



I HAVE A VOICE

Call for written evidence – The Government’s Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission

1. I have a voice is a social enterprise that empowers people to engage in politics through education. We are non-partisan and our political literacy programme shows young people how they can engage with existing parliamentary mechanisms and political processes to get their voices heard. By making democratic processes accessible we enthuse young people to become active citizens. Our work clearly shows that young people are engaged with politics they just do not know how to engage. **Therefore, we urge the Commission to include access to Parliament as well as access to justice in its remit.**

Q1. What form should the Commission take?

a. How should it be composed?

b. Should the Commission engage the public, and if so how?

c. How should the Commission proceed in its work? Over what timescale?

2. Given this Commission will have responsibility for democracy it seems only right that it engages with the public. I have a voice appreciates that there are existing mechanisms for public engagement, but we encourage this Commission to contribute to growing efforts to try different approaches to public engagement alongside traditional methods, for example citizen panels and assemblies, and social media. Accessibility is crucial if the Commission truly wants to restore trust in our institutions and how our democracy works. A form of deliberative democracy would facilitate these efforts. Our experience is that if you provide people with space for debate and discussion it fosters curiosity, empathy and ultimately buy-in to decisions, even if it is the outcome is not their personal preference.
3. Deliberative democracy has a long-standing history with its roots in Athenian-style democracy in ancient Greece. It is based on the idea that authentic discussion between free and equal citizens can enable consensual decision-making, which has legitimacy and is much less vulnerable to the distortions that come with party politics. Deliberative democracy is underpinned by the following principles:
 - a. Debate should be informed and informative, enabling people to explore issues from a range of perspectives based on sound argument.
 - b. Participants should be willing to talk and to listen with respect.
 - c. Participants should represent a range of backgrounds and perspectives from across the general population.¹

¹ <https://www.thersa.org/blog/2018/07/our-call-for-action-on-deliberative-democracy>

4. The UK has gone some way to examine the potential for deliberative democracy mechanisms. **Therefore, as a minimum the Commission should analyse evidence from these efforts and make clear recommendations to the Government about whether these should be a standard component of legislative and policy decision-making, and suggest parameters for when these methods should be included alongside the existing representational system.** We appreciate there are some decisions, particularly those that have to be made swiftly, which are well-suited to representative democracy. Therefore, setting parameters for how these two systems would complement one another would be, in our view, a useful output of the Commission.
5. One of the greatest policy challenges of our time is social care and more than one election has been lost because of the public's lack of understanding about how the current system works and therefore how proposals from across the political sphere would have been an improvement on the current system. This kind of informed and robust debate could be the key to unlocking what has now become a 'politically dangerous' problem to resolve and enable the Government to make long overdue life-or-death decisions about social care in England. Citizen Assemblies have been conducted on this topic by Involve and it came up with proposals similar to the Dilnot Commission.²
6. Given our experience in working with young people and the education sector **it is our strong view that both young people and the teaching profession should be involved in the work of the Commission.** Citizenship is a core component of the national curriculum, but it is our understanding that teaching is of mixed quality because it is given differing levels of priority in different education institutes. I have a voice is embarking on a project to understand what teachers and young people think about the political elements of the citizenship curriculum and to seek their ideas on how teachers, the DfE, OFSTED and other interested parties can collaboratively ensure that all young people leave education with a sound basic knowledge of the UK's democratic system and crucially how they can engage with it meaningfully. A simple example is working with sixth forms and colleges to ensure all 16-18 year olds are registered to vote before they leave further education.
7. Rather than focusing on the timeframe we suggest the Committee focuses on what steps it would need to take to embed the principles of deliberative democracy in its work and then sets a realistic timeline for genuine democratic engagement with the public.

Q2. What should be the main purpose and output of the commission?

a. How should the Commission report its findings?

8. I have a voice is supportive of the existing range of areas, but strongly urges the Committee to include access to Parliament as well as access to justice.

² <https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/practice/how-can-we-find-sustainable-solution-funding-adult-social-care>

9. Given the Commission's remit is to restore trust in our institutions and in how our democracy operates it is important that all findings are made available to the public. Not only that, but it would be useful if the Committee could clearly, but succinctly explain the reasons for its recommendations in more accessible formats. Those outside of politics are not likely to know how to find, or be inclined to read a report in its traditional form – even though many Commission reports are well-reasoned and would provide the public with the information they need to analyse the Commission's findings. This Commission should take the lead in exploring new ways of publishing its findings for example: vlogs; social media posts with the key findings, not just posts that highlight that the report has been published; a lesson plan for schools about the work of the Commission and its findings; and a video conference with schools / teachers and other important stakeholder groups. Again, Parliament TV is great from a 'democratic' perspective, but not from a genuine public engagement perspective.

Q3. Given the remit of the Commission to look at “the broader aspects of our constitution” and “come up with proposals to restore trust in our institutions and in how our democracy operates” are there issues not on the Government’s list that need to be examined?

10. I have a voice repeats its recommendation that the Commission includes access to Parliament as well as access to justice in its work.

Q4. What areas should be a priority for the Commission and why?

11. As discussed above examining evidence on deliberative democracy should be a priority, this should be both a line of inquiry and embedded in the Commission's method for conducting its work. Our view is that ensuring all young people leave education with a sound basic knowledge of the UK's democratic processes and how they can meaningfully engage with them should also be included in the Commission's work.

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