Public Engagement in the Welsh Parliament: Shifting the Dial from Public-Facing to Public-Engaging

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of public engagement as it is practised and conceptualised by the Welsh Parliament. It does so by applying an interpretive framework to elite interviews and select committee report forewords, in order to identify institutional narratives of public engagement. These narratives are identified and discussed at three different levels of decision-making (and in ascending levels of 'abstraction'): practice, strategy, and concept. The chosen framework and methodology show the usefulness of narrative at a conceptual and analytical level. The conclusions drawn - regarding 1) the need for a shift from public-facing to public-engaging committee work, 2) a lack of clarity on desired outcomes, and 3) continued tensions around sources of evidence and knowledge - are relevant and applicable to parliaments across a range of contexts.

Keywords: parliament, engagement, institutions, narratives, strategy, interpretive

Introduction

Public engagement - by which publics[1] are connected to governance via parliament as a mediating agent - remains a nebulous area of activity for many parliaments (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). 'Publics' constitute a range of audiences for engagement, including organised groups, experts, stakeholders, as well as individuals from the general public. For some, it remains an open question as to whether engagement is in fact a core function (in the same sense as legislation, scrutiny, representation, etc.) or one that supports these core functions. The very question of whether parliaments (rather than their Members) *should* engage citizens is itself controversial (Norton, 2013).[2] Moreover, parliaments are unique institutions, with complex structures and myriad actors (government, political parties, committees, etc.) that, by extension, represent markedly different interests. As Shepsle (1992) famously set out, even a single parliament is best understood as a 'they' rather than an 'it'.

Exploring institutional understandings and attitudes towards public engagement - within the parliamentary institutions themselves - is therefore essential, and as important as understanding engagement from citizen perspectives, which lies outside the scope of this article. This article investigates institutional understandings of public engagement within parliamentary organisations set against a complex backdrop of individual and collective narratives, alongside a wide range of engagement related activities and processes that mediate the relationship between legislatures and their publics.

We use the case of the Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru, (formerly called the National Assembly for Wales), hereafter referred to as 'The Welsh Parliament', a relatively small and young unicameral subnational legislature in the UK. The Welsh Parliament is an ideal site for examining narratives of parliamentary engagement given the extent to which the search for public legitimacy and acceptance has been inscribed in the institution's DNA. It is also an internationally relevant case and timely selection for this inquiry on three further grounds: first, the Welsh Parliament has already been commended within the UK and internationally for its innovative digital engagement practice, outreach initiatives, for its public petitions system, and

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[1] Where necessary throughout the article, we will specify whether different types of engagement are relevant and/or specific only to a particular 'public' (e.g. stakeholder engagement). Nevertheless our conclusions with respect to 'public engagement' carry (unless stated otherwise) an assumption of relevance and value across civil society (i.e. to a wide array of publics).

[2] Discussing the case of the UK Parliament, Norton states that it traditionally had no means "to inform or engage with citizens"; meanwhile, MPs "were keen to promote themselves [but] devoted little time to…promoting the institution of which they were a member" (2013, p.147).

its educational facilities and the streamlined Public Information and Education Service (HoC, 2004; Hansard Society, 2010, Williamson, 2014). Second, the Welsh Parliament offers important lessons for newly established parliaments in terms of the institutionalisation process (Stirbu and McAllsiter, 2018) and embedding a new institution within a reformed multi-level democratic polity. Lastly, Wales' constitutional flux (structure and powers, constitutional position within the rest of the UK, reforms to the electoral franchise) since the establishment of of its parliament, alongside the most recent developments, such as the work of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales[3], and the Welsh Government proposals for an enlarged parliament and adoption of legislative gender quotas in elections (Welsh Government, 2022), offer a rich backdrop against which we can examine narratives of democratic engagement in a new polity, with great significance for newly established parliaments elsewhere, or for parliamentary and democratic reforms at national and sub-national level internationally.

In this paper we take a broad view on engagement, as a concept that encapsulates a variety of forms - of different intensity, quality and purpose - that embody the relationship between public institutions and the public.

The objectives of this article are twofold: first, it maps out institutional practices of public engagement in the Welsh Parliament, thus emphasising the wide range of activities pursued as engagement, as well as the actors involved. Second, it explores institutional narratives (the institutional actors' understanding, meaning, beliefs and aspirations) in relation to public engagement. We do this by focusing on the fourth term of the Welsh Parliament (2011-2016) - a critical term in the institution's process of maturing and in its constitutional journey as a whole (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018). This period has been characterised, amongst others,[4] by "a larger and institutionalised emphasis on public engagement" (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018, p.25), an emphasis that has been successfully built on by subsequent terms (and by other legislatures). The article uses the work of the Welsh Parliament's policy and legislation committees[5] to locate the discussion. Given the centrality of committees to the

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[3] The Commission was appointed by the Welsh Government in November 2021 with the view to consider and develop options for fundamental constitutional reform in the United Kingdom, and to consider ways to strengthen Welsh democracy.

[4] For example, adaptation of the legislative process in line with granting of primary legislative powers following the 2011 Referendum.

[5] The Welsh Parliament (in the fourth term) featured a dual function committee system, whereby thematic (rather than mirroring executive portfolios) policy and legislation committees deal both with scrutiny of the government and administration, scrutiny of policy, as well as with consideration of bills.

legislative, scrutiny and representation role of parliaments, this positioning allows us to analyse these narratives in the context of parliamentary activity.

This article makes two important contributions to scholarship on public engagement in parliamentary institutions. First, it provides a first comprehensive assessment of institutional narratives on engagement in Wales' national parliament, offering a territorial (sub-national) dimension that is often neglected within parliamentary studies.

Secondly, it explores institutional narratives within a new parliamentary setting in the context of the institutionalisation of engagement practice, thus enhancing our understanding of political and institutional actors' drivers and motivation to engage with the public, as well as shining light on the contextual factors shaping the emergence of innovative practice in engagement. The newness of the institution, as well as the elite-led process characterising its establishment (McAllister and Stirbu 2008), are important constitutive factors here, meaning that the Welsh Parliament benefitted from certain institutional blank slate (McAllister and Stirbu, 2007). This is particularly relevant for our investigation of narratives of engagement given that top down views in institutional design suggest that "the political leadership can start with a blank slate, tearing up the old laws and making new laws at any time" (Easterly, 2008, p.95). This provides a unique context to study how new institutions engage from the moment of (and indeed before) their establishment, and how they shape and reshape their relationship with citizens over time. Mackay (2014) describes these new, 'nested', institutions as "carriers of multiple - sometimes contradictory - interests and ideas" (p.567), whose design and establishment is imprinted not only with historical legacies, but also with the interactions with the already existing publics within a polity.

These legacies and interconnections mean that a parliament's intended functions and principles should inform not only policy but design. In a discussion of institutional reform, Mackay (2014) comments that "the goal is to set off fledgling institutions along progressive paths" (p.549), a point made in relation to gendered institutional change, but highly relevant to engagement as well. A lack of institutional interest in - and capacity for - engagement represents a traditional power imbalance in its own right; it is a claim as to which publics a parliament needs to (or should) hear from. These claims - which continue to be highly gendered - hold substantial implications for the practice of parliamentary and representative democracy.

With this in mind, it is important to establish whether a capacity (and desire) for public engagement is strategically present in newer parliaments (such as Wales) at the level of

'institutional design', which would counteract a historical lack of institutional interest in this practice.

This article proceeds as follows. We outline the interpretive theoretical framework for our research, before describing the methods, analysis and data that we used. We then move on to our analysis, beginning with a mapping of public engagement practice in the Welsh Parliament. This mapping provides a foundation for our identification, and discussion, of three prominent public engagement narratives (relating to practice, strategy, and broader concepts). This article concludes with our key findings in relation to public engagement, and the need for its re-examination at a practical, strategic and conceptual level.

An interpretive theoretical framework

We adopt an interpretative theoretical framework in this article, with a special focus on the role of narratives in shaping collective action. This reflects our objective to understand public engagement practices, as well as the patterns of belief and behaviour that constitute and shape them. Understanding these practices and patterns, from those who represent parliaments - i.e., those who speak on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967) - is central to comprehending how engagement can function. Examining institutional understandings of public engagement is all the more pertinent at a time when the importance, and even the legitimacy, of parliaments is increasingly called into question. The common denominator of these understandings, and the focus of this article, lies in narrative. As discussed by Prior and Leston-Bandeira (2022), narrative theory provides a means of studying not only the relational and symbolic nature of parliaments - as sites of contested interpretations - but also their increased use of storytelling in reaching out to citizens. An interpretive approach, as outlined by Bevir and Rhodes, entails that

> We can understand and explain practices and actions adequately only by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors. Hence to study political life adequately we have to engage in the interpretation of the beliefs and desires of those we study (2003, p.18).

This article accordingly examines public engagement with the Welsh Parliament through identifying (1) relevant actors, and (2) the practice of engagement, alongside (3) actors' beliefs and desires in relation to engagement. In discussing 'institutions' and the 'institutional', we acknowledge interpretivist problematisations of these terms. For example, Bevir and Rhodes posit that

Once interpretive theorists leave the micro-level of actions and beliefs for the mid-level and macro-level, they think about practices rather than institutions, structures, or systems. A practice is a set of actions, perhaps a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. (2015, p.15)

This informs our analysis, which focuses to a large extent on 'practices' (that is to say, patterns of actions). However, we also maintain a conceptual focus on institutions which is nevertheless cognisant of Bevir and Rhodes' observation that

When political scientists appeal to 'institutions', they often evoke something akin to a practice, but they assign it a greater constraining power on individuals. If they do want to attribute such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practises constrain actions. (2015, p.15)

Our object of study - and by extension our assumption - is the effect of parliaments (and their associated narratives) as institutions that constrain individuals and their 'patterns' of action. This constraint is exercised through a combination of formal and informal rules, rituals and norms. In this way, we employ an interpretivist framework while also acknowledging the continued relevance of institutions as a 'backdrop' for a discussion of behavioural patterns.

We focus in particular on narratives, as a key component of the interpretive approach and a means by which actions (aggregated into, and articulated through, institutional policy and practice) can be understood vis à vis beliefs and desires. Through an interpretive approach, narratives are understood as "a form of explanation that works by relating actions to individual beliefs and desires that produce them. This allows us to capture the way in which events happened in the past or are happening today" (Geddes and Rhodes 2018, p.22). This is consistent with definitions put forth by narrative theorists such as Suzanne Fleischman:

Narration…is a verbal icon of experience viewed from a *retrospective* vantage…stories are one of the most basic of our acquired constructs for organising and making sense of the data of experience. (Fleischman, 1990, quoted in Landa, 2008, p.429)

Public engagement narratives, in the context of this paper, are defined and analysed as interpretations of engagement as it fits within social reality. They are a useful means of analysis within this study due to their ubiquitousness (Barthes and Duisit 1975, p.1) as a common denominator within expressions of a concept (e.g., public engagement) and its relationship with other processes. Moreover, parliaments are - by definition - replete with narratives.

Parliamentary narratives are contested and malleable, so there is great potential for parliamentary efforts that seek to address harmful narratives and/or construct new ones. These include the UK House of Lords 'Lords of the blog' series, which addresses a broader narrative of the Lords as antiquated (and by extension abstract and distant). It does so by informing and educating publics on the role of the Lords, thus de-mystifying the institution. It also - by the very act of blogging - demonstrates the Lords' capacity to take up digital technology. It is noteworthy, however, that there have been no posts to Lords of the Blog since 20 August 2018. Thus it may cease to be effective in countering the aforementioned narratives (and may indeed reinforce them) if the series itself is 'archived'. Parliaments can therefore be understood as "places where competing narratives are told" (Parkinson, 2013, p.440).

The theoretical framework for this article builds on the interpretive approach by focusing also on storytelling; i.e., the means by which these narratives are actually communicated between individuals (Langellier, 1999, p.125). Storytelling has been (albeit briefly) discussed in previous studies which seek to develop Bevir and Rhodes' position, and relate it more firmly to everyday practices (see Geddes and Rhodes 2018). We draw on attempts to examine the use of storytelling in (and by) parliaments from an explicitly narratological perspective (Prior and Leston-Bandeira 2022).

By examining narratives and/or storytelling in these sources, we can begin to construct (and thereby examine) an institutional culture, and the ways in which individual parliamentarians and officials relate to (and constitute) this culture. Moreover, by positioning these narratives within existing practice, we further support understanding of practical innovations in engagement, thus making a novel contribution to the emerging scholarship on parliamentary public engagement. This comes at a crucial time when basic (yet vital) conceptual and procedural questions remain unanswered or unaddressed, for example with respect to 'evidence' (defined generally as substantiated arguments, but in practice shaped and conceptualised according to parliamentary narratives, as we discuss later). As Geddes (2021) points out, "legislatures have been somewhat neglected" by scholars in their use (and even definition) of evidence, and as such "deserve greater attention to increase understanding of how their use of evidence shapes policy and political debate" (pp.41-42).

Engagement is most often defined as an ongoing process. It usually describes the formalised set of methodologies that grew from the citizen/public participation theories in the late sixties (see Arnstein, 1969). More recent interpretations and developments describe a

'spectrum of engagement' framed by different goals and expectations, based on the level of impact on decision-making: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, to empowering (International Association for Public Participation, 2018). Leston-Bandeira (2012) presents engagement as a continuum of 'steps', pointing out that "[d]ifferent tools may therefore suit different steps of the engagement process. Likewise, these can have varying consequences according to the way they are implemented" (p.419).

At conceptual level, within parliamentary studies, engagement has been framed as a participatory make-over, following broader trends in modern participatory governance. Hendriks and Kay (2019) refer to engagement as a way of opening up parliaments, as well as supporting the deliberative function of legislative committees. Others frame engagement as a vehicle to supporting symbolic representation in parliaments (Leston Bandeira, 2016), or see it as a widely accepted and necessary linkage between parliaments and the public that "provides a range of mechanisms to enable the public to have a greater voice in the political and policy making process outside of the normal election cycle" (Fox, 2009, p. 674).

We also examine references to particular 'publics' which, as Warner attests, "exist only by virtue of being addressed" (2002, p. 67). Moreover, these addresses "only work, or even exist, if 'audiences' acknowledge them in some way, and are able to absorb or reject or accept them or otherwise engage with them" (Saward, 2006, p. 303). As Young (2000, p. 130) states, "in most situations the specific constituency exists at best potentially; the representative institutions and the process of authorisation themselves call its members into action". When examining the forewords of committee reports (i.e., the only sections drafted by Members themselves), searching for an audience entails looking for 'personal addresses'.

Our contribution thus lies in providing a holistic analysis of institutional narratives (e.g., a drive for legitimacy, and a lack of preconceived identity) alongside public engagement practice, as well as the experiences (as 'retrospective vantages') of those who were instrumental in directing and/or implementing it. Through a narrative analysis, we can identify a link (or lack thereof) between words and action (i.e., strategy and practice) in public engagement, through participant experience.

Methods and data

The research for this article was designed to address the role of public engagement for the Welsh Parliament (and identify whether a single role exists), its integration into parliamentary

committees' work, and its perceived importance. This research encompassed interviewing parliamentary officials and analysing narratives by elected members, committee chairs, that we found in committee report forwards. Members are in some sense defined by parliament, and so their perspectives (and practices) in relation to engagement are a vital area of study. Nevertheless, as Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) point out, the paradox of 'institutional representation' is that parliamentary public engagement strategies are highly dependent (especially at implementation level) on non-partisan institutional claim makers or parliamentary officials (p. 168-69).

In order to discern a comprehensive picture of public engagement in the Welsh Parliament, it is therefore important to study not only the words and deeds of Members but also of officials. The latter is especially relevant in a study of *institutional* engagement (rather than electoral engagement, for example), since

> [t]he narrative of such claim-makers is consciously institutional. In the words of one UK parliamentary official: 'It's not our job to disseminate the work of Members, … it would be inappropriate for us to do so. We're here to promote awareness of the institution and the processes of the institution'. (Judge and Leston-Bandeira, 2018, p.164)

This article accordingly draws on a mixed methodology, involving primary and documentary research. It draws on 10 interviews conducted with senior parliamentary officials in October 2016, representing a wide range of corporate and parliamentary business services. It also draws on a thematic analysis of 35 forewords of committee inquiry reports during the fourth term. Committee reports are typically written by committee staff (rather than Members, who typically sign off on content). Therefore, our analysis was restricted to the forewords of these reports, which are the only sections that are written by Members.[6] We examined forewords from the five policy and legislation committees within the Welsh Parliament that cover the range of devolved policy responsibilities, scrutiny of government as well as legislation in Wales: Children, Young People and Education [CYPE], Health and Social Care [HSC], Environment and Sustainability [EandS], Enterprise and Business [EandB], Communities, Equality and Local Government [CELG].

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[6] Any reports without forewords were thus excluded from the study.

Word frequency analysis (facilitated by NVivo) was used to discern the prevalence of 'public engagement' relative to other key terms. NVivo analysis (using 'word trees' and coding) was also used to show the typical contexts in which this term was used. More broadly, the sources described in this section were subjected to thematic narrative analysis: we examined their textual content, identified key terms (e.g. frequently occurring words), and then discussed the themes and cultures that these terms signified (and, by extension, helped to construct).

> researchers can begin developing themes from the substance of narratives to look for across other stories and/or across cultures describing similar life events. Conversely, researchers may discover a theme's absence in other stories, confirming its uniqueness to a single narrator or culture. (Parcell and Baker 2018, p.1071)

The methods elaborated so far will inform the narratives we identify at three different levels: *practice*, *strategy*, and *concept*. The link between practice and strategy is acknowledged and studied in fields including management studies, in which practice is defined as "detailed actions and interactions" (Paroutis 2016, p.2). Strategy, meanwhile, describes the tendency of organisations to "develop plans for the future and…evolve patterns out of their past" (Mintzberg 1994, p.24). We also provide a narrative of engagement as a concept - i.e., as an abstract (non-concrete) idea - as a means of discussing more fundamental assumptions of committees, with respect to knowledge claims for example. Just as engagement practices "over time constitute a strategy process" (Paroutis 2016, p.2), engagement as a concept will necessarily inform strategic plans and patterns. Through this approach, we can provide a narrative account of engagement at different levels (and stages) of decision-making and implementation, from the epistemological to the ontological.

Public engagement practice in the Welsh Parliament

The Welsh Parliament was established in 1999, following a UK wide process that devolved political power to subnational legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the then Labour government constitutional reform programme. Devolution is not unique to the UK, but represents a wider trend in regional governance that has seen a quiet revolution in the past 40 years, and that has been accompanied by democratic gains at regional and sub-national level internationally (Hooghe and Marks, 2016).

In Wales, the conditions underpinning devolution shaped the development of public engagement practice and narrative within the Welsh Parliament (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018).

At its inception, the Welsh Parliament did not embody a preconceived institutional identity (i.e., no sense of what it 'was', or what it should express), and certainly not a parliamentary identity in the traditional sense. It was set up as a corporate body upon which many of the previous executive functions exercised centrally by the UK Government were devolved. It did not have primary legislative powers, nor was there a distinction between what in a parliamentary democracy would be an executive and a legislative arm of the government. It was nevertheless established within (or at least alongside) a broader narrative: a need for democratically elected institutions to connect with their citizens, and for them to be more accountable (Laffin and Thomas, 2000; Burrows, 2000). This is a feature of many newly established parliaments as Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) point out:

> "Alternatively, newly established parliaments – with no, or few, historical residues of 'taken-for-grantedness' of their institutional legitimacy and status – have had to be proactive in generating their own institutional claims." (p.157).

By contrast, older parliaments have needed to *adapt* to a narrative that they themselves predated.

The 1997 referendum, which determined whether there was support for some degree of self-government in Wales, resulted in a very narrow majority in favour (50.3%). The narrowness of this result (a difference of less than 1% of valid votes cast), along with low turnout (50.22%) meant that the legitimacy of the new institution was rather contentious. Additionally, the low turnout levels in the first two elections further cast a shadow over the legitimacy of the institution and on the ability of devolution to revitalise Welsh democracy (Scully et al, 2004). Subsequent reviews[7] and reforms of constitutional arrangements included wider, inclusive and critical public debates and consultations, thus supporting the legitimation process (McAllister and Stirbu, 2008). These were complemented by internal processes of institutionalising public engagement at both strategic and operational level, where the policy and legislation committees, as well the petitions committee, played an important role (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018). As such, scholarship to date suggests there is a "strong correlation between devolution's inclusive rhetoric and its transposition in organisational structures and

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[7] For example: The Richard Commission in 2004, The All Wales Convention in 2009, The Silk Commission (2012-2014), The Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Arrangements in 2017.

processes" (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018, p.388), such as resourcing and professionalising citizen engagement, or maintaining an outward looking and visible profile through outreach.

Public engagement practice and actors

Within the Welsh Parliament, public engagement has been operationalised in a wide range of activities delivered by several corporate services but also through parliamentary committees. These activities include: provision of information (i.e., through the external media and communication services, as well as committees), outreach and education (i.e., through visitor and education services), consultation and evidence gathering (i.e., through committees and corporate services), issue-specific involvement (through the Petitions Committees), as well as raising the institution's public profile more generally. Most of these activities are guided by the Public Engagement Toolkit, developed in 2014 by the Citizen Engagement Team, the professional service supporting the institution's engagement with its publics. The Toolkit provides a menu of different tools of engagement, together with advice on how to use them most effectively (National Assembly for Wales Assembly Communications, 2014).

In mapping out engagement activity in the fourth term of the Welsh Parliament, we used the toolkit as a starting point but went beyond and identified other forms of broader engagement that other corporate services do as well. This mapping relies on types of activities mentioned in committee reports as well as in the interviews with officials.

First, we distinguish between formal and informal engagement, in order to differentiate between the highly standardised, scripted, minuted, scripted, minuted and institutionalised forms of consultation at committee level, and the less scripted and procedural forms of engagement, as the less scripted and procedural forms of engagement, as an area where innovative practice across the whole institution as well as the narratives underpinning it could be explored. Furthermore, we distinguish between 'direct' engagement, meaning those activities where elected members are present, and ''indirect'' engagement, where the role of parliamentary officials dominates. This helps us understand the positioning of these two different actors. The quadrant of engagement activity depicted in Figure 1 maps out the different types of engagement activities and their focus on and their focus on widening engagement as well as on diversifying the evidence base supporting committees' inquiries.

Figure 1 - Engagement activity in the Welsh Parliament (compiled by the authors)
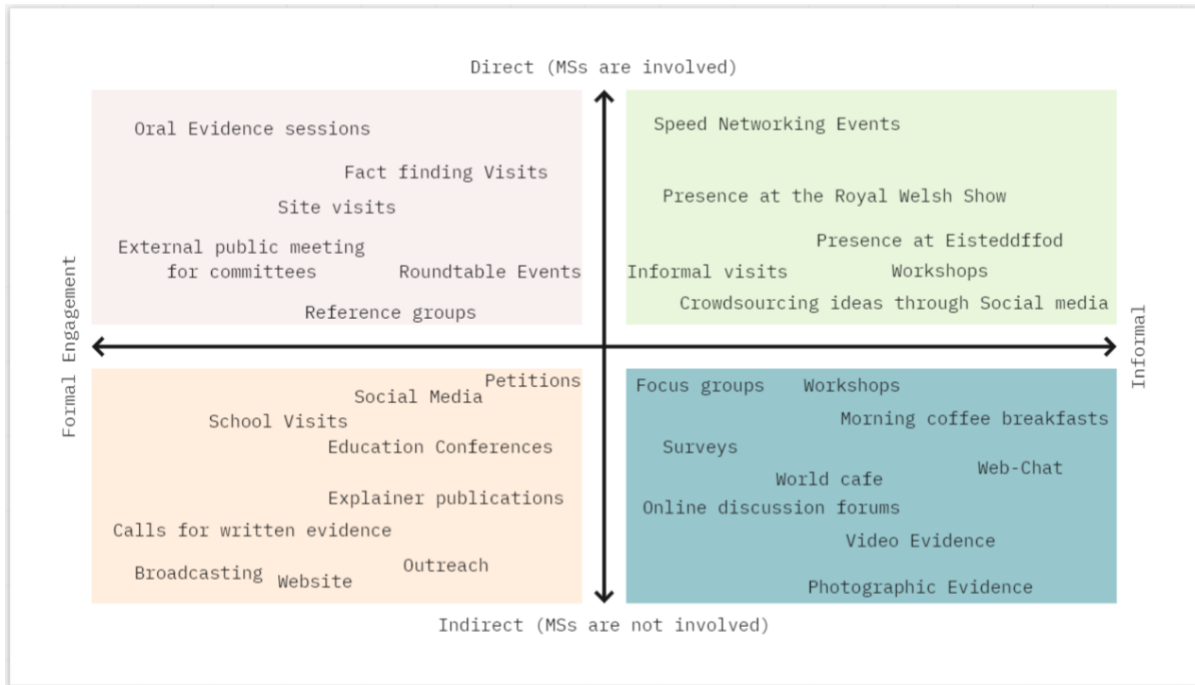
In most cases, formal engagement, both direct and indirect (i.e., committee oral evidence sessions, calls for written evidence, site visits, fact finding visits) has been highly standardised and in line with other international practice. It is also the most important channel to gather evidence in committees. It also represents an important area of work in relation to diversity of witnesses and evidence in the Welsh Parliament, with efforts being made to go beyond the 'usual suspects' (see Rumbul, 2016; Stirbu, 2021).[8] Other formal engagement initiatives (such as school visits, outreach, website etc.) have the potential for broadening the reach of the Welsh Parliament, but most of these support a 'broadcasting' mode of engagement.[9] Conversely, informal engagement, both direct and indirect, reveals an important space for innovation and experimentation (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2015), which is visible through the wide range of activities the Welsh Parliament undertook through committees or at corporate level. Whilst informal direct engagement offers a welcome exposure to elected representatives, by 'going where people are' (i.e. the parliaments or committees having a presence in national festivals for instance), and crowdsourcing views from the general public

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[8] A House of Lords (2011) report on constitutional change exemplifies the ever-present risk of public engagement only "tak[ing] place at an elite level". It cites "limited but expert responses to most government consultations, many of which came from the 'usual suspects'." This type of input is described as "provid[ing] an intermediate level of public involvement between Parliament/government and the general public", rather than a direct connection. (p.49)

[9] In the case of the Scottish Parliament, despite intentions for a more diverse and proactive approach to engagement, "the 'usual suspects' remain the dominant players giving evidence to committees" (Bochel and Berthier, 2020, p.4), while the proportion of genuinely discursive events outside Parliament declined after the first session (Bochel and Berthier, 2021).

to shape committees' agendas, there is a question relating to the relating to the overall impact of engagement.[10] Similarly, informal indirect engagement, such as conducting focus groups, surveys, facilitating online discussion forums, has the potential to contribute significantly to widening the evidence base and bringing the lived experience of regular citizens into committees' work, but questions arise in relation to how this type of evidence is weighted and used in committees.

Patterns of engagement

In total the six policy and legislation committees conducted 92 inquiries between 2011 and 2016, the majority (54.3%) constituting policy inquiry work, and scrutiny of government (29.4%). The rest includes consideration of petitions, when these are referred to committees, legislative scrutiny and short inquiries seeking to inform the committee's forward work.

The most standardised form of engagement is the consultation process (oral evidence sessions and written call for evidence). All committees follow a similar procedure: they issue a consultation letter inviting written evidence from interested organisations, experts, members of the public as well as from the relevant government ministers. In addition, committees invite oral evidence from expert witnesses, government officials and other relevant stakeholders. Between 2011 and 2016 the five committees received 2,627 written responses and heard evidence from around 1,195 individuals. The majority of the written and oral responses come from stakeholder organisations from the voluntary sector, local government, non-governmental public bodies, academic experts, and only a very few from interested members of the public.

Beyond the formal and standardised process of consultation, committees used a range of other engagement practices aimed primarily at widening their outreach. More informal engagement initiatives, such as focus groups, informal meetings, reference groups, visits, workshops, round table networking events have been used to help committees reach out beyond the usual suspects or simply to diversify the mode of engagement. Online engagement tools, such as surveys, web-chats, and social media have also been used to support engagement at

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[10] This reflects broader questions around "the impact of informal activities on decision-making processes in the public, private or third sector", due to "a lack of data" and the fact that, in many cases, such "activities are aimed at enabling expressions of dissatisfaction with formal politics, rather than seeking clear and specific political change" (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2015, p.3). There are also persistent resource challenges; the UK House of Commons Liaison Committee (2019) stated that it did not "have a budget at present to help people attend our more informal engagement activities beyond Westminster". (p.55)

scale. However, the degree to which committees go beyond just the formal consultation process varies across the board (see Table 1)

Table 1 - Engagement patterns variation across committees

	Percentage of inquiries which included more forms of engagement (visits, reference groups, focus groups, surveys, informal meetings, video engagement) in addition to the formal consultation process		
Committee / total number of inquiries (2011-2016)	Just formal consultation	1 additional form of engagement	2 or more other forms of engagement
Communities, Equalities and Local Government / 18	66.7%	5.5%	27.8%
Enterprise and Business / 19	26.4%	36.8%	36.8%
Environment and Sustainability / 23	65.2%	30.4%	4.4%
Health and Social Care / 21	71.4%	4.8%	23.8%
Children, Young People and Education / 11	54.4%	18.2%	27.4%

Two committees (the Enterprise and Business Committee and the Children, Young People and Education Committee) used two or more forms of engagement consistently throughout their inquiry work, whilst one (Environment and Business) was less inclined to diversify the means of engagement beyond the formal consultation process and just one other type of engagement in the vast majority of its inquiry work. The two others (Committees, Equalities and Local Government, and Health and Social Care) tended to use two or more forms of engagement (rather than just one) when going beyond the formal consultation process. This suggests that engagement practice in the Welsh Parliament committees is diverse but varied; standardisation of practice (the formal consultation process) is complemented by diverse engagement initiatives supported by the professionalisation of the supporting service. The reliance on

formal consultation shows that committee's may have been in 'listening' mode, whereas diversification efforts (such as public young people involvement in the legacy work of the CYPE) may suggest a move towards more involvement and empowerment. This will provide a useful context for our following narrative analysis.

Three narratives of public engagement

Our mapping discussion indicates some broad themes with respect to engagement practice. As Table 1 illustrates, committees tend to restrict the majority of their activity to formal consultation, which often involves only the 'usual suspects', i.e., those with already-existing connections to, and/or engagement with, Parliament. However, in some cases we also see considerable diversification beyond formal consultation (e.g. in the Enterprise and Business committee). In these cases (especially those employing two or more other forms of engagement) we identify a more proactive engagement practice which carries more potential for unheard voices, diversifying stakeholders and, by extension, evidence. We will now link these themes to narratives of committee engagement practice, in order to determine whether the practices suggested by the mapping exercise are reflected at the level of 'narratives', i.e., consistencies between actions and underlying beliefs.

A narrative of committee practice: public-focused, but not public-engaging

The first narrative we identified relates to the significance of engagement compared to other committee functions. One way in which we investigated the significance that committees attributed to engagement was through text analysis of committee report forewords (as detailed in the Methods and data section). Across our study of these forewords, the most frequently-used terms are listed below.

Table 2 - Most frequently-used terms in committee report forewords[11]

| Frequency ranking	Term	Occurrences
1	Wales	180
2	Welsh	122

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[11] These results were cleaned of words that were not directly relevant to parliaments, committees, and their functions. These included connective words 'also'.

3	Government	104
4	Inquiry	83
5	Committee	82
6	People	67
7	Evidence	58
8	Services	55
9	Work	54
10	Report	49
11	Health	48
12	Public	44

Of the terms listed in Table 2, the two most related to engagement are 'people' and 'public'. Given their prevalence, this would ostensibly suggest a narrative of public engagement as highly significant within the broader spectrum of committee functions. However, the context of their use implies otherwise. For example, in the committee report forewords we examined, the term 'people' was typically invoked to emphasise significance ("[f]or many people, home adaptations are a lifeline") rather than describe engagement *with* people. By contrast, the context of the term 'public' included phrases that are prerequisites for engagement, or which might result from engagement ("public confidence", "public awareness"). However, discussions of actual engagement methods and strategies were almost non-existent. .

The phrase "public engagement" meanwhile occurs only once in this entire dataset. Moreover, variations of this phrase (e.g., 'public participation', 'public consultation') do not occur in the dataset. Based on the analysis so far it is evident that people and publics are a key focus of committee activity, and that there is an acknowledgement of the importance of public confidence and awareness, but not as it pertains to public engagement (as either input or output). The content of committee report forewords thereby indicate a narrative of *public focus without public engagement*. This narrative was reflected in the context of the term 'engagement' - which occurred 12 times. Using 'word tree' analysis, we identify these preceding and subsequent terms:
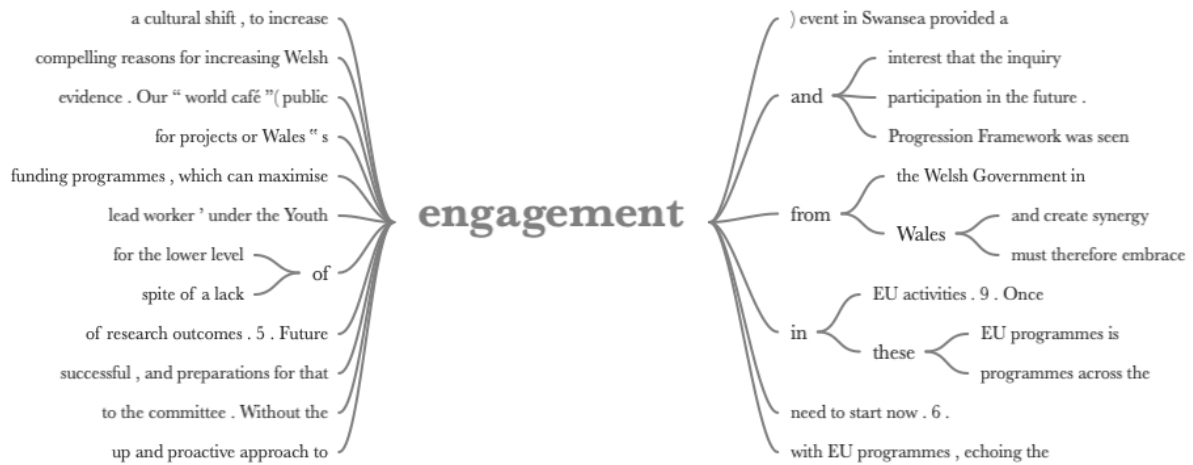
The ways in which the term was prefaced in these documents were almost exclusively prospective in nature ("a cultural shift, to increase",[12] "reasons for increasing", "can maximise", "future", "preparations for"). In other instances, engagement was only mentioned in relation to its absence, or scarcity ("lower level of", "a lack of"). In other words, engagement was almost never described as ongoing, or even existent.

The frequency of references to people/public, as opposed to engagement, reinforces a narrative of committee work being public-focused, but not public-engaging. This is further emphasised by a distinct lack of personal addresses in the committee forewords. Personal addresses indicate an attempt to generate empathy, a common narrative device (Nussbaum 2001; Bennett and Edelman, 1985). Of the forewords examined, only one contained a direct address: "[f]or many people, home adaptations are a lifeline – they allow people to live a full life. Imagine feeling trapped in your own home, as some people do – it's difficult to think of it as being a home then".[13] The foreword also begins with a quote from a public contributor to the inquiry, reinforcing a sense of committee engagement with public input. In its inclusion of a personal address (which addresses and, by extension, *conceptualises*[14] an audience for this report), this foreword is exceptional as an explicit effort to engage readers. We see no other such examples across the material consulted, indicating the absence of an *institutional* desire to engage readers (outside of an already-interested cohort) in committee publications.

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[12] In this case (on 'EU funding opportunities 2014-20') the 'cultural shift' was cited not as an achievement, but as a need. This reinforces the prospective tone in which these key terms were cited.

[13] Inquiry into home adaptations, p.7.

[14] This forms part of what Prior and Leston-Bandeira (2022, p.83) refer to as "a framework for parliamentary storytelling, based on the following components: storyteller (S) and narrator (N), characters (C) and plot (P), and audience (A). All of these require consideration and identification as part of effective parliamentary storytelling".

A narrative of committee work being public-focused, but not public-engaging, was also observed in the interviews. One of the most frequently-cited concepts among interviewees was 'relationships'; specifically, the need to build and/or strengthen them. One interviewee spoke of the need to 'shift the needle' on engagement, from a typically 'representative' model (based primarily on consultation) to one of genuine participation (in which a meaningful relationship is maintained between public and parliament).[15] The same interviewee acknowledged that committee engagement during the fourth term had been rated highly by NGOs focused on engagement (such as the Democratic Society), but remained 'tokenistic' in nature.

Tokenism (consisting of processes such as informing and consulting) is a vital component of engagement but all too often manifests as 'window dressing', or as a one-way (i.e., non-dynamic) flow of information. Arnstein's 'ladder' is noteworthy in underlining the development of effective engagement through constituent stages. Consistent with this conceptualisation - as well as that of Leston-Bandeira (2012), and the spectrum of participation (International Association of Public Participation, 2018) mentioned earlier - the institutional narrative illustrated through the interviews was that engagement had to develop from (and, by extension, *progress beyond*) 'public-facing' consultation, towards 'public engaging' co-decision-making, facilitating the development (and maintenance) of relationships and partnerships. We also see this narrative reflected in Table 1, which shows that, in four of the five committees, less than half of engagement activity progressed beyond formal consultation.

A narrative of committee strategy: a 'drive' for engagement with no 'destination'

At a corporate level, public engagement has been an integral part of the Senedd's strategy, forming an important narrative about supporting democratic representation for the people of Wales. However, this coherence has not fully been reflected at the level of parliamentary business. This issue has become more apparent in the fifth term, and informs Stirbu's (2021, p.15) recommendation that the Senedd "[a]lign corporate strategy with parliamentary business so that it reflects committees' engagement activity. Service level strategies need to reflect parliamentary and committees' business". Stirbu's recommendation suggests a need for a more coherent public engagement strategy. This need was also discussed by interviewees, who identified the importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in relation to engagement. When discussing coaching for committee chairs, one interviewee confirmed that

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[15] Interviewee 9.

all committee chairs had compulsory CPD across themes such as including stakeholder consultation, external facilitation, prioritising objectives, and media coverage.[16] Yet, the relatively modest turnout (just over 30%) at these CPD sessions raises questions for incentives and performance maintenance.

Interviewees expressed the view that institutional discussions on public engagement should incorporate more clarity around the purpose that engagement serves. Such discussions were also seen to require more clarity on the broader purpose of some of the activity carried out by committees and/or other corporate services. Research participants contextualised this point by noting that during the fourth term there was a substantial drive from the committees to do engagement 'at all costs' - and across all formats - without necessarily being clear what the purpose was. This may explain the trend that is visible in Table 1: aside from Environment and Sustainability (for reasons discussed later in this sub-section) committees tend to use two or more forms of engagement (rather than a single additional form) when they go beyond formal consultation.

The narrative of a 'drive' for engagement, but without direction, was noted by several interviewees as a 'conceptual struggle',[17] explored further in the following section. The status of engagement as a 'secondary function' is evident even in parliamentary mechanisms that ostensibly focus (and indeed subsist) on public interaction. For example, an interviewee attested that the setting-up of social media accounts and other digital innovations largely served the purpose of serving members (and the parliamentary process) rather than public engagement or communication.[18] This 'conceptual struggle' is indicative of what Geddes and Mulley (2018, p.38) describe as an ongoing dilemma in relation to whether "staff exist…to support the institution of Parliament or to support Parliamentarians?"

In a wider sense, engagement as a function was seen as secondary to serving elected Members. Given the small political capacity of the Senedd - only 60 elected Members covering a range of powers and competencies that have significantly expanded since the institution's establishment (Stirbu and McAllister, 2018) - efforts to enhance support for Members have defined the Commission's strategy over the years. This 'member-centric' approach is reflected in the Senedd's legacy report for the fourth term, which observes that

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[16] Interviewee 8.
[17] Interviewees 1 and 9.
[18] Interviewee 6.

As a small legislature, where powers and responsibilities have increased incrementally since 1999, Member-centric and creative services and solutions have been developed to ensure that they address the specific needs and range of functions that Assembly Members are required to carry out (Assembly Commission 2016, p.7).

Committees are diverse bodies, and possess diverse portfolios. As interviewees observed, for certain committees (such as Children, Young People, and Education) it makes more sense to want to use engagement to enhance their evidence base. For some committees - especially those dealing in more specialist topics, such as Public Accounts and Public Administration - it is crucial to adopt a targeted and focused approach, bringing together the best available expertise. For others (e.g., Communities, Equalities and Local Government) it is more important to establish 'the big picture' within a policy area, thereby necessitating a broader process of engagement.[19] The specificity or breadth of engagement efforts may depend on the remit of the committee, or even on specific inquiry topics. This would reflect the findings presented in Table 1, in which Communities, Equalities and Local Government, for example, employed numerous forms of engagement on a relatively frequent basis. It may also explain Environment and Sustainability's aforementioned tendency to employ formal consultation only, or at most one additional form of engagement, in around 95% of its inquiries (given their highly technical subject matter and a likely corresponding desire to primarily consult experts). These observations are highly relevant to interviewees' emphasis on considering public engagement at the start-up phase of an inquiry, and deciding both the purpose of the inquiry and the means by which engagement could supplement that purpose.[20]

Through the 'conceptual struggle' around the place of engagement (in relation to other parliamentary functions), we can identify a significant institutional narrative for the fourth term: a drive for engagement but without a broadly understood destination, and therefore an (at best) ambiguous direction of travel. This builds on the narrative identified in the previous section ('public-facing' but not 'public-engaging') which relates to the way in which engagement is practised. The narrative identified in this section concerns a different level of decision-making; it suggests that more clarity is needed at a strategic level, in relation to what engagement is for. This is especially important given the indications of diversification in Table

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[19] Interviewee 6.
[20] Interviewee 3.

1, a context in which a clear strategic direction (to manage a growing range of activities) is more important than ever.

A narrative of engagement as a concept: a clash of voices and knowledge claims

The aforementioned 'conceptual struggle' at a strategic level suggests fundamental tensions as to the definition of engagement in more abstract terms. These tensions are reflected in the third narrative we identified, in relation to how engagement was conceptualised by committees. This conceptualisation is shaped and defined by concerns around who is being engaged, and what claims (i.e., knowledge, authority) they are making. For example, interviewees noted how non-governmental organisations have been reluctant to be open and critical about the government in public (in evidence sessions, for example), due to the scale of government funding for them. Therefore, committees seek to engage them informally, in an environment where representatives of such organisations feel more comfortable critiquing the government.[21]

This creates a certain uneasiness with government officials, based on a concern that committees are meeting important organisations and stakeholders 'behind closed doors'. Informal (i.e., unofficial) meetings are also more likely to be criticised on the basis of non-transparency and lack of accountability.

This brings additional questions about the role of public engagement in brokering (and ultimately enhancing) the evidence base(s) that committees use in their deliberations. For example, it problematizes the extent to which informal engagement - unofficial dialogue with stakeholders, for example - constitutes an 'evidence' base. This, in turn, hints at broader tensions within parliaments (and society more broadly) regarding the legitimacy of different types of knowledge and evidence. In parliamentary committees, as Geddes (2021) points out, the juxtaposition of knowledge claims made by political actors, social movements, science and interest groups "can and do clash" (p.51).

Moreover, these discussions illustrate fundamental tensions and uncertainties about how engagement can, or should, be translated into evidence (and, by extension, action), and who would take responsibility for this. Forming a conclusion on these questions will entail some form of negotiation between the Senedd and the Government. Negotiation would also be

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[21] Interviewee 3.

required *within* the Senedd: between Members and staff, and between Committees and other legislative apparatus.

This indicates a narrative of competing knowledge claims, reinforced by value judgements relating to the publics that committees hear from (and the types of input they are thought to provide). This is most acutely visible in the foreword of a report from the Children, Young People and Education Committee (2015, p.5) on supply teaching, which notes that

> The views expressed in the survey responses, and from teachers and supply teachers, enhanced the inquiry and provided the Committee with a balance against which to consider the wider evidence from stakeholders. It was clear that many of the views expressed personal experience. While this helped the Committee gain an understanding of how individuals are affected, the Committee was keen to ensure that the inquiry remained focussed on the systems and practices in place for the delivery of supply teaching.

This statement draws a dichotomy between personal experiences (of survey respondents, teachers and supply teachers) and evidence. It presents such personal experiences as different (or even detracting) from a focus on systems and practices. In this way, the statement exemplifies an institutional culture that risks disincentivizing future engagement (from both the institutional and public side).

The statement (and associated institutional culture) also conflicts with - and potentially jeopardises - the intended role of public engagement described by interviewees: as a means to address the democratic/information deficit in Wales. Interviewees noted confusion among the electorate regarding means of political representation and the extent to which legislative powers were devolved. They also noted a limited perceived legitimacy of Welsh devolution (reinforced by lower turnout in Welsh Parliament elections than for UK Parliamentary elections).[22] This links back to the Welsh Parliament's formation on a relatively small margin, and the knock-on effects of this result for perceptions toward the institution. Engagement - from the perspective of interviewees - was a means of addressing these real and perceived disconnects. Committee forewords that dichotomize personal experiences (a necessary by-product of engagement) and evidence are therefore all the more noteworthy, given the professed need for engagement to address the democratic/information deficit.

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[22] Interviewee 9.

The disincentivizing effects of such institutional attitudes - consistent with a discourse of 'story/information' dichotomy observed through previous analyses of UK Parliament committee reports (Prior, 2019) - could trigger a cycle of ever-narrowing engagement. As observed by the interviewees, a lack of engagement restricts the pool of stakeholders from whom evidence could be gathered. This can have the effect of limiting diversity and creating fatigue among those consulted.[23] This is a crucial observation since, through public inquiries, committees can learn more about public priorities, and even about the inquiry topic itself. In the case of the UK Parliament, White (2015, p.14) attests that committees' discouragement of "reference to anecdotal material [in their reports] can restrict the evidence base available to committees".

A report from the Enterprise and Business Committee (2013) exemplifies this point, noting that "[o]ur "world café" (public engagement) event in Swansea provided a solid evidence base to inform our inquiry" (p.9). Other examples credit public input providing a form of information that would not have existed otherwise; the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee (2013) acknowledge that "the service users we met during the inquiry…were able to give us an insight that only they could give" (p.7). Reports from the Health and Social Care Committee contain several acknowledgements of public input:

- "I would like to note our thanks to all those who shared their experiences with us and helped shape the 14 recommendations we have made". (Health and Social Care Committee, 2015, pp.7-8)

- "In particular I am grateful to the cancer patients who shared their insight and experience during our workshops and focus groups". (Health and Social Care Committee, 2014, p.5)

Nevertheless, it is still important to differentiate tokenistic practices from more efficacious forms. The second quote appears right at the end of the Chair's foreword, with no detail on how (or indeed *if*) these insights and experiences were meaningfully used as part of the inquiry. The first quote (again, coming at the end of the foreword) does provide details on this point, crediting public input in shaping their eventual recommendations. The fact that two almost contemporaneous reports from the same committee contain such varying references to public

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[23] Interviewee 9.

input reinforces the importance of a coherent strategy for public engagement: not just a 'drive' but a 'destination'.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study - based on elite interviews and narrative analysis of relevant documentation - has identified three distinct narratives of public engagement in the Welsh Parliament:

1. Focusing on 'public', but not 'engagement'
2. A 'drive' for engagement, but no clear 'direction', and therefore an (at best) ambiguous 'direction of travel'
3. A clash of voices and knowledge claims

There are two principal connections between these narratives. All three demonstrate an institutional desire for engagement (even if the reason for that desire is not always agreed-upon or clearly articulated). They also indicate a lack of consensus regarding the practice of engagement, and the role of different publics within it.

Crucially, they demonstrate a need to re-examine engagement at three separate levels (respectively): at a practical, strategic, and conceptual level. Some interviewees provided perspectives that were relevant across all these levels; for example, the need for engagement to be accountable. This is all the more important given the varying levels of interest in engagement across different committees.[24] Institutional interest can be generated and maintained by presenting engagement as relevant and conducive to committees' other responsibilities, rather than 'syphoning' time and energy from them.

In describing a more relational model of engagement (conceptually, strategically, and practically), interviewees emphasised the need for existing engagement processes to improve qualitatively and quantitatively,[25] with outcomes and outputs considered holistically. Discussing the quantitative aspects in detail, one interviewee recommended the increased use of analytics to understand which parts of the Welsh Parliament website perform well and which do not (making use of tools such as user research analytics, market research, and surveys).

This emphasis on relationship building was discussed in relation to digital media content; for example, the need for more personalised content in closing the 'feedback loop'

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[24] Interviewee 6.
[25] Interviewee 9.

(and avoiding a 'broadcasting' - i.e., one-way - approach to engagement and communication).[26] This was acknowledged by interviewees as relevant to offline engagement as well as online. Taking the example of petitions, closing the feedback loop would entail that the Senedd not only processes public petitions, but responds to them in some form.[27] Moreover, the Senedd would keep petitioners informed (either about the outcome of the specific petition, or more broadly about relevant petitions in future, and/or additional opportunities to engage).

It is important to note here that some forms of engagement, especially formal and direct engagement, illustrated a high degree of institutionalisation and standardisation. In particular, inquiries involving and/or affecting young people, or other hard-to-reach groups, were described as a comparatively diverse and concerted effort to reach out beyond the usual suspects (i.e., stakeholders, experts, government departments). The matching of a specific technique to an audience or public indicates a strategic approach to engagement that could help address the three narratives identified above. This is an important finding, at a time when there is still significant trial and error in the application of digital engagement and other means of informal engagement.

Moreover, a distinction could be made in future between work that seeks to influence policy or merely inform or raise awareness. If the purpose of the inquiry is to influence the government, then formal evidence sessions with high calibre witnesses and organisations are a very effective way to go about it. If the purpose of the inquiry is to raise awareness of the work the committee is undertaking, then a more varied, flexible and relaxed approach to engagement is encouraged and is more effective in achieving a wider reach. If the purpose of the inquiry was to conduct a review of evidence and get an overall picture of a particular policy issue, then engagement might reach out wider.

To conclude, this article performed an interpretive analysis of elite interviews and select committee forewords, in order to identify institutional narratives relating to public engagement. In doing so, we reinforce the usefulness of narratives as tools for both conceptualising and analysing engagement, in theory and practice (as well as the tensions between both). We found

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[26] Interviewee 7.

[27] Though it lies outside the timespan of this article, the petition on specialist prosthetics for child amputees (P-05-817), first considered by the Petitions Committee in 2018, was a noted "example of policy action based on a petition", and of "clos[ing] the feedback loop between petitioners and policy action". This was based on such actions as the Committee "writ[ing] to the petitioner to congratulate them on the success of the petition".

three institutional narratives of engagement, across three levels of decision-making (practice, strategy, and concept).

All three narratives merit attention from parliamentary staff, members, and scholars, in order to investigate and address the issues they raise: for example, in relation to the perceived need for a more focused, holistic engagement strategy (across the institution), and for a reconceptualisation of different forms and sources of 'knowledge' regarding committee input. These findings are relevant to legislatures at several levels, from the sub-national to the supranational. They speak to the importance of placing *publics* at the heart of engagement practices, strategies, and concepts, in order to inform and enrich a core function of parliaments as tenets of representative democracy.

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