

## National Centre for Social Research – written evidence (FGU0030)

### House of Lords Constitution Committee Inquiry into the Future Governance of the UK

1. The National Centre for Social Research are Britain's leading centre for independent social research, we have over 50 years' experience of listening to the public and making sure their voice is heard. The research we do helps government and charities make the right decisions about the big issues and we're passionate about ensuring its widest possible impact on the world around us. As a non-profit organisation we are never compromised by commercial or political agendas.
2. In 2020 we started our Centre for Deliberative Research, led by Dr Ceri Davies, which delivers projects and develops evidence on citizen engagement with policy making in the context of democratic innovation as well as conducting research that draws on wider participatory methods and expertise in public engagement. We deliver this work across a range of public policy areas with recent projects focused on Brexit, the environment and gender.
3. NatCen read with interest the call for evidence the Lords Constitution Committee has made to support its inquiry into Future Governance of the UK. As the Committee will appreciate, this inquiry comes at a crucial time for democracy and represents a golden opportunity to ensure the voices of citizens themselves can also be heard in an organised and meaningful way. Principles fundamental to forms of participatory and deliberative democracy offer a useful roadmap here which we believe has an important role to play alongside our representative systems and rights.
4. Alongside the wide range of evidence the Committee will consider, we add our voice to those advocating for **citizen engagement to inform the work of the inquiry** and in particular through the use of **Citizen's Assemblies or other form of mini-public**; giving the public an opportunity to learn about the issues under consideration, trusting them to have their say and giving you access to new opinions and perspectives on the issues and solutions available.
5. Our submission shares a case study of one of our national projects which we hope might be of interest in illustrating the place and potential of citizen engagement on questions of governance.

#### Case study - Future of Britain after the EU Referendum

6. The aim of this project is to use an approach called Deliberative Polling to find out what citizens want to see happen post-Brexit in a number of policy areas hitherto subject to EU regulation. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under their 'Governance after Brexit' initiative, with Professor Sir John Curtice we have successfully used a mini-public model to engage over 380 members of the public (selected to be representative of the UK as a whole) to consider policy options for immigration, food policy and consumer regulation<sup>1</sup>.
7. The way forward on these particular areas is uncertain and to date had lacked a clear view of what citizens wanted to see; an essential part of building mandate

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from our work so far can be viewed here: <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/thinking-about-post-brexit-public-policy-voters-perspective-on-immigration-and-regulation/>

and being able to effectively represent what people think is important in the future.

8. A well designed deliberative process distils complex or technical evidence, providing participants with an opportunity to learn about the issues before discussing their views with others. Working with an advisory group and subject matter experts, we provided participants with briefing packs of relevant material, identifying the policy options we wanted them to discuss and specifying the pros and cons of each.
9. Practically speaking, this also gives the convenors of the process the ability to delimit *what* participants should deliberate on, ensuring focus and relevance, rather than wide ranging discussions that risk defaulting to an exchange of top of mind opinions or drawing in material tangential to the subject.
10. Whilst such political deliberation is traditionally undertaken face to face, our research has been using video-based online approaches, starting pre-pandemic in 2019. In our work we have involved over 380 citizens in a weekend of deliberations on our selected subjects held entirely online. We selected the platform Zoom as it provides a number of functions to ensure security, stable audio/visual quality and it is free for participants to use.
11. Participants moved through a mixture of small group discussions (with groups randomly determined, ensuring diversity of vote and attitudes), and plenary sessions where they could ask questions of experts. Despite holding diverse views, moderation and purpose enables for rich discussion, even where people disagree with each other and many participants commented on how much they enjoyed hearing other people's views and opinions.
12. Whilst online is still a relatively new way to conduct deliberation, our work received comparable evaluative scores to similar face to face exercises – for example, 90% agreed that everyone has a chance to have their say, 95% agreed that important aspects of the issues were covered in discussions.
13. Participants also felt that with such processes important in giving people a way to share their views and hear all sides of a debate, it was an opportunity everyone should have the chance to get involved with and saw what they were doing as able to contribute to national development and progress.
14. With this work, NatCen has delivered the UK's first and largest online Deliberative Poll using videoconferencing software. To do so particular consideration was given to access and technological capabilities and whilst issues of digital exclusion persist, this also enabled the involvement of people who would find it hard to attend face to face events, such as those with caring commitments, long-term health conditions that make it difficult to leave home for a period of time, and those who live far away from urban centres – such as in the Highlands of Scotland.
15. It demonstrates that technology can be made to work for large scale involvement in deliberation and dialogue which can be comparable to face to face events in terms of providing an effective, accessible and cost-friendly format capable of providing participants with a positive deliberative experience.
16. We have already weaved many of these ideas into the proposals for the Citizens Convention on UK Democracy<sup>2</sup> and are working alongside global leaders in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ccukdemocracy.org/>

innovation in this field including Prof Jim Fishkin at Stanford University who is for example, exploring the use of Artificial Intelligence to support deliberation at national scales with opportunities for anyone who wants to contribute.

17. What our experience to date tells us is that:

- The public are ready to participate and grapple with complex issues relating to our futures and that their views and aspirations are sometimes, but not always aligned with those in power; making it even more important that their voices are heard.
- People can disagree well when given good conditions for participation and deliberation can bridge polarisation and support consensus building even on very ambitious or complicated agendas.
- Using deliberative approaches directly engages citizens and gives them access to the debates and information that shapes and affects their lives; and so giving them an opportunity to have a meaningful say also delivers on democratic principles.

18. We would be pleased to be available to the Lords Committee through further evidence or via a personal briefing to expand on any of these suggestions and the practicalities of achieving dialogue-based engagement between citizens and parliament in this exciting moment.

*30/04/2021*