POLICY BRIEF

Earning Trust: How Can Elected Representatives Engage People Better?

Conference hosted by Dr Jeevun Sandher MP

Co-organised by Catherine Day, Andrew Blick, and Christel Koop

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Trust in elected representatives remains a core pillar of democracy, yet mistrust and political alienation are increasingly visible in the UK and beyond. Strengthening public engagement is widely regarded as essential to rebuilding confidence in democratic institutions. This note provides an account of the discussions and presentations during a half-day conference that brought together researchers and practitioners to explore how participation is being reshaped across local, regional, and national governance. It presents key insights, lessons, and innovations shared at the event, highlighting emerging approaches to enhance trust and improve the health of representative democracy.

Opening remarks by Jeevun Sandher

Jeevun Sandher MP, who completed his PhD in the Department of Political Economy, which also houses the Centre for British Democracy (CBD), opened the conference by observing a general international tendency towards growing distrust of institutions and processes, constituting a serious threat to democracy. Economic divides are widening, with fewer people doing well whilst many others struggle to afford a decent life. Issues such as controversy around immigration and polarising social media dynamics are deepening these divisions. The challenge is stark: how do we build trust, strengthen social cohesion, and work collectively when powerful forces are pulling people apart?

Panel one: International experience

Chaired by Sarah Castell

There is an increasing pressure on representatives to engage the public more effectively, and this panel examined international experiences with democratic innovations, not only their potential to rebuild trust, but also how they can improve systems, deliver better outcomes, and solve problems more effectively.

Christoph Niessen (University of Antwerp) – Institutionalised citizen deliberation in Belgium: Experiences, uptake and scaling

Different federated entities in Belgium have institutionalised citizen assemblies in parliament. The German-speaking community has installed a permanent citizen council next to parliament that can initiate citizen assemblies that provide recommendations on specific topics to the parliamentary committee in charge. The Brussels Region has introduced deliberative committees, composed by citizens and MPs, to produce recommendations on specific topics that are submitted to Parliament for consideration.

In both cases, citizens are selected by random sortition, ensuring diversity in gender, geography, age, and education. Findings show that participants report positive experiences, though acceptance rates are higher among more educated people and those from less remote areas. Institutionalising participation under the name of Parliament appears to increase appeal among those already positive toward political institutions. Polities of different size appear to face different opportunities and challenges. Smaller polities come with social cohesion, implementation advantages and higher sortition likelihood, while larger entities come with social diversity and administrative scale benefits.

Shu Yang Lin (head of design, CrownShy and co-founder; Public Digital Innovation Space (PDIS), Taiwan Government) – Taiwan's Participation Officers Network: The missing half of open government

Open government is usually defined by transparency, participation, accountability, and integrity, but meaningful collaboration inside government is often missing. Taiwan has tackled this by creating a Participation Officers (PO) Network that builds a culture and capacity for participation across ministries.

Launched in 2016 by the Public Digital Innovation Space (PDIS), the network includes around 80–100 civil servants from 32 ministries who coordinate engagement efforts. POs act as the primary contact points within policy teams, identify issues that need cross-department collaboration, support research and internal discussion, and help integrate engagement outcomes back into policy. The success of this model rests on regular collaboration, clear empowerment structures, and long-term capacity building.

Charlotte Wagenaar (Tilburg University) – Insights from the Netherlands into citizens' and politicians' preferences for participatory designs

Successful participation processes require support from both citizens and politicians. This presentation – which is part of the larger Redress project – explored citizens' and politicians' preferences regarding different aspects of participation design and the extent of the differences between them. The analysis was based on data from identical conjoint experiments fielded with participation from 1,457 local politicians and 24,630 citizens. The experiments varied participation processes on initiator, topic, mandate and participation mode: vote-based, deliberation-based or hybrid.

Citizens and politicians agree on key elements: the initiator rarely matters, hybrid assembly-referendum models are attractive, outcomes should at least trigger political discussion, and local issues are the best fit. Differences remain: politicians are more likely to react negatively when the executive initiates and to resist fully binding outcomes, whilst citizens tend to reject purely consultative processes and favour stronger mandates.

Catherine Heaney (co-founder and CEO, Caradem) – Caradem: An Irish-led democracy initiative

Caradem is an Irish-led international democracy initiative exploring how Ireland can contribute to inclusive governance. The presentation highlighted a fast-growing democratic movement, but also pressures arising from defunding facing the sector. There is a clear need for collaboration, coordination, and a recognisable European stamp in democracy support.

In the consultative phased preceding the establishment of CaraDem, organisations in the field emphasise the importance of streamlining what already exists to increase impact and rethinking how "democracy support" is framed to better reflect its core components. Ireland brings a distinctive history and set of experiences, yet it has not been a major voice in this sphere. CaraDem aims to change that, operating through collaboration, respect and trust, co-creating solutions, valuing diverse perspectives, and working transparently to strengthen democracy where it matters most.

Kevin Keith (UK Open Government Network) – Experiences from the Open Government Partnership

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is an international initiative that brings together reformers inside and outside government to make governance more transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable. Since 2011, it has expanded to take in 74 countries, 150 local governments, and thousands of civil society groups, united by a shared vision but grounded in diverse contexts.

Members co-create action plans that commit to real improvements in transparency, accountability, and public participation. The core idea is simple: the crisis of trust is a crisis of participation, and embedding meaningful citizen influence into decision-making is how trust is rebuilt. Just as physical infrastructure requires proper investment and no shortcuts, social infrastructure, including our democratic systems, must be strengthened through participation at every stage of governance.

Panel two: New initiatives

Chaired by Chris Shaw

Support for democracy is weakening worldwide and trust is eroding. This panel explored how new initiatives can respond to this challenge by moving beyond traditional forms of engagement and strengthening how people participate in governing their societies.

Marta Wojciechowska (King's College London) & Susana Higueras (Goldsmiths, University of London) – Arts-based methods for inclusive Participation

The Inspire Democracy project aims to reimagine democracy by placing the lived experiences of marginalised groups at the centre of policymaking. It co-designs participatory spaces and uses arts-based methods to foster empathy, dialogue, and structural change while embedding participation into governance frameworks. The goal is to challenge systemic exclusions across race, gender, class, ability, and migration status, and to strengthen intersectional inclusion in democratic processes.

The practice of legislative theatre illustrates the approach: young people create a play from their own experiences, and co-design policy responses with audiences, including policymakers. Legislative theatre can help communicate serious issues with impact and joy, broaden engagement, build solidarity and sustain involvement through ongoing digital follow-up.

Suzanne Hall (King's College London) & Ceri Davies-Tyrie (IPSOS UK) – Compact deliberation: A practical way to build a deliberative culture

Compact deliberation explores whether it is possible to expand the toolkit of democratic innovations by testing whether high-quality deliberation can occur within shorter, more "compact" timeframes. Experiments were conducted with four treatment workshops, each with the same information and agenda, but each with a different timespan. They showed that, even with reduced time, participants were able to engage in in-depth conversations, evidence-led debates, and argument formation, and to undergo attitudinal change. Longer deliberations tended to produce more strongly held positions but sometimes risked dominance by certain participants.

Findings suggest that compact dialogue can make deliberation more inclusive, scalable, and cost-efficient, especially when supported by AI-enabled moderation and online environments. Participants can contribute from home, overcoming time barriers and enhancing accessibility. However, shorter deliberations limit possibilities for developing detailed policy recommendations. When complemented by other approaches though, they still provide robust insight into considered public opinion and pathways for meaningful democratic engagement.

Esther Moss (Nesta) – The AI Social Readiness project

In the UK, public sector organisations are under increasing pressure to adopt AI to improve service speed and quality. But responsible deployment depends upon securing public trust; and practical guidance is limited. The AI Social Readiness Advisory Label addresses this gap by measuring confidence in specific AI tools and providing clear advice on how to respond to public concerns. Designed by Nesta to support leaders in AI procurement, deployment, and risk management, it complements technical evaluations and compliance processes.

Insights were drawn from 18 deliberative workshops with 144 participants broadly reflective of the UK population, using deliberative polling to capture both quantitative and qualitative views. The process led to an 11% increase in trust, highlighting that transparency and public engagement are key to responsible AI in public services.

Hana Kapetanovic (Demos) – Optimising for representation not polarisation: A new model of MP-constituent engagement

The modern MP-constituent relationship is facing a puzzling paradox. MPs report feeling overwhelmed by e-mails, social media messages, and constituency work, yet most constituents feel unheard outside of election periods and express declining trust in politicians. Digital communications and pressures on public services have increased the volume of messages, but MPs largely hear from constituents in crisis or the politically engaged, leaving the majority unheard.

This skewed input fuels polarisation, weakens representation, and reduces the quality of policymaking, while frustration and distrust grow, sometimes resulting in abuse that disproportionately affects MPs from underrepresented groups. A practical model aims to fix this by going beyond the usual voices to create participatory, reciprocal, accountable, and pragmatic engagement. Pilots in two constituencies will test whether broader, meaningful dialogue can rebuild trust and improve policymaking.

Simon Carroll (Lever)– Lever: Uniting citizen action into collective power

Lever is a non-profit civic tech start-up that aims to create a space for citizens to leverage collective power. The platform allows citizens to 'pin' the actions and activity they generate in relation to issues they care about – such as ideas, campaigns, petitions, and meetings – to an online map of their constituency. It links these actions with the specific geographical locale in which people have a vote, making verified constituents visible to their representatives.

Gamified tools make participation easy and engaging, while collective activity becomes a powerful signal to MPs and organisations. Citizens gain strength in numbers, MPs receive real-time insight into public priorities, and organisations can reach supporters and track impact. Beyond activism, Lever highlights community life, groups, public spaces, and local initiatives, turning engagement into actionable data that strengthens connections between people and decision-makers.

Panel three: Trust, accountability, and representation

Chaired by Rod Dacombe

Trust is essential to democracy, yet it has been steadily declining. This panel explored the factors driving that decline and examines how trust can be restored and strengthened.

Phillip Lee (Physician & Former MP for Bracknell) – From one of the most trusted professions to one of the least: An insider's view

Trust is essential to politics, yet questions remain about how to strengthen it and who is responsible for doing so. Trust cannot rest solely on politicians; the electorate and the media also play critical roles. Drawing a comparison with the medical sector, trust and informed consent are fundamental to the doctor–patient relationship. In politics, MPs must balance competing responsibilities to their party, constituents, and country, which can make meaningful engagement difficult.

Media organisations should help build trust by offering consistent and accurate coverage of parliamentary work, but this is often lacking in the UK. Without an informed public, as highlighted by the 2016 referendum, political consent and trust remain fragile. Strengthening public understanding of policies must be recognised as a core responsibility of the media.

Ros Taylor (journalist and author) – The future of trust

Journalists are among the least trusted professions, only just above MPs, and trust continues to decline. People often say they distrust politicians, but struggle to specify why. Understanding the reasons behind mistrust is essential to addressing it, just as tackling vaccine hesitancy requires knowing its causes. Trust, mistrust and distrust are rarely rational judgements based on full information. They draw on personal experience, media narratives, statistics, anecdotes, and perceptions of government competence during crises. Distrust can also act as self-protection: a way to avoid being let down again.

More transparency alone does not guarantee trust: the workings of government are infinitely more transparent than they were a generation ago, yet trust is lower. Distrust is easy to sow and easier to spread. The shift to social media has weakened local journalism and pushed MPs to communicate to national audiences rather than engage locally. Many drivers of distrust lie beyond Westminster's control, rooted in a changing information ecosystem that shapes how people see politics.

Sarah Birch (King's College London) – How to close the (perceived) accountability gap between citizens and representatives

There is a clear difference in how ordinary citizens and elites view trust in politicians, which motivated this research into public perceptions of politicians and political ethics. Its findings include that citizens and politicians define ethical behaviour differently. For citizens, ethics means speaking honestly and answering questions directly. For politicians, it often means simply staying within legal boundaries.

This mismatch creates a perceived accountability gap, which fuels mistrust. Closing the gap requires improving public understanding of how politics works and better aligning the interests of citizens and politicians. Suggested reforms for the UK include changes in the electoral system to make it more proportional, making government more representative of broader sections of the public, and banning private donations so representatives serve citizens rather than donors.

Alex Bevan (Future Governance Forum) – Seeing it through: Tackling regional disparity to rebuild trust

Trust can be improved when politicians are more responsive, but regional divides create a deeper structural challenge. Addressing regional disparities requires a focus on local growth to ensure fairness across the country. The aim is to deliver more balanced outcomes, yet inconsistencies in implementation undermine the credibility and purpose of policy. When delivery is uneven, trust erodes.

Five tools stand out as essential for ensuring that all levels of government remain focused on reducing regional disparities and turning policy goals into real improvements for local economies. These include: tracking renewal investment to fund the fundamentals; strengthening evidence gathering and evaluation to learn what works; opening up innovation and removing competitive funding pots to improve collaboration; establishing regional development banks able to draw on both local insight and authority; and embedding place-based criteria to ensure growth sectors genuinely benefit the communities they are meant to serve.

Catherine Day & Matthew Rycroft (National Strategy Project) – The National Strategy Project

Across the UK and globally, trust in government and institutions is fraying - because our systems are not delivering for people, either in daily life or in how we face the biggest challenges of our time. And because a culture has taken hold where Government is too often seen as a distant "other", solving problems for people rather than with them. That leaves us vulnerable as a society. Our institutions were never designed for the world we live in now. But they could be. We need a system that gives people real agency - the power to help shape the future. For the first time in human history, we have the knowledge and technology to bring this about. Used wisely, technology can help rebuild trust - connecting people, amplifying unheard voices, making decision-making more informed and effective - more deliberative.

We created the National Strategy Project (NSP) to meet this challenge. It's an independent, cross-sector initiative to build the means for the UK to think, decide and act together - co-creating a shared direction for the country and the systems, culture and mindset needed to deliver it. The project's first major step is a national dialogue - the world's first mass deliberation at true national scale - engaging people across the country in identifying and shaping the biggest choices that will define our shared future.

In the process, it is exploring questions that go to the heart of democratic renewal: What a trusted national deliberative system looks like in practice; and what it will take for it to deliver real-world impact successfully on the big things that matter to people - the cost of living, energy and the environment, immigration and integration, security and health. The goal is not simply to “engage” people - but to give them power and genuine agency in shaping a future that reflects the values and priorities of the whole country, rebuilding trust through shared purpose and practical collaboration.

Form for people wanting to participate in the NSP: https://forms.gle/iMfC6hxJEsJq6mdE7
Contact email: catherine@nationalstrategy.uk