

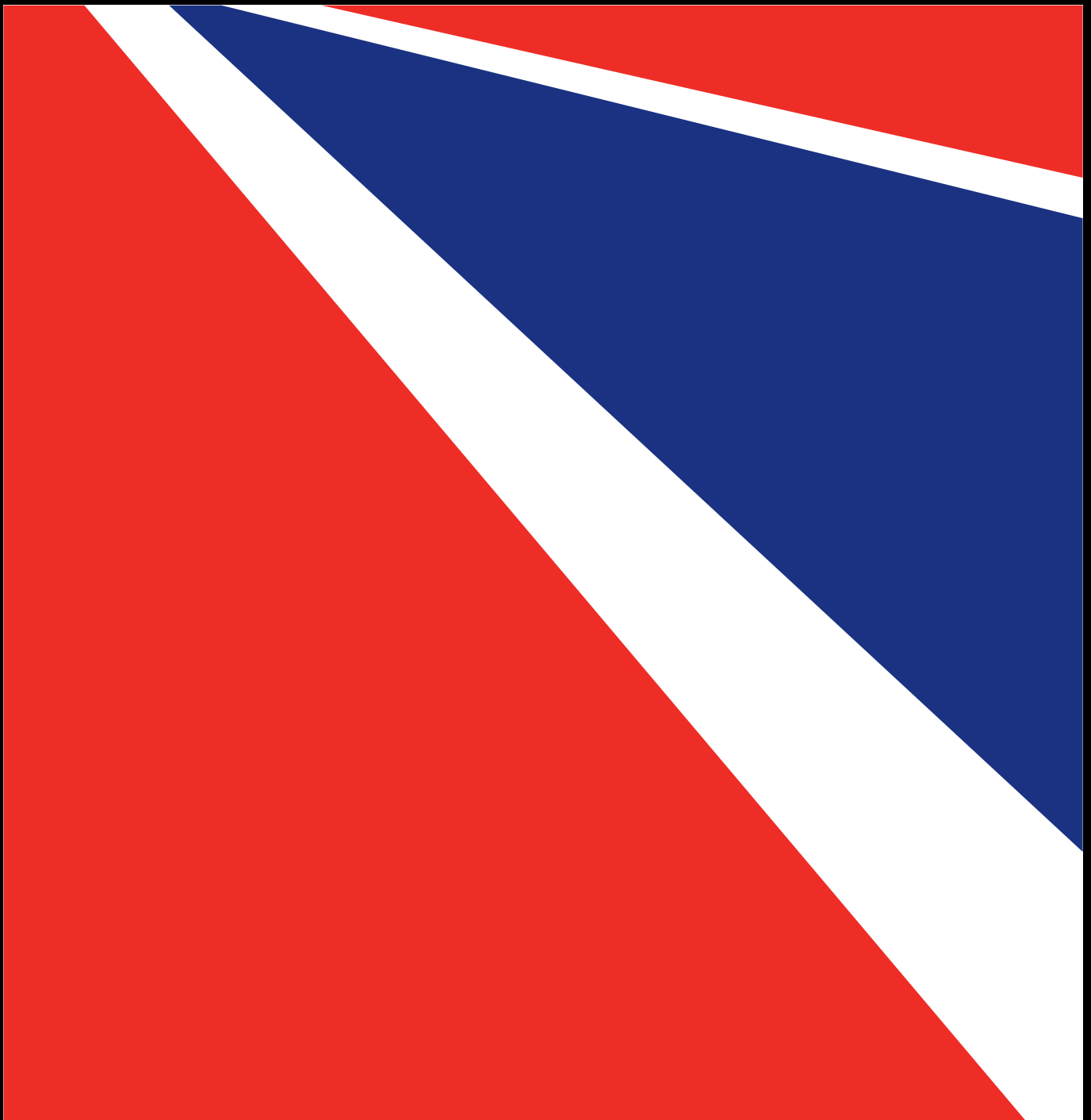


Ministry of
JUSTICE



A national framework for greater citizen engagement

A discussion paper – published July 2008



Contents

Ministerial Foreword	3
Chapter 1: Introduction	5
Chapter 2: Representative democracy and engagement	6
Chapter 3: Re-invigorating representative democracy	10
Chapter 4: Engagement mechanisms	13
Chapter 5: Next steps	23

Ministerial Foreword



The *Governance of Britain* Green Paper which was published in July 2007 set out the Government's proposals for the next stages of constitutional renewal. A major theme running through the Green Paper was the importance of re-invigorating democracy. Active participation by as many people as possible is essential for a healthy democracy as it encourages a shared understanding, builds cohesion and instils confidence in the institutions and the people who are elected to represent us.

Representative democracy remains the cornerstone of our constitution and it is widely believed to be the fairest and most effective system of governance. Parliament stands at the apex of our system of governance: it exercises power on behalf of the people who elect it; passes laws for the courts to apply; provides the authority for the Government to govern; and holds the Government to account. The Government believes that representative democracy – and therefore Parliament – must remain at the heart of the governance of this country. This Government is also proud of its record in enhancing democratic engagement through the devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive.

However, the Government recognises that the demands on our democracy are evolving. People are less engaged with the formal democratic process. Some, particularly disadvantaged groups and younger people, are increasingly unlikely to vote at elections. Others are channelling their political activity beyond voting and party politics to protest groups and single issue campaigns. The Government wants to address these challenges by increasing opportunities for people to participate in the decision-making process between elections and in ways that encourage participation by those whose voices are not often heard.

This discussion paper sets out a proposed constitutional framework for the use of a number of engagement mechanisms, including deliberative methods – citizens' summits and juries – which are complementary to the Parliamentary process. Finally, there are proposals for a strengthened petitioning process for the House of Commons.

We believe that these proposals will encourage greater involvement, provide people with opportunities to participate in collective debate on issues and, over time, lead to a greater understanding of the value of parliamentary democracy. The Government believes that providing innovative means for the public to participate in these ways will serve to re-invigorate and strengthen our democracy. The Government is keen to gather views from Parliament and the public on the content of this discussion paper.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Wills". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Michael Wills MP

Chapter 1: Introduction

Representative democracy continues to serve this country well, but it is facing challenges. Over the past few decades electoral turnout, party membership and partisan identification have declined in the UK – as in many other Western European countries – and profound changes in the economy, society and technology are creating a new political culture.

Detachment from the formal political process is most evident amongst the disadvantaged in society. It is also apparent amongst those who are politically active but who often choose to channel their activism elsewhere than through political parties. The *Governance of Britain* Green Paper published in July last year, recognises the need to re-invigorate our democracy by encouraging people to participate in the democratic process.

Over the last ten years the Government has introduced significant reforms at the local political level. *Strong and Prosperous Communities – the Local Government White Paper* published in October 2006 signalled a devolution of power from Whitehall to townhall and from local authorities to local communities. Building on this, the White Paper *Communities in Control: real people, real power*, has set out measures to ensure that power is passed to local communities in England, giving control to a wider pool of active citizens. The Government's response to the Councillors' Commission report also sets out the importance of councillors and councils as the hubs of local democracy¹.

Engagement at the local level tends to focus on everyday issues which often have a direct impact on people's lives. For example, people report that they would like greater influence over how their local council allocates its budget and the Government is exploring such opportunities further. However, at the national level, policy-making is often several steps removed from everyday experience. The Government believes that, where appropriate, national policy needs to be more accessible to people through greater use of engagement mechanisms that provide opportunities for people to participate across the UK.

This discussion paper sets out the case for a framework for the use of engagement mechanisms by national government. The aim of the framework would be to provide clarity on where they fit with Parliament and Government. The Government is confident that, over time, the application of these mechanisms of engagement will help re-invigorate and strengthen popular participation in the political process and help build the public's confidence in our democracy.

¹ The 2007 Local Government White Paper established a Councillors' Commission to review the incentives and barriers to people standing and serving as councillors. Their report *Representing the Future* was published in December 2007.

Chapter 2: Representative democracy and engagement

Representative democracy works

Representative democracy, the system of governance in the UK, offers *effective* and *fair* government. It allows for the fairest distribution of power among all citizens and provides for the fair treatment of minorities. It gives government the ability to tackle complex issues continually as they arise and it gives space for effective deliberation for government to refine and improve policy – so decisions are not taken in haste and repented at leisure.

Through the power of the vote, representative democracy enables people to exercise power over politicians, while recognising that relatively few people want to exercise power directly themselves.

Our representative democracy has a number of defining characteristics, common to other established democracies, such as the United States, France and Germany. From the early 20th century, these democracies have been characterised by the emergence of mass political parties with distinct ideologies which were broadly aligned with social classes. Parties galvanised support with manifestos which set out a package of proposals on which the public voted at periodic elections. These characteristics have shaped our formal engagement with the political process and our political culture. Indeed, for most of the 20th century:

- Most people identified strongly with a political party, though few people were members of a political party;
- Most people believed that it was their civic duty to vote. For example, nine out of 10 people just after the Second World War believed that a person was seriously neglecting their duty if they did not vote²;
- Voter turnout in general elections after 1918 consistently reached over 70% and sometimes over 80%.

But it has come under increasing pressure

Today, at the start of the 21st century, people in the UK are less engaged with the formal political process. Although there are variations in the patterns of engagement across the different nations and regions of the UK, in general fewer people vote and fewer still are members of a political party.

² IPPR: A Citizen's Duty: Voter inequality and the case for compulsory turnout. May 2006.

Voter turnout in UK general elections is now around 60% of those eligible to vote. In addition, the number of people who identify strongly with a political party is much less than was the case fifty years ago. Individual membership of political parties is much lower than it was and the trend suggests it will fall even further. Membership of the three main parties in 2001 was less than 25 per cent of its 1964 level³. Other institutions that sustain collective action are weaker than they once were.

Significantly, the decline in engagement from the formal political process – largely demonstrated through propensity to vote – is uneven across society. People in 'very deprived' wards have the lowest propensity to vote (37%), while people in 'affluent' areas have the highest propensity (76%)⁴.

Turnout is lowest among the young with some evidence that this is not a life-cycle effect but rather a new cohort of people who are unlikely to pick up the habit of voting in later life. There are also changing patterns of political engagement amongst older people with only 14% of 'baby boomers' believing that 'in general the people in charge know best' compared to 26% of the older generation⁵. However, while participation with the formal political process has declined, interest in politics has remained broadly the same (60%) over the last 30 years⁶. Indeed, 70% of people say they are willing to sign a petition to express an opinion and 55% have done so⁷. And almost a fifth of the population have boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons⁸. Although, here again, there is a growing socio-economic divide among those who report an interest in politics, with those from more disadvantaged groups reporting less interest.

How might these developments in formal political engagement be explained?

The decline in election turnout and party membership is a factor in almost all European countries. This reflects complex trends in political action and attitudes, driven in large part by far-reaching social, economic and technological changes that have been felt across most established democracies.

³ The Power Inquiry: *Power to the People: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*. March 2006.

⁴ Electoral Commission: *Election 2005: turnout*. 2005

⁵ Demos: *The New Old*. 2003

⁶ Ipsos MORI: *Political trends in Britain 1997-2007 and what they mean for the future*. 2007

⁷ Hansard Society: *Audit of Political Engagement*. 2006

⁸ Hansard Society: *Audit of Political Engagement*. 2008

UK society has become much more heterogeneous and this has changed people's sense of collective identity. Today, fewer people define their politics in terms of social class distinctions and the class structure that shaped the formation of the political parties has itself changed dramatically: one hundred years ago, three in four men were manual workers, whereas today this is one in four.

There has also been a decline in deference and, to a lesser extent, trust in established democratic institutions, although the decline in trust should not be overplayed. The level of trust and satisfaction in politicians and the political class has been fairly consistent over time. Even towards the end of the Second World War when victory was in sight a majority of people surveyed by Gallup believed politicians were out for themselves or their party rather than the country, while surveys from 1970s consistently found only two in ten people trusted politicians to tell the truth, a figure that has changed little since.

Prosperity has empowered people as consumers who increasingly define relationships with the state in this way. People expect the same standards of customer service and redress from their public services as those they receive in the private sector and evidence suggests that a majority of people think that their local councils should be more accountable⁹.

The impact of technological change has also affected engagement with politics. People now have access to a wealth of information that informs their interaction with public and democratic institutions, which has grown with the passing of the Freedom of Information Acts. The fast growth in internet, mobile phone and e-mail use, combined with cheap, accessible websites is resulting in new types of interactive social, political and civic activity.

In summary, representative democracy in the UK is facing new pressures:

- There has been a significant decline in public membership of political parties, on which the system rests. The weakening of old collectivist structures and historic social identities has served to undermine the public's formal engagement with the political process;
- There is less participation in formal politics and civic activism amongst disadvantaged groups as well as growing political activism outside the formal process by the more advantaged. Democracy is increasingly an interest of the better off and the better educated;
- The impact of far-reaching social, economic and technological changes has resulted in a less deferential relationship between government and citizens.

⁹ Department of Communities and Local Government: *Public Perceptions of Empowerment Survey*. 2008

There is therefore a need to respond to this situation by developing the existing model of British representative democracy in a way that retains its fundamental advantages but makes the system more responsive and more engaging to the public. This will also involve empowering and engaging communities to reinforce and strengthen representative democracy by making it more relevant and accountable.

Chapter 3: Re-invigorating representative democracy

The political system needs to become more responsive to the public

The changes in our political landscape call for a more dynamic relationship between government and the public, recognising that the demands on the system are evolving. A large section of society is less engaged with the formal political process. When asked, only a fifth of people felt they could influence decisions affecting Great Britain.¹⁰

Effective public engagement should complement representative democracy. Direct democracy, at the national level, in which the public makes the decision rather than their elected representative has some advantages, but it is not a panacea. It can reduce complex national policy decisions to simple choices which can result in serious public policy problems in the future. National direct democracy can be vulnerable to being manipulated by the wealthy and the powerful who can dominate single-issue campaigns more easily than the complex layers of political activity that characterise the operation of parliamentary democracy. A balance must be struck between increasing the public's participation in decision-making and maintaining the Government's accountability for its actions to the people, their representatives in Parliament and their will expressed in elections.

Evidence suggests that people are keen to engage at the local level, on local issues. The Government has introduced a range of measures that aim to increase people's participation at the local political level, providing new opportunities and mechanisms for doing so and empowering communities so they have greater capacity to influence decision-making. For example, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provides a vital framework for engaging people at the local level in England. From April 2009, local authorities will have a duty to inform, consult and involve local people in their decisions and services, and new powers for local councillors to call for action on a broad range of local issues in England. The Government is currently considering the introduction of a duty requiring local authorities to consider and investigate petitions from local communities, and guarantee a response on the issues that have been raised.¹¹

And the Government has also sought to empower people in other, more direct ways in the relationship between government, people and public services. These forms of empowerment range from enhanced choice in health care to the use of public satisfaction targets to drive public service improvements, putting responsiveness to the

¹⁰ Department for Communities and Local Government: Citizenship Survey 2007-08.

¹¹ Department for Communities and Local Government: Local petitions and Calls for Action Consultation. December 2007

public at the heart of reforms to local government services, the police and healthcare. The Government is promoting a range of innovative ways in which local people can be directly involved in local decision-making through mechanisms such as Participatory Budgeting. This involves people in decisions about how sections of local public budgets are allocated and invested. We want Participatory Budgeting to be used in all local authority areas in England by 2012. The Government has also taken steps to increase the capacity of individuals, and the third sector organisations that campaign and advocate on their behalf, to engage effectively including through increased investment in community asset development and improvement.

The Government believes that *national* policy development can be similarly a collaborative venture between people and the state. The task today is to develop a coherent constitutional framework, compatible with the fundamental principles of representative democracy, within which national public engagement activities can sit and take strength.

As engagement processes broaden and deepen at the national level, it is important to set out the circumstances in which the Government believes it is appropriate to adopt different measures of engagement. By involving a wide range of people from across the UK directly in the policy process, people can both inform collective decisions and become more familiar with the constraints on politicians and how they take decisions, helping to develop greater understanding and hence greater trust. In the Government's view, this will give greater clarity and legitimacy to the process, ensuring mechanisms of democratic engagement serve all citizens and help to ensure that representative democracy, with Parliament at its heart, will remain the cornerstone of the governance of this country.

The Government believes that national issues that could benefit from greater public participation include:

- Where issues will result in significant constitutional change;
- Where individuals themselves need to act in addition to the government to make a significant impact – for example, on behavioural issues such as smoking or obesity;
- Where there are several policy options on which government has an open mind; and,
- Where there is public benefit in exploring complex and difficult trade offs between different policy options – for example, between a personal desire to purchase cheap flights and the societal need to reduce carbon emissions.

How should we engage?

Any mechanisms to strengthen people's engagement with democratic processes and enhance trust will only do so if they meet the following criteria:

- **They register with the appropriate public.** To achieve this, they must be viewed as a beneficial experience and participants should feel better informed as a result;
- **They are as broadly representative and accessible as possible** involving a broad spread of the population and ensuring that a good cross section of relevant audiences are engaged as part of the process;
- **They are credible** so that people believe they matter. To achieve this, there should be a robust objective standard in place for how engagement mechanisms should be applied to a national policy issue and effectively delivered: there must be feedback to participants in deliberative engagement exercises and a commitment to appropriate levels of evaluation;
- **They are open and transparent** in that participants must be aware in advance of the degree of influence they might have, and the way in which the government will consider and take on their conclusions. There must be a shared understanding of when and how these mechanisms will be used;
- **They are systemic and embedded in the policy making process** otherwise people could regard them as gimmicks damaging the legitimacy of the process;
- **They are consistent with the fundamental principles of representative democracy.** Government and Parliament must continue to have the space to consider the impact of any changes in policy, for example where there are substantial resource implications. The Government believes it is important that these mechanisms should complement and not challenge the supremacy of our system of representative democracy and there should be a clear understanding of the relationship to the parliamentary consideration of issues.

The Government invites views on these criteria and on whether other criteria should be added.

Chapter 4: Engagement mechanisms

This chapter sets out proposals for the use of a number of engagement mechanisms at the national level, including referendums and deliberative forums. It sets out the Government's support for a revised petitioning facility for Parliament.

Referendums

Referendums have been rare in the UK. Only one UK-wide referendum has ever been held: in 1975, on the question of whether or not the UK should remain a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). The international picture varies widely, but there are very few countries where the use of the referendum is commonplace.

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 sets out rules on the conduct of referendums. But it does not stipulate when a referendum should be held. Instead, when referendums have been held in the past their use has been approved by Parliament. The position of the referendum in British constitutional arrangements was explained by Edward Short, Lord President and Leader of the House, before the 1975 referendum "The Government will be bound by its result, but Parliament, of course, cannot be bound."¹² In all cases, it is for Parliament to debate and decide on the precise terms of a referendum. The Government believes that it is right that it is for Parliament to determine when to hold a referendum and the precise terms.

Past practice is instructive, however. In the UK, several referendums have been held in recent years – in particular prior to devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. In relation to the European Union, after the initial referendum in 1975, referendums have not been held on less significant changes to the existing institutions of which we are members – no referendum was held on the Single European Act, Maastricht, Amsterdam or Nice Treaties.

Referendums have been held in the following circumstances:

- The Northern Ireland Border Poll in 1973 asked the people of Northern Ireland whether the province should remain part of the UK or join the Irish Republic;
- In 1975, a referendum asked the people of the UK whether they wanted to remain in the EEC;
- Devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has been the subject of referendums (in 1979, 1997 and 1998);
- Local referendums have been held to ask local communities whether they would like a Regional Assembly or Mayor.

¹² House of Commons, Official Report, 11 March 1975, col. 293

There are also statutory provisions concerning when referendums must be held on some specific issues:

- The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires a referendum before Northern Ireland could cease to be a part of the United Kingdom;
- A referendum is required before a Regional Assembly can be established (under the Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Act, 2003);
- The Government of Wales Act 2006 requires a referendum before full legislative competence (that is, the ability to make primary legislation) can be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

In each case, the electorate has been composed of those who would be most directly affected by the outcome. In addition, there are issues which one or more political party have considered to be of such fundamental importance that they merit a manifesto commitment to hold a referendum – for example a decision on joining the Euro. The Government believes that the holding of national referendums should continue to be an exceptional feature of our constitutional arrangements, used in circumstances where these sorts of fundamental issues are at stake. To act otherwise would be to undermine the fundamental principles of representative democracy.

4.1 Referendums

The Government believes that the precedents set by previous referendums provide a guide to the types of issue that ought to be considered for any referendum in the future. The outcome of any referendum does not bind Parliament but would be expected to influence significantly subsequent parliamentary consideration of an issue. However, the Government believes that where a policy is the subject of a clear manifesto commitment, voted on by the British people at a general election, a referendum should not, generally, be necessary.

Deliberative Forums

In everyday life, people can find it hard to invest time and effort into acquiring information on public policy issues, to confront difficult choices and the trade offs that often need to be made and come to a considered view. Deliberative engagement is a way of enabling a sample of the public to be given the opportunity to deliberate on the questions before them and then reach and express a considered view about the issue. Depending on the issue, these deliberative techniques might be used to supplement traditional consultation exercises but may also be of value as stand-alone activities.

Deliberative engagement works by bringing together a range of people to discuss issues of public policy. Participants are sometimes polled in advance for their views on an issue or group of issues. Appropriate briefing materials are usually made available to participants and are usually also made public. Participants might then engage in dialogue with experts, organisations and political leaders holding different views based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators. After deliberating, the participants are asked for their views. The evidence suggests that the views reached can often broadly replicate the conclusions the wider public would itself reach, if they had gone through a similar in-depth analysis and discussion of the issues¹³. The quality of the process depends on several key factors, including: the integrity of the process and development of the agenda and briefing materials; the representativeness of the original sample; the sample size (larger samples are more reliable, but with diminishing returns); and the robustness of the facilitation (such as ensuring that no one individual dominates the discussion while others remain silent).

The Government believes that greater use of deliberative engagement will add value to the national policy making process by introducing opportunities for a more meaningful dialogue between government and the public. Citizens' juries enable government to engage small groups of citizens in debate, to ask questions and to make informed recommendations. Citizens' summits represent a step further, engaging a larger group of citizens in discussions on a particular topic and potentially allowing them to make a recommendation which could be put to Parliament.

As noted earlier, representative democracy remains the cornerstone of our constitution and Parliament must remain at the apex of the political process. The democratically elected members of Parliament must retain the final say over decisions. But representative democracy can be strengthened by the use of deliberative engagement mechanisms by building trust, encouraging public involvement in the decision making process, and reassuring people about how their voice can make a difference.

The Government is keen to gather views on proposals for the more systemic use of deliberative engagement within the national policy making process. In particular, the use of **citizens' summits** and **citizens' juries**. The key features of summits are set out in Box 4.2 and of juries in Box 4.3.

¹³ Professor James S. Fishkin: *Deliberative Polling®: Toward a better-informed democracy*. Center for Deliberative Democracy. <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/summary/>

4.2 Citizens' Summits

Citizens' summits bring together a large body of people (usually between 500-1000) to deliberate on an issue or a number of related issues. This can either take place face-to-face or online.

Summits should only be used sparingly where there is a compelling case for submitting a national policy issue for large-scale deliberation. For example, Government proposals to make significant change of a constitutional nature might be appropriate. The issues on which summits would be held would have to meet agreed and published criteria. These criteria would follow those set out in Chapter 3.

As with referendums, summits are not intended to be used in cases where there is a clear manifesto commitment to a particular policy, voted on by the British people at a general election.

Participants

Summits should comprise a broadly representative sample of the public (500 – 1000), selected and filtered to ensure they are demographically representative. This will increase their legitimacy and involve people from groups who are less likely to participate in the formal democratic process.

Process

Criteria for summits would be published and departments would publish their assessment of these in advance of a summit being held. Government departments would submit proposals that meet these criteria for collective approval by Ministers.

Funding

Funding would be found from within departmental budgets.

4.2 Citizens' Summits (*continued*)

Recommendations

The recommendation of a summit would then be put to Parliament for consideration. Where the Government has a position on an issue, or where there are significant resource implications for the Exchequer, the Government would make a statement on the proposed way forward alongside the recommendation of the summit. This would depend upon the issue but would likely follow with a Government debate in the Commons, preceded by a take note debate in the Lords.

The Government believes that whether the summit's decision is put to a free vote or a whipped vote should be decided on a case by case basis. Representative democracy depends on political parties and governments getting their business through Parliament. It therefore follows that a whipped vote may be constitutionally appropriate in some instances. Equally, there may be circumstances in which a free vote should take place on, for example, matters of conscience.

The Government invites views on these proposals including what sorts of issues would benefit from the use of this mechanism and what should be included in any assessment criteria.

4.3 Citizens' Juries

A citizens' jury is an independent forum for members of the public to examine and discuss an important issue of public policy. Juries can take a variety of forms and sizes, although the Government believes that for national policy issues juries need to be sufficiently large to ensure that all relevant groups of the population are able to participate in the debate. The jury receives information about the issues in question which may include a range of options. These are often presented by experts in a series of presentations after which the jury is invited to ask questions before making their decision, much like a jury in the courts system. Citizens' juries have tended to refer to smaller sample deliberations than those involved in a summit. Citizens' juries allow for the expression of opinions that will help government form policy. They also give policymakers insight into the issues of most concern to members of the public with interest in the policy area.

A citizens' jury could help government to reach decisions about issues that concern specific groups and also where the issue may require sufficient time to allow proper discussion and evidence taking. They would be particularly useful for significant national public policy issues which are out for consultation by helping to generate a wider range of public contributions to government consultations at either the Green Paper, White Paper or strategy stage and where there are a number of workable policy options to consider. Juries could also form part of the policy development process and their views would inform government decision-taking rather than being put to Parliament. The issues on which juries would be held would have to meet agreed and published criteria. These criteria would follow those set out in Chapter 3.

Participants

A national citizens' jury would need to involve participants who were as demographically representative as possible although certain issues may call for particular membership. They would be likely to involve 50-100 participants overall and juries might take place over 1 – 2 days, depending on the complexity of the issue.

Juries could be rotated throughout the UK, or just in England depending on whether issues are devolved. There may be a case for holding some juries in areas where an issue is particularly relevant.

Process

Criteria for juries would be published and departments would publish their assessment of these in advance of a jury being held.

4.3 Citizens' Juries (*continued*)

Funding

Funding would be found from within departmental budgets.

Recommendations

Government would publish a response, either as part of a broader response to any wider consultation exercise or as a stand-alone public document. This would set out government's analysis and consideration of the jury's recommendations and justification for any proposals which have not been adopted.

The Government invites views on these proposals including what sorts of issues would benefit from use of this mechanism and what should be included in any assessment criteria.

Petitions

Referendums, citizens' summits and citizens' juries are all government initiated processes. But the Government believes that it is important that the public themselves can also register their interest in a particular issue and inform policy making on it. The public petition has played such a part in our country's constitutional arrangements for centuries. It is widely understood and used with almost half the public having signed a petition of some kind in the previous year even before the current trend towards electronic petitions¹⁴.

As stated previously in this document, the Government has recently consulted on its plans to revitalise the framework for petitions at the local level in England¹⁵. And, as indicated in the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper, the Government believes that the petition can be similarly revitalised at the national level.

The public can already petition the House of Commons to make MPs aware of their opinion on an issue and to request action. Petitioning is a formal process involving sending a written appeal to an MP, following a loosely set format, which is then presented to the Commons by the MP. The text of the petition is published in Hansard and is referred to the appropriate Commons departmental select committee. Since November 2007, almost all petitions now receive a response from the relevant Government department and this response also is printed in Hansard.

There is also a long-established tradition of members of the public presenting petitions at the door of Number 10 Downing Street. The e-Petitions service introduced by the Government in November 2006 has been designed to offer a modern parallel, which is more convenient for the petitioner. Petitions that attract 200 signatures – and meet the guidelines which exempt subjects for a number of reasons, including those that are deemed offensive, libellous or party political – are passed to the appropriate government department for consideration and response. Although the No10 petitions facility is a popular and useful mechanism for submitting views to Government, it does not feed directly and formally into Parliament.

The Scottish Parliament has an e-petitioning facility which allows individuals, community groups and organisations to raise issues of public concern with the Parliament. Once petitions are submitted, they are considered by the Public Petitions Committee. The remit of the Committee is to decide what action should be taken on admissible public petitions. The Committee is also responsible for deciding, in cases of dispute, whether a public petition is admissible.

¹⁴ The Hansard Society: *Audit of Political Engagement* 2007.

¹⁵ Communities and Local Government, *Local petitions and Calls for Action Consultation*, December 2007

Petitioning Parliament is of course a matter for Parliament itself. In the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper, the Government noted that the Commons Procedure Committee would be carrying out an examination of possibilities for e-petitioning the House and looked forward to that further work. The Committee has recently published its report setting out proposals¹⁶, which are described in Box 4.4 below.

The Government is grateful to the Procedure Committee for its report and will issue a separate response to the Committee's recommendations in due course. However, we hope that responses to this discussion paper will inform the implementation of the e-Petition system in Parliament. We also welcome the commitment of other parties to developing the petition process, building on mechanisms already in place and we look forward to working with them and other consultees.

¹⁶ House of Commons Procedure Committee: e-Petitions: First Report of Session 2007-08. HC 136. April 2008.

4.4 Petitions for Westminster

The House of Commons Procedure Committee has proposed a system for e-petitioning, to run alongside the traditional petitioning system, under which:

- e-petitions are submitted via the parliamentary website
- If they comply with the House's rules, the petitioner's constituency MP will be asked to act as facilitator
- The e-petition is then posted on the parliamentary website for a set period: other people may add their names to it until the end of the set period (and at this point other Members will be able to indicate support for it)
- It is then presented to the House, either electronically or orally on the floor of the House
- Petitioners and signatories may opt in to receive updates on the progress of the e-petition and/or up to two emails from their constituency MP
- e-petitions will be printed in Hansard and sent to select committees and may be considered by them
- The Government will normally be expected to reply within two months of presentation

The Committee also proposes that:

- On three occasions each year, certain e-petitions will be debated by the House of Commons in Westminster Hall.

The Committee has noted that "Setting up an e-petitions scheme is not without risks. We are not aware of any other existing scheme of comparable scale and ambition. Its successful implementation will require new ways of working and novel forms of governance. If it is to attract the widest possible range of users, it will need to be able to adapt and respond to what they expect of it. It must be able to cope with potentially high and unpredictable levels of demand".

The Government notes that alternative possibilities could also be considered, in terms of triggering debate on petitions, for example through a sifting process whereby certain petitions which met a number of criteria could be committed to a select committee for a response or generate a debate in Parliament. Any such process would have to ensure there was no duplication with existing inquiries and debates and include safeguards to protect against inappropriate campaigns.

The Government welcomes views as to the merits of the proposal from the Commons Procedure Committee, including on what thresholds or other criteria might instigate action in the form of a Commons debate or other process. In the meantime Parliament will also be discussing how to take forward these issues.

Chapter 5: Next steps

The proposals within this paper are published for discussion. In particular, the Government is seeking views on the proposals for:

- **Citizens' summits**
- **Citizens' juries**
- **A petitioning mechanism for Parliament**

A paper summarising the responses to this discussion document will be published in October 2008. The response paper will be available on-line at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/index.htm>

How to respond

Please send your response by 1 October 2008 to:

Laura Beaumont
Ministry of Justice
Governance of Britain Division
6.06 Selborne House
54-60 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6QW
Tel: 020 7210 1727
Fax: 020 7201 7777
Email: laura.beaumont@justice.gsi.gov.uk

Extra copies

Further paper copies of this discussion paper can be obtained from this address and it is also available on-line at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/index.htm>

Representative groups

Representative groups are asked to give a summary of the people and organisations they represent when they respond.

Confidentiality

Information provided in response to this discussion paper, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

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