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An Emerging 'Welsh Way'? Innovative Participatory Deliberation in Wales

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Contents

Executive Summary	3.
1. Introduction	4.
2. Case Studies	6.
<i>Case Study 1: The Talking Shop</i> [®]	6.
<i>Case Study 2: The Constitutional Futures project: Using collaging to deliberate on the theme of ‘My Wales: Now and in the Future’</i>	8.
<i>Case Study 3: The Everyday Politics of Independence project</i>	10.
3. Conclusion	13.
4. Further Resources	14.

List of Figures

FIGURE 1 Photographs from the Talking Shop Project	7.
FIGURE 2 Images of the process and outputs of deliberative collaging workshops	9.
FIGURE 3 Images from the Everyday Politics of Wales Photography Exhibition	12.

Executive Summary

In this report, created for the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales's 'Deep Dive' Session on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, we present three projects demonstrating that **Wales is a site of ongoing innovation in the design and execution of participatory deliberation.**

The projects are **the Talking Shop®**, the **Constitutional Futures** project, and the **'Everyday Politics of Independence'** project. The three projects are innovative in their integration of creativity into constitutional deliberation. They serve to demonstrate the potential of creativity as a means of building more **inclusive** forms of participatory deliberation and enabling more profound **expressions** of political ideas.

A common challenge facing all three projects relates to resourcing – particularly in identifying lines of funding and partnership that enable innovators in participatory deliberation to 'scale up' in terms of reach, to plan over an extended time horizon, and to feed directly into the wider constitutional/political reform agenda in Wales.

The points of difference across these projects demonstrate that it is unlikely that a single 'silver bullet' can harness the potentiality of innovation in participatory deliberation. Indeed, none of these innovations is designed to replace established practices within a representative and deliberative democracy. Instead, they can be seen as techniques that can **augment, enliven, and popularise** Wales's national conversation about its constitutional future and its politics more generally.

That innovative participatory deliberation projects are nascent in Wales represents a significant opportunity. With sustained, strategic investment in such projects and their inclusion within the wider constitutional reform process, as well as participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives more broadly, Wales could emerge as a world leader in this fast-developing area.

Introduction

Despite the growing confidence and maturity of Wales's democratic institutions during the two decades since devolution, it is widely acknowledged that there are still major weaknesses in the country's democracy, not least in citizen engagement. Turnout at Senedd elections remains stubbornly low – but this is only the headline indicator of deeper issues; low levels of public knowledge of and engagement with Wales's (and the United Kingdom's) democratic institutions and processes are widely documented. In Wales – as elsewhere – there is growing interest in finding alternative ways of engaging citizens with democratic processes and decision-making to counter this pattern of disengagement and breathe new life into our political system.

Deliberative approaches to citizen engagement have become popular worldwide in recent years. Such approaches aim to bring citizens together to learn about political issues, discuss, and come to an informed opinion. These deliberations take a variety of forms – including citizens' assemblies, citizen juries and summits, various forms of policy co-creation, and participatory budgeting. While still emerging and subject to political and scholarly critiques, participatory deliberation has been shown to affect citizens who take part positively – such citizens typically emerge better informed, more satisfied with the policy decision, and more engaged in their political systems.

In the Welsh context, deliberative approaches to citizen engagement have looked at various issues and have operated on both national and local scales. The use of co-creation/co-production approaches to policy development is particularly well established in Welsh policymaking, with these approaches being championed within the Welsh Government's Sustainable Development Change Programme, which began in May 2012. Such approaches are also embedded in the emphases on involvement and collaboration within the 'ways of working' outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The Welsh Parliament organised a citizens' assembly in July 2019 to consider how people in Wales can shape their future through the work of the parliament, whilst in March 2021, the Blaenau Gwent Climate Assembly considered ways of tackling the climate crisis. The Institute of Welsh Affairs, in partnership with The Open University in Wales, has engaged a citizens' panel to examine the role of the media in Wales. In Newport, participatory budgeting is becoming normalised as a process of resource allocation to community wellbeing projects.

Despite these initiatives, the Welsh experience of deliberative democracy remains relatively limited and *ad hoc*. Both within and beyond Wales, participatory deliberation has encountered two significant limitations. First, such projects have struggled to draw wide public attention. Secondly, they have a mixed record of successfully engaging with conventional political structures to implement their decisions and recommendations. Thus, this report is written in a context where participatory deliberation is widely seen as an important, but imperfect mechanism of democratic renewal. In short, the context calls out for innovation in the design and delivery of participatory deliberation.

This report is co-authored by five individuals working in Wales who have developed and led projects that embrace the objective of innovating in the domain of participatory deliberation. The projects are the Talking Shop[®], the Constitutional Futures project, and the 'Everyday Politics of Independence' project. All three projects have engaged substantially with issues in constitutional reform that are to the forefront of today's politics in Wales, but they can also be seen as novel in a broader sense, adding to the global toolkit of methods for participatory and deliberative democracy beyond the constitutional issue.

The report begins by providing overviews of each project, showing how each one has placed a significant emphasis on creativity as a mode of involvement and expression that can add significantly to participatory deliberation. We conclude by discussing the matrix of challenges and opportunities that characterise this space, identifying key barriers to overcome so that Wales can harness the possibilities that combining creativity and deliberation promises.

Case Study 1: The Talking Shop®

Omidaze Productions has been developing the concept of **The Talking Shop®** – a democratic and cultural information centre– since 2019. The Talking Shop® is a public creative space inside a disused shop in a town or city centre created by Yvonne Murphy/Omidaze and hosted by trained professional creatives and co-hosted by a range of collaborating organisations. Inside The Talking Shop® Yvonne Murphy/Omidaze is developing the use of creative approaches to deliberative democracy and exploring the intersection between cultural and democratic participation. The aim is to tackle our democratic deficit and increase democratic participation both at and beyond the ballot box.

The Talking Shop® was piloted in Cardiff in 2019. A recurring insight during this pilot was the need to establish a political knowledge base, with many visitors to the shop reporting that lacking such a base was a barrier to their engagement in political discussion. This insight led to the creation of The Democracy Box®, a public information campaign including multimedia and paper materials developed with a team of young co-creators. In 2022 Omidaze began trials of The Talking Shop® across Wales, incorporating The Democracy Box® to create a blueprint for how to use The Talking Shop® and The Democracy Box® as models for a conversation with the nation. Inside The Talking Shop® trained hosts begin open conversations around democratic and cultural engagement, introduce the public to The Democracy Box and Omidaze's the story of our UK democracy® and signpost to democratic and cultural information. Everyone contributes to and helps curate the shop.

The Talking Shop aims to address the current democratic deficit by raising democratic participation (including but not limited to registering to vote) through conversation, information and creative approaches to democratic deliberation, including bunting making, collaging (individual and collective), stone painting, poetry, journaling, origami, knitting, crocheting, music, podcasting, creative writing, paper lantern making, graffiti, Christmas crafts, clay modelling, pompom making, illustration, zine making, dance and spoken word.

Omidaze has integrated questions from the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales consultation survey into The Talking Shop® trials. These adapted questions are on The Talking Shop® walls and are used as questions for the day. 100% of visitors we spoke to about the Commission's consultation had not heard of the Commission's work or the survey. The majority we spoke with about the Constitutional Future of Wales needed information on how our UK democracy is currently constituted before they could begin a conversation about Wales's constitutional future.

Figure 1. Photographs from the Talking Shop Project



The model has now been trialed successfully in Cardiff, Newport and Merthyr Tydfil in 2022/23 and has engaged over 8,400 visitors with no dedicated marketing budget. Visitors range from 6 months to 96 years old and include all socio/economic demographics with a high percentage of young people aged 16-30 and represent the full range of democratically engaged from self-declared non-engagement to highly engaged citizens. Omidaze's work to date has evidenced that most Welsh citizens do not understand how our democracy works and fits together and need a shared baseline of information before engaging in meaningful democratic deliberation. The Talking Shop and The Democracy Box combined address this identified need.

Case Study 2: The Constitutional Futures project: Using collaging to deliberate on the theme of ‘My Wales: Now and in the Future’

In this section, we discuss a collaboration between Dr Anwen Elias (Reader in Politics, University of Aberystwyth), Dylan Moore (the Institute of Welsh Affairs Media and Democracy Policy Lead and Editor of the IWA’s magazine, *welsh agenda*), and Dr Matthew Wall (Head of Department of Politics, Philosophy and International Relations, Swansea University). It formed part of the **Constitutional Futures** project (led by Elias), which aimed to experiment with new ways of starting conversations about constitutional change, and Institute of Welsh Affairs’ **ongoing work** (led by Moore) on strengthening Wales’s media and democracy.¹

Based on initial scoping work,² we identified collage-making as a creative activity that is highly accessible, portable, and stimulative of deliberative discussions, so the project focused on developing a protocol for using collage-making to facilitate participatory deliberation. We held five deliberative collaging workshops in Newport, all facilitated through Newport Live. Two were with participants from Reality Theatre (one with an over-60s group, one with a group for 16-25-year-olds with additional learning needs), one with Newport Youth Council, and two were drop-in sessions as part of the Newport Rising festival. The key theme explored across the sessions was ‘My Wales: Now and in the Future’ – which sought to connect the daily experiences and priorities of participants to the current and future governance of Wales. During the participant’s creation and exploration of their collages, conversations with the facilitators aimed to draw on key themes and tensions explored in the creative work.

1 The Constitutional Futures project received funding from the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society, the Learned Society for Wales’s Research Workshop Grant Scheme, and Aberystwyth University. The IWA’s Media and Democracy project, in collaboration with the Open University, is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

2 This included a poetry workshop with Merched y Wawr and Young Farmers (November 2021); two drop-in sessions in Cardiff used sewing and collage making, facilitated through The Talking Shop® (June 2022); and one drop-in collage-making session held at the National Eisteddfod in Tregaron (August 2022).

Figure 2. Images of the process and outputs of deliberative collaging workshops



Our analysis of the pilot showed that this approach is highly inclusive, evidenced by the variety of the participants who engaged in our workshops (as outlined above), several of whom indicated that they would not normally consider taking part in, or have the opportunity to contribute to, the ongoing debate about Wales’s constitutional future. The quality of the discussion that took place in these environments was a theme picked up by participants in their evaluations of the workshops: one noted that ‘it was a comfortable space to discuss issues that matter to me’, whilst others valued ‘the open and friendly environment’ that ‘allowed for each person to have time to talk’; ‘as a group the discussions were very interesting and well considered.’ Across these workshops, approximately 20 hours of conversations were had around the theme of Wales’s

constitutional future, prompted by the different creative methods adopted. As such, we found that our approach created sustained, deliberative, and insightful conversations about a highly complex and polarising aspect of politics.

We concluded that further iteration of our protocol should consider scalability more explicitly. If the protocol provided for interested individuals to be supported/trained to run their own sessions as facilitator-expert-participants, there is potential for considerable and organic expansion of the reach of this innovation. We acknowledge that the creative outputs generated by these sessions do not lend themselves as easily to a synthesis of key conclusions in the same way as structured group ‘decisions’ (usually expressed in terms of a vote on a proposition or set of recommendations) from a conventional citizen engagement process. However, we see considerable opportunity in the capacity of these creative outputs to spark the interest of citizens in a way that text-heavy reports may not. For instance, it would be possible to exhibit these outputs in a variety of digital and physical settings and to develop interpretive and interactive experiences around them.

In summary, our workshops led to a formalised protocol for participatory deliberation using collage-making, and its application demonstrated the advantages of this approach to deliberation in terms of inclusivity, quality of discussion, and richness of expression. Scaling this approach and feeding its outputs into the wider constitutional reform agenda represent the next steps in the project.

Case Study 3: The Everyday Politics of Independence project

The Everyday Politics of Independence project, funded by the ESRC as part of the [**WISERD Civil Society Research Centre**](#), aims to enhance understanding of attitudes towards independence in Wales, Scotland and Catalonia. In this section of the report, we report a piloting of qualitative, creative techniques deployed by Dr Anwen Elias and Dr Elin Royles (Senior Lecturer in the Department of International Politics, University of Aberystwyth) in Wales. The goal of the project is to go beyond the tendency in existing research to focus on trying to understand why people decide to support or oppose independence. It investigates how people think and feel about the issue of independence and how lived experiences shape their views. The project utilises photovoice as a visual research methodology to start conversations about independence.

Researchers collaborated with photography clubs and colleges offering photography courses. Group participants first took photos capturing how they think and feel about independence. Participants shared their 4 pictures and explained their selection in a group discussion. In-depth individual interviews then further explored thoughts and life experiences informing the images. Based on this approach, we report on project experience of two participatory methods of engaging citizens in discussing constitutional change:

1. Engaging photography clubs and college group members’ utilising photovoice (2.2).
2. Organising an exhibition featuring Aberystwyth Camera Club’s project photographs in the Bandstand, Aberystwyth 13-15 April 2023. More than 600 people attended. Attendees were asked to complete a survey about the exhibition.

Our project findings thus far show that:

- i. Using visual methods like photography is an effective way of starting conversations about constitutional issues. It enables such conversations to go beyond a simple binary response (for or against independence), to tap into deeper emotional responses and motivations based on lived experiences. The resulting conversations convey the complexities inherent in thinking about such an issue.
- ii. Exhibiting the photos and engaging the broader public with them enables the

conversation to be extended beyond the project participants. Photography exhibitions can help people to make sense of complex constitutional issues and can initiate and support respectful and constructive conversations on a complex and divisive issue. Attendees reported a strong interest in knowing more about the issue and appreciate the opportunity for informed and respectful dialogue.

Our findings are based on project participants' reflections on their experience of engaging with the project in the three cases, data from 6 focus groups and 24 interviews. A number of participants explained that the task had been challenging, particularly the early stage. To many, this related to the challenge of grasping the concept at the heart of the project and visualising independence. Another challenge emerged as participants tried to avoid simple, predictable images and to produce images depicting their perspective on independence from different viewpoints, getting 'a little deeper into everyone's thinking'. However, participants welcomed the opportunity to use their creative interest to explore a complex issue. The project encouraged participants to engage in a process of making sense of and exploring their own thoughts on independence. This ranged from thinking deeply about the topic, some undertaking research and others talking to people about independence. It led individuals who didn't usually think about politics to think much more about a political issue. With individuals who had previously thought about independence, it led them to think about related aspects that they had not thought much about prior to engaging with the project.

Our analysis of photography exhibitions and their ability to engage citizens with constitutional discussions draws on 125 responses to a survey we asked visitors to the exhibition to complete. 91.7% of respondents agreed that photography was an effective way to get people to think about independence. Respondents noted that the exhibition created a space for reflecting on, and learning about independence, including increasing awareness of issues such as the practicalities, alternatives, problems and complexities surrounding the issue. Photography was considered as accessible and especially suited to fostering engagement with the issue, due to its ability to convey ideas and perspectives, and stimulate thoughts and ideas. More generally, respondents expressed a strong desire for conversations about the issue. The type of dialogue they wished to engage in was one informed by facts, representing the complexities inherent to the issue, and addressing the full range of hopes and anxieties associated with independence.

In their free-text comments as part of the survey, 88% of respondents who attended the photography exhibition noted that it was effective as a means in initiating respectful and constructive conversations about independence based around exchange of perspectives, and stressed photography's capacity for creating empathic experiences. They often associated enhanced understandings of the issue with going beyond their own perspective and engaging with others' perspectives. Specifically, respondents noted it 'showed different views'; encouraged 'listening to the views of others' and demonstrated nuance and complexity between polarised positions.

Figure 3 Images from the Everyday Politics of Wales Photography Exhibition



Conclusion

Across the three projects discussed in this report, we have shown the value in adopting a creative approach to citizen deliberation. Such an approach:

- i) draws a wider cohort of citizens into deliberative processes – lowering the barrier to entry for these processes in terms of prior knowledge and creating a portable form of deliberation that can be brought to people in their own spaces; and
- ii) opens new avenues of thought and expression relative to conventional deliberative approaches, which prioritise more formal reasoning and argumentation.

However, all three of the projects here could benefit significantly from support to scale up their activities across and (eventually) beyond Wales. In discussing this report, the authors all identified the lack of a clearly targeted, medium to long term funding stream that would enable this to take place. There is a danger in this situation that projects like these can struggle to move beyond the pilot stage. Secondly, because of the creative nature of these engagements, finding a means to integrate their outputs with the wider constitutional reform agenda (and political debate and policy-making more generally) will require sustained and sometimes unusual collaborative partnerships with decision-making institutions. The diverse issues and benefits delivered across the three projects reported here indicate that openness to a variety of projects and partnerships (rather than seeking a single ‘silver bullet’ solution) will be key in harnessing the benefits of innovations in participatory deliberation.

In the global and Welsh-specific contexts that we outlined in the introduction to this report, innovations that can achieve improvements to the inclusivity, richness, and popular appeal of participatory deliberation are of considerable value. The fact that Wales is the site of such innovations represents an opportunity for Welsh politics and society. The vibrancy of these innovations, combined with the wider emphasis on establishing a conversation on Wales’s constitutional future and the widespread use of participatory deliberation in Welsh policymaking, means that there is real potential for Wales to emerge as a world leader in innovative participatory deliberation.

Weblinks For Further Information on *The Talking Shop* Case Study

[The Democracy Box Story of our UK Democracy that Every Citizen Should Know](#)

[The Democracy Box LinkTree](#)

[The Democracy Box Website](#)

[Omidaze Productions Website](#)

[Information on The Talking Shop](#)

[Information on The Democracy Box](#)

[The Talking Shop 2019 pilot report](#)

[The Talking Shop Trials 2022-23 Summary of emerging themes](#)

<https://linktr.ee/Omidaze>

***The Talking Shop* trailers and explainer videos**

[Merthyr trailer](#)

[Merthyr full length](#)

[Talking Shop pilot 2019](#)

[The Talking Shop explainer film 2022](#)

[Video of The Newport Talking Shop made by Newport Youth Council](#)

[Cares Family/Multiplier The Talking Shop 2022 Cardiff Film](#)

[Talking Shop generic trailer](#)

[Cardiff & Newport Talking Shops 2022 Full length](#)

[Cardiff & Newport Talking Shops 2022 short](#)

Media Coverage of *The Talking Shop* Project

1. [BBC Radio Wales The Idea Debate Live](#)
2. [ITV Wales clip re Merthyr Talking Shop 2022](#)
3. [BBC coverage of The Democracy Box sharing the story of our UK democracy with all year 11s in Blaenau Gwent 2022](#)
4. [Nation Cymru article re Merthyr Talking Shop January 2022](#)
5. [The Talking Shop Welsh Agenda January 2023](#)
6. [IWA article The Talking Shop & The Democracy Box November 2022](#)
7. [IWA article re Clwstwr research and The Democracy Box December 2020](#)

8. [IWA article Talking Shop & Constitution Commission Launch December 2022](#)
9. [The Leanne Woods podcast We can't have a democracy without informed citizens](#)
10. [Wales Arts Review April 2023](#)
11. [Setting the Scene Cardiff – blog article on Omidaze's 2017 Romeo & Juliet & Democracy Explained School Workshops](#)

The Democracy Box public information campaign prototype

1. <https://linktr.ee/TheDemocracyBox>
2. [The Democracy Box Podcast Series](#)
3. [Democracy Box music video series commissioned by BBC Bitesize](#)
4. [The Democracy Box on Instagram](#)
5. [The Democracy Box on TikTok](#)
6. [The Democracy Box YouTube Channel](#)

Links to output from schools participating in the 2022 Democracy Box Creative Cascade programme for schools pilot in partnership with Central South Consortia.

[Thornhill Primary The Democracy Box Creative Cascade project](#)

[The Democracy Box Creative Cascade Programme pilot Feb 2022 Image & Audio slideshow](#)

[The Democracy Box Creative Cascade Programme pilot Feb 2022 snapshot of pupils creative output](#)

[The Democracy Box Creative Cascade Programme pilot Feb 2022 Pupils Reflections Central South Education Consortia slides of the 2022 sharing of the pilot programme](#)

The 4 Democracy Box Prototypes

1. The Democracy Box public information campaign[®]
2. The Democracy Box Creative Cascade[®] in schools programme
3. The Talking Shop[®] - a cultural and democratic information centre. A democracy hub which contains The Democracy Box
4. The Democracy Box Toolkit[®] for working with young people as co-creators prototype

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