

# OUR BBC

## A BLUEPRINT FOR A MORE INDEPENDENT & FUTURE-PROOFED BBC

FAQ FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN BBC  
GOVERNANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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The BBC is a public service media organisation - and a public interest technology organisation - that exists to serve the whole of the UK. This means it has to interact with the public in many ways: through its content, audience research and analytics, consultations and surveys, complaints and feedback, and large-scale exercises like the 870,000-response survey it ran in 2025. These are all important, as they help the BBC understand what people want and how well it is serving them, while preserving the editorial and creative freedom that is the foundation of its unique value.

**But these interactions are largely one-way: the BBC asks, the public responds, and the institution decides what to do with what it hears.** Five years ago, researchers Donders and Vanhaeght [wrote](#) that “public broadcasters need to let go of their monopoly over the public interest in media, sharing responsibility with citizens.” As the nature of media has changed, **people’s expectations of responsiveness have changed too - not just to be consulted but to be represented** - in the BBC’s case, to have a meaningful influence on the direction of an institution they collectively fund.

The BBC’s foundational principle of ‘universality’ - of access, appeal, usage, and funding - should expand to include universality *in governance*, by including citizens. We propose two distinct forms of citizen participation in BBC governance, each serving a different purpose. This document explains what they are, how they differ, and why they matter for the BBC’s independence.

## HOW IT CAN BE DONE AND WHY NOW

### How does citizen participation strengthen independence?

Currently, all formal accountability mechanisms for the BBC ultimately flow back to the government of the day. Ministers appoint the Chair, negotiate the funding settlement, and control the Charter renewal process. When politicians claim to speak “for the people” about or against the BBC, there is no mechanism for the people themselves to respond.

Embedding citizens directly in governance creates an alternative source of democratic legitimacy that politicians cannot bypass or override. For a Board acting in good faith, the Panel provides evidence of public support when navigating political pressure. For a Board that has become politicised, the Panel provides a public interest benchmark against which its decisions can be judged.

### Why are there two different citizen bodies?

The report proposes both a **Citizens’ Assembly** and a **Standing Citizens’ Panel** because they address fundamentally different kinds of questions.

- The **Assembly** is a safeguard against existential threats to the BBC - it would be convened rarely, only when someone proposes to abolish or fundamentally alter the foundational values or purpose of the BBC, or when once-in-a-generation questions need to be answered.
- The **Panel** is an ongoing feature of governance, providing a public voice on high-level principles, strategic direction, performance, and priorities (but not in editorial, creative or operational decisions, what programmes get made, or who gets hired).

You might think of the Assembly as an emergency brake, and the Panel as a permanent advisory body with real teeth.

### Why is this the right moment for citizen governance of the BBC?

Trust in public institutions across the democratic world is under serious strain. The [OECD’s 2024 Trust Survey](#) found that across 30 countries, more people distrust their national government (44%) than trust it (39%). The BBC still commands trust across a broad cross-section of the UK population - Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters alike - but that trust is not unconditional, and it is being actively, intentionally eroded by political attacks, culture war framing, and a wider collapse of confidence in institutions.

Each Charter renewal cycle - in which the BBC’s very existence is up for debate - deepens this vulnerability. **The current government’s Green Paper for the 2026–27 Charter Renewal explicitly invites consideration of deliberative forums as a way to enhance engagement between the public and the BBC.** But there is a critical difference between a consultation exercise and a governance mechanism with actual power. What prevents deliberative bodies from becoming ‘talking-shops’ is not the quality of their design, but the formal authority they hold. This is the moment to deliver what Donders and Vanhaeght envisaged.

The methods for doing this are no longer experimental. The OECD has documented [733 representative deliberative processes since 1979](#), with institutionalised cases doubling between 2020 and 2023. Over 80,000 citizens worldwide have been randomly selected to participate in such processes. Permanent models are operating in Ostbelgien (Belgium), Paris, Lisbon, and elsewhere. In the UK, the National Gallery has convened a Citizens’ Assembly, and Nottingham’s New Art Exchange is now led by one. The field is mature, the evidence is strong, and the design principles are well-established.

## THE STANDING CITIZENS' PANEL

### What is the Citizens' Panel for?

The Panel provides ongoing citizen input into the BBC's governance - **not** on day-to-day programming or editorial decisions - but on *strategic questions* such as:

- What should the BBC's priorities be for the next year?
- How well has it delivered against its public purposes?
- What principles should guide budget allocation across nations and regions?

The Panel would also feed into the periodic Operational Reviews that we propose to replace the multiple current review processes for the BBC such as the current Charter renewal consultations, the Mid-Term Review, and Ofcom's review. The Panel could also be asked to deliberate on specific questions by the Board, government, Parliament, other legislatures, Ofcom or the proposed new bodies - the Independent Funding Commission and the Independent Appointments Commission.

### How is a Citizens' Panel different from the Audience Councils the BBC had until 2017?

The BBC Trust's Audience Councils (2007-17) and the Citizens' Panel proposed by Demos serve **fundamentally different purposes** within the BBC's accountability architecture.

The [Audience Councils](#) were **volunteer advisory bodies**, organised by nation (and 12 English regions), chaired by the relevant BBC National Trustee, and composed of self-selecting applicants with an "informed interest" in the BBC and its services, recruited through open advertisement, and receiving expenses. [Their role](#) was to help the Trust understand audience needs and concerns, including on aspects of the BBC's programming, services, policies and strategy: in essence, they were a **consultative listening mechanism feeding views into the Trust's own decision-making**. The Audience Councils had **no formal powers, no guaranteed response mechanism, and no constitutional standing** beyond the requirements for their composition and meetings specified in the Charter.

The proposed standing Citizens' Panel is, by contrast, a **deliberative governance body**, operated at **arm's length from the BBC** and government, with 100-120 paid members selected by civic lottery (sortition) with UK-wide demographic and geographic stratification, embedded in both the Charter and statute, and with defined constitutional authority. Critically, it carries a "comply or explain" obligation, meaning the BBC Board would be required to respond publicly to the Panel's recommendations and justify any deviation.

Whereas the Audience Councils were a BBC-led instrument of the Trust's own accountability work, the Citizens' Panel is designed as an independent anchor against political capture, providing democratic legitimacy that complements and counterbalances ministerial or Board oversight.

### How is a Citizens' Panel different from the audience research the BBC already does?

The BBC's audience research serves an entirely different purpose from a Citizens' Panel. The BBC's audience research is extensive and sophisticated - it helps the BBC understand how it is reaching and serving different audiences, reveals gaps, and informs operational decisions.

However, audience research is **extractive**: the BBC gathers data and opinions, then decides what to do with them. A Citizens' Panel is **deliberative and constitutive**: it brings together a representative group of people, ensures that barriers to participation such as income and carer

status are removed, gives them time, evidence, and independent facilitation, and asks them to form collective judgements together, which the Board, the body ultimately responsible for the BBC, must consider and respond to, publicly. The difference is not one of scale or quality - it is a difference of purpose.

The BBC's existing forms of research tell the Board and Executive what people think at the time they answer a question. A Citizens' Panel would help the Board understand what the public judges to be right, having considered the evidence and trade-offs - and would require the Board to respond to that judgement publicly.

### What powers would the Panel have?

The Panel operates on a **"comply or explain"** basis. When it makes recommendations on matters within its remit - such as annual strategic priorities, budget allocation principles, or input to the funding settlement - the BBC Board (and in some cases the government) must either implement the recommendation or publish a public explanation of why they have chosen not to. This is stronger than pure consultation but stops short of binding decision-making power over the Board. The Panel anchors decisions in public judgement without transferring institutional accountability away from the Board, e.g on areas where the Board would have access to more detailed internal information than the Panel would or should.

### Why "comply or explain" rather than binding power?

The BBC Board has fiduciary and legal accountability for the corporation's performance. Giving a citizens' body binding decision-making power would create confusion about who is ultimately responsible. "Comply or explain" preserves clear accountability of the Board while ensuring that decisions out of step with public judgement must be publicly justified - both making it harder for a Board to act against the public interest without consequence, and easier for a Board to resist political or industry pressure with the backing of public judgement

### What would the Panel not be involved in?

The Panel would have **no role in editorial decisions, programming, commissioning, complaints handling, or operational management**. This boundary is essential to *protect the BBC's editorial independence* - the same independence we at Demos as a whole seek to protect from political interference through [other linked reforms](#). Citizens should not be deciding whether a particular documentary airs or how a news story is framed. The Panel's role is strategic oversight, not editorial control. Some experts we consulted suggested that the Board could refer some *retrospective* high-level questions about editorial matters to the Citizens' Panel, such as on climate coverage.

### How would Panel members be selected?

Members would be selected through a now widely-used two-stage process: first is **sortition** - what is sometimes called a 'civic lottery', in which invitations would be sent to thousands of randomly selected households across the UK. From those who respond, a representative sample would then be drawn using a technique called **stratification** to ensure the final group reflects the UK population in terms of age, gender, geography, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. This is not a self-selected group of the politically engaged or those with leisure time or resources - it is designed to be a genuine microcosm of the country, and literally represents or embodies the UK public as a whole.

## How would you ensure that the Panel is not just those with time and resources to take part?

Right from the beginning, it would be made clear to everyone receiving invites through the civic lottery that it is of the highest importance to ensure participation is genuinely possible for people from all backgrounds and circumstances. To enable this, the budget of the Panel would include enough resources to make sure that members are compensated for their time and provided with travel expenses, care costs, and accessibility support.

Practical experience from hundreds of deliberative processes - including the [OECD's database](#) and UK practitioners such as the [Sortition Foundation](#) - has identified what works:

- **The invitation sent through civic lottery really matters.** It should feel like a special occasion - formal, but friendly - and should include a personal message from the Chair of the Board and/or the Director-General - and a FAQ addressing practical concerns. People wary or dismissive of 'consultation' may be more likely to respond to a personal invitation to serve.
- **Financial barriers must be removed, not merely reduced in order to facilitate truly representative and diverse participation.** This means budgeting for proper remuneration for time (not token 'expenses'), plus childcare, eldercare, travel, accommodation, and accessibility support funded from the Panel's dedicated budget.
- **Stratification criteria must go beyond superficial criteria.** The Sortition Foundation's own research shows that even when recruiting from areas of high deprivation, [people with higher educational attainment are over-represented](#). Effective stratification needs to include socio-economic proxies alongside age, gender, geography, disability and ethnicity.
- **The process must be run independently at arm's-length from the BBC and government.** If the BBC or government controls the invitation, selection, information, or facilitation, people will not trust the integrity of the process. The Panel must be supported by a properly-resourced specialist organisation to be seen as independent. (Some suggested that the cost of the Panel could comfortably be covered by the savings made by moving to a perpetual Charter.)

## Would people who don't trust the BBC take part?

In the current political and social environment, this is a central question, and the design of the Panel is specifically intended to address it. Enthusiasm for or trust in the BBC is not a pre-requisite for participation. The civic lottery process also ensures that people who would never attend a public meeting, respond to a consultation, or join a campaign group are reached directly.

[Evidence from deliberative processes around the world](#) shows that what persuades people to participate - and to stay engaged once in the room - is the combination of a credible, independent process and the knowledge that their input will have an impact on decision-making. Practitioners consistently report that sceptics and the initially reluctant often become among the most engaged participants once they experience genuine, meaningful deliberation. In contexts marked by low trust in institutions, participants report that the random selection process itself is reassuring - it signals that anyone could be there and that the process has not been stacked.

The sortition and stratification process will ensure that the 100-120 members of the Panel include a spectrum of people with diverse views on the BBC, including those who are disengaged, sceptical or hostile, as well as those who already support or are engaged with it. The Panel's democratic legitimacy rests on its independence from the BBC - having a room full of cheerleaders would defeat the purpose.

## Is there evidence that this kind of process actually improves trust?

The evidence base related to 'deliberative democracy' is substantial and growing, as the OECD's research across its member countries shows. [Effectively-conducted deliberative processes enhance trust between citizens and institutions](#) - and the evidence shows that the *regular practice* of deliberation, not one-off exercises, builds trust over time. This is why we specifically propose a standing Citizens' Panel - this is not a ceremonial or one-off event, but an ongoing feature of governance and of meaningful citizen participation (which the OECD identifies as one of the most important levers for improving public confidence - particularly when people believe their input genuinely influences decisions - hence the 'comply or explain' requirement.)

It is crucial to ensure that information flows out from the Panel to the wider public, as well as to the Board and the BBC - the BBC might even be required to broadcast information or extracts from it. Showing citizens a representative group of people like them has been randomly selected, given support to participate, given genuine access to evidence and decision-makers, and given a status that means the institution is required to respond publicly to their judgements, could be transformative. Rather than simply assuming trust, the BBC will, as Donders & Vanhaeght suggest, share responsibility with citizens, and show - both to the UK and the wider world - that its decisions are anchored in considered public judgement.

Researchers Moss and Edwards, studying Ofcom's 2020 online citizens' assembly on public service broadcasting, concluded that public deliberation is necessary to give the public a genuine collective voice in media governance decisions and to understand the trade-offs necessary therein - and that traditional (one-way) consultation methods are inadequate for this purpose.

For the BBC specifically, the Panel also serves to counter a dynamic corrosive to trust: the perception that the BBC is accountable only to politicians and insiders, not to the public that funds it. While this does not solve every issue related to trust, giving citizens a structural, ongoing role in governance - with real authority and full transparency - creates a visible, credible answer to the claim that, through BBC-led consultation or research, the BBC is to some extent marking its own homework.

## How big would the Panel be, and how long would members serve?

We recommend 100–120 members, selected by the sortition and stratification process above, serving two-year terms. To maintain continuity while refreshing perspectives, membership would be staggered: roughly half the Panel would be replaced each year.

## Who would run the Panel?

The Panel would be supported by an independent host organisation - a specialist in deliberative democracy, selected by public tender - rather than being run by the BBC or government. This host would conduct the sortition process, provide balanced evidence and expert witnesses, manage the budget and logistics, facilitate deliberations, and publish outputs. A steering group including deliberative democracy experts and, over time, former Panel members, would provide oversight. This arm's-length structure is crucial: if the BBC or government controlled the Panel's information and facilitation, its independence would be compromised.

## THE ONE-OFF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

### When would a Citizens' Assembly be convened?

A Citizens' Assembly would only be triggered when someone - typically a government - proposes fundamental changes to the BBC's constitutional foundations. This includes attempts to abolish or significantly shorten the Charter, remove the BBC's independence protections, end universal funding, or otherwise threaten the corporation's continued existence. Under the report's proposals, no such change could proceed to a parliamentary vote until two *separate Assemblies*, each with fresh members, have deliberated and tabled Advisory Reports before Parliament, three years apart. This design feature has been used elsewhere to prevent governments exploiting short-term crises or media storms to push through irreversible changes.

### What power would the Assembly have?

The Assembly's Reports would be **advisory rather than legally binding** - Parliament remains sovereign. However, the process creates powerful democratic accountability. A government that wished to proceed against the Assembly's recommendation would need to secure supermajorities in all four UK legislatures (Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd, and the Northern Ireland Assembly). The combination of citizen deliberation and high parliamentary thresholds makes it politically very difficult to dismantle the BBC without genuine public support.

**The overarching principle:** *The BBC belongs to the public, not to temporary elected representatives. These mechanisms ensure that when existential decisions are made about its future, the public has a direct, structural voice that requires a response - not just a consultation exercise that can be ignored. This can be the beginning of a deeper, more reciprocal relationship between the BBC and the public it serves.*

## RESOURCES

- Demos (2026), Our BBC: [A Blueprint for a More Independent and Future-Proofed BBC](#)
- Demos (2024), [Citizen's White Paper](#)
- OECD (2020), [Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave](#)
- OECD (2021), [Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy](#)
- OECD (2024), [Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results](#)
- Vanhaeght, A., & Donders, K. (2021). [Audience participation in public service media. From an instrumental to a purposeful vision.](#) adComunica.
- Moss, G. & Edwards, L. (2024), '[Public deliberation and the justification of public service media](#)', International Journal of Cultural Policy, Vol. 30, Issue 3, pp. 322–337
- Niemeyer, S., Veri, F., Dryzek, J. S. & Baechtiger, A. (2024), '[How Deliberation Happens: Enabling Deliberative Reason](#)', American Political Science Review, 118(1), 345–362
- Tambini, D. (2024), '[Constitutionalising the BBC](#)', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 95, Issue 1, pp. 56–63
- Democracy Next, [Assembly Design Guide and Resources](#)
- The Sortition Foundation, [What is a Citizens' Assembly?](#)
- Sortition Foundation (2024), [Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality in Citizens' Assembly Recruitment](#)
- Ostbelgien permanent Citizens' Council and Assembly, [Bürger Dialog](#)

# DEMOS

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15 WHITEHALL, LONDON, SW1A 2DD

T: 020 3878 3955

HELLO@DEMOS.CO.UK

WWW.DEMOS.CO.UK