

involve

Putting people at the heart of English devolution

Involving people from all walks of life in how decisions are made to unlock more effective, fair and democratic devolution in England

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About Involve

Involve is the UK's leading public participation organisation. We are an independent charity that works to make public participation and deliberation an everyday part of democracy, to help meet the challenges of the 21st century. Our vision is of a vibrant democracy where everyone can shape a society that works for us all.

Since our foundation in 2003, we have worked with governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, businesses, academics and the public across all four nations of the UK, and internationally, to put people at the heart of decision-making.

Find out more [here](#).



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Executive summary

This paper sets out how involving people from all walks of life in decision making could unlock a more effective, fair and democratic approach to devolution in England.

There is a major democratic deficit in this country. Trust in politics is at an all time low, many feel they have no influence over decisions, or that the government doesn't have their interests at heart. And, turnout in elections, particularly local and regional elections, is consistently low.

Successive governments have sought to 'complete the map' of English devolution. The new Labour government is similarly committed to achieving this aim, and will outline its plans imminently in an English Devolution White Paper. Done well, English devolution presents an opportunity to help tackle the democratic deficit. But, this will only happen if regional politicians and officials work *in partnership* with local residents to make decisions about our future.

Why does our politics need a greater role for the public, starting with English devolution?

There are a number of reasons why putting people at the heart of decision-making would benefit our politics in general, and make English devolution in particular more fair and effective.

1. **Complete the English devolution map, together;** to ensure deals are agreed, and the public support them. Without this, we risk spending years on deals that are ultimately rejected (see [Cornwall example](#)) or undermining trust by enforcing agreements from central government, or only allowing a handful of local politicians to select from a range of options.
2. **Rebuild public trust;** with public trust and confidence in government so low, the way we do politics needs to change. Public participation and deliberation has a track record of increasing public trust. Be it through those directly involved, ensuring better decisions are made, or increasing trust from the wider public when they hear 'people like them' were involved in the decision.
3. **Deliver more effective decisions;** making the right decision at the right time is difficult. Involving the public more effectively can help increase decision makers' ability to make the right decisions, through supporting them to tackle morally challenging or controversial topics, build the case more effectively, and avoid policy failure by hearing from those the policies will affect.
4. **Build greater accountability;** with low turnout in local and regional elections, finding ways for those in power to be held accountable *between* elections can help ensure a successful, democratic relationship between the governing and the governed.
5. **Empower people from all walks of life;** our current approach to politics and making decisions leaves many people feeling they aren't well represented and they have little to no say over decisions that affect their lives. Giving them a say, in a robust, fair, effective and transparent way can help build people's sense of agency.
6. **Build community cohesion and tackle polarisation;** there is clear evidence that, through public participation and deliberation, the public can become less polarised and help carve a way forward on difficult subjects. This is particularly important in an increasingly polarised political environment.
7. **Show that a participatory culture is possible;** Establishing a different way for politicians and the public to relate to one another could hold clues for how to achieve a more profound cultural shift - where people from all walks of life can have a say in a society that works for all of us.

What is public participation and deliberation?

Public participation and deliberation play a different role to tools of social research, such as focus groups, ethnography, or polling, and those of public communications, such as messaging frameworks and audience segmentation. Public participation and deliberation are designed to facilitate collective public *judgement*, not simply gather *opinion*, and provide a clear way forward on any tradeoffs that should be made in meeting the big challenges we face.

Deliberation is a particular form of public participation; it allows those involved to consider balanced information and experiences, engage with tradeoffs collectively, and form a shared conclusion on what to do next.

There are different ways of understanding how to involve the public in decision making, how to pick the right method and how to ensure the process is delivered in a robust, inclusive, transparent and impactful manner. Part 2 of this report looks at this in more detail.

How could public participation and deliberation improve and support English devolution?

There are a number of opportunities for the public to play a greater role in English devolution, right now. And, in doing so, build a more effective, fair and democratic approach to how decisions are made in communities across England.

For English devolution to deliver what so many communities need, it must be based on the idea that people have a right to determine how they are governed. There are opportunities to do this, right now, and we have the knowledge and experience to make the most of these.

We have set out five recommendations below that could be taken on in the coming months, responding to specific opportunities, as an important first step in the right direction.

Summary of key opportunities and recommendations		
	Opportunities	Recommendations
1	Successive governments want to complete the map of English devolution, but poor public engagement can stop deals from happening that have public support.	Use regional citizens' assemblies / panels supported by hyper-local community conversations where deals are most controversial to agree geographical boundaries for devolution and new powers as part of devolution deals.
2	Devolution deals include an agreed approach to effective governance and accountability, but often don't define a role for the public.	Each devolution deal should include a requirement for a Public Participation and Accountability Strategy to be developed as part of its governance and accountability arrangements.
3	Combined authorities will be required to develop Local Growth Plans. These will only work if they build on local knowledge and assets.	Combined authorities to ensure each Local Growth Plan includes a clear approach to building on local knowledge and assets, with local residents and institutions.
4	There will be major, flagship decisions made by combined authorities. These can be moments to demonstrate a different approach to politics.	Combined authorities to demonstrate political leadership, by choosing to include the public in making at least one flagship decision or plan.
5	Combined authorities may want to work with the public, but are concerned they don't have time or that they will struggle to reach the right people.	Combined authorities to set up regional citizens' pools, to reduce the barriers to including the public in decision making.

Introduction

In June 2024, the British public's trust and confidence in the UK government fell to the lowest levels ever [recorded](#), with 45% saying they would 'almost never' trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party. Half (47%) of people in the UK believe they have no influence over decision making. Most believe the current political system [does not understand them](#).

People in England largely [do not feel political and social change is possible](#). And, people's lack of power and trust is not uniform – those furthest from traditional forms of power understandably have [the least trust](#) in the current system.

The fact that people in England feel this way is a major concern for the democratic legitimacy of our politics. Local election turnout in England is also low – part of a recognised '[accountability deficit](#)' in England. Average turnout in local elections across the UK [has never risen above 50% in the last half century](#), and is [consistently lower than in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland](#) and other [European countries](#). Not only is turnout low, but [understanding of and trust in local government is lacking](#), with a [limited role](#) for local voice and civic engagement in many key institutions. When considered alongside the [multiple kinds of poverty and a lack of social infrastructure](#) experienced by so many, it paints a challenging picture.

The new Labour government has been clear that they recognise some of these challenges. Prime Minister Keir Starmer [has said](#) '*The fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era*'. Part of this could be through English Devolution, about which Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner [has said](#), '*Work will now continue at pace to deliver on manifesto commitments to transfer power out of Whitehall, and into our communities, with upcoming devolution legislation to take back control*.' But, the detail on what this will look like remains limited.

Done well, English devolution presents an opportunity to help tackle this democratic deficit and rebuild trust between government and the public. But, this paper argues, this will only happen if it truly seeks to ensure regional politicians and officials are working *in partnership* with local residents to make decisions about our collective future.

This paper looks at why this partnership between politicians and the public is needed, what it could look like and the immediate opportunities to deliver it, through English devolution, right now. It focuses on combined authorities in particular and their relationship to both national government and local residents. This is not because this is the only, or even the most important way to tackle the democratic deficit across England - it is only a small part of the significant effort required. But, we believe there is a specific window of opportunity in relation to these new(ish) institutions to shift the dial and put the public at the heart of how they make decisions, as the start of the wider shift required.

We also believe that greater public participation and deliberation can help deliver English devolution on its own terms. Consecutive governments have sought to devolve powers to regions across England. But, doing that from the top-down only risks a reaction that will make it too politically contentious to achieve. It would also mean undermining efforts to rebuild trust and build the power of communities to enact change. Instead, working with local residents, national, regional and local government, can demonstrate the Prime Minister's recently [stated belief](#) that '*those with skin in the game... make much better decisions than people sitting in Westminster*'.

Part A. Why does our politics need a greater role for the public, starting with English devolution?

Reason 1: Complete the English devolution map, together

Currently, only [around half](#) of England is part of a combined authority - a regional, intermediate tier of government above local authorities that can take on key policy levers such as transport and skills development.

A 'devolution deal' is currently the main way for power to be transferred from Whitehall to a combined authority. This involves negotiating an agreement between Whitehall and local political leaders that sets out specific powers to be transferred in return for agreed governance and structural reforms. Often, this involves the creation of a mayoral combined authority (MCA) - with a Mayor at the helm of the new authority (e.g. Greater Manchester Combined Authority), but not always (e.g. Lancashire). It's possible that the new government moves away from deals, adopting an 'off the shelf' model. Either way, this will involve engaging with trade-offs and agreeing a way forward between central government and local leaders.

It's [clear](#) that the new Labour government is focused on building on the legacy left by the Conservatives. Given [their statement](#) that, 'A Labour government will ask all councils outside of an existing or agreed combined authority or county devolution deal to begin preparatory work to join together on sensible economic geographies and take on a new suite of powers through our enhanced devolution framework to benefit their residents', most expect the new government to try to 'complete the map' - ensuring the rest of England is covered by either a combined authority, or some similar form of devolution settlement.

[This map](#) from the Local Government Chronicle does a great job of trying to grapple with the range of deals and their varying levels of progress.

"Governance of England is so messy. There is a long way to go to streamline who does what, why people should care and why people should engage. We are making great strides with the mayors, they are easier to explain - but there is a long way to go."

Senior Officer, Combined Authority

"[There is] Limited public involvement during the conceptualisation, negotiation, and ratification of devo deals. There has been an... opaque process to the extent that local consent has to be given but it is through councils... and the leaders of these councils will have been involved in negotiating the deals. Often deals have fallen at this stage."

Senior Leader, Think Tank with English devolution specialism

The government now faces a number of difficult decisions about what the geography of new devolution arrangements should be, which places to prioritise and the trade-offs involved. This raises a question - how can the new government ensure every part of the country benefits from devolving powers to their region, in a way that works *with* those that live there, rather than imposing a new settlement on people, further undermining trust?

That's where public participation and deliberation comes in.

If done badly (see [Cornwall example](#)), more traditional forms of public consultation can harm progress to form a deal, with years of negotiation wasted. But, if done well, local political leaders, Whitehall and local residents could work together to decide which powers should be devolved, what new governance structures need to be in place and what role the public will play in holding this new institution to account.

In Part 3 of this report, '**Opportunity 1: Form devolution deals together with the public, to complete the map**' looks at how this could be done. If delivered effectively, it could help ensure English devolution was achieved consistently across the country, together with those living in a region, so all can be part of receiving greater powers and funding in their communities.

Reason 2: Rebuild public trust

With trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at a [record low](#), and people in England [feeling that political and social change is not possible](#), efforts to rebuild public trust are increasingly essential.

"politics doesn't trust people, whilst expecting them to trust [in return]"

Senior Leader, Regional Charity

We believe there are three ways that better inclusion of the public in making decisions can increase trust.

1. Increased trust for those directly involved

We consistently find that members of the public that are involved in public participation processes have a greater sense of trust in politics, and its ability to make a difference in our lives, as we found in a recent citizens' assembly Involve delivered in partnership with Westminster Council. When Westminster Council ran a public participation process around climate change the percentage of people that felt listened to grew from [27% to 63%](#).

This is reinforced by findings about impact on participants in Involve's Climate Assembly UK - commissioned by UK Parliament. The proportion of respondents that 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the UK political system works fairly well increased from [45.3% at the start of the assembly to 57.6% at the end, rising again to 65.3% in the following year](#). But, that position declined, almost to its original position, a year later. Research into the impact of the process found that this is likely because of both a [general decline in the public's perception of government in that period](#), and that the assembly's recommendations weren't taken as seriously after the change in Prime Minister from Theresa May to Boris Johnson.

So, being involved in a decision does not make people immune to wider concerns about politics, and the improved trust is dependent on decision makers honouring the recommendations made by the members of the public they are working with.

2. Increased trust among the public, when people like them were part of a decision

To materially rebuild public trust in politics, the public beyond those involved in the process also need their faith in our political system to grow due to the involvement of others like them.

[Polling done by Demos](#), as part of their [Citizens White Paper](#), delivered in partnership with Involve, showed that 44% of the public said they would trust the government to make decisions in the best interests of people in the UK when the public were involved, in comparison to 35% who were given the scenario without public involvement.

This builds on findings in Ireland, after their citizens' assembly and subsequent referendum on abortion rights. [Studies](#) found that '*knowledge of the Citizens' Assembly made one significantly more likely to vote yes*' –

supporting what fellow citizens had concluded in the Assembly, and [other studies](#) of the Assembly found *'there is a positive and statistically significant effect on the probability of voting yes'*.

3. Increased trust due to more effective decisions being made

This final area is more difficult to define. But, it's not just *how* the decisions are made that matters - what the decisions actually are and how effective they are matters too. In the next section, we'll look at how public participation and deliberation can help ensure more effective decisions are made.

Reason 3: Deliver more effective decisions

There are a number of different ways that high quality, well designed public participation can improve the way we make decisions. The impact this can have is varied and nuanced depending on the context. The benefits listed below are not exhaustive, but indicative of the significant difference effective public participation can make.

1. Tackling morally challenging or controversial topics

Involving the public in a decision can help find a path through difficult moral issues. For example, in Jersey a [citizens' jury](#) identified a way forward on assisted dying, which led to legislation being brought forward to legalise it in certain circumstances for the first time (see case study). Similarly, in Ireland citizens' assemblies were used as an approach to form a view on how and if to [legalise abortion](#) and provide [equal marriage](#) rights, both perceived as politically challenging topics in Ireland, given the historic religious and cultural context. Or, in Scotland, where [distributed dialogues](#) supported a mass consultation on fracking, that led to the second largest response to a Scottish Government consultation ever at the time, with the Scottish Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy saying the high levels of engagement were a ['clear validation of our participative approach'](#).

2. Building the case for difficult decisions

Sometimes, the decisions required to tackle a problem can be disadvantageous for some individuals. For example, we might need to build new forms of sustainable energy generation, or new homes, that some that live locally may not want, but may be asked to accept for the benefit of the wider community and society as a whole.

We often find that when the public are part of making recommendations together, they are able to identify these difficult decisions, and understand and accept the downsides. This demonstrates to those making the ultimate decision that the public can be persuaded to engage in those trade offs, and understand that there might be a downside, but can also help identify conditions that make that downside more palatable.

For example, [recent YouGov polls](#) suggest that while the British public are very much in favour of getting more energy from renewables and less from fossil fuels, only 59% are in favour of on-shore wind. And, this is before the local aspect is taken into account - the 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) element of being supportive in principle, but not in practice if it's in their community. The political concern for this aspect was so strong within recent Governments that on-shore wind farms were [banned until recently](#). However, when a range of public, private and voluntary organisations from across Devon - including local authorities - came together to form the [Devon Climate Emergency Response Group](#) and run Devon Climate Assembly, local residents involved reached a different conclusion. Those involved, chosen to reflect the population of Devon, were [89% in favour of on-shore wind](#) in their communities, when some of the benefits went to the local area.

3. Avoiding policy failure

We consistently see policy failures that could have been avoided with better public engagement. This can be challenging to prove, given the lack of a counterfactual, but it doesn't take a huge leap of the imagination to understand how this would work. The example of Cornwall's devolution deal is just one. Similarly, take the now

infamous case of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs). There have been signs of protest up in windows across the country, against the seemingly sensible step to reduce traffic in key parts of our towns and cities, and encourage walking and cycling too. This has been so consistently a problem that the government issued [statutory guidance](#) earlier this year, saying of LTNs that, 'too often local people don't know enough about them and haven't been able to have a say'. The right public engagement in decision making, at the right time, could avoid these contentious battles.

4. Hearing the right voices

Without hearing the right voices, decisions can be made without the right information to hand. Assumptions are consistently made on the basis of anecdotal experience, bias or using the wrong sort of public opinion gathering exercise.

Sometimes, this is about listening to the public in general - and key actors - who might be affected by a decision or needed for a decision to succeed. For example, when the UK government was [forced to scrap](#) a £1.5 billion green homes grant scheme in 2020 because both the public and builders were put off by the complexity of the application versus the amount of money being offered - up to £10,000. It's not difficult to see how actually involving both the public and builders in designing the scheme could have helped avoid this mistake.

Other times, policy decisions affect some groups a lot more than others. For example, after The Scottish Government took responsibility for some of the benefits previously delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), they established [Social Security Experience Panels](#). This involves around 2,000 active panel members that are all recipients of certain social security benefits. The Scottish Government works with panel members to inform key decisions in the design of Social Security. [Most recently](#), this included detailed recommendations, many of which were taken on and/or fed directly into decisions, on Carer's Assistance and Winter Heating Payment.

"Big strategic decisions will be made better if the public have a say in them. This can only be for the benefit of our democratic health in the long term."

Senior Leader, Think Tank with English devolution specialism

Reason 4: Build greater accountability

Many discussions about accountability of combined authorities focus on how they will be held to account by the Government. While some support to ensure effective discharging of responsibilities may be important - this is not the primary accountability concern in a democracy. Instead, the focus needs to be on how these institutions are accountable to those they exist to serve.

Local election turnout in England is low – part of a recognised '[accountability deficit](#)' in England. Average turnout in local elections across the UK [has never risen above 50% in the last half century](#), and is [consistently lower than in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland](#) and other [European countries](#).

In mayoral elections in 2024, turnout [was down in almost every vote](#), despite their increasing powers. In the 10 mayoral elections on 2 May 2024, the average turnout was just 30%, down from 35% in 2021. More needs to be done to increase turnout, ensuring a greater electoral mandate for those in combined authorities. There are numerous ways to achieve this, from Automatic Voter Registration to political education and beyond, but others such as the [Electoral Reform Society](#) and [The Politics Project](#) are better placed to explain how.

Beyond electoral reform, greater public participation and deliberation *between* elections can also help improve the mandate that elected representatives have to make decisions, and strengthen the relationship between politicians and the public.

Reason 5: Empower people from all walks of life

As outlined previously in the paper, most people in England believe the current political system [does not understand them](#). However, it's not all bad - the public do want to be involved. [Recent polling](#) shows 63% say they would be likely to accept an invitation to take part in a public participation exercise by the government. The biggest thing stopping them is their belief that the government wouldn't listen to what they had to say; 41% say this would make them less likely to take part. This demonstrates the underlying need to shift the dial and start to give people from all walks of life a say in decisions that matter.

When done well, this can significantly increase people's agency and sense of confidence. For example, the percentage of members of Involve's Climate Assembly UK that believed they had some say about what the UK parliament does [almost doubled over the course of the process](#). This echoed the experience of Citizens Researchers as part of Involve's [MH:2K Tyneside](#) project, which engaged young people in conversations about mental health and emotional wellbeing in their local area. 86% of those involved said their confidence improved through being part of the process.

Public participation and deliberation is one crucial part of how we build a stronger, more empowered citizenry across all four nations of the UK, and ensure many more can have a role to play in decisions they care about.

Reason 6: Build community cohesion and tackle polarisation

Public participation and deliberation can help carve a way forward where a subject has become politically polarised, or where community relations are strained. In particular, it allows members of the public to move beyond the 'positions' they hold, and into 'interests and values' they hold, or even the 'needs and fears' they might have. [This allows for greater understanding to be built, and new common ground identified](#).

For example, [research](#) in 2021 by the National Centre for Social Research and UK in a Changing Europe showed that attitudes became more nuanced and less polarised as a result of being part of a deliberative process. 'Leavers' became more likely to feel that immigration has been economically and culturally beneficial - support for the view that immigration is good for the economy increased from 43% to 58%, and those who said it was culturally enriching rose from 42% to 50%. 'Remainers' became a little less liberal in their attitudes towards immigration control - 63% said EU migrants should have to apply to come to Britain, up from 38% beforehand.

These findings were supported by [research](#) done on Stanford University's 'America in One Room' project. A group of people who reflected the country as a whole were asked a number of questions about immigration, before and after deliberating with others. After deliberating, both Republicans and Democrats, including those taking the most polarised positions, moved significantly closer together, across all five questions.

Reason 7: Show that a participatory culture is possible

Many of the arguments above have been largely practical or instrumental, making the case for why greater public participation in English devolution is needed to tackle specific concerns that already exist around increasing public trust, ensuring more effective decision making and greater accountability between regional leaders and local residents. They are also targeted at central government, combined authorities, and local authorities that are exploring forming a devolution deal.

But there's also a broader argument for why a greater role for the public in English devolution is important - it demonstrates that a new political culture is possible.

Taken in isolation, individual public participation and deliberation processes will have a significant impact on both policy and people. But to achieve a more profound shift - where people from all walks of life can have a say in a society that works for all of us - it needs to become a cultural, everyday norm.

English devolution is a significant opportunity to move our political culture in this direction. The first principle of devolution must surely be that [people have the right to decide on how they wish to be governed](#). For example, those that don't want mayors should not be forced to have one. The [focus](#) by current political leaders is often on the economic benefits of devolution. But, without applying a wider understanding of the potential benefits, there is a real danger that devolution simply feels to many like a way to add another layer of politicians in whom the public have no more faith than the existing layers.

For those in positions of authority, it should become an everyday practice to ask, 'have we involved the right people, in the right way, in making this decision?' Or even, 'is this a decision I'm best placed to make, or is someone closer to the issue better able to form a view on the way forward?'

For the rest of us, it should become an everyday practice to assume both the right and responsibility to play a role in decisions that affect us, and our communities and society at large.

Part B. What is public participation and deliberation?

What makes public participation and deliberation different?

So, what are public participation and deliberation, and what makes them different?

On the surface, public participation and deliberation can look similar to useful tools of social research (such as focus groups, ethnography, or polling) and public communications (such as messaging frameworks and audience segmentation). However, participatory and deliberative methods are different. They are designed to facilitate collective public *judgement*, not simply *opinion*, to inform the live considerations of the Government, and to provide a clear way forward on any tradeoffs that should be made in meeting the big challenges we face.


Deliberation is a particular form of public participation; it allows those involved to consider balanced, relevant information and experiences, engage with tradeoffs collectively, and form a shared conclusion on what to do next.

A spectrum of public participation

There are different ways of understanding the involvement of the public in decision making¹. We are using the [International Association of Public Participation's](#) 'spectrum of public participation' as the basis for framing how the government could embed meaningful public participation and deliberation into how decisions are made.

Specifically, this paper focuses on areas that sit within the "Involve" and "Collaborate" parts of the spectrum, with some that sit in 'Empower'. This paper includes 'empower' examples where authority is delegated by decision makers, not where people choose to organise themselves and take action independently from those in positions of power. That said, there are many other disciplines that focus on empowerment - such as [community organising](#) and [asset based community development \(ABCD\)](#) - that sit out of scope for this particular piece of work but are essential to building a participatory society beyond the relationship between government and the public.

¹ For example, [Sherry Arnstein's 'ladder of participation'](#) published in 1969 to [John Gaventas' 'power cube'](#) introduced in 2001.

 Increasing impact on the decision					
	Out of scope		In scope		Partially in scope
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding decisions made	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions still to be made	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solutions	To place final decision making in the hands of citizens, providing support to make that decision possible.
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how we canvassed a range of views	We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations in the decisions to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide, or will support you to implement what you decide.
How the spectrum relates to participatory policy making	Informing and Consulting includes marketing and communications, sending out information, formal consultations, public meetings. Usually means setting out information, and at a particular time in the decision process, asking for views.		Involving and Collaborating are the primary focus of this paper. It is a two-directional approach to inviting the public into making decisions with the Government.		For empowering, the decision itself is made directly by those citizens involved in the process.
Examples of methods², some of which span more than one category, depending on approach and what is done with the output.		surveys public opinion polls interviews public meetings focus groups workshops pop up stalls consultative panels world cafe	citizen research world cafe citizens' assemblies, juries or panels community conversations conversation cafés distributed dialogue	co-design co-production future visioning	referenda community votes participatory budgeting

² We look at a much wider range of methods on our website's resources pages [here](#), these are examples of approaches to help explain the difference between different elements of the spectrum.

How to choose the right method?

In order to determine which tool is the most appropriate to use for which policy issue, policy teams across government will need to assess against a series of criteria, asking themselves the following questions:

1. What question is the public being asked, and what is their level of influence?
2. Who is affected and has an interest in the decisions on the issue?
3. At what stage of the policy cycle is this public participation planned to happen? Is it upstream - ie: strategic or agenda setting, or downstream in policy development, implementation or evaluation? See diagram below mapping opportunities for public participation onto the policy cycle.
4. How much time is available to run the process, to ensure that results can have timely impact?
5. How many people need to be involved?
6. How long? Is this a process which requires a longer period of participant engagement, or a shorter one off process?
7. Does the issue have a national or local scope?
8. How much budget is available?

To make sure the right method is used - these questions need to be answered first. Only then should a method be chosen, rooted in the answers to the questions above.

Ten qualities for effective public participation

These ten criteria are the defining features of participatory, deliberative processes. They must all be present in the thinking and design, if the process is to unlock difficult issues and rebuild trust.

1. Clear purpose

- It's important that the process makes a difference and the decision has not already been made.
- The process takes place at the right point in the policy making or decision making cycle.
- The process has a clear question – or set of questions – to address, with a range of possible solutions.
- The scope for making a difference to the decision is explicitly declared at the start and things that are out of scope or cannot be changed are clearly outlined.
- Where there is a clear and obvious decision maker they are sincere in their willingness to be open-minded and make a public commitment to consider and respond in detail to the decision or recommendation
- Processes should be coordinated to ensure policy coherence, avoid duplication and reduce the risk of engagement fatigue.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Where there are obvious decision-makers, are they genuinely willing to consider different outcomes?
2	Is the process taking place at the right point in the policy making or decision making cycle where it can still influence the outcome?
3	Is there a clear question or set of questions that the process will address, and have these been communicated openly with the participants?
4	Is there a plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the process in making a difference to the decision(s)?

2. Sufficient time and resource

- There is sufficient time in the project set up to build important relationships with interested parties and decision makers.
- The time and resources available should be proportionate to the question or purpose.
- There is no single design for a participatory or deliberative process, but each process is designed to meet its specific aims and objectives.
- There must be adequate time for participants to learn, discuss and come to a conclusion needed for the specific aims, objectives and method.
- There are sufficient resources (people and budget) to deliver an inclusive and rigorous process.
- Participants need to be allowed to digest and contemplate the information they receive, so processes often require multiple meetings with time between for reflection.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Have I ensured that participants have enough time to learn, deliberate, and come to a conclusion that meets the specific aims and objectives?
2	Have I allocated sufficient people, resources and budget to deliver an inclusive and rigorous process?
3	Have I built in enough time in the project set up to build important relationships with interested partners and decision makers?

3. Reflective or diverse group of participants

- The participants involved go beyond self selecting groups and are usually broadly reflective of the wider population.
- An element of [random stratified sampling](#) is often included in the recruitment methodology, based on demographics, geographical and/or attitudinal data.
- Depending on the topic, there may be a need for a mixed method approach where people from marginalised or minoritised groups are specifically asked for their input, noting that in a reflective sample minority groups are still the minority.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Have I included an element of random stratified sampling in the recruitment methodology?
2	Have I assessed whether the voices and experiences of minoritised groups are adequately represented?
3	Are there specific strategies to reach out to groups whose voices might otherwise be underrepresented?

4. Inclusive

- Participants are paid for all reasonable expenses and their time, at minimum at real living wage per hour of their time.
- The accessibility requirements of participants are met, such as childcare costs, personal assistant costs for disabled people, and interpretation services.
- Information and materials are provided in a range of different formats.
- Inputs are accessible, avoid jargon and do not assume prior knowledge or require reading beyond the hours of the engagement (unless otherwise agreed).
- The process fulfils a duty of care to support participants so that they will not be harmed by the process.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Are we paying people at least at the real living wage per hour of their time? (See 'Guidance on participant payments (gift of thanks)')
2	Have I asked participants about any access or support needs and can I ensure these needs are met? (See 'How to make your public engagement accessible and inclusive')
3	Have I reviewed the materials to ensure clarity and accessibility for all participants?

5. Independent

- The agenda setting, design and inputs of a process ensures balance and impartiality.
- The process is designed and facilitated by impartial and trained process designers and facilitators (internal or external).
- Participants are surveyed to collect their views on their experience and the quality of the process, including the impartiality of facilitation, the balance of evidence and the opportunities to participate.
- An external evaluation process can offer independent scrutiny, legitimacy and accountability.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Have I ensured that the agenda, design, and inputs of the process are balanced and impartial?
2	Have I engaged an impartial and experienced team to design and facilitate the process?
3	Have I planned to survey participants to collect their views on their experience and the quality of the process?

6. Transparent and accountable

- The recruitment approach, speaker lists, agendas, learning materials and advisory group membership (if applicable) are openly published.
- The process's conclusions are published in full.
- It is clear to everybody involved how the results from the process are intended to be used and how decision makers will use their contributions.
- Decision makers publicly respond to the recommendations.
- It is made clear, after the process, how the public input has had an impact.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Will the conclusions from the process be published publicly?
2	Have I clearly communicated to all participants how the results from the process are intended to be used?
3	Will decision makers publicly respond to the recommendations provided by the process?

7. Balanced inputs

- Participants hear balanced, accurate and comprehensive information and evidence, proportionate to the question or purpose.
- If using multiple speakers, there should be a diversity of speakers with a range of views.
- Speakers do not lead or direct the participants.
- Participants determine their own questions for the speaker(s) and have sufficient time to question them.
- The learning phase supports the subsequent dialogue and deliberation, enabling participants to arrive at informed and considered judgements.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Will the speakers be representative of different backgrounds, disciplines, and viewpoints (if applicable)?
2	Have I briefed the speakers to ensure they understand they should not lead or direct the participants?
3	Have I provided participants with the opportunity and support to formulate their own questions for the speakers?

8. Structured dialogue

- Participants are supported through a facilitated process to consider and weigh up different perspectives and discuss with other participants.
- The process is well structured, with a clear progression through learning and deliberation, to come to shared conclusions.
- The process allows time for plenary feedback, so that participants have the opportunity to hear views from all other participants.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Are there small group discussions, breakout sessions, or other formats that facilitate in-depth conversations among participants?
2	Have I scheduled plenary sessions where participants can share and hear views from other participants?
3	Are facilitators skilled at ensuring that all voices are heard and helping participants weigh different perspectives?

9. Collective conclusions

- Participants consider key trade-offs and reach collective conclusions and/or recommendations.
- The report outlines the rationale behind the conclusions and/or recommendations and where there is disagreement.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1	Has a clear and defined conclusion or set of recommendations been reached as part of the process?
2	Were the conclusions or recommendations agreed upon collectively by the participants?

3 Have I compiled a comprehensive report that details the process, discussions, and outcomes?

10. Commitment by the decision makers

- Every process should include a commitment from the decision makers who commission it to the public - this process will make a difference. This is not the same as committing to deliver all the recommendations formed, but to take them into account, and support the delivery of the following at a minimum:
- Participants and the wider public are given a summary of conclusions and/or recommendations as they have been presented to the decision makers.
- The body responsible for enacting the decisions provides updates on how they have listened to and taken into account participants' views, with clear evidence of how decisions or policy developments have been influenced by it.
- If conclusions or recommendations cannot be acted upon, the reasoning is clearly set out.
- The participants may meet after the process to 'mark the homework' of the decision makers implementing the conclusions and/or recommendations.
- Sometimes, ongoing accountability for ensuring the recommendations continue to influence work can then be transferred to an existing part of the accountability structures in place, such as a scrutiny committee on ongoing questions at a Mayor's Question Time.

Questions to ask to see if this standard is being met:

1 Has the body responsible for enacting the decisions communicated what they will do with the conclusions and/or recommendations?

2 Is there documented evidence showing the impact of participants' contributions on this decision?

3 Will the body responsible for enacting the decisions or recommendations provide updates on how they have been incorporated?

Part C. How could public participation and deliberation improve English devolution, right now?

To fundamentally build a politics where people from all walks of life have a say in decisions that matter will take a significant culture shift. It will require political leadership, greater expertise and capacity in institutions across the UK, and embedding these ideas as a democratic norm. It will also require us to tackle key barriers, such as short-termism, misunderstandings about public participation, overcoming a 'Whitehall' mindset and the dire financial situation that so many local authorities are in.

But, there are opportunities to make a step in the right direction, right now. And, in doing so, to help improve and support the Government's current plans for English Devolution. Below are just some of these opportunities, and recommendations for how to take advantage of them.

Five immediate opportunities to put the public at the heart of English devolution

Opportunity 1: Successive governments want to complete the map of English devolution, but poor public engagement can stop deals with public support from happening decision making.

Background

The current Labour government sees greater devolution in England as [an essential route to some of its core policy aims, including its primary goal - greater economic growth](#). And yet, only [around half](#) of people in England are included in devolution deals of some kind. To this end, on 26 July 2024, the Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner [urged](#) regions without devolved power to 'partner with the government to deliver the most ambitious programme of devolution this country has ever seen', [inviting them](#) to submit proposals by the end of September 2024.

However, for a deal to be implemented, it is required by central government to go through a [four-stage implementation process](#): a governance review, public consultation, ratification by local councils, and approval by ministers and parliament. There is a real danger that, seeking to fast track deals and not giving due consideration to these stages will lead to a backlash and a failure to effectively ensure the steps above are complete. And, it could further undermine the trust between the government and the public that the current administration is trying to rebuild.

"Public engagement matters for the legitimacy of the new institutions that you are creating... People need to understand why they have been created, and feel they have some say in the process."

Senior Leader, Think Tank with English devolution specialism

This is not a theoretical concern - Mayors were [rejected](#) in 9 cities in 2012, [deals were delayed, watered down or abandoned in Yorkshire due to disagreements about geographical boundaries and poor public engagement, years of delay and changing of deals in North East / North of Tyne, and a rejected deal in Cornwall](#) in 2023.

Cornwall, and how better public engagement can save time, money and rebuild trust

Local political leaders and central government worked together to form a deal, which they subsequently put out to public consultation in the hope of it receiving public support. However, 69% of respondents were opposed to proposals for devolution, leading the council leader who negotiated the deal to reject it with 'the greatest regret'. This led to Cornwall missing out on greater powers to make decisions in the region and £360 million in additional investment. It also means those two years of negotiations were somewhat wasted, and relationships were strained locally with one local political leader [describing](#) remarks made by people opposed to the plans as 'vile and hostile'. Since then, a 'Level 2' deal has been [agreed](#), scheduled to be in place fully from September 2025, but without further engagement, and with less money and fewer powers going to the region.

"A skewed type of engagement killed the Cornwall deal. There was a campaign to whip up those who were already... against the deal. At the same time there was a more representative sample of people who were more up for it. It felt that if we had designed a process of consultation and [had] a more representative response, we might have had a different outcome."

Senior Official, Combined Authority

What if, instead, the public had played a role in forming the deal in the first place, and those involved reflected the population of Cornwall as a whole? Better engagement could have saved time, strengthened rather than damaged relationships and led to more money and powers being devolved to Cornwall, in the way that those that live there wanted.

The 'low hanging fruit' of devolution deals have already been picked; those where neither the geography nor the deal is contentious generally already have a deal in place. We're now in the upper branches. This requires a more intentional approach to involving the public, and buying them into the deal being brokered.

Below we recommend how to approach each of these two situations.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Use regional citizens' assemblies / panels supported by hyper-local community conversations where deals are most controversial to agree geographical boundaries for devolution and new powers as part of devolution deals.

In order to build deals *with* local residents, we recommend a two stage approach.

First, reaching out into hyper-local community conversations to understand the nature of geography, identity, and concerns about power and decision making that exist. Second, this should then feed into a follow up citizens' assembly or panel, with a remit and structure rooted in outcomes from the initial hyper-local conversations, as well as practical questions of geography and the powers that should be devolved, bearing in mind the present reality of what is and isn't on the table through devolution deals.

Further stages or approaches could be added if a deal is likely to be particularly controversial, or there are concerns raised that it will affect a particular group negatively, but the above process should form the core of the approach.

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Opportunity 2: Devolution deals include an agreed approach to effective governance and accountability, but often don't define a role for the public

Each devolution deal includes elements of governance and accountability as part of it - see list of deals [here](#) as of early 2024. However, there is no consistent approach to the role of the public participating in decisions, holding the new authority to account and scrutinising decisions made.

Some deals, like for [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough](#), outline the need for public consultation on issues such as buses, but with no detail on what that looks like or how it might go beyond, into public participation, or deliberation. Others, like [Cornwall's deal](#) go further, suggesting that 'local organisations will work with Government to design and agree an appropriate overview and scrutiny function for this deal', but again no further detail is included.

"There is a huge opportunity for emerging places to embed public participation and deliberation. Our democratic culture is crumbling, and there are opportunities at Mayoral and combined authority level to experiment with different models."

Senior Academic, with English devolution specialism

Fundamentally, if English Devolution is to rebuild trust, deliver more effective decisions and build greater accountability and scrutiny, we need to use these deals to set expectations for the new, greater role for the public in helping to make decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Each devolution deal should include a requirement for a Public Participation and Accountability Strategy to be developed as part of its governance and accountability arrangements.

When new devolution deals are formed, or reviewed, the UK Government should require the combined authority to develop a 'public participation and accountability strategy' as part of its governance processes. To support this, we recommend the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government works with the Participatory Methods Forum in the Cabinet Office, external, independent experts such as Involve, and experts that already exist within Combined Authorities to form guidance on how to do this effectively. But, the content of that strategy beyond the guidance should be developed by new Combined Authorities, with local residents.

We're suggesting guidance come from central government, rather than be developed locally or regionally, because that's how the accountability dynamics exists within deals at the moment. Working with the grain of the current approach allows the recommendation to be implemented relatively quickly, while a number of deals are yet to be agreed.

"How does it [public participation and deliberation] iterate with governance? They are strict at the moment. There is an expectation that things are done in a certain way by central government."

Senior Officer, Combined Authority

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Opportunity 3: Combined authorities will be required to develop Local Growth Plans. These will only work if they build on local knowledge and assets.

The Labour government announced '[Local Growth Plans' in the King's Speech](#) earlier this year – the requirement for combined authorities to work together to identify economic clusters and build on their local advantages. Since then, they've established the Council of Nations and Regions and Council of the Mayors as they start to develop Local Growth Plans.

This will require working with key actors in the area to form ‘long-term plans that identify growth sectors and put in place programmes and infrastructure they need to thrive.’ This is part of plans that place economic growth as the Government’s top priority, as reiterated in last month’s Budget. As such, this is a major opportunity for the public to play a key role in a flagship area of policy.

“The past 10 years... it [English devolution] is all seen through the lens of empowerment of local leaders in areas that matter for economic performance as a way to improve growth, productivity, [and] bring in investment...”

Senior Leader, Think Tank with English devolution specialism

The idea that English devolution can help deliver greater economic growth has been built on what key figures see as early signs of success towards this aim, such as [The Greater Manchester Strategy](#), [West Yorkshire’s Business Board](#), and London’s recently announced [plan](#) to create 150,000 jobs by 2028. This builds on existing [evidence](#) that applying local knowledge to make decisions that are well tailored to local needs is an essential part of devolution leading to growth.

But, this raises the question - how will combined authorities and other key actors gather and coordinate that knowledge to be useful? Other examples suggest that creating a greater role for the public can unlock the potential for growth that both benefits local people and contributes to national prosperity. Whether it is Preston showing that prioritising local actors over inward investment can not only deliver [economic success](#), but also [improve the mental health of residents](#), or Wigan applying the significant successes through its [Wigan Deal](#) – [which helped save £25m on adult social care](#) – to [economic growth](#), there are an increasing number of examples for how to harness local ideas, energy and experience to deliver economic success. These examples also raise the important question of the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ growth. It is possible to achieve regional or national aims for growth that reinforce societal problems such as inequality. Working *with* local residents allows for these discussions to happen, and agree what the right approach is for that particular community.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Combined authorities to ensure each Local Growth Plan includes a clear approach to building on local knowledge and assets, with local residents and institutions.

This will help ensure a broad and deep understanding of local knowledge is developed as part of the effort, to ensure inclusive and effective growth plans are developed.

What methods this strategy should include depends on answers to questions in Section 2 of this report on ‘How to choose the right method?’ But, it’s important the engagement isn’t simply to gather information, ie. ‘consult’. We’d encourage combined authorities to look at ‘involve’, ‘collaborate’ and ‘empower’ options, such as future visioning on economic opportunities, partnering with [local anchor institutions](#), developing [local asset based strategies](#) and delegating a portion of the budget to be directly allocated by local residents through [participatory budgeting](#).

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Opportunity 4: There will be major, flagship decisions made by combined authorities. These can be moments to demonstrate a different approach to politics.

A joined up strategy such as the one described in Recommendation 2 is the best way to ensure a high quality, consistently impactful approach to public participation and deliberation.

But, there are a number of specific policy areas that also lend themselves to high quality, impactful public participation and deliberation. Where these policy areas become a strategic priority, we encourage combined authorities to form a clear plan for how the public can play a role in making the decisions needed. This will not always be appropriate, sometimes important decisions need to be made that aren’t right for the public to play a

big role. But too often decisions that could benefit from public participation or deliberation don't. There are a number of policy areas that are particularly live right now and could benefit from a greater role for the public, such as net zero and bus reform. On the former, local authorities across England have [already begun the work](#) of centering local residents in their plans for net zero, with [more work to come](#). On the latter, central government's planned [Better Buses Bill](#) will likely provide new opportunities to franchise buses and further options for how to deliver a better, fairer bus system.

At present, the default way to make decisions in combined authorities is for the public to only be involved when most if not all of the decisions are made - often via statutory consultation. There are exceptions to this, such as West Midlands Combined Authorities' [Greener Together Citizens' Panel](#), [South Yorkshire's Citizens' Assembly on climate](#), or [Greater Manchester's use of Legislative Theatre to form their Homelessness Prevention Strategy](#). But, these examples are largely outliers, not the norm. We want to flip this on its head, with the default being to ask, 'how could the public be meaningfully involved in making this decision'?

RECOMMENDATION 4: Combined authorities to demonstrate political leadership, by choosing to include the public in making at least one flagship decision or plan.

This recommendation is about culture and how to shift norms as much as a practical proposal. The other recommendations here talk about practical steps that could be taken to start to embed public participation and deliberation into how combined authorities work, and the approach to English Devolution more broadly.

But, we think political leadership of the public participation and deliberation agenda is a critical factor in ensuring its success. Choosing to involve the public in a flagship initiative allows the combined authority to say loudly and clearly how it is working differently with local residents, looking to form a new relationship between regional authority and the public. This would require a significant communications campaign alongside it if the exercise is to rebuild trust beyond those most politically engaged, and those involved in the actual process.

The exact methods should be chosen based on the answers to questions in Part B.

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Opportunity 5: Combined authorities may want to work with the public, but are concerned they don't have time or that they will struggle to reach the right people.

One reason many in government don't involve people more in how they make decisions - across national, regional and local levels - are concerns about (a) the time it would take, leading to delays in plans and (b) how to ensure the right people are involved in a decision.

When decisions need to be made relatively quickly, running effective, inclusive processes are often no longer a priority. And, a lack of understanding about how the right people can be recruited effectively and in a timely way is often a barrier to decision makers opting to involve the public.

This is a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, not including the right people in a decision increases the chances that the wrong decision is made - examples of this are countless, but [the UK government failing to understand the experience of women in setting Covid-19 policy is particularly damning](#). Second, responding to events is often also a moment where the scope for change increases. In these moments, given the potential for greater impact on people's lives, those most affected should be part of the decisions being made.

In response to the question, 'What do you think are the main barriers to including more participation and deliberation in English Devolution?', the interviewee answered '*Time. Mayor[al] terms are four years. They need to do things at pace, which is slowed down by participative processes.*'

Good crisis response strategies, and doing public participation and deliberation well, means that involving the public in immediate crisis response is often not appropriate. But, it can be, such as when those crises drag on over time, or there is a question about how to rebuild effectively. And, there are ways to reduce the barriers to those within combined authorities choosing to involve the public in decision making.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Combined authorities to set up regional citizens' pools, to reduce the barriers to including the public in decision making.

Create a large pool of demographically representative members of the public to provide a body from which to draw smaller groups to feed into key decisions. This will take time initially, but save resources and time when teams want to involve the public in a decision in a timely manner.

The pool could be used for big decisions that need to be made more quickly than others, lighter-touch engagement if authorities wanted to take a temperature check on a specific issue, or bring members of the public in to understand the impact of an unfolding crisis or a decision in real time. Once people had participated, they would rotate out of the pool, and new members would be recruited.

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Conclusion

For English devolution to deliver on its potential, it must honour the core idea that people have a right to determine how they are governed. Successive governments have planned for all of England to be under a devolution deal in the years to come. This should be done in a way that involves the public, from how the deals are formed, to how combined authorities then make decisions and are accountable between elections. We have shown that there are opportunities to do this, right now.

Through putting public participation and deliberation at the centre of English devolution, there is also potential for this approach to have a major, positive impact on our politics. From the need to rebuild public trust, to making more effective decisions, to showing that a different way of doing politics is possible - the reasons for a greater role for the public in how decisions are made is clear.

And, the practices for how to do this are already in place. After years of innovation in public participation and deliberation practices across the world, we know how to do this in a high quality, robust and fair way. For this to become a democratic norm, we need national, regional and local governments to trust the public's judgement and recognise the essential role that people from all walks of life should play in making decisions that matter. Only then can deliver the English devolution that so many need.

Research Approach

We undertook both primary and secondary research to explore the potential benefits of public participation and deliberation, and how they can both improve and support a more effective, fair and democratic English devolution. This included:

- 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with interested parties working in policy, think tanks, academia, local authorities, combined authorities, civil servants, and community groups.
- A desktop review of relevant literature. This was used to inform the development of the interview questions. It also informed the analysis and theming of the semi-structured interviews.

Bibliography and links

See [here](#).

For more information about Involve, please go to www.involve.org.uk

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