

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PENSIONS

Building a democratic mandate
for pensions reform



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ABOUT NEW CITIZEN PROJECT

New Citizen Project is a participation strategy and innovation consultancy founded on a simple but powerful premise: **given the right opportunity, people can and will shape the things that matter to them for the better.** We exist to help organisations of all types involve people as active, empowered citizens

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Conclusions and recommendations made in this report have been informed by all contributors, but **do not necessarily represent the views of all parties at all times.**

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THIS REPORT

Through a literature review, interviews and workshops with stakeholders from across the pensions sector and beyond, this scoping project has sought to identify the opportunity to use deliberative democracy to constructively shape pensions policy in the UK.

THIS REPORT PROVIDES:

- A **rationale** for why deliberative democracy is needed now and the role it could play in making decisions around the future of pensions policy;
- A **framework and blueprint** for involving the UK public in decisions around pensions reform, specifically aligned with the timing of the Pensions Commission;
- **Illustrative process design** and a broad view on scope;
- An overview of **what success would look like** for such a process.

IT DOES NOT PROVIDE:

- The **exact scope** for or detailed guidance on **convening** or **commissioning** a future deliberative process. These elements should be informed by this report, but ultimately will be a decision for the convening organisation(s) based on how a deliberative process can best complement existing and previous work.

- ① This project has mainly considered the opportunity presented by the relaunched **Pensions Commission**.

Therefore, this report primarily explores the case and methods for using deliberative democracy to constructively support the government's ambition to ensure a **strong, fair and sustainable pensions system**.

In addition, this project examined the wider opportunities for deliberative democracy to play a role in **strengthening decision making in the pensions sector**, including ways to expand citizen involvement in shaping the approaches and governance of pension providers.

These reflections can be found in the annex.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Choices made about the future of pensions affect us all. They affect the shape of our later lives, social cohesion across generations and even global sustainability.

Right now, **the UK pensions system faces the considerable challenges** of an ageing population, increased life expectancy, structural inequalities and widespread undersaving and disengagement.

Reaching solutions to these challenges will require more than expertise and data modelling alone; it will take **values-based judgements** on how to achieve a fair settlement across the population. Any solutions will require high levels of **trust** and **legitimacy**. This means equipping our policymakers with the capacity to account for our differing experiences of pensions, emboldening them to make difficult, nettle-grasping decisions.

<4

WORKING-AGE ADULTS PER PENSIONER TODAY

In 1950 there were **five**; by 2070 there will be fewer than **three**.

31%

OF ADULT LIFE SPENT IN RETIREMENT

In **1950**, the average man retired at 67 and lived another 10 years. Today, the average male retires at 64 and lives a further 20 years.

14.6M

WORKING-AGE PEOPLE UNDERSAVING

More than 4 in 10 working-age people are **undersaving** for retirement.

48%

GENDER PENSIONS GAP

A typical woman currently in her late 50s can expect around **£5,000** less in annual private pension income than a typical man.

3M+

SELF-EMPLOYED NOT SAVING INTO PENSION

Self-employed pension participation has plummeted from 48% in 1998 to **less than 20%** today.

The ambition of this scoping project has been to assess the opportunity for deliberative democracy to **strengthen decision making** on the future of our pensions system.

The **Pensions Commission**, relaunched as part of the government's ambition to 'finish the job' of creating a pensions system that delivers adequate, fair and sustainable retirement incomes, creates a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address the big challenges.

Here, we set out how involving citizens in creating a democratic mandate for reforms can support policymakers to reach a long-lasting settlement and shape the pensions system for the better.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

THE MORAL CASE

The shift towards Defined Contribution schemes has transferred risk to individuals. Combined with the gender pensions gap, broader inequity of pension outcomes and a system based on inertia, this creates a strong moral case for involving citizens in shaping future pensions policy.

FALLING TRUST

Falling trust in government and a challenging political and economic context places greater emphasis on strengthening the democratic mandate of our national pensions policy in order to create a lasting settlement.

A UNIQUE WINDOW

The relaunching of the Pensions Commission creates a unique window in time for citizens to be involved in the development of national policy with long-term, society-wide effects.

TACKLING COMPLEXITIES

The representative makeup of deliberative processes, and their model of learning and discussion, can enable the public and policymakers to grasp difficult decisions. These processes strengthen legitimacy by going beyond the usual voices and vested interests.

UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE WILL

Deliberative democracy uniquely offers the chance to understand collective will. Recommendations would be formed by a representative group finding consensus on actions they believe would set the path to a fair and sustainable pensions system, with adequate outcomes for all.

THE CORE RECOMMENDATION

A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON THE FUTURE OF THE UK PENSIONS SYSTEM

Bringing together a representative group of the population to learn about the status quo and options for change, engage with trade-offs and reach recommendations to inform the work of the Pensions Commission and decisions of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

A citizens' assembly could complement and be integrated into existing plans for public engagement, and could be **supported by:**

PUBLIC DIALOGUES WITH DEFINED COHORTS

Tailored deliberative workshops with representative cohorts affected disproportionately by worse pensions outcomes; exploring options for change and informing both a citizens' assembly and the wider policymaking process.

NATIONAL INVITATION FOR PUBLIC SUBMISSION

Giving every citizen the opportunity to learn about and participate in the policy-making process by submitting their experiences, ideas and concerns for the future of the pensions system.

In the context of **declining trust** in our political system and institutions, creating meaningful opportunities for citizens to shape decisions can help to renew the social contract on which our pensions system is built.

In 2006, timed with the Turner Commission, citizens were involved in shaping pensions policy through the **National Pensions Debate**. Now, there is a need to go further. This report is a call for policymakers to be brave in **going beyond conventional methods**. To embrace approaches that enable citizens to engage with the big question of how to create a fair and sustainable pensions system and all the trade-offs that will entail.

Ultimately, this report argues that for any new pension settlement to be sustainable and trusted, **it must be shaped by the citizens whose futures depend on it**.

INTRODUCTION

There are few challenges that affect us more universally than how to plan for our later lives. While one person's version of retirement may differ from another's, there are consistent themes in what we are all looking for. We want to maintain our independence and purpose, to have greater flexibility for enjoyment and connection, to still have opportunity and security.

The mention of pensions can make many of us shy away but our pensions are the bedrock of the later lives we want to lead and a signifier of the kind of society we want to create. It makes the question being posed by the government and explored by the relaunched Pensions Commission on **how to achieve a strong, fair and sustainable pensions system with adequate outcomes for all** both timely and ripe for public involvement. The design of our pensions system is an issue of national importance, especially in a context where:

- Many working in the private sector are saving (through automatic enrolment) but **not saving enough** to avoid a significant drop in living standards in retirement. Others are excluded from automatic enrolment entirely.
- Differences in age, earnings, employment type, ethnicity and gender disproportionately affect **pension outcomes**.
- The shift from *Defined Benefit* to *Defined Contribution* schemes with the attendant drop in the generosity of employer pension contributions has created a huge **transfer of risk** to individuals.
- **Slow wage growth** and changing labour markets significantly impact the **ability to save** more for later life while balancing the costs of living today.

These are challenges that will require navigating highly sensitive political and economic trade-offs - determining the **fundamental balance of responsibility and cost between the state, employers, and individuals**. Alongside factual evidence and data, this will require values based judgements on how to achieve fairness between generations and how to mitigate the inequalities in our system.

Given the importance of the issue and the nature of the decisions that need to be taken this report outlines a vital opportunity to use **deliberative democracy** to inform the decision making of the Pensions Commission, DWP and wider industry, and **secure a lasting, democratic mandate for future reforms**.

This report covers:

Part 1: Why deliberative democracy is needed now: what deliberative democracy is and the role it could play in supporting the work of the Pensions Commission and decisions of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Part 2: How deliberative democracy could be used in practice: a framework and blueprint for involving the UK public in decisions around pensions reform, specifically aligned with the timing of the Pensions Commission.

Part 3: What success would look like: including design considerations to support a brief from which a deliberative process could be commissioned.

PART 1

WHY DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IS NEEDED NOW



THE CHALLENGE FACING THIS PENSIONS COMMISSION

In 2006, there were significant concerns that people were not saving into a pension and many were at risk of falling into poverty in their later years. **The Turner Commission was tasked with addressing these issues and “creating a new pensions landscape”.** The recommendations of that Commission, including most notably automatic enrolment, have contributed to a dramatic increase in workplace pension saving and a reduction in pensioner poverty.

For the relaunched Commission, the structural and systemic challenges are similar. More people are saving, but many are not saving enough to prevent a significant drop in living standards. We are further down the line to an ageing population with an increased life expectancy, placing greater strain on the working age population and increasing the risk of pensioner poverty. Structural inequalities such as the gender pensions gap remain and those who fall out of the ‘traditional system’, such as gig workers and the self-employed, face considerably worse pension outcomes.

However there are some significant differences for today's decision makers:

GREATER POLITICAL INSTABILITY

This Commission is happening at a time of greater political instability with an increased likelihood of pensions policy becoming politicised.

CHALLENGING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Challenging economic conditions are affecting social cohesion and increasing fault lines between different generations and cohorts of the population.

RISK WITHOUT VOICE

The shift towards Defined Contribution schemes means citizens bear more risk for their retirement, but do not necessarily have more voice or control of the decisions that shape the system.

AS A CONSEQUENCE, THERE IS AN EVEN GREATER NEED TO:

→ STRENGTHEN LEGITIMACY

In order to reach a long-term settlement, policy decisions must have a true democratic mandate that achieves consent for nudges like automatic enrolment and elicits cross-party support.

→ REACH A SETTLEMENT ACROSS THE POPULATION

Recommendations must balance experiences and outcomes across and within generations; not considering interests in isolation but reaching a consensus on what trade-offs people are collectively willing to accept.

→ GRASP THE DIFFICULT DECISIONS

To 'finish the job' this Commission will need to form difficult, potentially politically contentious, recommendations; finding ways to prove viability and break impasses.

WHAT IS DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY?

Deliberative democracy is a model of governance where decisions are made through informed discussion and consensus-building among citizens.

DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES TEND TO FEATURE:

- A group of participants **representative** of a wider population in demographics and attitudes;
- **Informed, structured deliberation** around a topic in need of considered public judgement;
- Reaching **citizen-generated recommendations**, supported by independent facilitation and oversight.

Deliberative processes enable citizens to engage with complex issues, hear diverse perspectives, weigh trade-offs, and come to informed, reflective judgments that can provide valuable input into political and organisational decision-making.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY GLOSSARY

Deliberative mini-public: a process where a demographically representative group of people are brought together to learn about, deliberate and draw conclusions on a topic. Types of deliberative processes (methods) mentioned in this report include:

- **Citizens' assemblies:** a representative group (50–150 people) meeting for an extended period (30+ hours) to learn from experts, deliberate and form recommendations.
- **Public dialogues:** structured engagement exercises bringing together members of the public and stakeholders to explore views, build mutual understanding and inform decision-making.
- **Deliberative Polling®:** a method developed by James S. Fishkin where a representative group of people are polled on an issue, given balanced information, and then polled again after discussion to measure how information and deliberation impacts opinions.

Sortition: a method of recruitment (also called 'civic lottery') where participants are selected at random to create a group that is representative of a wider population in terms of demographics and attitudes.

Convening organisation(s): initiate and provide necessary resources and conditions for a deliberative process to take place. This may include: funding, setting the mandate and appointing an independent delivery organisation. The convening organisation is often, but not always, accountable to the recommendations and would be responsible for formally responding. It is possible for multiple organisations to act as a consortium of convenors.

A word on "citizens": we use this word, not in reference to legal status, but to frame the public who would be participating in a deliberative process as active agents working towards a collective goal, rather than as individual consumers.

HOW CAN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY SUPPORT POLICYMAKERS?

Deliberative processes perform a different and complementary function to market research. They are less about understanding how individuals *feel* about an issue or proposed policy change and instead ask what the public, when informed, **would do** about a particular policy challenge.

Deliberative democracy has been used around the world to:

CREATE NATIONAL PENSIONS POLICY

In 2020, [Chile Delibera](#) brought together a representative group of over 500 people to learn about and discuss various policy proposals for the pensions system. The resulting polling was cited as a key input to draft legislation. The Cabinet Office has commissioned a [People's Panel for Digital ID](#) running until June 2026 to reach recommendations to shape national policy.

NAVIGATE POLARISING TOPICS

In 2026, the UK Home Affairs Select Committee commissioned [“citizen-assembly style” events](#) with the aim of understanding the public's considered views and areas of consensus on the sensitive issue of immigration.

SHAPE INVESTMENT STRATEGIES

Large pension providers, including [Nest](#) (2026) in the UK and [Pensioenfonds Detailhandel](#) (2024) in the Netherlands, have established citizens' panels and dialogues, where members deliberate to inform investment strategies.

CONTRIBUTE TO SYSTEMIC REFORMS

The 2017 Irish Citizens' Assembly on an Ageing Population provided the democratic permission for the government's landmark [roadmap](#) for automatic enrolment, while [Scotland's Climate Assembly](#) (2021) saw the Scottish Government formally adopt 81 citizen-led recommendations into national policy.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IS...

Less...

- Focus groups surfacing people's needs and wants
- Public polling of spontaneous majority preferences
- Focusing on short-term output

More...

- Setting a future direction together with citizens
- Informed public deliberation that brings expert evidence and lived experience to a set of recommendations
- Shaping long-term policy

THE ROLE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN CREATING A FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE PENSIONS SYSTEM

Throughout this project, stakeholders from across the pensions sector and beyond identified **three clear reasons why** deliberative approaches should be used to support the work of the Pensions Commission in creating a system that delivers adequate, fair and sustainable retirement incomes for future generations.

REASON 1: STRENGTHENING LEGITIMACY

Involving citizens in shaping national pensions policy can help policymakers to understand what people believe a fair and sustainable settlement looks like.

At a time of declining trust in our political system, it can demonstrate that the **interests of citizens** have been balanced with those of the industry and other vested parties. What's more, significant policy and societal change means there is a **strong moral imperative** for the public to have a role in shaping the futures they're working towards. Contributors to this project pointed to the importance of:

SUPPORTING LONG-TERM DECISION MAKING

The reinstatement of the Pensions Commission to 'finish the job' and offer answers to long-term questions on the fairness, adequacy and sustainability of retirement outcomes creates a **unique window of opportunity** for citizens to meaningfully shape pensions policy.

Timed with the 2006 Pensions Commission, the DWP commissioned the [National Pensions Debate](#) as a way to understand citizens' attitudes to fundamental trade-offs, supporting decisions on landmark reforms such as automatic enrolment and a higher State Pension age.

At a time of greater political and economic instability, securing a **democratic mandate** for policy recommendations is even more important for reaching a lasting settlement.

RECOGNISING THE RISK TRANSFER

The movement over the last 30 years from *Defined Benefit* to *Defined Contribution* schemes means the risk, management and delivery of financial security in later life now sits more firmly with individual citizens.

As **citizens bear more of the risk** for their financial future, it is only right that they have a **greater say in how those risks are managed.**

A DEMOCRATIC MANDATE FOR CHANGE

Because the current system is designed to enrol people without their direct engagement, there is a need to gain democratic consent for any changes to automatic enrolment - reaching consensus with consideration for different needs and expectations.

"The pension system is designed on inertia, which means it's designed so that people do not engage. We've created a system that allowed a generation of people not to care about this. There's a lot of undoing required in order to progress."

"If you are designing a system explicitly to protect people without them fully knowing it. I would argue you morally have to get a democratic mandate to do that... to give some confidence that this is something that the public consent to."

REASON 2: REACHING A NEW 'SOCIAL CONTRACT'

Reaching recommendations for fair, sustainable and adequate pensions will mean making value judgements and trade-offs.

Stakeholders see the opportunity for deliberative democracy to **offer something different and complementary** to focus groups and surveys; by giving citizens knowledge of the system, challenges and decisions and the chance to **collectively deliberate**, these processes can support and enhance the work of policymakers in:

REACHING AN AGREED SETTLEMENT

Defining a strong, fair and sustainable pensions system will mean reaching an agreed settlement on **where responsibility lies** and **what actions we collectively need to take**. Deliberative processes can help to reach this consensus, define the "deal" and the balance of responsibilities between the state, employers and individuals.

Given the different prospects faced across age groups and against a backdrop of falling social cohesion, agreeing the social contract underpinning our pensions system is a particularly important exercise to do **within and across generations**.

ACHIEVING A COLLECTIVE VIEW OF WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT

By bringing a representative group of citizens together across generations, employment types and financial positions, there is an opportunity to explore **how people understand and want to realise concepts such as fairness, sustainability and adequacy** in pensions.

As well as individual differences, deliberative approaches enable greater understanding of where there is consensus **across experiences and expectations**; creating collective principles that can help to shape and underpin future policy decisions.

"The question of fairness is all about trade-offs and about choices and you cannot just analyse or survey your way to the answers. For that, you have got to engage people deeply enough that they can make some choices."

REASON 3: GRASPING DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Stakeholders saw a role for deliberative democracy in **equipping policymakers** to take difficult, potentially politically contentious, decisions through:

NAVIGATING TRADE-OFFS

While surveys can elicit positive responses to many proposals, deliberation moves people to a **nuanced understanding of trade-offs**, such as the interaction between the State Pension age and the fiscal cost. It builds understanding of cost realities and decisions on who bears that cost.

This deeper knowledge building and discussion can create considered recommendations on what citizens feel are the best options having weighed up the pros and cons.

Being equipped with citizen-backed recommendations that **explicitly acknowledge trade-offs** can support policymakers in making difficult decisions on the future of our pensions system.

BREAKING POLITICAL DEADLOCK

Deliberative processes **can help to break impasses or stock positions**. Some noted the challenge in parts of pensions policy for political parties, Trade Unions and campaigning organisations to reverse decisions or offer concessions due to political realities.

Deliberative processes, as shown by the 2016-17 [Irish Citizens' Assembly on Abortion](#), offer routes forward on **entrenched issues**. They have shown that when afforded the time to understand and discuss topics in an in-depth way, citizens can reach a democratic consensus.

GENERATING NEW IDEAS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Through the bringing together of **lived experience** with a range of **expertise and evidence**, there is an opportunity to uncover new ideas or considerations that are not currently part of government, employer or industry thinking.

"I think the benefit of this process is to hear directly from the pension saver in a way that's not tokenistic, in a way that considers the options that are on the table, and in a way that is sensible, reasonable and structured."



PART 2

A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS TIMED WITH THE PENSIONS COMMISSION

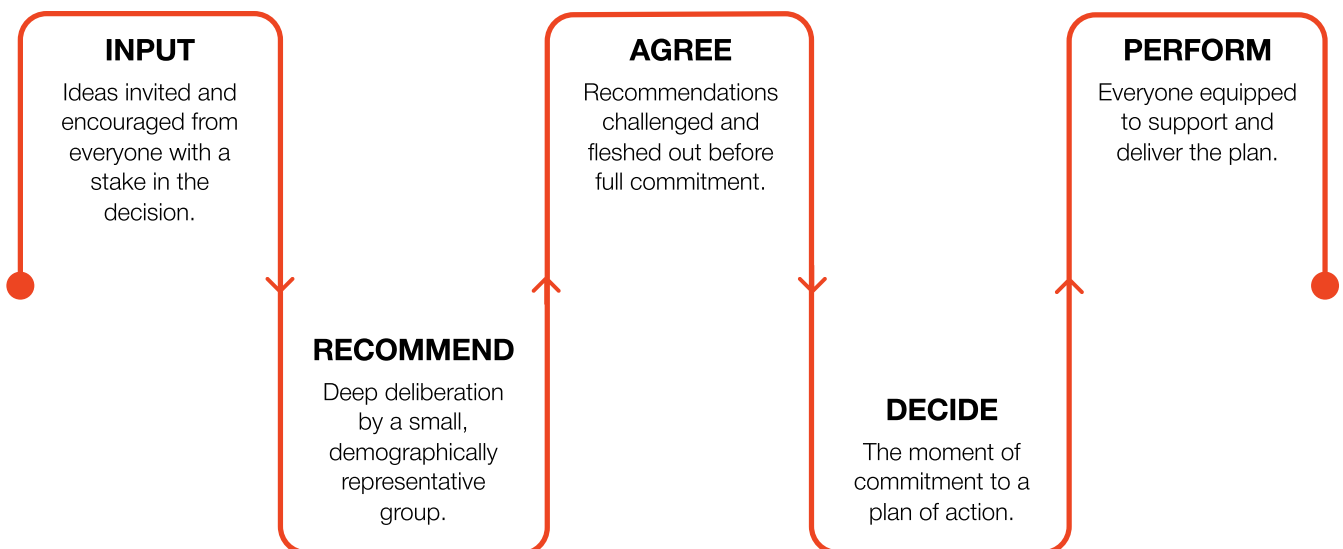
A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS TIMED WITH THE PENSIONS COMMISSION

So far, this report has shared how deliberative democracy can serve as a **vital input** for forming recommendations and ultimately shaping policy decisions regarding the pensions system.

To illustrate how such a process fits into the broader context of pensions decision-making, this section provides a **framework** which aims to clarify the various roles citizens and policymakers can take on in the development and implementation of pensions policy.

Based on this framework, the section proposes **methods** for citizens to play their most effective role in pensions policy decisions, taking into account the opportunities and success factors identified by stakeholders across the sector.

RAPID DEMOCRACY: A FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING



Adapted from the Bain and Company **RAPID® Decision Making** model, New Citizen Project developed the **RAPID Democracy** framework as a way to support a structured, phased and inclusive process for decision-making with the wider public. It is intended to support institutions of all kinds to increase both the quality and the legitimacy of crucial decisions.

In the context of the government ‘finishing the job’ of the 2006 Pensions Commission and future-proofing the pensions system, this framework offers a way to understand **how citizens and policymakers could work together** in arriving at decisions that impact people and communities, employers, industry and government.

APPLYING THIS FRAMEWORK TO SHAPING PENSIONS POLICY

INPUT

Everyone should have the opportunity to provide input on creating a fair and sustainable pensions system. At its simplest, this could be a way to capture public submissions on people's experiences, ideas and considerations for a fair and sustainable pensions system, as part of agenda-setting and options-scoping. **In addition**, depending on work already undertaken or being planned by the Pensions Commission, this could be supplemented by **public dialogues with defined cohorts**. These would consist of tailored deliberative workshops held with a group representative of a cohort of the population (e.g. low-earners, self employed workers, women, ethnic minority groups) to explore challenges and potential solutions to addressing the needs of currently underserved groups.

RECOMMEND

This wide and deep public input would help to shape the content for a citizens' assembly. Here, a representative group of the UK population would learn about, discuss and deliberate at length on the principles, reform options, trade-offs and actions that should underpin the design of a fair and sustainable pensions system. These citizen-generated recommendations would play a crucial role in developing policy proposals.

AGREE

The convening organisation(s) would formally respond to the assembly's recommendations, saying what will and won't be supported and where there might be further decisions to make. Stakeholders including industry bodies, civil society organisations, trade unions, employers and political parties would have their **own chance to respond** to the assembly's recommendations too.

DECIDE

The Pensions Commission would present its recommendations to the government. Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions decide the policy direction for the pensions system, informed by citizen involvement, and put forward any required legislation to Parliament. There might be a role for citizen involvement at the 'decide' stage too, for example in supporting decision making on unresolved trade-offs using methods such as [Deliberative Polling®](#).

PERFORM

Finally, Parliament and the pensions sector would respond to the policy recommendations from the government. As policy moves into **implementation** and **evaluation** there are ongoing opportunities for citizens in considering how policy ambitions can best be rolled out in practice through methods such as consultation, lived experience panels or further deliberative processes.

THE RAPID DEMOCRACY PROCESS AT A GLANCE



WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

We have identified **three distinct but complementary ways** to bring citizens' voices into the heart of this current moment of pensions policy-making as part of the **'Input'** and **'Recommend'** phases of the RAPID Democracy process.

The proposed methods focus on citizens playing an **upfront role** in the policymaking cycle; helping to set the agenda and developing policy proposals for a strong and fair pensions system.

In recognition of the need for any proposals to **grapple with difficult, value-laden decisions, validate a social contract** across generations and to achieve **high levels of legitimacy** our strongest recommendation is for:

A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON THE FUTURE OF UK PENSIONS

This method would allow a representative group of the public to engage deeply with complex reform options. By weighing different lived experiences, an assembly can provide the Pensions Commission with recommendations for a strong, fair and sustainable pension system, backed by a strong public mandate.

In an ideal world, the quality of deliberation and proposals to consider would be supported through:

PUBLIC DIALOGUES WITH DEFINED COHORTS

In recognition that large parts of the population have disproportionately worse pension outcomes, this report recommends supporting the discussion and decisions of a citizens' assembly, and ultimately policymakers, through deliberative workshops with representative groups of underserved cohorts. Workshops would explore the experiences of these cohorts in-depth, surfacing challenges and potential solutions for creating a fair pension system in a way that is more focused than in a broader citizens' assembly.

NATIONAL INVITATION FOR PUBLIC SUBMISSION

To support a holistic review of the pensions system, ensure the legitimacy of recommendations and acknowledge society-wide implications, this report recommends enabling broader participation through a national invitation for public submissions. This would provide a format for learning about the pension system, its challenges, and options for change, while allowing the public to submit key considerations.

The following section explains how each of these recommendations could be used in greater depth, beginning with a citizens' assembly as the core recommendation.

1. CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON THE FUTURE OF UK PENSIONS

OBJECTIVE

To work with a representative group of the UK public to reach recommendations for the long-term future-proofing of the pensions system; understanding where there is most consensus for change once people are informed with challenges, actions and trade-offs.

METHOD OVERVIEW

A group of citizens selected by **sortition** (a type of civic lottery) to represent a wider population to learn about, engage in discussion and come to recommendations on a particular issue or combination of issues. Citizens' assemblies are usually groups of between 50–150 participants who meet over multiple sessions (30+ hours) to tackle complex or divisive topics. Examples have included constitutional reform and climate policy.

KEY FEATURES

Adapted from OECD's [Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making](#).

- **Representative recruitment:** a representative sample of the public is recruited with both demographic and attitudinal recruitment criteria tailored to the process.
- **Knowledge building:** assembly members hear balanced evidence from different perspectives including both professional expertise and lived experience. Balanced evidence and content is ensured by an independent advisory board.
- **Guided deliberation:** independent facilitation supports discussion of views and trade-offs.
- **Structured voting and recommendation development:** time is dedicated to forming recommendations in the words of citizens; using mechanisms like voting to test levels of consensus and record reservations.
- **Impact framework:** an agreed impact framework is created to support assembly members in making and prioritising recommendations.
- **Process evaluation:** members' perceptions on the design and delivery of the assembly are assessed both during and after the process

CITIZENS' FORUM ON MPS' PAY AND FUNDING

The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority commissioned a mini-public to reach principles for MPs' pay and funding. Recommendations fed directly into the work of IPSA, but also went beyond their scope to encourage a renewed focus on issues such as the modernisation of Parliament.

THE PEOPLE'S PLAN FOR NATURE

Commissioned by three leading NGOs, it involved 100 people from across the UK creating a roadmap for nature recovery. Combining a representative assembly with a massive national call for public submissions, the plan led to a ban on harmful fishing practices and shaped manifestos ahead of the 2024 general election.

WHY AN ASSEMBLY?

- **TIME TO EXPLORE AND UNDERSTAND**

Provides the time to **explore and understand the logic** behind the pensions system, challenges faced, potential actions and consequent trade-offs.

- **BREADTH AND DEPTH**

It is possible to hold both **breadth and depth**; to start broad—looking holistically across the pensions system and at concepts such as fairness and sustainability—before narrowing to specific areas of focus.

- **DIVERSE KNOWLEDGE BUILDING**

Enables knowledge-building from a **variety of perspectives** and consideration of **different experiences** of the pensions system - essential for reaching recommendations on fairness and sustainability across gender, age, employment status and ethnicity.

- **GREATER DIVERSITY IN RECRUITMENT**

As opposed to smaller alternatives such as citizens' panels or juries, an assembly would allow for a **greater degree of diversity** in recruitment criteria, including consideration of pension participation rates and adequacy across age, gender, ethnicity and employment status, and the intersectionality between these.

- **CITIZEN-GENERATED RECOMMENDATIONS**

Produces citizen-generated recommendations, supporting **legitimacy** and a consensus behind changes which can be enacted by Government and Parliament over those synthesised by an independent operator or convening organisation.

- **WIDER BENEFITS**

Recommendations are typically made public, bringing wider benefits to more than just the convening organisation(s). Recommendations frequently **go beyond** what a convening organisation can achieve in isolation, sparking further debate and prompting wider action.

RECOMMENDED DESIGN ELEMENTS

100-PERSON ASSEMBLY

To support recruitment that is representative of both demographics and pension-specific criteria.

MINIMUM 30 HOURS

To meet best practice and ensure sufficient time in the process for knowledge building, deliberation and forming recommendations.

IN-PERSON SESSIONS

To ensure assembly member engagement, support the forming of recommendations and create opportunities for wider communication (e.g. photography, video, vox pops).

DIGITAL PLATFORM

To help assembly members refer back to evidence shared, see further information on the topic and share reflections to support discussion and deliberation.

'AGREE PHASE' BUILT IN

Where policymakers and actors from across the sector can support the development of emerging recommendations.

BESPOKE SUPPORT

Addressing assembly members' own pension positions following the assembly and building capacity to act for their recommendations.

ILLUSTRATIVE CONTENT

ASSEMBLY QUESTION:

HOW CAN WE DESIGN A FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE PENSION SYSTEM THAT DELIVERS ADEQUATE INCOME FOR ALL IN LATER LIFE?

STARTING BROAD, BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ON:

- Logic behind pensions system & how it has developed
- Pillars of our pensions system & how they work in practice (e.g. state pension funding, DB vs DC schemes)
- Challenges facing pensions system & arguments for reform

FOCUSING IN, DELIBERATING ON:

- How to define and apply concepts of fairness, sustainability, and adequacy in pensions policy.
- What actions can best achieve a fair and sustainable pension system (this might be narrowed to specific areas of focus)
- How components of the system can best work together to ensure adequate pension income

OUTPUTS

✔ OUTPUTS

- **Principles** for how fairness and sustainability should be enacted in the pensions system
- **Recommendations** on specific courses of action across the different pillars (e.g. increasing contribution rates as part of auto enrollment, expanding auto enrollment to underserved groups)
- **Public engagement insights** (e.g. what most stood out to participants & supported changes in opinion)

✘ OUT OF SCOPE

- **A complete rewriting of the pensions system**
- **Recommendations for policy covered in separate legislation** (e.g. State Pension Age, pension pot consolidation)
- **Recommendations for non-pension-specific policy areas** (e.g., housing, health, social care)

2. PUBLIC DIALOGUES WITH DEFINED COHORTS

OBJECTIVE

To work with groups representative of cohorts of the population currently underserved by the pensions system to **deep dive** into the experiences, challenges and potential solutions to achieving adequate pensions outcomes.

Outcomes would **support a citizens' assembly**, providing insights and early proposals to be considered holistically in the context of creating a strong, fair and sustainable pension system. Public dialogues can also surface cohort-specific recommendations on knowledge gaps and engagement needs that can support policy implementation.

METHOD OVERVIEW

A group of citizens selected at random to **represent a specific cohort** of the population to learn about, engage in discussion and come to potential solutions on a particular issue. Public dialogues are usually groups of between 30–100 participants who meet for between 0.5 and 2 days (consecutively or with time in between) to tackle complex or divisive topics. They are typically independently facilitated and evaluated, with an oversight group to ensure that evidence and content is balanced and unbiased.

ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTION:

HOW CAN WE BEST ADDRESS THE GENDER IMBALANCE IN ACHIEVING AN ADEQUATE PENSION INCOME FOR LATER LIFE?

ILLUSTRATIVE OUTPUTS

- A **vision** for what might change in the pensions system to address the imbalance.
- **Cohort-specific solutions** (e.g. how best to address caregiver gaps, identifying specific knowledge gaps and engagement needs, intersections with other areas of policy such as wage disparity) with consideration for the effect of any recommendation on the wider population.
- **Communication and engagement insights** (e.g. what most stood out to participants and supported changes in opinion).

POLICING AND THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

In 2024, Police Scotland established a **citizens' panel** to deliberate on the question "What does Police Scotland need to change and do to build greater trust and confidence amongst LGBTQI+ people?". Dialogues surfaced recommendations on key issues and findings were used to inform Police Scotland's equality, inclusion and community engagement work.

WHOLE GENOME SEQUENCING FOR NEWBORN SCREENING

In 2021, a **public dialogue** was commissioned by Genomics England and the UK National Screening Committee. The process involved dialogues representative of the UK population, as well as "specific perspectives groups". These targeted conversations surfaced nuanced, lived-experience concerns that a sample of the general population might have overlooked.

WHY PUBLIC DIALOGUES?

- **GOES FURTHER THAN FOCUS GROUPS**

Gives participants the knowledge and opportunity to debate ways forward rather than respond to options, with a fuller consideration of trade-offs.

- **ADDRESSES UNDERSERVED COHORTS**

Can address the needs of a number of different cohorts underserved by the current pensions system.

- **DEEPER EXPLORATION**

Allows for a deeper exploration of experiences and challenges for particular cohorts than is feasible in a citizens' assembly due to both the make-up of participants and the time afforded.

RECOMMENDED ELEMENTS

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK COHORTS

Identifying at-risk cohorts established as a focus for the Pensions Commission (e.g. low income workers, self employed workers, 18-21 year olds, certain ethnic minorities, women) and where there is sufficient complexity and trade-offs to benefit from a deliberative approach.

2X DIALOGUES PER COHORT

Holding 2x dialogues per cohort (possibly more for gender gap given percentage of population) in different regions to enable participation across the UK.

CONSIDERING INTERSECTIONALITY

Considering intersectionality designing recruitment criteria with consideration for how different characteristics (e.g. gender, employment type, ethnicity) can compound inequalities.

INVOLVING POLICYMAKERS

Involving policymakers in the dialogue considering how policymakers can be directly involved in dialogues to hear firsthand key considerations and support citizens' understanding of the policymaking process.

WIDER COMMUNICATION

Wider communication that captures dialogues in a way that can be engagingly shared with decision makers, the wider sector and public (e.g. video, personal testimony, blogs).

3. NATIONAL INVITATION FOR PUBLIC SUBMISSIONS

OBJECTIVE

To provide an **open-to-all opportunity** to participate, which could feed into the forming of policy recommendations by a citizens' assembly, work of policymakers and ultimately decisions of Ministers.

METHOD OVERVIEW & ILLUSTRATIVE PROCESS

Providing a format where citizens can **learn** about the pension system (e.g. key challenges and options for reform), before sharing their experiences, considerations and ideas.

At its simplest this could be a **survey**. Alternatively, it could be achieved through an **online platform** that allows for interaction between citizens, supporting greater understanding of areas of consensus and division.

WHY INVITE PUBLIC SUBMISSIONS?

- **Public submissions would provide a valuable evidence point**, supporting the content and deliberation of a citizens' assembly and the wider policymaking process.
- **Public submissions are frequently used** to inform and shape the work of deliberative processes with examples including the [French Citizens' Convention on Climate](#) and the [2016-18 Irish Citizens' Assembly](#).
- **Supporting legitimacy and building trust** by making it possible for more people to engage with and participate in forming policy for the pensions system. In a system where people are nudged into action without necessarily making a conscious decision, this is an opportunity for all citizens to share their considerations, ideas and concerns.

NATIONAL PENSIONS DEBATE

The [National Pensions Debate](#), coordinated with the 2006 Pensions Commission, included an open-to-all survey for citizens to input into pensions policy.

NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY

The 2025 National Youth Strategy Survey invited young people to share their experiences, challenges and hopes in order to create the [Youth Matters: State of the Nation](#) report, informing the policy recommendations of the National Youth Strategy.

CHANGE NHS

An open-to-all [platform](#) launched in 2024, where citizens could share their ideas, and comment on and upvote other people's suggestions. It received over 250,000 submissions and results were used to shape the government's 10-Year Health Plan.

Similar initiatives in **Taiwan** have seen the use of discussion platforms such as [Pol.is](#) to understand public consensus on issues including the regulation of Uber and adoption of AI.

RECOMMENDED ELEMENTS

KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

Including learning on the pensions system and the challenges to address as part of any engagement could help focus submissions and discussion.

MAPPING CONSENSUS

Deploying tools that enable the public to respond to different viewpoints can build a picture of where there is greatest alignment and difference.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM

Many purpose-built platforms exist to support knowledge building, user-to-user interactions and back-end sensemaking.

COMMS & ENGAGEMENT

Publicise the opportunity to participate through a range of channels (including partners e.g. VCSE organisations) to encourage different people to engage.

CAPTURING DEMOGRAPHICS

Whilst the invitation is open-to-all and is not supposed to be representative, it is important to capture information that supports data analysis. Consider how to do this in a way does not create large barriers to participation (e.g. minimal, key data collection with an opt-out).

SUPPORTED BY AI

Human sensemaking supported by AI can help to make national engagement with thousands of inputs possible, without requiring unfeasible amounts of resources.

SUMMARY OF METHODS

The opportunity set out in this report is for these methods to be used to **support policymakers and strengthen decision making**.

With the right design, a citizens' assembly, defined public dialogues, and a national initiative could work together or separately to **inform the Pensions Commission's recommendations** and support the **DWP's response**.

The following table summarises the proposed methods for involving citizens in shaping policy for a strong, fair and sustainable pension system. Indicative costs can be found in the appendix.

Method	Description & objective	Timeline	Key variables
1. A citizens' assembly on the future of UK pensions	<p>Representative group recruited by sortition learns, discusses & deliberates on principles & actions for a fair & sustainable pensions system.</p> <p>Reaching long-term future-proofing recommendations to support policy development.</p>	<p>4-6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment & design: 2-3 months Delivery: 1-2 months Reporting: 1 month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. participants (suggest 100) Hybrid vs online-only
2. Public dialogues with defined cohorts	<p>Tailored deliberative workshops with groups representative of specific underserved cohorts.</p> <p>Deep-diving into experiences, challenges and solutions to support agenda setting and options scoping.</p>	<p>4-6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment & design: 2-3 months Delivery: 1-2 months Reporting: 1 month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. cohorts (suggest 4) No. participants per cohort (suggest 30) No. dialogues per cohort (suggest 2)
3. National invitation for public submissions	<p>An open-to-all opportunity for the public to share experiences, ideas, and reflections.</p> <p>Supporting agenda setting and options scoping.</p>	<p>3-4 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platform choice & design: 1-2 months Delivery: 1 month Reporting: 1 month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platform choice (simple survey vs interactive) Extent of wider campaign to build engagement

SUPPORTING POLICY APPRAISAL & DECISION MAKING

In line with where contributors saw the greatest opportunities for involving citizens in the policymaking process, this report focuses on where deliberative approaches could best support agenda setting, options scoping and policy development.

There are **other deliberative methods** for involving citizens that could play a constructive role **further along the policymaking process**.

- ① For instance, **Deliberative Polling**[®]—where a representative group of people are polled on an issue, given balanced information, and then polled again after discussion—could support the appraisal of emerging policy recommendations or final decision-making on policy proposals.



PART 3

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESS

Stakeholders identified a number of success factors for any deliberative process on the pensions system, including most notably, **timing**.

TIMING

Key to success is a process that **genuinely supports decision-making**. Timing is therefore crucial. Methods set out in this report are achievable within the timeframes of the Pensions Commission and the expected response of the DWP, but there will be a need to move at pace. For example, a citizens' assembly could be convened:

- **In 2026: designed, delivered and reported on by the autumn**, feeding into the forming recommendations by the Pensions Commission, or;
- **Later in 2027: once the Pensions Commission has shared its recommendations**, an assembly could deliberate on those recommendations and inform the decision making of the DWP.

OTHER KEY COMPONENTS

- **Representation:** recruitment needs to be diverse, including factors like employment status and pension participation rates. A focus should be placed on those disproportionately affected by pension inadequacy, as well as how disengagement with pensions might affect recruitment.
- **Transparency:** to ensure legitimacy, there should be transparency on everything from methodology to funding. There should be a clear and publicly available process for reaching and publishing recommendations.
- **Unbiased governance:** design and content for any process should be steered by an independent, balanced advisory board, including civil society and academia.
- **Communication:** success depends on public perception, requiring engaging communication of any process and promotion of opportunities to take part. A feedback loop should enable reporting on the difference public participation made and what will happen as a result.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** building influential stakeholders' understanding of the process is essential. Stakeholders should see the process in action as observers and through written, video and photo content.
- **Cross-party engagement:** involving all political parties and a broad range of funders is necessary to ensure the results have longevity beyond a single political cycle.
- **Experience and expertise:** processes should harness both lived experience and professional expertise. Deliberation across cohorts and generations will support fair recommendations, and experts should be “*on tap, not on top*” to inform participants without swaying discussions.
- **Bespoke participant support:** as well as practical support for participation (e.g. childcare, travel, remuneration), processes should consider specialist support to match the subject matter. For example by providing free consultations with Independent Financial Advisors along with signposting to further support.

Further good practice for deliberative processes can be found in the appendix.

WHAT IMPACT COULD THIS HAVE?

Contributors to this project spoke about about successful citizen involvement:

- Supporting the work of policymakers in reaching **actionable, specific recommendations that have grappled with trade-offs** across system actors and the population as a whole
- Supporting the adoption of long term policy decisions through the **strengthened legitimacy** of policy proposals developed with a representative group of the population

In addition to these recurring themes there were a number of identified benefits to a successful process.

WIDER POLICY ADOPTION

That these recommendations are listened to and acted upon not just by the Pensions Commission and DWP, but by further system and political actors such as the Pensions Regulator, FCA, employers, unions, civic society organisations and pension providers.

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

Insights on the language citizens use around pensions, and on the knowledge or perspective gained that most shift opinions, support development of compelling communication around pensions that resonates with the wider public.

PARTICIPANT VALUE

Citizens involved feel they are given meaningful opportunities to shape the future pensions policy and transparency over what will happen as a result.

PUBLIC TRUST

The process for reaching proposals to achieve a strong, fair and sustainable pensions system is considered legitimate in the eyes of the wider public, strengthening the case for the policy recommendations put forward.

CATALYST FOR ONGOING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

A deliberative process leads to further citizen involvement in pensions policy, rather than being a 'one-off'.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE AUTHORS

Through this project we have spoken to people across the pensions sector and beyond: from government, regulators, civil society, consumer and employer bodies and industry providers. There were a variety of views on what the key areas for debate should be but there was **universal support for citizens having a role in this once in a generation moment to shape pensions policy.**

There is a wide acknowledgement of the practical and moral case for involving citizens in the decisions that will affect our later lives, but there are **two paths before us.**

One is the well-trodden path of limiting citizen involvement to the safety of focus groups, to conversations with interest groups and a minor voice in our governance structures. In this path, having already gone some of the way to making decisions, we test ‘*consumer appetite*’ for proposed reforms and trigger responses more likely to be shaped by short-term self-interest rather than by a collective sense of how our pension system should be. It’s a path better suited to incrementalism - to small steps forward that at face value offend the smallest possible amount of the electorate, but push the full extent of challenges down the road.

While there is a valuable and complementary role for consumer research, this path fundamentally misses the opportunity set out in this report. If, during this moment of shaping the pensions system and in moments to come, we keep citizens on the sidelines, we could fail to achieve a democratic mandate on what a strong, fair and sustainable future for our pensions system looks like.

We may well fail to grasp the nettle, leaving politically difficult decisions unresolved or more complex options for change inadequately explored. In so doing leaving room for pensions policy to become increasingly politicised, used to expand faultlines across the electorate and making the ambition for greater fairness, sustainability and adequacy harder to realise.

The other path is to **empower citizens to genuinely shape reform.** To involve people early enough in the policymaking process for them to set a collective direction and inform specific actions. To work with people not just as individual *consumers*, but as active *citizens* with an eye to fairness and sustainability across cohorts and generations. To give new perspectives and weight to our decisions through the direct involvement of scheme members and wider citizens.

There are well-rehearsed arguments against greater public involvement in pensions. People don’t care about pensions. The system is too complex. People vote in favour of their individual interests without engaging with the trade-offs. But those reservations don’t stack up against the reality of meaningful participation. Examples of deliberative processes highlighted in this report show that people are capable of understanding complexity, navigating trade-offs and reaching constructive recommendations.

Taking the opportunities outlined in this report will require moving past these reservations and taking the path less travelled. It will mean expending energy and investment. But meaningfully involving citizens in shaping our pensions system fulfills not just a moral obligation to involve people in their future and investments—it promises the rewards of breaking impasses, increasing trust and building legitimacy for society shaping decisions.

And it might just make all the difference.

HOW CAN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY STRENGTHEN DECISION MAKING IN THE PENSIONS INDUSTRY?



HOW CAN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY STRENGTHEN DECISION MAKING IN THE PENSIONS INDUSTRY?

This report establishes why and how to involve citizens in this moment of shaping national pensions policy. But contributors were keen to point out that the reasons for involving citizens in the work of the Pensions Commission also hold weight for why citizens should be more involved in shaping the decisions of the wider pensions industry.

THE CASE FOR ACTION

RECOGNISING RISK

In a world where Defined Contribution schemes have become the norm - **the risk borne by "citizen investors" should be recognised through having a more meaningful voice at the table.** Members' values and long term interests should shape how money is invested and steer the role that pension funds can play in shaping the society we'd like to see.

REBUILDING TRUST

Trust in **financial institutions** and **government** is low and falling but that decline isn't inevitable. Greater and more meaningful **citizen involvement can help to rebuild trust** and "re-humanise" what pensions are meant to signify and achieve. Countries like Denmark and Netherlands where member-elected boards are the standard practice, have **high levels of trust and confidence.**

ADDRESSING A SYSTEM PARADOX

The paradox of a largely passive system which then expects high levels of engagement and complex decision making at the point of retirement, is something that needs addressing with citizens. **The experiences and insights of citizens can strengthen solutions** to the challenges of adequacy and how to manage our financial savings through later life.

PROVEN CAPABILITIES

Deliberative processes like the **Pensioenfond**s **Detailhandel** in the Netherlands help to prove that **citizens can not only engage with trade-offs but reach constructive conclusions** that challenge and make it possible for Boards to go further in achieving targets like greater sustainability through their investments.

"We refer to it as the great risk transfer, where risk is being transferred from large institutions onto the individual... People have now more control about how they set up and draw down their pension, but they're also inheriting an awful amount of risk."

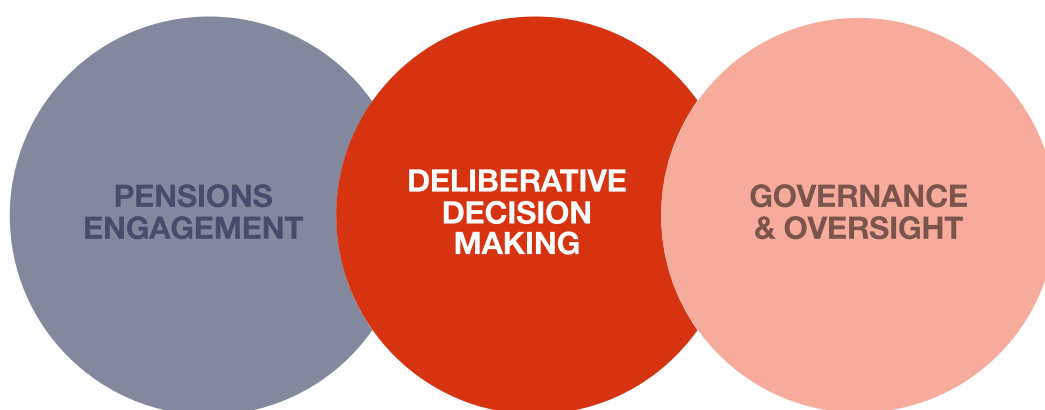
"The pension system has to work for the people who don't engage with the system, people who never will... the system still has to work and deliver for those people."

AN IMPORTANT MIDDLE GROUND

Citizen involvement in the pensions sector often falls broadly into two dimensions:

- **Pensions engagement:** knowledge building and promoting citizen engagement on personal pensions options.
- **Governance and oversight:** sustained involvement in established governance structure (e.g. member trustees or member panels).

This section explores the opportunity for deliberative processes to act as a fertile middle ground between individual engagement and member representation in governance and oversight.



The recent Nest Member Assembly on its investment approach is an example of deliberative decision making — involving a representative group of members in helping to shape Nest's investment strategy. This time-limited process tackling a specific issue is intended to supplement and work alongside bodies such as the Nest Members' Panel who retain an ongoing role in governance and oversight.

While there is lots invested in governance, pensions engagement and consumer research, processes like the Nest Member Assembly are outliers. It is rare in the pensions sector to bring together a representative group to learn about the status quo, options for change and to invite them to collectively reach recommendations.

"Nest has just run, over two weekends, a Member Assembly on a deliberative mini-public model. And what has worked really well is that it's been honed in on a specific set of questions about Nest's investment beliefs and how its investment strategy should evolve."

Contributors pointed to the opportunity to **make participatory processes common practice in the pensions landscape;** for more citizens and members to contribute to decision making and strategy development in more ways, challenging thinking and building trust in the process.

This report is not saying that citizen assemblies represent a silver bullet for involvement in the pensions sector, but rather that a variety of deliberative approaches could offer constructive paths forward on a greater variety of issues. And that these approaches could helpfully complement existing work on pensions engagement and governance.

CASE STUDY: PENSIOENFONDS DETAILHANDEL

The [Deelnemersdialoog](#) (Member Dialogue) was a pioneering citizen engagement initiative organised by the Dutch pension fund Pensioenfonds Detailhandel in 2024. It brought together a demographically representative "mini-public" of around 50 fund members to deliberate on how their money should be invested.

THE PROCESS GENERATED 49 SPECIFIC MEMBER RECOMMENDATIONS, INCLUDING:

- **Sustainability Focus:** members highlighted a desire for more impact investing (aiming for 2-5% of the portfolio), specifically in areas like the circular economy and technology.
- **Geographic Priorities:** the dialogue revealed a preference for impact investments both locally in the Netherlands and in emerging markets.

AS A RESULT, PENSIOENFONDS DETAILHANDEL HAVE:

- **Significantly increased its impact investing** from €300 million to €1.5 billion. This moves the exposure from roughly 1% to 2–5% of total assets under management.
- **Targeted investment themes:** The fund adjusted its strategy to match member preferences for specific [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), prioritising:
 - Climate & Circular Economy: Greater weight on companies performing on SDGs.
 - Social Justice: Mandatory human rights training for all board members in 2025.
- Following member votes, the board is incorporating a **mix of impact investments "closer to home" in the Netherlands** and in emerging markets.

The fund committed to **repeating this deliberative process every two years** to ensure the investment policy continues to reflect the evolving values of its 1.3 million members.

✔ **More broadly the process has helped to demonstrate:**

- That ordinary citizens do not need prior financial expertise to meaningfully engage with complex pension issues.
- That it is possible to overcome public disengagement with pensions. Evaluations showed almost all participants would recommend participating in a similar process to others, noting that they felt their opinions were respected and that everyone's voice counted.

WHAT DECISIONS CAN DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES SUPPORT THE PENSIONS SECTOR TO MAKE?

DEFINING ESG APPROACHES

A key area for participatory processes is determining how funds approach Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors. As shown through the examples shared, deliberation can help funds understand what members actually want, potentially expanding the focus beyond short-term financial returns to include climate change, sustainability, and local community investment.

While Defined Contribution schemes with 'citizen investors' have a clear rationale for involving members in investment strategy, some made the case for Defined Benefit scheme members having a greater role in steering ESG investment principles and shaping governance for collective good.

"The pensions industry has enormous power because it controls a lot of people's money... People need to be part of a conversation that digs into some of the choices and priorities, whereby the management and investment of that money can really reflect their interests and preferences."

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

One recommendation from the Pensioenfonds Detailhandel process has seen the fund embark on a website transformation to improve ease of understanding and engagement. Through both their recommendations and the reflections of participants, deliberative processes can support the sector to drive greater engagement in pensions by directing efforts and revealing the most compelling messages.

SOLUTIONS TO SECTOR-WIDE CHALLENGES

Issues such as supporting decumulation are sector wide challenges and with the complexity to warrant a deep exploration of public concerns, considerations and proposed solutions.

Decumulation is an example of an issue where a deliberative process could be commissioned in partnership across different providers - sharing solutions and pooling resources.

"There's this question of decumulation. What do you actually do with the money you've accumulated? How can you make sure it's enough? It's an important conversation to have with people. These are pension pots that people have saved themselves."

SHAPE GOVERNANCE AND OVERSIGHT

How members are involved in the governance of pension funds is in itself an important topic for deliberation. Contributors point to the fact that there are relevant examples for members in other countries' pensions systems and within other sectors that can help stimulate deliberation on what is needed to support trust and best take account of member values.

WHAT COULD SUPPORT DELIBERATIVE APPROACHES TO BECOME COMMON PRACTICE?

Contributors saw a range of ways for deliberative decision making in the pensions sector to take form.

MINI-PUBLICS AND DIALOGUES

Bringing together a representative group of a population to deliberate on an issue or set of issues in depth — as evidenced throughout this report.

TECHNOLOGY-ASSISTED DELIBERATION

Taking inspiration from [digital voting platforms](#) used by Australian pension funds, that might invite member learning and consideration on a specific resolution.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETINGS

Looking outside of the pensions sector to borrow from other membership organisations in standardising the practice of holding AGMs.

This might grant scheme members rights akin to corporate shareholders, providing a formal and engaging arena to ask questions, demand transparency, and hold fiduciaries and fund managers accountable.

"My own view is that pension funds should hold an annual general meeting every year to which all members are invited... Members should have various rights a bit like shareholders have in a company or electors have in a democracy, which allow them to ask questions and receive answers, for things to be transparent..."

The move towards more deliberative decision making across the sector could be supported by:



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Encouraging the industry to share learnings between those already using participatory methods to build a "Community of Practice."



USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Adopting AI to break down complexity of the pensions system for participants in deliberation, making trade-offs accessible for consideration, and support sensemaking in a less resource-intensive way.



REGULATORY LEADERSHIP

Other actors in the system such as the Financial Conduct Authority and The Pensions Regulator leading the way by adopting and championing deliberative approaches.

As with our national pensions policy there is a strong argument for the decisions within the pensions sector to be more **shaped by the citizens whose futures depend on it**. Deliberative processes offer a route to building trust, improving communication, and supporting complex decisions through informed, representative deliberation that shows where there is most consensus.

"I would love for citizen involvement to include an understanding of fiduciary duty, specifically how trustees consider things like systemic risks — climate, biodiversity loss, inequality — and long-term goals of members. I think if you do this in the right way, it can align thinking around all pension schemes."

Going even further involving citizens and members in shaping decisions **can help to realise our pensions as a greater force for societal good**. As one contributor noted, hearing the considered views, values and recommendations of citizens can lead to an expanded sense of fiduciary duty. One that places a longer, more holistic and collective sense of members' best interests at the heart of decision making.

APPENDICES



SCOPING PROCESS

This scoping project, independently led by [New Citizen Project](#), kicked off in January 2026 with the ambition of exploring how deliberative approaches could bring citizens more directly into shaping the future of UK pensions policy.



DISCOVERY: JAN–FEB 2026

Building understanding of the current pensions landscape and identifying ways in which public deliberation could add genuine value. This phase involved:

Desk research: an extensive review of existing literature on pension adequacy, fairness, and sustainability, as well as international precedents for deliberative democracy.

Stakeholder interviews: in-depth conversations with senior experts including government, regulatory, industry, academic, trade union and civil society organisations.

Outputs: centered on the opportunities and considerations for deliberative democracy in pensions.

DEVELOPMENT: MAR–APR 2026

Insights from the discovery phase were used to form a hypothesis on the role for deliberation within pensions, which was then tested with the wider sector.

Cross-sector workshop: an online session bringing a wide range of stakeholders together to explore and build on the Discovery Phase findings, including setting markers for success, examining convening questions and key trade-offs, and considering ongoing public participation in the pensions system.

Drafting: New Citizen Project developed a first draft of this report, which was shared with sector stakeholders for further input and feedback.

Finalising: New Citizen Project used feedback to finalise the report.

LAUNCH: MAY 2026

The final phase of this scoping project focused on sharing the proposal via this report and at an event on Tuesday 5th May.

KEY DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Stakeholders identified four main considerations for the design of a deliberative process.

AVOIDING VESTED INTERESTS

Several stakeholders highlighted the difficulty of running truly independent processes in a sector dominated by large financial interests. How deliberative processes are perceived — how they're funded, designed and delivered — will be essential to how recommendations are received.

SETTING CONSTRUCTIVE SCOPES

Stakeholders identified the importance of reaching actionable outputs through deliberative processes rather than a 'wish list'. There'll be a requirement to set a scope that's not so 'narrow' that it risks not accounting for the complexities, dependencies and interconnections of the pensions system, but not so broad that it risks overly focusing on related areas (e.g. housing, social care) which, although relevant, fall out of the realm of pensions policy.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE & PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

The complexity of the topic and the public's psychological relationship with pensions are significant considerations. Stakeholders point to a need to convey some of the fundamentals (e.g. the difference between DB and DC, how the state pension is funded) to avoid having a flawed discussion. There was a worry that because many people expect so little from the pensions system (e.g. believing the State Pension won't exist in 30 years), their contributions might be shaped by these expectations rather than optimal outcomes.

Some highlighted that what people say in a group setting (collective good) often differs from what they say anonymously (self-interest/highest returns) and that the framing and design of a deliberative process needs to account for this discrepancy.

PRACTICAL & REPRESENTATIVE CONSTRAINTS

Stakeholders pointed to practical challenges such as recruiting a representative body of people for an issue that the public are particularly avoidant of. They stressed the potential difficulty of capturing the views of specific sub-groups (e.g. ethnic minorities or gig workers) within a standard deliberative process.

FURTHER GOOD PRACTICE FOR DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES

Consideration should be given to established and emerging best practice in deliberative processes, including:

- **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Clear contracting for how the convening organisation(s) will respond to the recommendations from a deliberative process and how those recommendations will be communicated to wider stakeholders and the public. The convening organisation(s) should consider the budget and resources they might need to respond to and act on recommendations.

- **DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF POLICY MAKERS**

Considering how policy makers can be brought into a deliberative process to support citizens' understanding of policy development and the forming of recommendations while maintaining the independence of the process. Involving policy makers to build their understanding of a deliberative process should support willingness to engage with the recommendations.

- **USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT DELIBERATION**

Considering how digital tools can be used to inclusively support participants through a sustained deliberative process like an assembly with the ability to refer back to information shared, see the discussion across groups and reflect on emerging findings together with other participants.

- **A RESPONSIVE PROCESS**

Building in flexibility for a deliberative process to respond to participants' needs (e.g. to call back speakers or build understanding in a particular area) in forming recommendations.

- **ONGOING ADVOCATES**

Early consideration for the communication and support to offer participants following a deliberative process; to both relay what has happened as a result of their participation and support any ongoing role in advocating for recommendations.

GOVERNANCE OF A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

For the legitimacy and impact of a process like this, it is essential that it is considered unbiased and independent. The following sets out the key roles for delivering a deliberative process and consideration for what measures could support this process' legitimacy and independence.

Credit: [DemNext Assembling an Assembly Guide](#)

1. CONVENING ORGANISATION(S)

The convening organisation **initiates and funds the process**. It sets the mandate and responds to the recommendations following any deliberative process. They typically appoint an independent operator to design and deliver the process, to ensure recommendations are not influenced or biased.

It is possible to have a number of Convening organisations acting as a consortium. [The People's Plan for Nature](#) was commissioned as part of a partnership between the National Trust, RSPB and WWF, with staff members from each organisation forming part of a joint project team. There are examples (e.g. in infrastructure development) of the public and private sector acting as joint conveners(s) of independent panels to support decision making.

2. INDEPENDENT OPERATOR

The independent operator **ensures a deliberative process is trustworthy and unbiased** by operating "at arm's length" from the convening body. Key responsibilities include designing the assembly's structure and agendas; providing impartial facilitation; curating balanced evidence and speakers in collaboration with an independent advisory group; managing the representative recruitment and welfare of participants; and ensuring transparency through reporting of deliberations and recommendations to policy-makers.

3. INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUP

The Independent Advisory Group (IAG) **supports the legitimacy, fairness, and quality of the deliberative process**, acting as an overseer to prevent any convening organisation(s) agenda from taking control. Typically composed of diverse specialists and stakeholders, the IAG's core responsibilities include vetting speakers, evidence, and materials to ensure they are comprehensive, balanced, and accurate; reviewing the assembly's overall design, agenda, and the framing of its core question; and providing external scrutiny to guarantee the assembly operates independently, which builds public trust in the final recommendations. The IAG does not hold the power to make final policy recommendations, which remains the exclusive role of the assembly members.

BOLSTERING INDEPENDENCE AND OVERSIGHT OF THE IAG

Practices that could be used to bolster the independence and oversight of any Independent Advisory Group include:

NOMINATED MEMBERS

For IAG members to be put forward by different parts of the pensions sector (e.g. public, private and third sector) rather than suggested by any one party.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Establish clear role and agreed responsibilities for the IAG.

AGREED SIGN-OFFS

Agreed decisions and materials for the IAG to advise on and sign off.

VOTING RIGHTS

Giving IAG members the chance to vote on key decisions or content to measure and document levels of approval.

TRANSPARENT DISCUSSIONS

Published minutes available to the wider public.

ADDITIONAL ROLES IN A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Establish key personnel from the convening organisation(s) to work alongside the independent operator to ensure timings, budgets and objectives are met.

CONTENT GENERATION

Compiling the range of evidence and information to share with assembly members — typically supported by the convening organisation(s) and overseen by the IAG.

COMMUNICATION

Resource from the convening organisation(s) or an external body to manage press briefings, social media and wider communications.

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

The operator typically employs measures to evaluate participants' experience of the deliberative process. An evaluator can be employed to assess the overall quality and impact of the process.

INDICATIVE COSTS OF THE THREE PROPOSED METHODS

Method	Description & objective	Timeline and cost	Key variables
<p>1. A citizens' assembly on the future of UK pensions</p>	<p>Representative group recruited by sortition learns, discusses & deliberates on principles & actions for a fair & sustainable pensions system.</p> <p>Reaching long-term future-proofing recommendations to support policy development.</p>	<p>Timeline: 4-6 months</p> <p>Indicative cost depending on key variables:</p> <p>£150k-£300k</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. participants (suggest 100) Hybrid vs online-only
<p>2. Public dialogues with defined cohorts</p>	<p>Tailored deliberative workshops with groups representative of specific underserved cohorts.</p> <p>Deep-diving into experiences, challenges and solutions to support agenda setting and options scoping.</p>	<p>Timeline: 4-6 months</p> <p>Indicative cost depending on key variables:</p> <p>£50k-£75k per cohort</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. cohorts (suggest 4) No. participants per cohort (suggest 30) No. dialogues per cohort (suggest 2)
<p>3. National invitation for public submissions</p>	<p>An open-to-all opportunity for the public to share experiences, ideas, and reflections.</p> <p>Supporting agenda setting and options scoping.</p>	<p>Timeline: 3-4 months</p> <p>Indicative cost depending on key variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple surveys: £5k-£10k Interactive platform: £25k-£50k Promotional campaign: £50k-£100k 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platform choice (simple survey vs interactive) Extent of wider campaign to build engagement

OPTIONS FOR FLEXING COST AND COMPLEXITY

While the citizens' assembly proposed in the report is intended to optimise representation, depth of discussion and legitimacy, there are options shortening timeframes and funding requirements while maintaining an inclusive and meaningful process. The most significant options include:

A COMPLETELY ONLINE PROCESS

Rather than the suggested hybrid process, this could be designed as an entirely online process which can support recruitment and reduce costs by taking out the need for travel and venue costs. However consideration would need to be given to how this might affect the cohesion of the assembly, engagement and dropout rates, formation of recommendations and ability to document and communicate the process to the wider public and policymakers (e.g. through photography, video etc).

REDUCING THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

While still keeping representation of the population, it is possible to reduce the number of participants. This can reduce both costs and the time needed for recruitment, however, would need to be balanced with ensuring representation specific to pensions (e.g. different pension participation rates, employment status etc).

FOCUSING THE SCOPE

Narrowing the scope to some defined decisions and trade-offs would reduce the time needed in knowledge building and deliberation. This could reduce the overall time needed for an assembly as well as some of the cost.

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