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Reflecting on Systems of Participation with Energy and Climate Change

Key Insights from a Public Engagement Observatory Assembly

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Introduction

How do different forms of public engagement with energy and climate change work with and against each other? What does it mean to think of public engagement as a system? How can we create a more effective system of public engagement with energy and climate change? These were the central questions explored in the first Public Engagement Observatory Assembly, held in London at the Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre on 17th September 2026. The Assembly brought together over 60 practitioners, policymakers, community groups, activists and researchers associated with diverse forms of public engagement with energy and climate change in the UK.

At a time when debates about energy and climate change are becoming increasingly polarised, there are also growing disconnects and divides between different forms of public engagement – from opinion polls and citizens' assemblies to community action and protest – and how formal institutions recognise and respond to them. A key challenge is that existing approaches, each with their own understandings of 'best practice', often consider individual engagement processes in isolation. Yet tackling interconnected problems like energy transitions and climate change demands more joined-up and systemic approaches to participation.

Moving to more systemic understandings of participation has been the recent direction of travel across social science disciplines and wider fields of practice - notably in deliberative systems, ecologies of participation and systems of practice - including through the work of the Public Engagement Observatory of the UK Energy Research Centre. This has also come into focus through the development of national strategies for public engagement in Scotland, Wales and the UK government's climate and nature public participation plan 'Energising Britain'.



The Assembly process

The Assembly aimed to create an interactive and participatory space for those associated with diverse forms of public engagement to make connections, learn together, and explore what an effective system of public engagement with energy and climate change in the UK might mean. It intentionally assembled a diverse range of participants, bringing professional engagement practitioners and policymakers face to face with those involved in community, grassroots and activist groups (see Appendix for the list of participants). This made for a lively event, with lots of debate, challenge and difference, as well as connection, commonality and collective commitment.

The Assembly was facilitated by a team from the Public Engagement Observatory and the 3S Research Group at UEA (see Appendix). After an introduction to the Public Engagement Observatory and its mappings of diverse public engagements with energy and climate change, participants worked in breakout groups and plenary discussions in a first session to consider different forms of public engagement and their best practices, and in a second session on creating a more effective system of public engagement. This was followed by a panel discussion featuring reflections from Jon Alexander, Rebecca Willis and Parisa Wright, followed by a closing plenary discussion. This briefing summarises key insights from the process.



Many best practices and the current system

In the first session participants worked in breakout groups with each group focusing on a form of public engagement they had some association with, namely: opinion elicitation, deliberation, behaviour change, artistic engagement, activism and protest, community action, and everyday practices/lived experience. Participants discussed how the forms of engagement are defined, what counts as good or best practice, and how they relate to each other in wider systems. A summary of the definitions and example good practice criteria produced by each group is provided in Table 1.

Form of public engagement	Definition and good practice criteria
Opinion elicitation	Social research techniques that seek to elicit awareness, understanding and opinions of individuals or groups through traditional or creative techniques (*example criteria*: inclusive and legitimate; transparent and responsive design; actionable and targeted outcomes).
Deliberation	Groups and spaces that bring citizens together, empower them to debate, learn, listen, consider each other's perspectives, and form recommendations (*example criteria*: representative & inclusive; collective learning and agency; impact on citizenship and decision-making).
Behaviour change	Initiatives to change individual behaviours and shift stated values into action through material or discursive change in the context of wider system change (*example criteria*: recognise conditions for change; change what is acceptable; connect individual and wider change).
Artistic engagement	Arts-based creative practices characterised by holistic experiences, emotions and imagination, with the aim of opening up questions and ambiguity (*example criteria*: open up imaginations; express diverse emotions and experiences; create new knowledge and understandings).
Activism and protest	Citizen mobilisation in groups with shared concerns and/or visions to lobby, pressure and disrupt those in power to alter their actions in line with the groups' shared aims (*example criteria*: convincing messaging; flexible solutions; build effective relationships and alliances).
Community action	Groups of people coming together to collectively address problems of concern, create solutions and implement opportunities for action in their own terms. (*example criteria*: shared collective purpose; collective community-based action; honesty and humility).
Everyday practices / lived experience	Getting beyond numbers, words and thoughts to represent the rich, complex and diverse situated practices and experiences of life that we engage in and that use energy (*example criteria*: attend to diversity and multiplicity; situated and interconnected; embrace qualitative richness).

Table 1. Public engagement definitions and good practice criteria articulated in Assembly groups.

Opinion elicitation has established standards for surveying representative public views and opinions, though participants also expressed the need to challenge extractive methods through more transparent and responsive design, for example. While criteria for good **deliberative** processes, such as representative, inclusive and impactful public reasoning, have become globally standardised through the deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) model, group discussion questioned whether this has become too rigid with a need to embrace a broader 'spirit of deliberation' across different settings, also emphasising participant agency and citizenship, for example. **Behaviour change** interventions were seen to place the emphasis on shifting individual behaviours through material or discursive change, but participants emphasised the need for such processes to link with wider system change.

For **artistic engagement**, openness, imagination, emotion and exploration were seen as particularly important, with its value being to open up questions and possibilities rather than reaching agreement or producing actionable recommendations. **Activism and protest** were seen to perform a different function, where citizens challenge established agendas and those holding power through lobbying, mobilisation, pressure or disruption. Whilst also citizen-led, **community action** was understood as people coming together to collectively address problems of concern through creating opportunities for action and implementing their own solutions. **Everyday practices and lived experience** were seen to more fundamentally challenge the notion of public engagement always being intentional, pointing to more mundane and unintentional engagements in everyday life in all their diversity, situatedness and interconnectedness.

What group discussions showed is that these seven types of public engagement all have different meanings of what public engagement is, what it is for, who is included, the form it takes and what is valued. Each form of public engagement has a different internalised version of best practice. This suggests that there is no universal definition of good public engagement but rather many, often competing, best practices. Yet while breakout groups identified established effectiveness criteria for each form of engagement, they often suggested ways to move beyond this.

In both breakout group and plenary discussions, participants reflected on these findings and the characteristics and problems of the current landscape of public engagement. The current 'system' was seen to be highly fragmented around different forms and approaches, communities of practice, and discrete engagements linked to specific decision moments. This can undermine learning and exchange and lead to conflict and exclusions between different forms of engagement that value different things. The current system was also seen to be fundamentally unequal, with institutionalised invited engagements and those 'producing numbers' in the form of quantifiable evidence being more legitimate and better resourced compared to uninvited, citizen-led and grassroots forms of participation. Citizens and their existing forms of participation are not sufficiently listened to or responded to by those in power. Having said this, participants also reflected on how the separate forms of engagement in Table 1 have positive synergies and complementary relationships. Taking a systems perspective can also help to recognise their value, distinctive contributions and place as part of a wider whole.

Effective systems of public engagement?

In the second session, participants worked in seven mixed groups and a full plenary discussion, which was followed by the final panel discussion, to consider what a more effective system of public engagement with energy and climate change in the UK might look like. The purpose was to move beyond the routine focus on specific or discrete forms of engagement and their own internal effectiveness, to explore what good participation might mean at the level of a wider landscape, ecology or system of public engagement. While this move can be challenging – and the notion of a system of participation can be problematic in terms of its abstraction, framing, boundedness, and so on – it brought forward a highly productive and generative set of discussions.

Assembly discussions articulated five principles for effective systems of public engagement, as summarised in Table 2.

Connectedness. *Enhance connections, flows and relations between diverse, discrete and divided forms of public engagement across places, issues and scales, without assuming central coordination.* • Connection and exchange between diverse engagements, associated actors and organisations. • Linkage across scales of public engagement and governance while enabling plurality and difference.
Diversity. *Start from and attend to the diverse ways people are already engaging and cultivate diverse forms of participation across wider systems, including those led by civil society.* • Understand, recognise and make visible diverse existing and emerging public engagements. • Cultivate, celebrate and value diverse forms of participation across wider systems.
Address systemic inequalities. *Address systemic inequalities of public engagement and tackle the underlying conditions, inequalities and powers that perpetuate them.* • Redress inequalities in the resourcing, recognition and legitimacy of citizen-led participation. • Tackle powers that drive inequalities, and give rights to participation, protest, knowledge and ownership.
Responsiveness. *Enhance capacities of institutions and system actors to listen and respond to diverse public engagements and be transparent and accountable about this.* • Cultivate capacities of institutions and system-wide actors to listen and respond to public engagements. • Transparency in how public engagements are accounted for in decisions, actions and commitments.
Reflexive learning. *Prompt systemic and reflexive learning about public engagement through experimentation, questioning assumptions and being open to other perspectives.* • Enable systemic and situated learning through experiments, reflection and knowledge exchange. • Prompt reflexive learning through questioning assumptions and being open to other perspectives.

Table 2. Principles for effective systems of public engagement co-created in the Assembly.

First, principles developed by five of the seven groups related to the theme of **connectedness**, which includes connecting and forming relations between diverse, disconnected or conflicting forms of public engagement and the actors and organisations associated with them while linking across scales of public engagement and governance (for example between grassroots, local and national scales). It was stressed that this should not take the form of centralised control or system integration but rather that capacities for connectedness should be distributed and allow for plurality and difference.

Second, principles developed by five of the seven groups related to the theme of **diversity**, which means starting with citizens and the diverse ways they are already engaging, as well as more actively cultivating and valuing diverse kinds of participation as a key feature of a vibrant democracy. This allows for more public-

centred approaches to addressing energy transitions and climate change, which start from where people are at through understanding, recognising and making visible already existing engagements.

Third, principles developed by three groups, but which formed a critical discussion point across all seven, is the theme of **addressing systemic inequalities**. There was a palpable sense of systemic inequalities in the forms of participation that are resourced, recognised and deemed legitimate which means taking action to redress this, for example through also resourcing citizen-led and civil society participation. Many participants emphasised the need to tackle the underlying conditions, vested interests and powers that shape these inequalities including incumbent models of growth, valuation and ownership, protest laws, protecting rights to participation, and impacts on the conditions for public engagement through emerging technologies, social media platforms and generative AI.

Fourth, principles developed by five of the seven groups related to the theme of **responsiveness**, which means institutions and system actors becoming much better at listening and responding to diverse public engagements and being much more transparent about how this is accounted for in decisions, actions and commitments. This turns the focus and questioning of public engagement back onto institutions and those in power who have a responsibility to openly respond, rather than the burden always being placed on the public and their assumed deficits being the barrier to progress.

Fifth, principles developed by five of the seven groups related to the theme of **reflexive learning**, which means enabling systemic and situated learning about public engagement through experimentation, questioning assumptions and being open to other perspectives about publics, participation and issues relating to energy and climate change. This includes challenging and questioning the purposes, assumptions and power relations shaping systems of public engagement, notions of effectiveness, who is in control, the exclusions that occur, and anticipating future implications.

These principles work together and create synergies but also raise challenges and productive tensions. Assembly discussions suggested that an effective system of participation does not mean trying to design a perfect system that is more joined-up, integrated and centrally governed as a whole. The principles rather emphasise the need to cultivate distributed capacities to work with complex, dynamic, plural and contested systems of participation, in more connected, responsive and reflexive ways that attend to diversity while tackling inequalities.

Assembly reflections

Moving beyond a routine focus on the internal effectiveness of specific forms of public engagement to consider what good systems of participation might mean has been attempted conceptually and academically but is yet to be well articulated, not least in more practical terms around challenges of energy and climate change. The Assembly therefore made an important contribution to these developments, bringing together a diverse range of actors from across the wider ecology of public

engagement with energy and climate change in the UK to develop principles of effective systems of participation.



While challenging, the Assembly demonstrated that addressing questions about systems of participation can be highly productive and opened up debates around, for example, the prevailing democratic conditions, systemic inequalities and exclusions, resourcing civil society, challenging institutions, and connecting beyond methodological silos. Discussions in the first Assembly session showed that there are well-established criteria for the internal effectiveness of different forms of participation. These are important and necessary but result in mutually exclusive and at times completing best practices, a fragmented and polarised landscape of public engagement, and can preclude critical questions and debate around systems of participation explored in the Assembly.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the principles of effective systems of participation co-created with Assembly participants closely align with the underpinning frameworks and the approach of the Public Engagement Observatory, including its mappings of diverse public engagements (diversity and addressing systemic inequalities), network (connectedness and reflexive learning), and experiments with partner organisations and institutions (responsiveness). Indeed, the design and event of the Assembly intentionally reflected these qualities. The Public Engagement Observatory is one example of the kinds of new organisational entities needed to take forward systemic approaches to participation. It is, however, a distributed entity working with already existing diversities of participation, practices and practitioners, and should be one of many.

The focus of this Assembly was on exploring principles rather than how to put them into practice. These conversations and actions are now needed, but ultimately this will depend on all system actors from governments to citizens themselves. We look forward to taking these next steps together.

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Appendix: Assembly participants

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About the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory

The UKERC Public Engagement Observatory maps the many different ways that people are engaging with energy, climate change and net zero on an ongoing basis. It openly shares, experiments withs, and undertakes these mappings with others to help make energy and climate-related decisions, innovations and participation more just, responsible and responsive to society. Through its network, the Observatory makes connections and encourages learning across wider systems of public engagement in the UK and internationally.

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