The experience speaks to the creative potential for much better connecting and embedding deliberative innovations like Citizens’ Assemblies with existing public debate and political institutions.

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4. Evaluating long-term impacts on policy development will help to stave off criticisms about tokenistic engagement.

The most pervasive concern about deliberative innovation across the world – both in elite sentiment and mainstream politics scholarship– is that it is a gimmick that regularly fails to have any tangible policy impact. We see potential for these concerns to be borne out in the British context, where our review shows that concrete links to policy outcomes are still thin on the ground.

To be clear, this is not to say that Citizens’ Assemblies need to have decision-making power. There are sound reasons – both pragmatic and philosophical – that they remain advisory only in function. Indeed, thoughtful scholarship linked to real-world policy practice highlights that the policy process is typically iterative, complex, non-linear, and that ‘direct’ impact is an unreasonable standard to uphold for deliberative innovation.

Nevertheless, it is clear that more could be done to follow through on the recommendations from a Citizens’ Assembly, and to direct resource further downstream in the policy process in order to track the outcomes and actions of commissioning bodies. This is vital to ensure accountability after the event. This will enable more detailed and nuanced accounts of successful ‘impact’, as well as providing greater insight into pervasive obstacles and challenges little considered in deliberative scholarship or practice. A commitment to long-term evaluation of impact – and not just short-term evaluation of the events themselves – will provide the fuller picture needed.

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***Comparing Citizens’ Assemblies commissioned by Select Committees: The ingredients for follow through***

While the relative recency of the Deliberative Wave in the British context makes it hard CAs commissioned by Select Committees for provisional answers.

The Citizens’ Assembly on Adult Social Care was the first such event run through a national Select Committee. However, our audit shows that the event itself garnered more attention for the method than for the substance. The Assembly recommendations featured prominently in the Select Committee’s report, but were completely ignored by the government’s decision to defer progress on social care reform. In other words, the event itself generated a lot of goodwill and interest, but it has seemingly failed to push forward substantive change in adult social care.

The more recent Climate Assembly already shows greater potential for meaningful impact. The recently released report generated a great deal of media coverage, including enthusiastic support from some civil society organisations, and critique from more radical environmental activists who felt the citizens’ recommendations were ‘too timid’. Our point in raising this example is not to drill into the quality of substantive outcome of the citizen deliberations, but to focus on the activity surrounding it. The discussion is already more focused on the substance than on the process.

The key is identifying conditions that generate accountability – especially via the involvement of civil society as an interested party to the deliberations, and the direction of their advocacy resources further downstream in the process to track policy actors’ follow through (see Boswell 2016).

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**Conclusion**

Overall, the audit reveals mixed findings for the Deliberative Wave. It is clear that CAs have made important progress in winning the trust of decision-makers and opinion leaders as a viable and robust technology of political participation in the UK. This is no mean feat – routinization and institutionalisation have long been a challenge for mini-public deliberation like CAs which are often sold and seen as one-off gimmicks (Dryzek and Hendriks 2012). The hard work of charities in the democratic sector, and champions in Parliament and Local Authorities on the ground, has made this possible.

However, there is still some way to go before deliberative innovation begins making a meaningful difference to democratic decision-making in the UK. Now that the novelty has worn off, the hard work of stitching CAs into the fabric of the UK’s democracy needs to begin (see Hendriks et al. 2020, p.2-4). In the process, it is vital to remember that CAs are just one of many options for deepening and widening participation. There is no one-size fits all. Other ideas, innovations and practices might have more value in different contexts. Deliberative innovation in the UK will really have reached maturation point when CAs are just part of a much broader embedded and connected effort to engage the public in democratic politics.

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