



Consulting



Electoral
Reform
Society
Scotland



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Dunfermline New City Assembly Final Evaluation Report

May 2026

Authors: Elisabet Vives, Inaki Goni

Disclaimer: This report was commissioned by the Electoral Reform Society. Any views expressed in it are exclusively the authors’.



This report is prepared by the Education, Youth and Civic Engagement (EYCE) Hub and commissioned via LSE Consulting which is set up by The London School of Economics and Political Science to enable and facilitate the application of its academic expertise and intellectual resources.

EYCE is a consulting business providing academic expertise on education, youth and civic engagement for more inclusive and democratic societies.

LSE Enterprise Ltd, trading as LSE Consulting, is a wholly-owned subsidiary of LSE and the LSE trademark is used under licence from LSE.

EYCE | LSE Consulting

Houghton Street
London, WC2A 2AE

☎ +44 (0)20 7107 5215

✉ consulting@lse.ac.uk

📍 lse.ac.uk/consultancy



Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Executive summary	5
1. Introduction	7
1.1 Background of the Evaluation	7
1.2 Deliberation in local democracy	8
2. General Assessment of the deliberative process	9
2.1 Who were the participants?	9
2.2 Design	12
2.3 Facilitation	17
2.4 Knowledge and evidence	19
2.5 Inclusion and equality	21
3. Impact and Sustainability	24
3.1 Impact on participants	24
3.2 Impact on policy: created, not pre-defined	30
3.2.1 <i>Design adaptation for greater impact</i>	30
3.2.2 <i>Unexpected political opportunities for impact</i>	31
3.2.3 <i>Observation for ownership building</i>	32
3.3 Sustainability	33
3.3.1 <i>Institutional sustainability: Continuation of the Assembly</i>	33
3.3.2 <i>Sustainability of civic energy: Assembly participants as agents of community building and strengthening</i>	33
3.3.3 <i>Ultra-local capacity building and its sustainability</i>	35
4. Uses and scalability of 'ultra-local' deliberative assemblies	37
4.1 Uses of ultra-local deliberative assemblies	38
4.2 Users of ultra-local deliberative assemblies	40
4.3 Lessons for implementing ultra-local deliberative assemblies	41
5. Conclusions and Recommendations	44
5.1 General Assessment of the Deliberative Process	44

5.2	Impact and sustainability	45
5.3	Uses and scalability of “ultra local” deliberative assemblies	47
References		50

List of Tables

Table 1.	Wilcoxon test results (pre and post Assembly comparison).	27
----------	---	----

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Assembly members' attitudes towards deliberation and politics.	10
Figure 2.	Assembly members' political participation frequency	11
Figure 3.	Assembly members' self-reported knowledge of the local policy context	12
Figure 4.	Example of the different kinds of materials employed.	14
Figure 5.	Empty chair used to represent those not included to provide testimony in the process.	15
Figure 6.	Clarity on the use of recommendations responses.	16
Figure 7.	Perceived deliberation and participation quality by participants.	18
Figure 8.	Learning and information during the Assembly.	20
Figure 9.	Representativeness and diversity of Assembly members.	21
Figure 10.	Trust in councillors.	24
Figure 11.	Understanding of the local economy.	25
Figure 12.	Awareness of economic plans and policies.	25
Figure 13.	Knowledge of policies and programmes for stronger communities.	26
Figure 14.	Understanding of Fife Council's policymaking processes.	26
Figure 15.	Confidence in checking information.	27
Figure 16.	Further questions to assess the impact of the Assembly on participants.	29
Figure 17.	"Key requirements" slide presented at the information session for potential facilitator candidates.	36
Figure 18.	Activity canvas for the workshop.	37

Executive summary

The Dunfermline New City Assembly was a deliberative mini-public convened in early 2026 to engage residents in shaping the future of the city following its designation as a city in 2022. Commissioned by the Fife Council, supported by the Electoral Reform Society, who engaged Kelly McBride as the lead facilitator and evaluated by the EYCE Hub at LSE Consulting, the Assembly brought together 31 residents selected randomly by Sortition Foundation to learn, deliberate, and develop recommendations for local policy.

It was also run as a pilot to test and learn from certain approaches, including whether attempts to embed the assembly in existing community ecosystems would add to the legitimacy and wider success of the Assembly, and to explore if ultra-local deliberative democracy adds enough value to local governance that it can be argued to be a crucial investment in the country's future.

Overall Assessment

The Assembly represents a high-quality example of “ultra-local” deliberative democracy, combining professional design with strong local grounding. Participants were broadly representative of Dunfermline’s population socio-demographic characteristics and benefited from inclusive, well-structured deliberation supported by diverse activities, expert input, and skilled (though sometimes uneven) facilitation.

The process successfully created a respectful and collaborative environment where participants could engage with complex issues, consider different perspectives, and co-produce recommendations.

Impact on Participants

Participation had a significant positive impact on individuals:

- Increased trust in local councillors.
- Improved understanding of the local economy, policies, and decision-making processes.
- Greater awareness of community challenges.
- Enhanced sense of civic agency and engagement.
- Sense of connection and friendships with other participants, creating cohesion.

Participants also developed a deeper appreciation of citizen engagement, shifting towards more nuanced and informed views about the role of public participation in decision-making.

Impact on Policy

Rather than following a linear “recommendation to implementation” model, the Assembly demonstrated that impact is emergent and dynamic. In that sense, pathways for impact were actively identified as the Assembly unfolded:

- Unexpected opportunities arose, including £5 million of council funding linked to Assembly outputs.

- Real-time interaction with policymakers shaped the relevance and direction of recommendations.
- Observation by councillors and officials helped build early ownership and legitimacy.
- Increasing confidence in deliberative and citizen-led processes from council managers, politicians and community actors.

However, participants expressed some uncertainty about how recommendations would ultimately be used, highlighting the need for clearer communication and structured follow-up. Proven implementation of recommendations will greatly enhance the legitimacy of the assembly process and of overall local governance in Dunfermline.

Sustainability

The Assembly generated strong civic energy, with many participants expressing willingness to stay engaged in community and council activities. However, sustaining this energy requires:

- Ongoing institutional engagement and accountability mechanisms.
- Opportunities for participants to monitor progress and remain involved.
- Clear pathways for continued participation beyond one-off events.
- Scoping for potential institutionalisation within Fife.

Capacity-building efforts, such as recruiting local facilitators, were valuable but require greater investment in training to ensure consistent quality.

Key Lessons and Recommendations on Assembly Operation

The evaluation identifies several key lessons for future assemblies:

1. Maintain a balance between local grounding and external expertise.
2. Strengthen facilitator training, especially for community-based facilitators.
3. Clarify pathways to impact early, including how recommendations will be used.
4. Embed structured follow-up and accountability mechanisms.
5. Engage a wider ecosystem of actors, including community and third-sector organisations, in implementation.
6. Invest in long-term ecological and institutional support rather than treating assemblies as one-off exercises.

Conclusion

The Dunfermline New City Assembly demonstrates that ultra-local deliberative processes can be highly effective, delivering meaningful participant impact and creating conditions for policy influence. Beyond specific recommendations, the Assembly functioned as a “school for democracy,” strengthening civic understanding, trust, and engagement. With the right institutional support and continued investment, this model has strong potential to be scaled and adapted across Scotland and beyond, with significant potential benefit of evolving democratic institutions, so they are re-rooted in their communities. It is easy to see how this could build Scotland's democracy to be increasingly resilient against shocks and threats by making governance feel owned, valued, and protected by local people.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Evaluation

Dunfermline was granted the status of city as part of Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in 2022. This historical milestone opened up opportunities for Dunfermline to reflect on its past, strengthen its community in the present and lay the foundations for a brighter future.

The Electoral Reform Society, Fife Council and the Scottish Government worked with the local community to devise the plans for the city's future through a mini-public, the New City Assembly. The participants, selected by sortition, gathered at the Abbeyview Community Centre during three weekends in January and February of 2026 to learn together, deliberate and make suggestions to the council for how Dunfermline should evolve in this new era of its history.

This report presents the final evaluation of the Dunfermline New City Assembly, assessing the quality of the deliberative process, its impact on participants and on policy, and the conditions for its long-term sustainability. It also explores the broader uses and scalability of 'ultra-local' (locally rooted) deliberative assemblies as a model for democratic innovation in Scotland and beyond.

This evaluation employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches across the full arc of the Assembly. Quantitative data were gathered through a pre-Assembly survey completed by 31 participants and a post-Assembly survey completed by 30 participants, yielding 27 paired responses suitable for before-and-after comparison. Qualitative data collection took several forms: three semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes each were conducted with Assembly members following the process, alongside numerous unstructured conversations with facilitators, observers, participants and organisers throughout the weekends. Direct observation of Assembly sessions amounted to approximately 28 hours in total, generating detailed field notes on facilitation dynamics, group deliberation, and recommendation-drafting processes. At the institutional level, a written questionnaire was circulated to senior civil servants and strategic partners. The evaluation also included two workshops: an ecological workshop conducted prior to the Assembly to map Dunfermline's existing participatory landscape with local stakeholders, and a post-Assembly workshop with Fife Council community engagement leaders focused on the uses and scalability of citizen assemblies. Together, these methods allowed for a rich triangulation of evidence across participant, facilitator, and institutional perspectives.

A thorough analysis of the costs and benefits associated with the Assembly is a crucial component of its evaluation, especially in relation to its scalability. Due to the diverse range of in-kind contributions from multiple partners, there are several approaches to accounting for and presenting these costs. This subject will be addressed in a dedicated third paper within the evaluation series, enabling a detailed exploration of resource allocation and returns, both as expenditures and as potential investments.

1.2 Deliberation in local democracy

Democratic innovations at the local level, such as the Dunfermline New City Assembly, offer significant potential for reconfiguring the role of citizens in local governance. These developments do not emerge in isolation but are situated within broader movements and trends. For example, the new 'localism' movement by the turn of the century advocated for decisions to be made closer to the people (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013), similarly, later "new municipalism" movements have advocated for stronger role of civil society in 'reclaiming' local decision making (Merida & Frances, 2025).

While these movements operate at a macro level, they illuminate the broader significance of initiatives such as the Dunfermline New City Assembly. Under this light, the Assembly may be understood as both a product and a driver of an ongoing transformation of local democracy; one that presents new challenges and opportunities for elected representatives, public administrations, and a wide array of local stakeholders.

Comparative evidence suggests that enhanced community engagement can indeed be aligned with the modernisation of local administration (Yi & Qiu, 2025). Achieving this alignment, however, requires the cultivation of new forms of partnership and the construction of institutional bridges between public authorities and self-organised communities (Bianchi, 2025). In this respect, well-designed deliberative processes, such as the New City Assembly, can perform a critical articulation function.

In this articulation role, local democratic innovations can help change the mindsets of both citizens and politicians (Agger, 2021). As we have explained in our previous report on the ecology of participation in the Dunfermline City Assembly (Goñi & Vives, 2025), this also entails connecting to the different demands and agendas of both the self-organised community and the institutions that can input into decision-making.

Importantly, as we also discussed in the report, the team behind the Assembly is already deeply rooted and aware of the ecology of Dunfermline. This situatedness has enabled the development of an ultra-local deliberative experiment in which the design and delivery are strongly connected city's social fabric. In this configuration, deliberation is not merely a participatory add-on but becomes more easily 'owned' by the city.

At a time of contentious national and international politics, the subnational level of governance, and particularly cities, have become one of the most important spaces for driving change. And crucially, they are still, as they have been, the ideal laboratory for democracy (Falanga, 2024) where authorities and communities, and places and ideas are the closest.

In this context, Dunfermline is well-positioned to assume a leading role in advancing ultra-local democratic innovations. Such efforts not only hold relevance for other cities across Scotland but also offer broader lessons on how to reconfigure political systems through the cultivation of robust civic ecologies from the ground up.

2. General Assessment of the deliberative process

2.1 Who were the participants?

The Dunfermline New City Assembly recruited 35 participants through a civic lottery process managed by the Sortition Foundation. A total of 9,000 invitation letters were sent to randomly selected household addresses across three Dunfermline wards, drawn from the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (PAF).

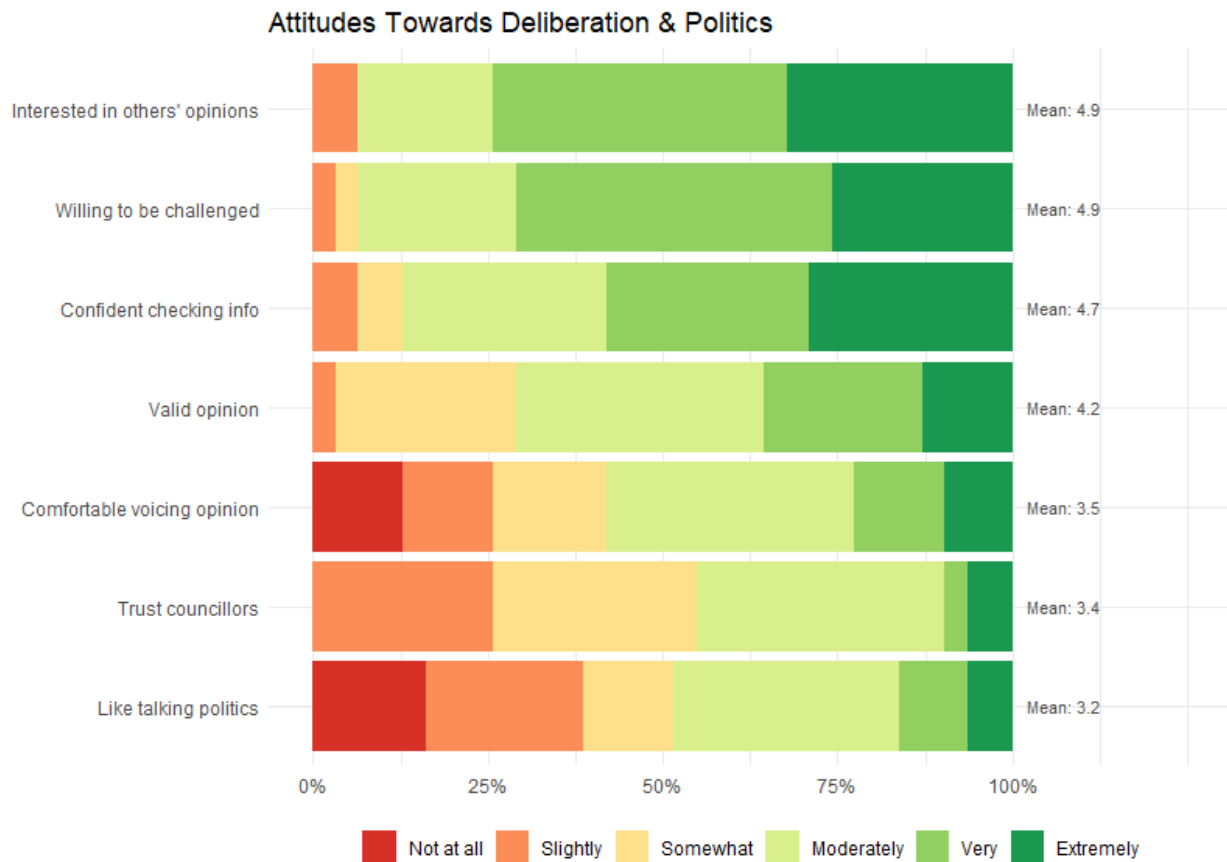
To mitigate the well-documented tendency for deliberative processes to under-represent more deprived communities, 20% of invitations were deliberately directed to postcodes falling within the most deprived deciles (IMD 1–3), with the remaining 80% distributed randomly across all addresses in the area. Eligibility was open to all residents aged 16 and over who received an invitation, with the exception of elected representatives, paid employees of political parties, and council employees in politically restricted posts.

The recruitment process ran from October to November 2025, with confirmed participants handed over for onboarding by 10 November, ahead of an introductory session on 19 November 2025. Participants received £500 remuneration, payable in cash or vouchers, and were provided with information about welfare advice should participation affect their benefits entitlements.

Beyond their demographic characteristics, this evaluation sought to explore the selected Assembly members' attitudes towards deliberation and politics, their political participation habits and their knowledge of the local context relevant to the Assembly.

Regarding their views and attitudes related to politics and deliberation, members were asked to report the following in a scale of 1 to 6: their interest in other people's opinions, their willingness to read or listen to people who challenge their own opinions, how confident they feel checking whether information is accurate and reliable, how valid they think their opinion is in any situation, how comfortable they feel when voicing their political opinion, how much they trust local councillors to act in the best interests of people, and how much they like talking about politics (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Assembly members' attitudes towards deliberation and politics.

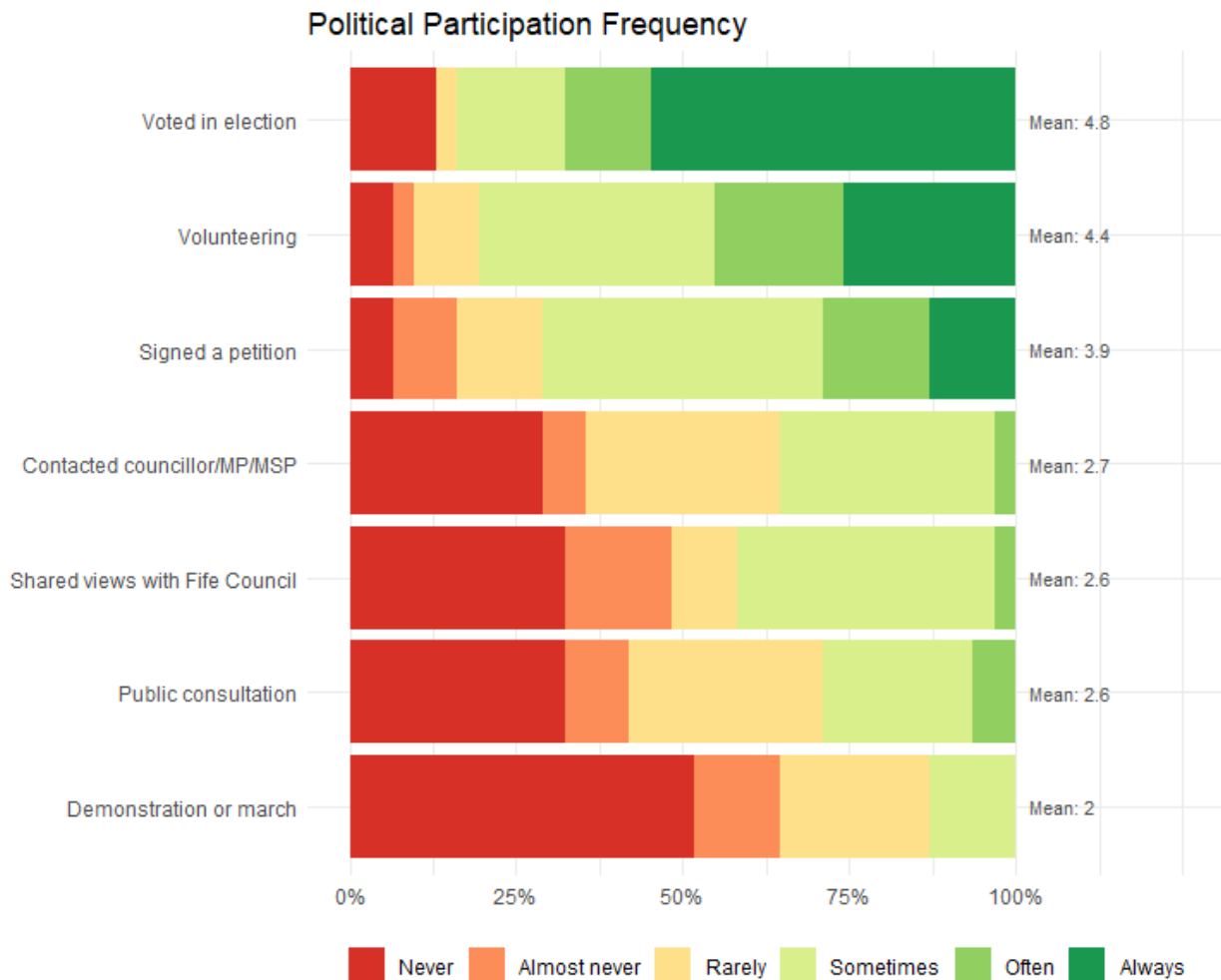


The results show a mixed picture where Assembly members are overwhelmingly interested in other people’s opinions, willing to be challenged, believe their opinion is valid and are confident checking information. At the same time, they are a somewhat less comfortable when voicing their opinion, their trust in councillors is lukewarm and are not too enthusiastic about discussing politics.

Our survey also sought to uncover Assembly members’ political participation behaviour. As shown in Figure 2, the single most frequent political participation action taken by Assembly participants is voting. The majority said that they vote often or always. Volunteering and signing a petition are the next most frequent activities, although less than 50% do so often or always. These contrast with the rest of political participation actions, including contacting a councillor, or an MP, or an MSP, sharing views with Fife council, participating in a public

consultation, or taking part in a demonstration or a march, which Assembly members do much less frequently.

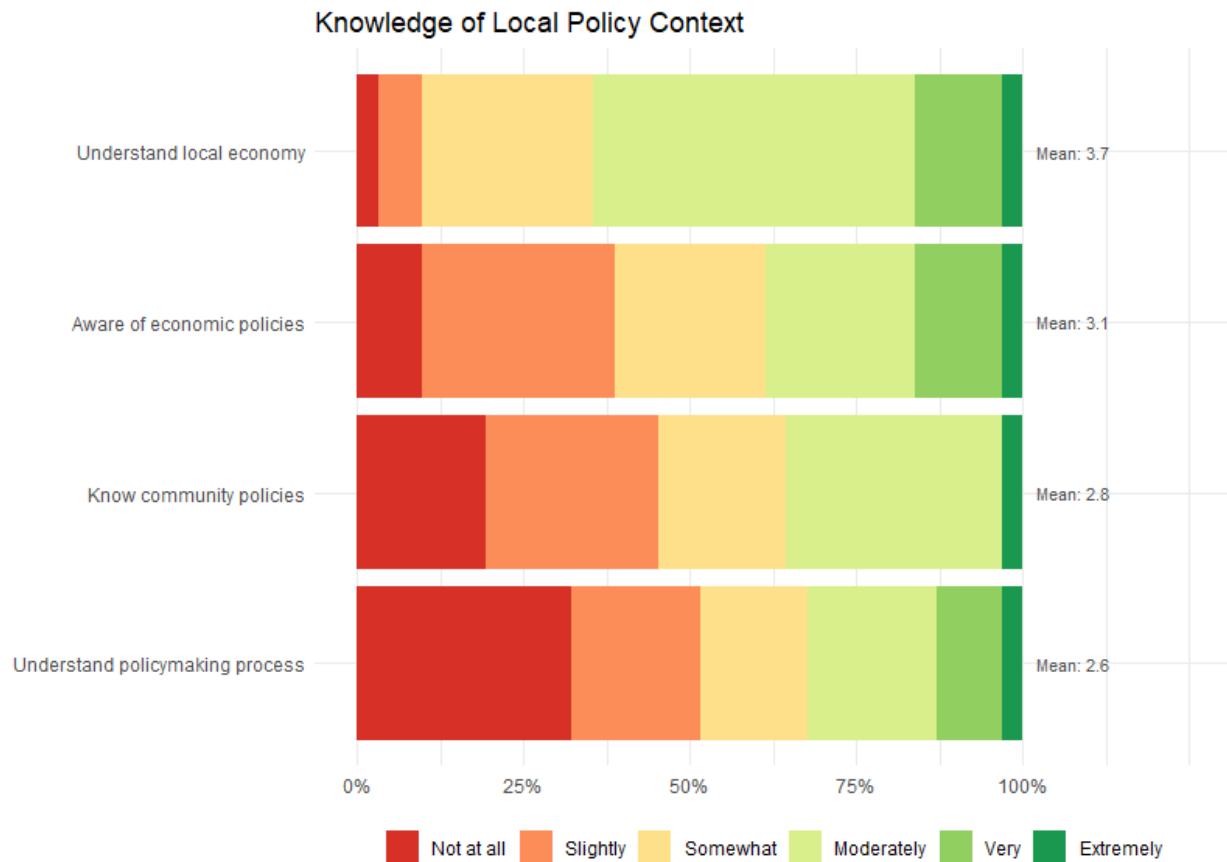
Figure 2. Assembly members' political participation frequency



Finally, we asked participants about their level of knowledge and familiarity with four key topics to be discussed during the Assembly: Dunfermline’s local economy, economic plans and policies that affect Dunfermline, plans and policies to strengthen communities and Fife Council’s policymaking and planning processes.

As shown in Figure 3, participants were least confident in their knowledge of Fife council’s policymaking process. More than 50% of respondents said they are not at all or slightly knowledgeable of how councillors make plans and policies. The reported level of knowledge of community strengthening and building policies was similar (mean of 2.8 out of 6). Assembly members reported a slightly higher degree of familiarity and knowledge about economic policies and were most confident on their understanding of the local economy, with over 60% reporting moderately, very or extremely understanding it.

Figure 3. Assembly members' self-reported knowledge of the local policy context



2.2 Design

The design of the Assembly was led by a team composed of local public officials of Fife Council with expertise in community engagement, community representatives from Dunfermline, as well as external experts from Electoral Reform Society, and led by renowned deliberative democracy expert Kelly Macbride. The design phase involved collaborative processes with stakeholders between July and September of 2025.

Generally speaking, the process included all key inclusion considerations of high-quality deliberative mini-publics, including compensation for participation, and one-on-one conversations and adjustments for participants with specific needs. On top of this, the design of the process presented characteristics of ultra-local deliberation, with facilitators being recruited from the city, engagement with community representatives, the use of community spaces (namely, the Abbeyview community hub).

The Dunfermline New City Assembly was structured as a staged deliberative journey, designed to move participants from initial orientation through collective learning and, ultimately, to decision-making. The process began with an introductory session and a Civic Reception, focused on welcoming members, clarifying the purpose of the Assembly, and introducing the guiding question.

During the introductory session, participants were presented different themes to choose from on how to focus deliberation. These themes emerged from a mixed methods process that

included 1) social media scraping – an entirely voluntary exercise done by a Dunfermline resident during the design phase of the project (City of Dunfermline, 2025) -, 2) social media polling, and 3) around 13-15 in-person consultations, both at established events and new ad-hoc workshops. After a presentation and round of voting, participants chose to focus on the themes of Community Issues and Local Pride, as well as High Street and Local Economy (which were also the most popular themes in the scraping and other consultation mechanisms).

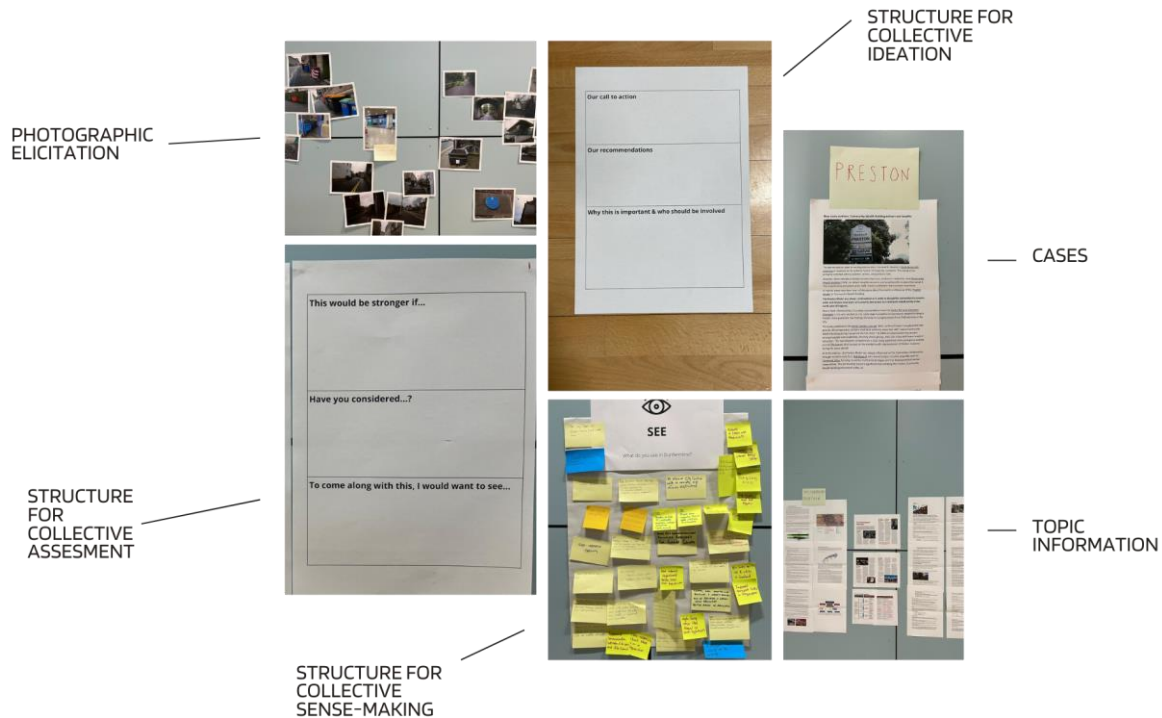
The first in-person weekend, held in mid-January, centred on community issues and local pride. Participants engaged in a series of activities aimed at surfacing shared values and developing a grounded understanding of Dunfermline’s current challenges. Through inputs from local stakeholders and facilitated discussions, members explored topics such as community wellbeing, safety, and local development. This phase combined exploratory dialogue with early forms of co-production, as participants began drafting initial calls to action.

The second weekend shifted the focus towards the city centre and local economy. Participants engaged with expert inputs and local evidence, while also reflecting on lived experiences of the city. This stage deepened the deliberative process through thematic “deep dives” and iterative group work. This second weekend also introduced more diversity in how experts engaged, through ideas café and the ability to walk across different conversations.

The final weekend marked the transition from deliberation to decision-making. Participants were invited to imagine a future vision for Dunfermline, before iteratively strengthening and consolidating their recommendations. Through multiple rounds of review, feedback, and revision, the Assembly worked towards a coherent and collectively owned set of proposals. The process culminated in the formal presentation and voting on priorities, alongside the articulation of a shared vision for the city’s future.

In our observations, we noticed that the design employed in this process was highly detailed and of a professional quality. For example, each activity was accompanied by dedicated materials that clearly explained the tasks, information was made readily available throughout, and there were different kinds of stimuli progressively displayed throughout the room (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Example of the different kinds of materials employed.



From our observations we also note that:

- The framing question of the process, namely around 'the future of city', would be considered too broad for most deliberative process, but given the ultra-local characteristics of the design, this did not seem to obstruct deliberations.
- The deliberation journey was multi-modal, combining instances of individual and collective action, as well as more cognitive and playful activities. For example, there were Lego or drawing alternatives to writing.
- The design included many prompts to consider wide perspectives and points of view, including prompts to consider future and past generations, non-human impacts, and the experiences of people who were not involved in the deliberation. See Figure 5 below for an example.
- The last session of the process included a lot of attention to the post-Assembly journey for citizens, which is now considered good practice yet not so frequently enacted.

Figure 5. Empty chair used to represent those not included to provide testimony in the process.

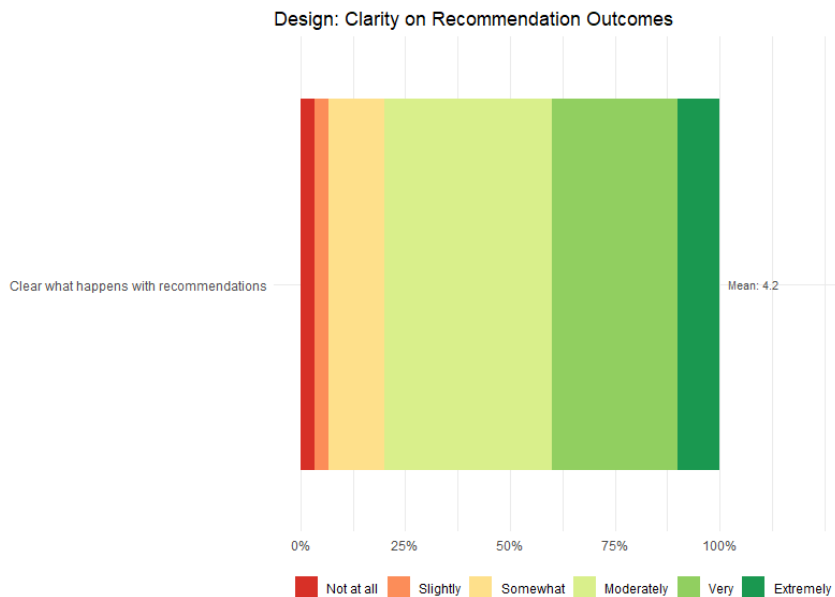


Another key aspect of the deliberation journey involves supporting the decision-making process of drafting recommendations. Over the last weekend, we observed an evolving strategy for how to best prompt and draft the recommendations. For example, between Saturday and Sunday, facilitators introduced a new prompt for members to think about 'for whom' and 'by whom' the recommendations are for. We observed that this additional structure helped define conversations much better, resulting in sharper recommendations. Thinking about 'by whom' should recommendations be enacted helped make explicit that it had been assumed throughout that the council would take everything forward. And yet, this was not necessarily the case.

Beyond the deliberation journey within the Assembly, another key design aspect of democratic innovations is explaining how the inputs will be used to drive change. As mentioned, most of these explanations were carried out in a dedicated 'post-Assembly'

discussion in the last day. Our evaluation survey (Figure 6 below) showed that by the end of the process, Assembly members had mostly either a moderate or a very high understanding of how the recommendations would be implemented.

Figure 6. Clarity on the use of recommendations responses.



This shows overall a sense of clarity. Nonetheless, a high prevalence of mid-level response (moderate) may also indicate that members did to some degree struggle to understand the uses of the Assembly. In fact, ideas of “transparency over ‘what happens next?’” often came through the survey’s open-ended questions. This should not come as a surprise to those involved in the process, as the very nature of the Dunfermline Assembly was open-ended, and the framing of the use of the recommendations was open-ended as well. For example, in our observations, we heard how the recommendations could be mobilised by a series of actors, exceeding local government, and including, for example, the third sector or local businesses. This approach is very much in line with the ecological approach taken by the designers of the Assembly.

From our participant interviews, we saw how critical one particular action was for driving this sense of clarity. As one Assembly member put it:

“But I think the very fact that this meeting's going ahead with the Area Planning Committee that we've been invited along to and we've to find in the future, I think it's the 28th of March, I think it is, we've to be informed of what the results of that were. So, it's nice to be kept in the loop over something that a lot of us felt quite passionate about”.

Indeed, the promise of a follow-up and the ability to attend first hand some of the events was seen as a key driver of trust in the outputs.

2.3 Facilitation

The Dunfermline New City Assembly was run by a team of 8 facilitators, including a lead facilitator, a co-lead facilitator, and 6 facilitators. Participants were placed in five tables, each one moderated by a facilitator.

The lead facilitator played a key role throughout the Assembly by constantly bringing structure into the table deliberations. She also frequently checked in with facilitators to provide support and guidance without disrupting group dynamics. Importantly, during plenary sessions where open requests for participants failed, she pivoted to smaller group discussions to which participants responded better. This shows her ability to read the room and adapt to maximise participation from Assembly members.

The Dunfermline City Assembly experimented with facilitation capacity building in the community by selecting the facilitators through an open call. Facilitators received two training sessions (one online and one in-person) before the start of the Assembly. During the Assembly, the lead facilitator provided briefings every morning and constant feedback to adapt each facilitator's style to the needs of the deliberation.

Through our observations, we identified uneven quality of facilitation. Some facilitators excelled in bringing everyone into the conversation, respecting participants' views and creating a space for true deliberation where tensions and respectful disagreements were allowed and used as catalysts. Other facilitators were observed to sometimes become a regular participant, expressing agreement or disagreement with Assembly members and even occasionally interrupting them. This view was supported by one of the participants interviewed after the Assembly:

"I think it [this participant's experience in taking part in the deliberations] did depend on your facilitator, because I think over the six sessions, I think I only had three facilitators. So then I just got around all the different facilitators, you know, that were at each table. But some of them were better than others".

We also observed implicit struggles between some facilitators and participants around wording. On one occasion, a facilitator was pushing for more formal language around accessibility to be included in a recommendation, while participants wanted to simplify language arguing that most people would not know what they meant otherwise. This example illustrates the level of steering that some facilitators exercised at times, even though the participants did not necessarily experience it as problematic.

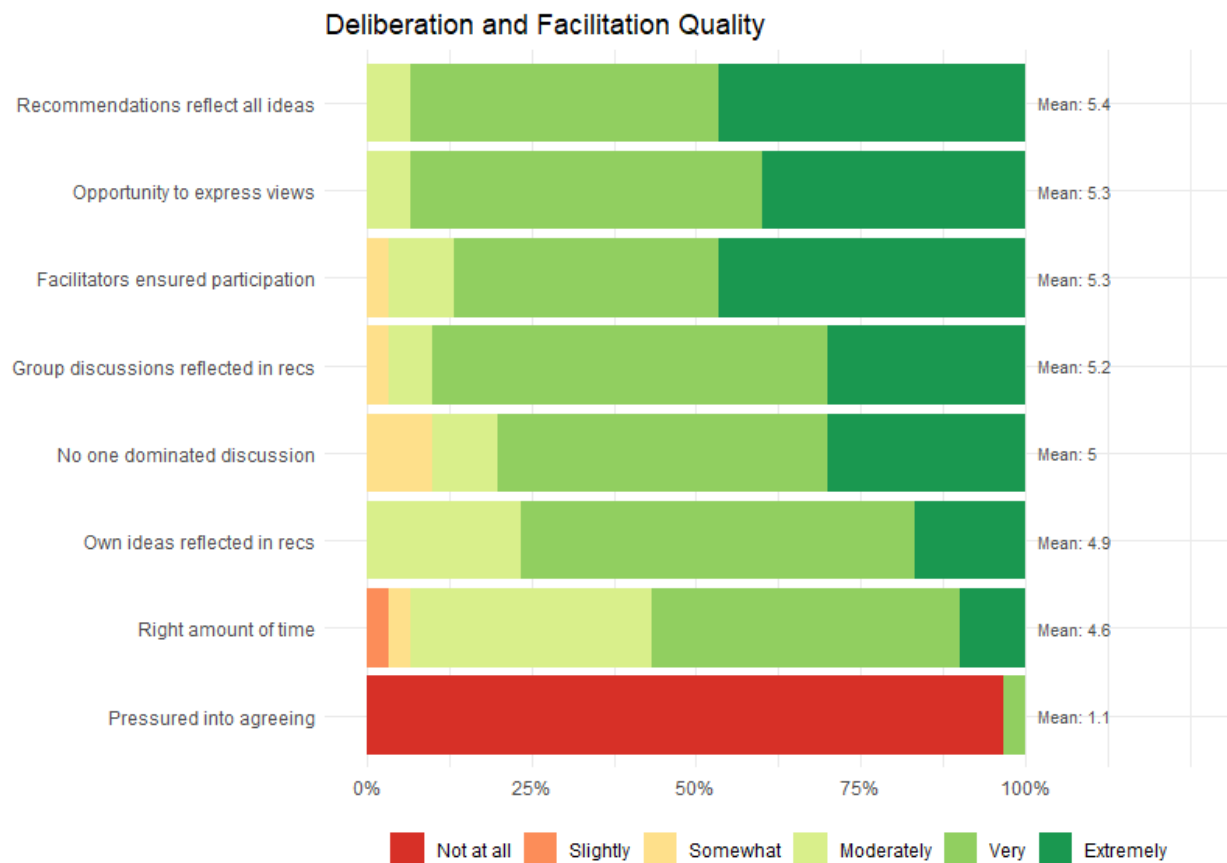
Inconsistencies in how facilitators managed recommendation drafting were also observed. In one instance, a facilitator independently invited external observers to review the group's draft recommendations, a decision that led to substantive changes to the content of the proposals rather than minor editorial adjustments. By contrast, at a different table, participants themselves approached observers as a group and explicitly requested feedback on the readability and clarity of their recommendations only, deliberately limiting the scope of outside input. The difference between these two episodes is significant: in the first case, a facilitator's unilateral decision opened the door for observers to shape the substance, whereas in the second, participants protected their ownership of the recommendations and set clear boundaries on the type of feedback they were willing to receive. This suggests that clearer guidance was needed to define when and how observers could be invited to give input during

the recommendation-writing phase, as well as the role of the facilitators as supporters, not initiators, of such engagement with externals.

When asked about the quality of deliberations in unstructured interviews during the Assembly, some participants expressed frustration at the fixation that a few fellow Assembly members had on certain topics, thus derailing or coopting conversations on other topics. Others reported not having many chances to speak because other people in their table talked a lot. This implies some difficulty by the facilitation team to keep deliberations focused and make everyone feel part of them.¹

Nevertheless, the assessment of facilitators by participants is very positive overall. In the post-Assembly survey, we asked participants to report on various deliberation and facilitation aspects and the results show the following:

Figure 7. Perceived deliberation and participation quality by participants.



Participants almost unanimously did not feel at all pressured into agreeing with recommendations that they did not fully endorse. The vast majority felt very much or extremely that: the recommendations reflected all the participant’s ideas; they had ample opportunity to express their views; facilitators made sure everyone could participate in the New City Assembly; group discussions were reflected in the final recommendations; no one

¹ The trade-offs between building capacity in the community and the quality of non-professional facilitation is further explored in section 3.3 Sustainability.

dominated the conversation and everyone had an opportunity to speak; and their own ideas about the local economy and community perspectives are sufficiently reflected in the final recommendations. The only aspect where there is some more variability, although positive assessment still dominates, is time. About 50% of participants are very or extremely satisfied with the time offered to discuss issues, while the other 50% range from moderately to slightly.

Post-Assembly interviews confirmed the overall sentiment of Assembly members. Interviewees appreciated the complexity of the job of facilitators and praised their efforts: “the facilitators did a sterling job. They really had their work cut out for them”. More than one interviewee highlighted the facilitators’ ability to prevent some people from dominating conversations. A participant said that “There are naturally people who will try to dominate a conversation sometimes (...) the facilitators were generally very good at that and not letting that happen”. Another one explained that “Some [facilitators] would (...) politely shut up the ones like me that talk a lot and obviously try and get other people to [talk]”.

Finally, an interviewee highlighted the role of facilitators not only as moderators, but also serving as guides throughout the process:

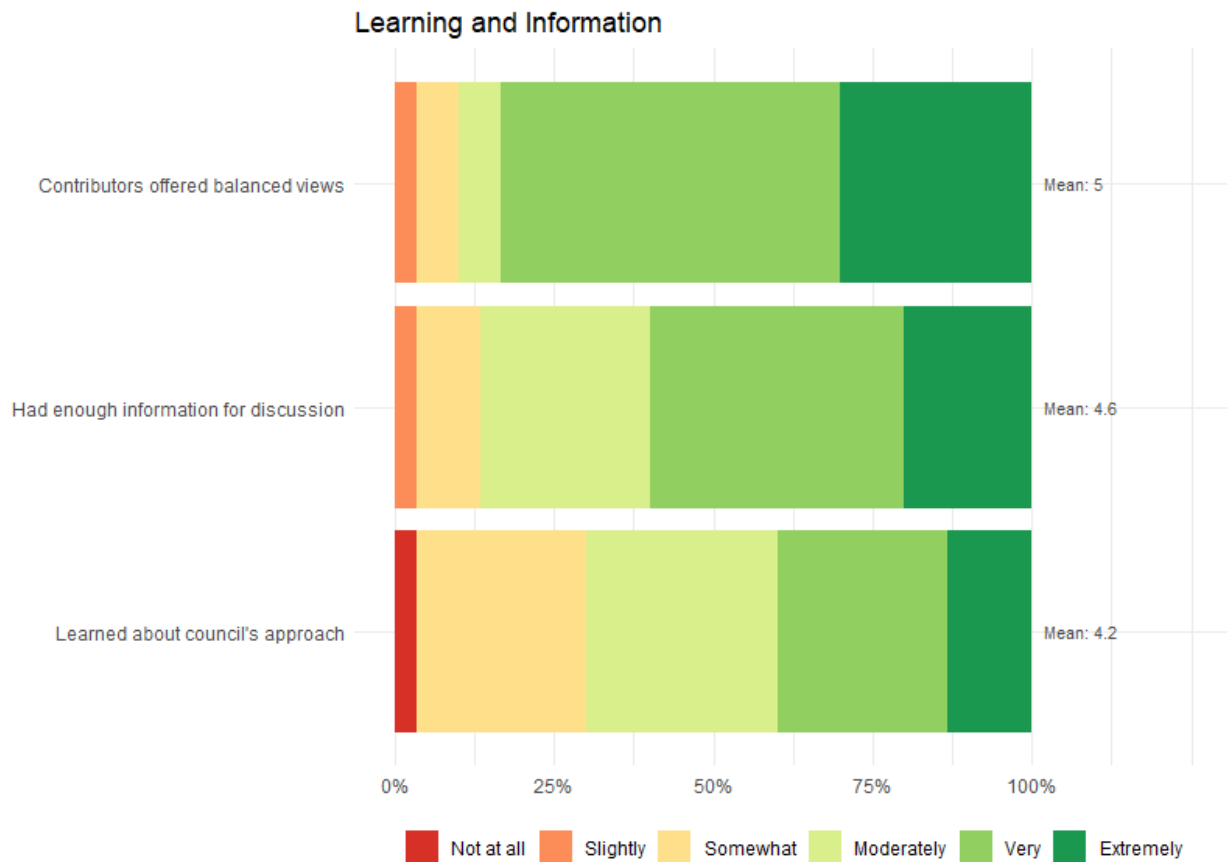
“The facilitators did their job and they were quite okay. They made it easy for us, because there was times that we didn't understand what was required of us, but the facilitators were briefed enough to explain the things to us”.

Given that interviewees expressed that the first weekend was quite daunting (a new environment, meeting lots of new people, receiving a lot of information), the quote above shows good practice of briefing facilitators about what each phase of the process is trying to achieve and what is expected from participants.

2.4 Knowledge and evidence

As discussed, a learning journey was designed as part of the process to create a shared information background for deliberations (Figure 8). Overall, our evaluation shows a positive average evaluation of the learning journey by Assembly members. Members felt, on average, that they had a moderately to very high perception of the balance of views they heard and how sufficient it was for the discussion. A similar result was found for learning how the Council addresses the issues relevant to the Assembly, although the distribution of views shows greater concern.

Figure 8. Learning and information during the Assembly.



Our observations of the sessions show that highly credible and diverse witnesses were called in to provide advice on the process. The final roster of presenters was a combination of policy experts to comment on different initiatives and policy instruments used to tackle the issues relevant to the Assembly, as well as so-called “lived experience” presenters, for instance, members of Dunfermline charities and youth groups.

In that sense, we observed that the learning journey was driven by an attempt to present Dunfermline as a city through many different perspectives. Presenters spoke of demographic changes, or economic performance. They also spoke of what is like to live, work and grow up in Dunfermline.

For Assembly members, the amount of information, especially the technical information, was sometimes seen as overwhelming. In our observations and participant interviews, we were repeatedly told that there was sometimes a feeling of “too much evidence, too little time to process and discuss it” (participant quote). The facilitators did improve their practices over time; for example, we noticed that they began bringing more copies of the technical materials and summaries for participants to read at the table. Other designs, such as the World Cafe for community organisations, also improved the learning experience for participants. Finally, Assembly members also had the opportunity to review the content through an online portal.

Through our interviews, we also realised that this focus on learning about Dunfermline through different angles had been quite impactful for participants. As one participant puts it:

“I’m quite keen on history, so I do pride myself that I know quite a lot of the local history. I’m a bit of a news hound, if you like, so I always like to find out what’s going on in my area. But it was a big eye-opener to find out exactly how many things and how many organisations were already involved in the Dunfermline area that I knew nothing about. I didn’t even know they existed”.

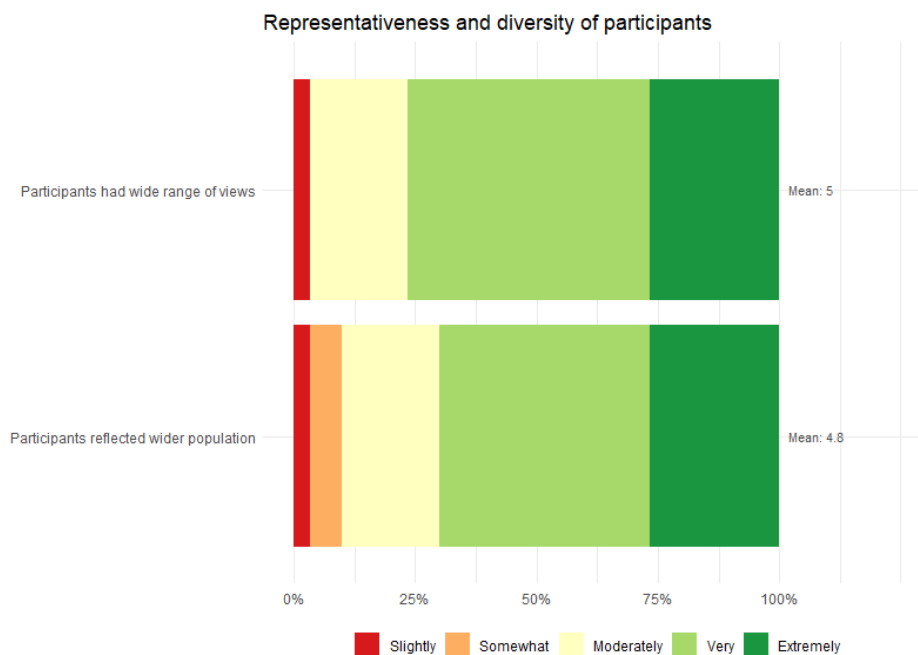
In that sense, and under an ecological perspective, one of the key lessons for participants was about reconnecting to the local ecology of participation and its vibrancy. This, of course, can be further empowered and connected through a ‘post-Assembly’ journey for participants.

Additionally, learning about the challenges and the hard topics was also impactful for Assembly members: “Seeing the levels of, I hate to say, I really hate the word poverty, but it is, levels of poverty across the area” (participant quote). Many of the initial presentations focused on some of the social challenges of the city. And throughout our observations and interviews, we also realised that for some participants this came as a surprise, or a pain within the community that can easily be ignored. From this standpoint, the learning journey of the Assembly was for some participants a safe space to talk about the ‘hard conversations’.

2.5 Inclusion and equality

As explained in subchapter 2.1 *Who were the participants*, the Assembly was formed by a group of people that broadly descriptively represented the population of Dunfermline along demographic lines, and more specifically in terms of age, ethnicity, disability, education, political persuasion, geography and gender. The diversity and representativeness achieved through the sortition process was perceived by most Assembly members, as shown in Figure 9:

Figure 9. Representativeness and diversity of Assembly members.



More than 60% of Assembly members very much or extremely felt that participants had a broad range of perspectives on the issue under discussion (the local economy and community perspectives) and were broadly representative of the wider population of Dunfermline.

However, a demographically representative group of people does not automatically translate into inclusive and equal participation in the Assembly. Mechanisms need to be in place to guarantee that different levels of education, ability to speak in public, cognitive capacities and confidence do not exclude some Assembly members from meaningfully contributing to the deliberations.

The Dunfermline New City Assembly included such mechanisms. As put by one of the participants during the second weekend, there were "so many ways to participate that everyone has a chance to speak their mind". This quote refers to the variety of formats and activities that the facilitation team put in place to guarantee that people who feel comfortable contributing and expressing their views in different ways could do so, from written and oral input to the use of pictures and Lego, to multiple chances to absorb complex information presented in various formats. Even when people felt overwhelmed recognised that the different ways to provide input were inclusive: "Perhaps folk are too overwhelmed at the table but then they can write up their ideas".

We also observed that participants themselves are key to increase the inclusion of others in the process. During the Assembly, participants supported each other by cheering, offering help to understand activities, congratulating fellow Assembly members who participated in plenary activities, etc. The companionship and positive group dynamics were a catalyst for better, more inclusive and equal participation. A participant who we interviewed after the Assembly explained it like this:

"Especially as the thing developed, first week was a bit quiet, shy, don't know everyone and all that. But as it went on, you can see the vibe, the sort of energy that was coming off it and just that whole mix of people coming together. So that was a good thing".

Age is one of the most determining factors for inclusion. The Assembly included very young participants (teenagers) as well as people in their late 70s and early 80s, thus spanning very different life experiences and abilities. Especially at the beginning of the Assembly, some of the oldest participants were seen to struggle with small print, hearing speakers and processing large amounts of information. The facilitation team responded to these difficulties promptly and kindly, by offering support at all times, reprinting materials in bigger size and providing summaries orally to participants.

At the other end of the age spectrum, some of the youngest members of the panel explained that even if taking part in the Assembly was outside of their comfort zone, they were less intimidated by older people than they expected to be. This is testimony to the respectful and welcoming atmosphere created by participants and facilitators.

A participant interviewed after the Assembly had strong views about the need to have more young people in future similar assemblies. This person felt that the "only negative thing" about the Assembly was that there weren't enough young Fifers in the room. Their views were echoed by another participant who saw the very few young people in the room as "tokens". This opens the question about whether descriptive representation necessarily

equals inclusion and fair, substantive representation of certain social groups. Especially in assemblies focusing on the future of a place, there is a case to be made for the overrepresentation of young people, who tend to feel more comfortable in places where they are the majority and who will be affected the longest by the outcomes of the Assembly.

3. Impact and Sustainability

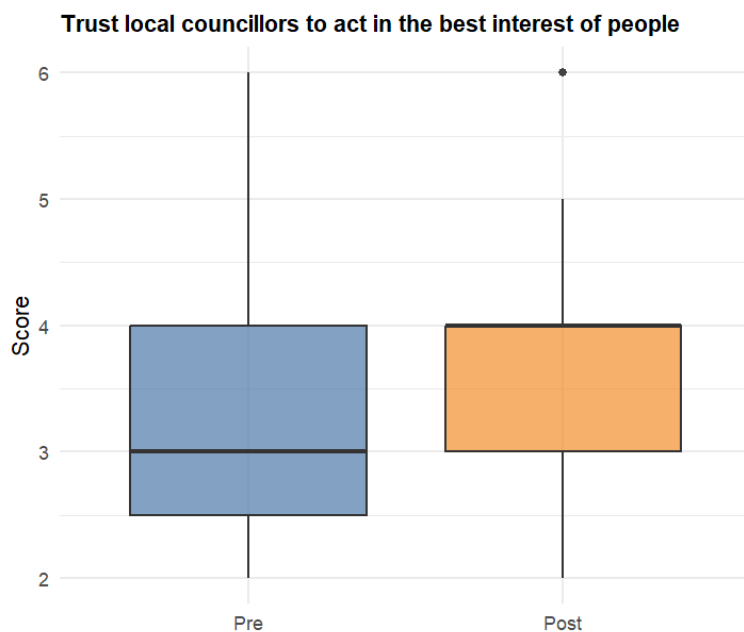
3.1 Impact on participants

To test the impact of the Assembly on participants, we included a battery of common questions in the baseline and endline surveys about trust in political representatives, knowledge of policy areas and self-confidence. All questions used Likert scales with values from 1 to 6, where 1 was “not at all” and 6 “extremely”.

The results indicate that participation in the Assembly significantly impacted most of the variables we tested. Participants increased their trust in councillors significantly. They also reported understanding the local economy more after the Assembly, to be more aware of the economic and community policies in Dunfermline and to have a better understanding of the policy making and policy and planning implementation processes.

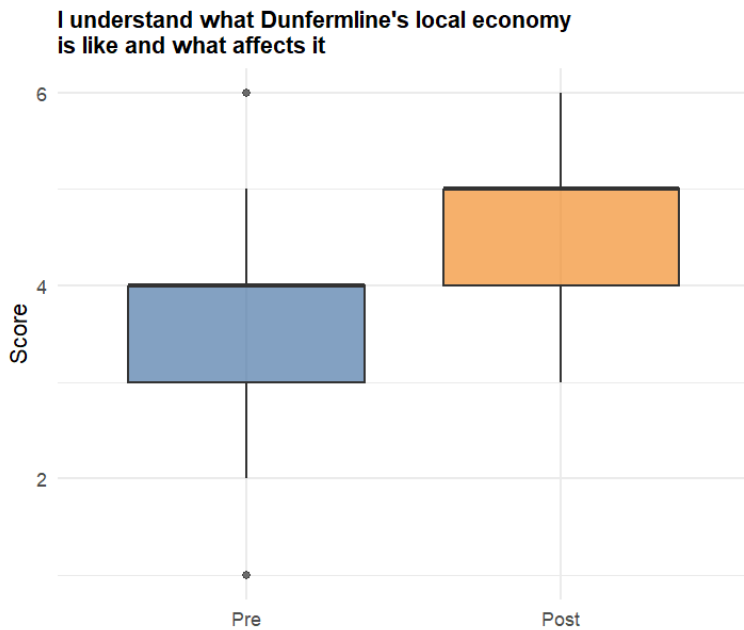
Regarding trust in councillors acting in the best interests of people, we saw a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.05$), with the average score rising by almost half a point (from 3.41 to 3.85 out of 6). As Figure 10 shows, the median score increased by a full point (from 3 to 4) suggesting this was a broad shift across participants rather than a few individuals dramatically changing their views.

Figure 10. Trust in councillors.



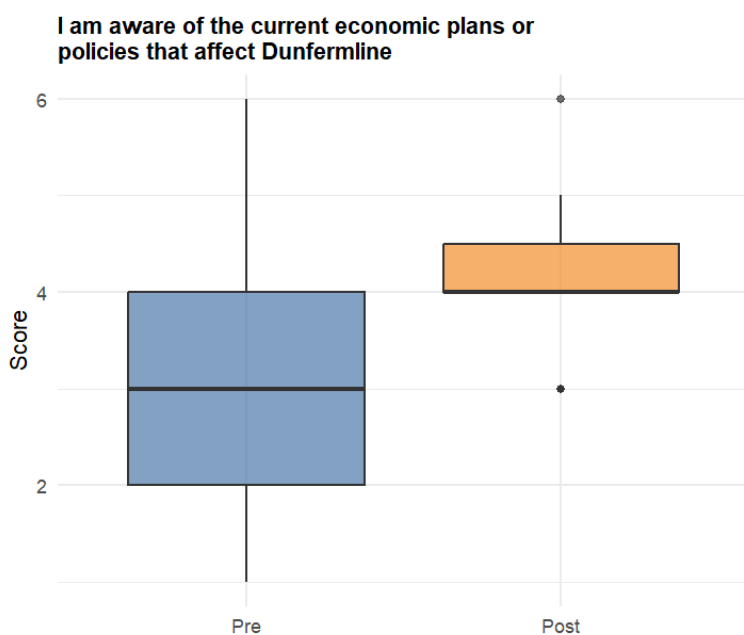
The understanding of the local economy (what it is like and what affects it) also increased on average, from 3.74 to 4.63 out of 6 ($p < 0.01$). Figure 11 shows that, once again, this positive shift was experienced across the sample, with a median increase from a score of 4 (moderately understanding the local economy) to a score of 5 (understanding the local economy very much).

Figure 11. Understanding of the local economy.



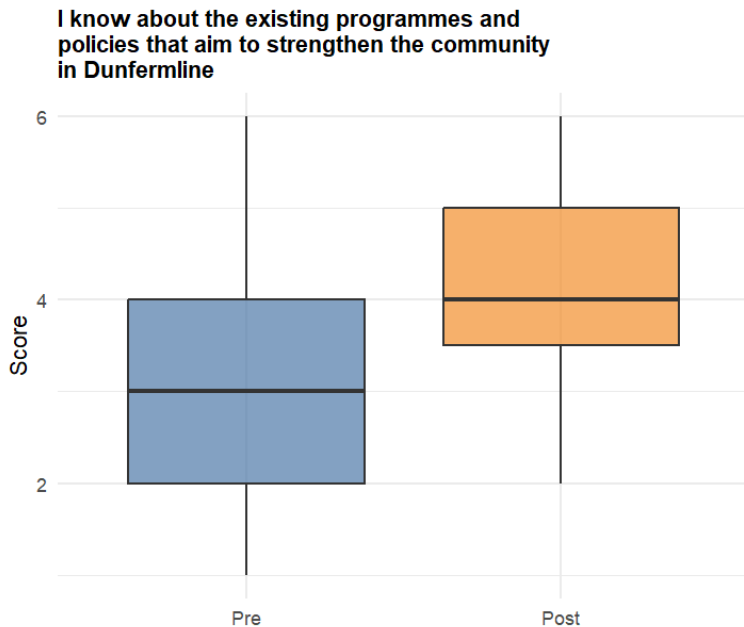
Similarly, the level of awareness of current economic plans and policies affecting Dunfermline also increased. The average self-reported awareness went up from 3.22 to 4.07 out of 6, which represents a 0.85 increase ($p < 0.005$). Figure 12 shows that responses became much more condensed around a score of 4, meaning that most participants, after taking part in the Assembly, answered that they were moderately aware of economic policies in Dunfermline. Interestingly, while before the Assembly 50% of respondents were either somewhat (score of 3/6), slightly (score of 2/6) or not at all (score of 1/6) aware of economic plans and policies, after the Assembly almost no one scored lower than 4. This shows a very significant and consistent increase in the level of awareness.

Figure 12. Awareness of economic plans and policies.



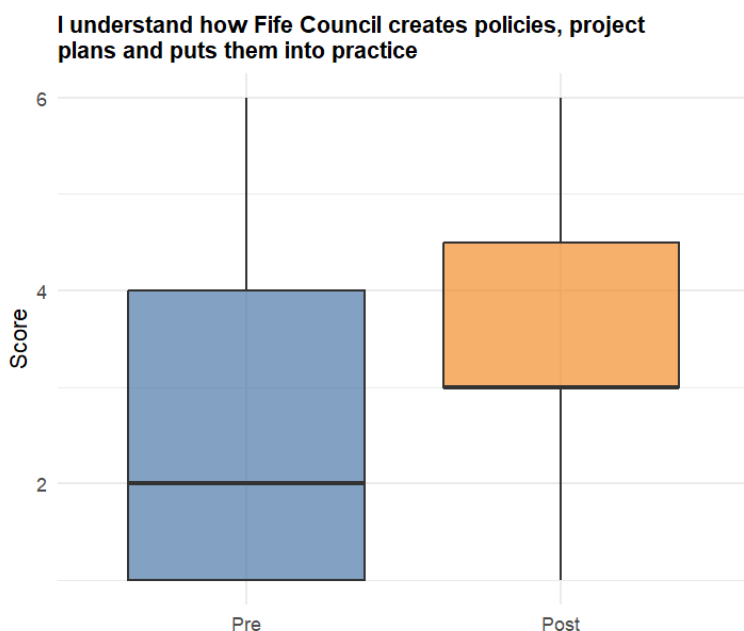
Knowledge of community-building policies and initiatives also presents a substantial increase, in this case even more dramatic than the previous variables. The average score shot up from 2.85/6 to 4/6 ($p < 0.001$). Figure 13 shows a very neat increase of the whole sample, with the median increasing one point from somewhat (3/6) to moderately (4/6) knowledgeable.

Figure 13. Knowledge of policies and programmes for stronger communities.



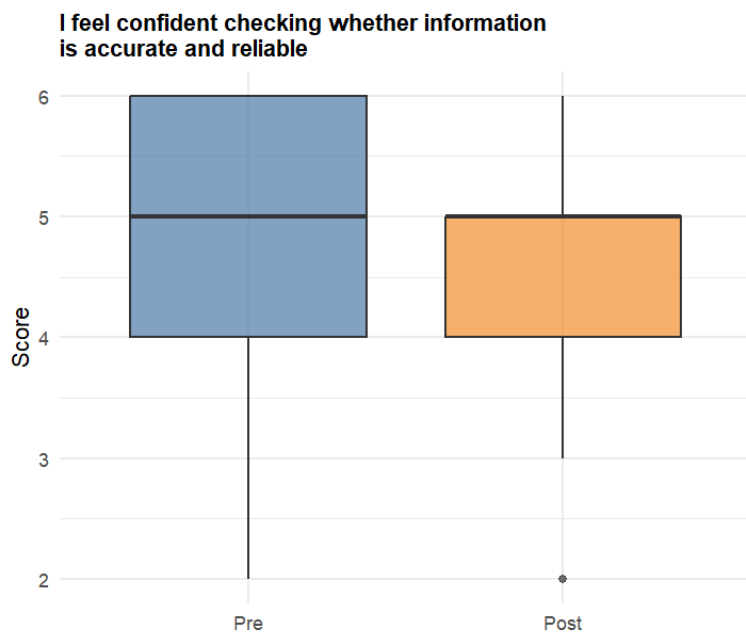
The participants' understanding of Fife Council's policymaking process also increased on average, in this case by 0.83 points (from 2.67 to 3.52, $p < 0.01$). The median increased by one point, as in all the previous variables, but this time with a lower baseline. Most participants started the process off with quite low levels of understanding of the policy making process of Fife Council (2/6), and ended it with reporting to "somewhat" (3/6) understand it.

Figure 14. Understanding of Fife Council's policymaking processes.



The only variable that did not show a significant improvement (or deterioration) was the confidence in checking whether information is accurate and reliable, which stayed practically the same. Interestingly, however, as shown in Figure 15, while before the Assembly we see some dispersion of the sample, with many people feeling very or extremely confident in their ability to check information accuracy and reliability, and a few participants having very low confidence, after the Assembly the responses became more condensed around scores of 4/6 (moderately) and 5/6 (very). This points towards a simultaneous phenomenon of the participation in the Assembly instilling some caution or modesty in some participants, and at the same time injecting confidence to those who started with lower levels.

Figure 15. Confidence in checking information.



The average changes for each variable and their significance (P values) are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Wilcoxon test results (pre and post Assembly comparison).

Variable	Mean in pre-Assembly survey	Mean in post-Assembly survey	P value
Trust in councillors	3.41	3.85	0.0478
Understanding of the local economy	3.74	4.63	0.0054
Awareness of economic plans and policies	3.22	4.07	0.0022
Knowledge of community policies	2.85	4	0.0008
Understanding of policymaking process	2.67	3.5	0.0097

Confidence	4.78	4.74	Not significant
-------------------	------	------	-----------------

Overall, these pre and post comparisons show that taking part in the Assembly had a very positive and significant effect on participants. It increased trust in local councillors, and improved their understanding, knowledge and awareness of the local economy, economic policy, community building policy and policymaking process of Fife Council.²

We also asked the same open-ended question to participants before and after their participation in the Assembly about why decision makers need to engage with citizens. The comparison of the pre- and post-Assembly answers reveal interesting shifts in the focus and reasons that citizens give for citizen engagement.

One of the most consistent patterns across pre- and post-Assembly responses is a shift between instrumental and normative framings of citizen engagement, though without a clear shared directionality. Some participants moved from practical arguments (engagement as a tool for better-informed decisions) towards stronger claims about the intrinsic right of citizens to participate. One participant's reasoning shifted from a critique of existing practice to the categorical statement that "Citizens ARE the city so our voices matter", while another moved from linking engagement to better outcomes for children to the simple assertion that "it's the citizens' city." Others, however, travelled in the opposite direction: one participant whose pre-Assembly answer asserted that decisions "should be made by the citizens or at the very least citizens should be involved" shifted post-Assembly to the more pragmatic view that engagement helps decision-makers "better understand the issues of the citizens." Another moved from "fairness" as a standalone justification to the practical claim that engagement will "improve living in the city." What seems consistent, then, is not a uniform direction of travel but rather that the Assembly prompted participants to reconsider which of these two dimensions — the principled or the practical — they place at the centre of their argument for citizen engagement.

A related trend is a growing awareness of what good engagement processes actually look like. Several participants who began with general statements about the need to listen developed more procedural and process-oriented arguments by the end. One participant, for example, moved from a broadly normative position to specifying the importance of regularity, inclusion of new voices, and feedback loops in future assemblies. Another introduced the idea of consistent follow-up as a condition of meaningful engagement. This kind of procedural literacy likely reflects direct exposure to the Assembly's own design and deliberative structure.

A smaller but notable cluster of responses introduced affective dimensions that were largely absent before the Assembly. For some participants, engagement came to be associated with pride, belonging, and community self-esteem. One participant's reasoning shifted from a straightforward representation argument to the claim that "public bodies need to engage with citizens to generate pride and belonging." This resonates with observations made during the

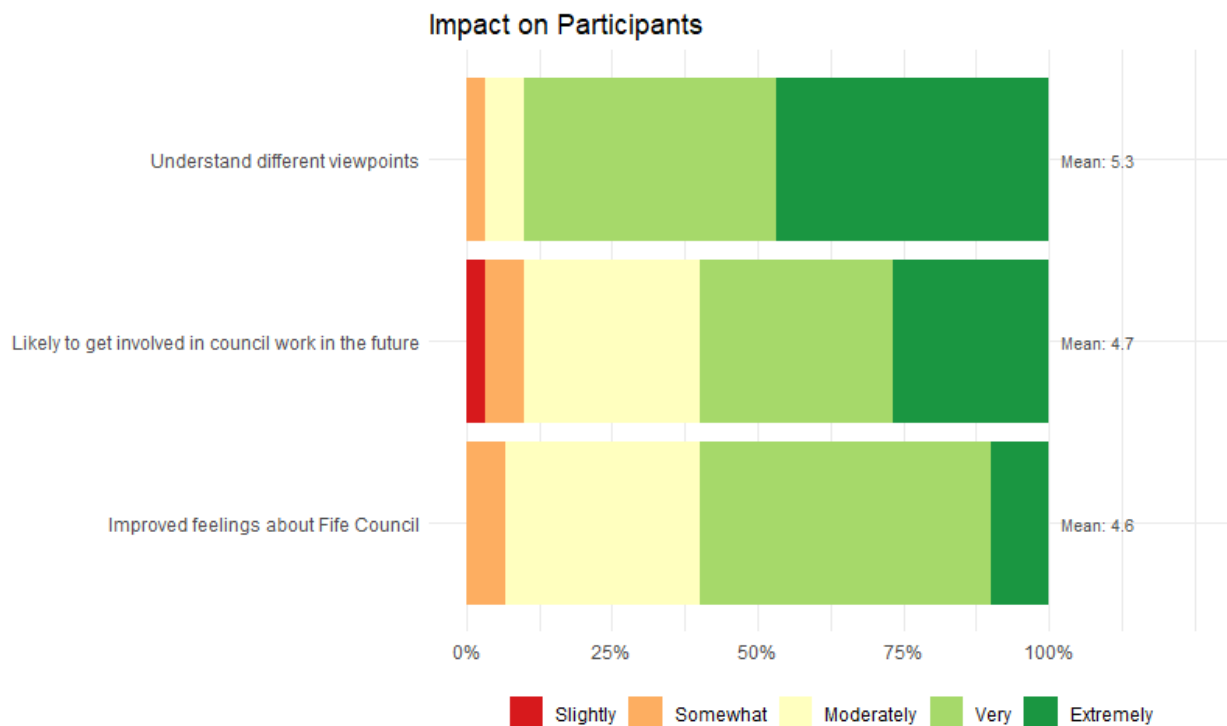
² Due to the absence of a control group, we cannot affirm that the change was *caused* by the participation in the Assembly, we can only point out a trend.

Assembly itself, where participants reported a changed relationship with their surroundings and a stronger sense of agency as citizens.

Finally, at least one participant grounded their post-Assembly argument in the experience of participation itself, adding that the Assembly had shown them that "citizens can engage thoughtfully when given the right structure and information." This is a subtly significant shift: rather than arguing abstractly for why engagement matters, this person is now reasoning from evidence they personally encountered.

In addition to pre- and post-Assembly comparisons, after their participation in the Assembly we asked members about three additional aspects. We prompted them to assess whether, as a result of their participation in the Assembly, they had come to understand different points of view relating to the Assembly topics (local economy and community issues); whether they were likely to get involved in the work of Fife Council in the future; and whether taking part in the Assembly had improved the way they feel about Fife Council. The results are summarised in Figure 16.

Figure 16. Further questions to assess the impact of the Assembly on participants.



The results across the three questions are positive, albeit with differences. On the one hand, most respondents said that they came to understand different viewpoints relating to the local economy and community issues very much or extremely after participating in the Assembly (mean of 5.3/6). On the other hand, around 60% of respondents also reported that they are very or extremely likely to get involved in council work in the future and that their feelings about Fife Council increased very much or extremely. These results are aligned and complement the pre and post comparisons and strengthen the findings that taking part in the citizen's Assembly improves people's views on democratic institutions.

Alongside the survey data, participants shared powerful testimonials about the effect that the Assembly had on them. This quote from an older woman summarises it well: "I now go down the street thinking 'oh, this could be done, that needs to change', when before I didn't think of that." The quote illustrates the transformative experience of the Assembly beyond specific measurement. Being a member of the New City Assembly changes what people see when they go out on the street, how they relate to their surroundings and, most importantly, what they can do about it, their agency as citizens

3.2 Impact on policy: created, not pre-defined

When asked about how impact of the Dunfermline New City Assembly should be measured, almost half of participants (13/30) answered the extent to which Assembly recommendations are implemented by the council. Researchers, however, have long struggled with this approach because it presents challenges: recommendations may be sometimes too broad and not have a direct translation into concrete policy interventions, or it is hard to attribute causality (how can we tell if policymakers implemented a recommendation because of the Assembly, or rather because it had been included in previous plans or in the governing party manifesto?) (Gąsiorowska, 2023).

Despite these challenges, conventional evaluation frameworks define impact in advance and measure success against pre-specified targets, typically asking whether an Assembly's recommendations were implemented. This linear model of change misses much of what deliberative processes actually do. Impact is not a fixed destination but an emergent property: it is created by actors, through more or less unexpected channels, during and after the event, and it rarely travels in straight lines.

In light of the above and the time constraints of our evaluation, which makes it impossible to trace recommendation implementation, we shift our approach to policy impact away from a binary framing (were recommendations implemented or not?). Instead, we focus on exploring and identifying the very first steps and conditions that allow for impact to be created. We are interested in capturing how opportunities for impact emerged as the process was ongoing and once it ended, who championed it and what conditions were in place for policy impact to occur.

3.2.1 Design adaptation for greater impact

The first dimension that proved important in the study of how impact is created relates to the facilitators' role in assessing recommendations as they were developed. In informal conversations with the evaluators during the second weekend, some facilitators expressed concerns that the recommendations lacked "oomph". Similarly, we observed that the ideas emerging in the deliberations at that stage of the process were somewhat unambitious (e.g. a notice board, a tourist guide, a newsletter).

The facilitation team addressed these concerns by introducing prompts in the third and last weekend to make recommendations more targeted and well-defined (see section 2.2 for further details). This design intervention thus emerged from an implicit understanding of what makes recommendations more likely to succeed, including foregrounding who should take responsibility for them. The design of the Assembly, and more specifically the recommendation drafting stage, proves crucial in increasing the chances of applicability of recommendations.

Some challenges remained, however, after the prompts were introduced. Dunfermline was almost always equated to the council in many calls to action and framings like "Dunfermline needs to..." defaulted to the council as responsible. A facilitator believed that this happened because there was not enough knowledge in the room to answer responsibility and accountability questions realistically. According to this facilitator, participants were not aware of who is responsible for what policy area or for specific actions beyond the council, which is conceived as a black box.

The difficulties to identify relevant stakeholders beyond the council (as a broad, undefined entity) points towards the importance of including an ecological approach to the Assembly design, one that emphasises the capacities (and power) of local actors, so that the imagination of participants is expanded during the deliberative process and recommendations can identify multiple avenues for implementation.

3.2.2 *Unexpected political opportunities for impact*

Thanks to the openness of the organisers, the Dunfermline New City Assembly presented an opportunity for the evaluation team to witness the interaction of civil servants and politicians with the Assembly as it happened. We could observe how the facilitation team, the Electoral Reform Society and Fife Council civil servants worked together to guide the participants, identify and use unexpected opportunities and create conditions for impact. Below, we explore a phenomenon that occurred during the Assembly to illustrate how impact is created, not pre-defined.

During the week before the final weekend of the Assembly, Fife Council published the proposed Revenue Budget 2026-2029. In it, Labour, the governing party, included the following clause:

Dunfermline City had been earmarked for funding of £5m by the previous UK Conservative Government, but following the General Election it transpired that this allocation was unfunded by the previous Government. The new Labour Government has set out a different approach to community regeneration which includes Pride in Place funding of £20m over 10 years for both the West Fife villages and Methil/Buckhaven. However, this means there is no funding from national level for Dunfermline. We therefore propose to allocate £5m in capital expenditure for Dunfermline City to address some of the priorities already identified but also to take account of recommendations which will be forthcoming from the current Citizens Assembly exercise.

This proposal explicitly linked £5 million of funding to the Assembly's recommendations before the Assembly had even concluded its deliberations. A councillor staff member surmised that it may have been tabled because the Assembly was happening. This event was unexpected and, as far as we understand it, not actively chased by the organising team.

The organising team discussed whether this information should be shared with participants or not. The concern was that these were motions that had not been approved yet and participants should not get the impression that funding for all recommendations had been secured. They concluded that since the proposal was public and included in the council agenda, the participants' attention should be drawn to them with the appropriate caveats.

The relevance of this event to understand impact as something that emerges through unexpected turns and active involvement by stakeholders, rather than it being pre-defined, pre-determined and something that either happens or not, concerns two key stakeholders and their roles (apart from organisers) in configuring, shaping, manufacturing impact: participants and politicians.

First, after participants were informed of the motions, we could observe a notable shift in participants' conversations about the next steps for the Assembly outcomes. Before this information, the discussions focused on how the participants would remain engaged with each other and the community. After, they shifted to focus on the participants' role in holding the council to account regarding the implementation of the recommendations and the long-term process of following up. Hence, sharing live information that links what is going on at the institutional level with Assembly participants is a way to empower them and make them think in more concrete terms about the policy impact and accountability of stakeholders.

Second, in informal conversations, senior civil servants in the council highlighted that the right pot of money being available at the right time is a real constraint for the implementation of recommendations, because the council is risk-averse on projects that don't stack up financially. The tabling of these motions by two political parties therefore addresses an important potential barrier for the implementation of the Assembly outputs, one that had not been cleared before the start of the Assembly. Many times, citizen assemblies take place in a landscape of funding constraints and uncertainty that is hard to tackle in advance, and even harder to integrate in the deliberations. The Dunfermline case shows that sometimes the implementation of the Assembly is the trigger that politicians need to remove some of funding barriers and clarify funding avenues. By existing, by happening, the Assembly allowed politicians to think more concretely about what funding could be linked to Assembly outputs. Sometimes, citizen assemblies need to set sail in the dark for impact opportunities to appear and find them.

An exclusively output oriented, ex ante definition of impact would have not been able to anticipate or assess such an event. With our evaluation approach we are also advocating for more open evaluation frameworks that can capture diffuse, non-linear, unexpected impact (and conditions that enable impact) moving through intricate political channels.

3.2.3 Observation for ownership building

During the Dunfermline New City Assembly, the ERS invited a diverse pool of observers to the Assembly sessions. Observers normally sat at the end of the room but were allowed to sit closer to participants at times in order to listen into the deliberations at each table. Some observers had requested an invite, while others had been proactively invited by the ERS.

We noticed that many political and policy actors (primarily councillors and senior council civil servants) were invited to observe the Assembly. We believe this was part of a deliberate strategy to reduce the distance between politicians and the deliberative event, as well as to establish an early contact between political actors and the Assembly's outputs, so that they would become more comfortable with them and shed any reservations they might have had. The underlying logic was to prepare the ground for the journey that awaited the recommendations once the Assembly concluded: if politicians and civil servants had already seen what the Assembly produced, witnessed how the process unfolded, and observed its

effect on participants, they would be more likely to take ownership of some of the recommendations, or at the very least be willing to try to implement them.

The value of this strategy, which could be described as an attempt to build ownership among relevant stakeholders over the process and, as one council staff member put it, to begin the co-creation process that would take place once the Assembly report was presented, is reflected in the fact that most observers with political or policy responsibilities informally remarked on the last day that the recommendations were "not unrealistic and doable."

Given the framework of this Assembly, which aspired to have a policy impact on the council and focused very much on council avenues for policy implementation, this strategy appears key to building conditions for impact and sustainability.

3.3 Sustainability

Our ability for assessing the sustainability of the citizens Assembly is again constrained by time. Nonetheless, the data collected allows for reflecting on how sustainability was embedded in the design and implementation of the Dunfermline New City Assembly. Here we focus on several dimensions: the continuation of the Assembly (institutional sustainability), the sustainability of the civic energy felt by participants at the end of the process and how it can be catalysed for community engagement, and the sustainability of the capacities built during the process.

3.3.1 Institutional sustainability: Continuation of the Assembly

The Assembly's design included two formal follow-up moments: a meeting with the Local Area Planning Committee on 11 March 2026, and a one-year reunion of Assembly members. While these represent positive steps, the data suggest they fall short of participants' expectations. Around 50% of participants, when asked about how to measure the impact of the Assembly, called for structured feedback mechanisms beyond a one-off update. Many advocated explicitly for ongoing fora, such as oversight committees, regular progress meetings, and re-evaluation sessions, through which commitments could be monitored and held to account. Participants are not merely requesting unidirectional updates; they are calling for sustained, institutionalised processes of engagement and accountability. For them, the sustainability of the Assembly evolving into a body focusing on scrutiny and monitoring *is* impact.

This has real implications for how the post-Assembly phase is designed. If organisers treat follow-up as a communication exercise (sending updates, publishing reports), they may satisfy some participants but fall short of what many actually envisioned. A more meaningful model would need to create structured opportunities for former Assembly members to review progress, ask questions, and potentially escalate concerns. In other words, several participants see the Assembly evolving into a citizen-led monitoring or scrutiny body. Building in a lightweight but meaningful accountability mechanism could help convert that energy into durable civic engagement rather than frustration.

3.3.2 Sustainability of civic energy: Assembly participants as agents of community building and strengthening

As reported in many other citizen assemblies (see for instance People Powered, 2026), Dunfermline New City Assembly members left the venue on the last weekend full of civic

energy. As proof, approximately 60% of respondents also reported that they are very or extremely likely to get involved in council work in the future. Along the same lines, Assembly members interviewed after the last weekend expressed their desire to be “kept in the loop” about the outcomes of the Assembly and their intention to volunteer in community work. All interviewees highlight that their future volunteering and community engagement work will be shaped by what they learned and the groups and people they interacted with during the Assembly. Moreover, a participant explained that some Assembly members had created a WhatsApp group to stay in touch during and after the Assembly, proving the group’s willingness to stay in touch and maintain links with each other, albeit without clear goals.

But how sustainable is this civic energy? Another interviewee was realistic: “That's why I find modern life... you've got all your demands (...). I like the Assembly, maybe take 3 weekends out to sit and so that's what made me come, the time to think about it. Whereas you won't always get that opportunity in life, life gets in the way”.

This is what makes a double strategy of ecological grounding and institutionalisation steps crucial. Regarding the ecology of participation and community engagement, presenting participants with concrete opportunities for engagement in the community is a way to pour their energy back into it, sustaining it and broadening the impact of the Assembly. The Dunfermline New City Assembly created two tools that could have supported this kind of civic energy sustainability and transferability. On the one hand, the ecology report commissioned by the ERS that helped map local actors could have been used to identify opportunities for further community engagement for Assembly members. On the other, the signatories of the Dunfermline Declaration constitute a self-selected group of local stakeholders committed to more democratic participation and stronger community engagement in the city that could have been brought on board to explore opportunities for civic energy repurposing.

At the same time, if civic energy generated by the Assembly dissipates because there is no institutional home for it after the final weekend, the long-term democratic value of the process is diminished. Hence the importance of planning concrete instances for engagement between institutions that are presented as having a role in taking forward the outputs of the Assembly and Assembly members, following the finalisation of the deliberation phase. A participant made this point with great clarity:

“The fact that we are being invited along to [meet with the Area Committee on the 11th of Marc 2026], it kind of alleviates the fears that I think most of us had at the start, which was that nothing would happen from this. You know, it would be a paper exercise. We turn up, give our views and go away again, and that was it, you know, nothing would come off it. But I think the very fact that this meeting's going ahead with the Area Planning Committee that we've been invited along to and we've to find in the future, I think it's the 28th of March, I think it is, we have to be informed of what the results of that were. So, it's nice to be kept in the loop over something that a lot of us felt quite passionate about”.

This quote shows that the sustainability of civic energy is linked to the institutional sustainability of the Assembly, which in turn is key for legitimacy and to prevent democratic frustration of participants.

At the very end of the third weekend of the Assembly, the facilitation team included a beautiful activity that consisted of participants writing to their future selves. They will receive

it in a year, just before the reconvening session. This is a great example of how small process design interventions can be used to re-energise, remember and relive the transformative experience of taking part in the Assembly but, again, they need to be anchored to some structured or formalised post-Assembly forum.

3.3.3 Ultra-local capacity building and its sustainability

One of the main intended contributions of the Assembly was building local capacity for future deliberative assemblies in Dunfermline and Fife. The main action underpinning this objective was the recruitment process of facilitators from the community, instead of parachuting in professional facilitators with no connections to the local community.

The organising team welcomed applications from experienced facilitators as well as people with no previous experience. During the briefing sessions for people interested in applying, the skills and experience that were highlighted as important were:

- Active listening
- Ability to paraphrase, summarise and reframe
- Recording ideas openly and transparently
- Staying neutral on content
- Working with diverse groups of people
- Taking an inclusive approach
- Keeping time
- Ability to follow instructions
- Adapting to changing needs

These requirements map well onto the functions that facilitators are expected to have in a deliberative process: internal inclusion (that all participants in the deliberation are equally able to participate), interaction (shaping the intra-group dynamics, managing how the flow of information is shared within the group) and impact (on, for instance, participant satisfaction) (Escobar, 2019). The mention of neutrality or impartiality is also aligned with the academic literature (Schneidmesser et al., 2023).

The only pass-or-fail requirements were related to availability on the Assembly weekends, as well as attending two training sessions and briefing sessions before each Assembly weekend. Based on the pre-assembly sessions, the organising team selected six facilitators out of the seven applications received. None of them were professional facilitators, although some of them had experience in similar settings.

Figure 17. "Key requirements" slide presented at the information session for potential facilitator candidates.

Key requirements

You **must** be available to facilitate every session in person:

- Wednesday 19 November (civic reception)
- Saturday 17 January
- Sunday 18 January
- Saturday 7 February
- Sunday 8 February
- Saturday 21 February
- Sunday 22 February

Sessions will take place at **Abbeyview Community Hub**.

You will need to be at the venue between **9am to 5pm**.

Reflecting on the experience of hiring non-professional facilitators from the community, one of the lead facilitators acknowledged the trade-off between building community capacity and the quality of facilitation. Indeed, as reported in 2.3 Facilitation, the quality of facilitation was uneven across the facilitation team and, according to this lead facilitator, this was identified throughout the process and mitigated.

The lead facilitation team proposed two interventions to minimise the loss of facilitation quality in peer facilitation: 1) amending the recruitment process and 2) more, and more practical, training. Regarding recruitment, it was felt that the way it had been designed favoured profiles of people that were not necessarily right for facilitation; instead, it attracted people with a social ability to talk to others and manage complex conversations, but not necessarily to stay impartial content-wise and focus on internal inclusion. Regarding training, the timeline and resources of the Assembly made it impossible to provide hands-on training before it started. One of the lead facilitators proposed including mock sessions before the start of future assemblies to identify behaviours that may undermine deliberative quality.

A key learning from this brave approach to facilitation, with a clear goal of community capacity building for sustaining deliberative capacities in local context, is that it needs to be properly resourced. Without enough time and resources, the capacity-building process risks being incomplete or of not enough quality to be reused in the future, thus defeating its core purpose around sustainability.

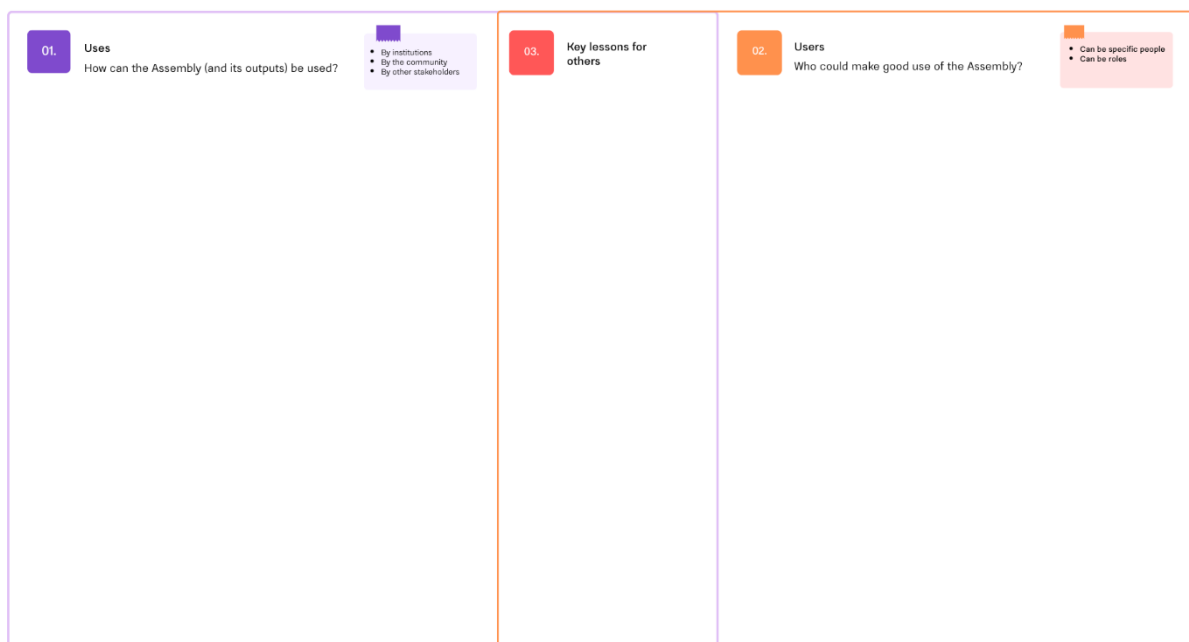
4. Uses and scalability of 'ultra-local' deliberative assemblies

Institutional-led deliberative mini-publics, like other complex policy instruments, rarely involve a unidimensional or linear way of achieving impact. Participatory governance mechanisms that seek to co-shape agendas with citizens must balance pre-set plans with openness to emergent outputs and impacts (O'Doherty, 2013). But also, complex policy processes generally require the active efforts of stakeholders to render visible the product of sometimes obscure and long institutional processes (Howlett et al., 2018).

As we have argued, the additional opportunity of the Dunfermline Assembly lies in its rootedness in the local ecology of participation. Among other things, this ecological awareness means that local civil servants have an expanded set of actors they can mobilise to advance the Assembly goals and mobilise their recommendations. However, the mechanisms of how to achieve impact, or how to effectively 'use' these ultra-local Assembly mechanisms at the local democracy level is still an open-ended question for future implementers to test and try out.

In order to explore the use of ultra-local deliberative process, we designed a workshop with Fife Council community engagement leaders behind the Dunfermline Assembly. This workshop was meant to identify lessons for future processes on how to maximise the impact of this design under an ecological lens. The figure below depicts the activity used.

Figure 18. Activity canvas for the workshop.



The activity was structured around three tasks:

- Identifying uses of 'ultra local' deliberative assemblies
- Identifying actors from the ecosystem that mobilise the outputs

- Synthesising major lessons from the process that may help other Councils to engage with similar processes.

Additionally, we circulated an online form to Dunfermline local councillors and strategic partners involved in the Assembly, inviting reflections on three forward-looking questions:

- Looking ahead, how (if at all) do you see the outputs of the New City Assembly being taken up or used within your area of responsibility?
- Where do you see the main points of support, resistance, or reinterpretation emerging when attempting to use its outputs at the local level (more generally, beyond the specific context of Dunfermline)?
- How do you think processes like the New City Assembly could be mobilised by different actors (e.g. local government, civil society, partners) to improve how local democracy works?

4.1 Uses of ultra-local deliberative assemblies

The workshop surfaced a range of uses that highlight both the practical and strategic value of ultra-local deliberative assemblies, while also revealing tensions around control, integration, and purpose. Dunfermline leaders noted that communities often expect integrated solutions, and assemblies provide a space to articulate these in ways that cut across service silos. However, this also exposes tensions, as services are frequently oriented towards pre-existing goals and may struggle to fully integrate Assembly outputs as binding mandates.

A first set of uses relates to strategic alignment and direction-setting. Dunfermline leaders emphasised that assemblies can bring actors coming from different backgrounds “in the same direction”, helping to align priorities across services and stakeholders. In contexts where multiple plans and policy instruments coexist, often addressing overlapping issues without necessarily increasing accountability, assemblies can function as a cross-sector mandate mechanism, providing a shared reference point around which services can organise. Of course, there may be specific instruments that are framed as the main receptors of the outputs, such as Locality Improvement Plans or Community Plans, and these can be used as the ‘guarantee’. However, the wider cross-sector use of the Assemblies was heavily emphasised during the discussion.

Closely linked to this, assemblies were seen as a way of peeling back layers of policy instruments and plans, enabling participants to interrogate existing frameworks and re-articulate priorities. In doing so, they can help address a broader systemic challenge: the proliferation of plans that do not necessarily translate into coordinated action. In that sense, assemblies can work as a policy revision mechanism. Assemblies could assess and review proposals coming from the public sector. This approach also opens up the possibility of a new layer of representative community governance, integrated within wider local governance arrangements but operating independently of political parties.

There is still support for Assemblies as ‘one-off’ mechanisms for complex tasks. Citizens’ Assemblies can be deployed to address specific, complex or contentious local issues (for example public transport provision, land-use decisions, or the decline of town centres). In these contexts, assemblies would provide councils and their partners with a structured way

to engage a representative cross-section of the community in informed deliberation. Over time, regular and repeated use would be required for this approach to move beyond isolated experimentation towards institutionalisation.

Another discussed use of this kind of process relates to enhancing democratic relationships and legitimacy. Participants highlighted the role of assemblies in improving relationships between institutions and communities, fostering mutual understanding and trust. Compared to standard consultations, assemblies were not only seen as integrative, but also as very robust way to justify a policy decision. This robustness is particularly relevant in a context where public processes are increasingly scrutinised, and where questions of legitimacy and public suspicion are salient. In that sense, assemblies can provide a robustness mechanism in contexts of distrust.

Assemblies were also framed as a complement (or alternative) to traditional consultation mechanisms. While some policy areas may only require consultation, more complex or strategic decisions may benefit from the depth and legitimacy provided by an Assembly. In this sense, assemblies can enhance existing participatory infrastructures rather than replace them, helping to differentiate when more intensive deliberative approaches are warranted. Assemblies, understood this way, operate as a consultation complement mechanism for complex policy areas.

Finally, a more ambitious model would embed Citizens' Assemblies within the electoral and representative system itself as a democratic reform mechanism. In this model, assemblies would deliberate on and set medium-term priorities for a community. Political parties and candidates would then respond to these priorities through, for example, manifesto commitments in advance of local elections.

Critically, under this use, Citizens' Assemblies would not sit outside existing institutions but would strengthen the role of local government by enhancing planning, accountability and trust-building, while keeping councils as the democratic anchor within the system. Following elections, assemblies could be reconvened periodically to assess progress against agreed priorities, with findings reported publicly. This would strengthen accountability between elections, support longer-term policy consistency, and deepen democratic engagement.

Across uses, the discussion also highlighted the operational and design dimensions of assemblies. Assemblies were described as spaces where power dynamics can be "flipped", especially when grounded in clear and transparent criteria. At the same time, Dunfermline leaders recognised trade-offs: more directed processes may provide clarity on issues to be covered, but risk undermining independence and citizen control.

Assemblies were seen as particularly useful in contexts of uncertainty or open-ended policy exploration, such as when funding is available, but goals are not yet clearly defined. Their open design allows for emergent outputs, although this flexibility also requires time and capacity to "tune" the process and makes them challenging to align with more rigid institutional instruments.

Across these uses, a recurring theme is that the method itself is what confers value. The structured deliberative design was seen as producing a robust and legitimate mandate, one that can carry weight in contested governance environments. Without such methodological

robustness, participants noted, decision-making risks becoming a struggle between competing mandates of different decision-makers.

At the same time, realising these uses depends on broader institutional conditions, including leadership buy-in, organisational culture, and the ability to work across less attuned areas of government. Organisers of deliberative process should recognise that not all civil servants will share the same level of alignment and that public administration is internally quite diverse. Assemblies, in this sense, are not only embedded in participatory ecologies but also embedded within governance ecologies.

4.2 Users of ultra-local deliberative assemblies

The workshop discussions revealed a diverse and context-dependent set of actors who may engage with, mobilise, or benefit from ultra-local deliberative assemblies. Rather than a fixed set of users, participants emphasised the contextual nature of uptake, shaped by institutional cultures, existing infrastructures, and local relationships.

At the centre are public bodies, identified as expected users of Assembly outputs if motivated by institutions themselves. These actors are expected not only to respond to recommendations but, in some cases, to take on an advocacy role, standing behind the outcomes and assessing their impact over time. However, their capacity to do so is uneven and contingent on broader conditions, such as budgetary pressures and organisational alignment. Participants noted that the backdrop of budget cuts can limit uptake, particularly where the necessary infrastructure to support deliberative processes is lacking.

Alongside public institutions, community and third-sector organisations were seen as important intermediaries. Their willingness to engage with assemblies was described as highly contextual, depending on prior relationships with local government and familiarity with participatory practices. In the case of Dunfermline, the presence of organisations with long-standing partnership relations and deep knowledge of local actors and community dynamics was seen as a key enabling factor. This is not necessarily easy to replicate across cases and foregrounds the need for constant investment in the ecological nurturing and not only as a one-off 'parachuting' of deliberative processes.

A distinct category of users are external facilitators and practitioners, particularly those involved in moderating and designing deliberative processes. Dunfermline leaders highlighted ongoing plans to involve external organisations in facilitating workshops with multiple stakeholders, pointing to a broader use of assemblies as a site for capacity building. In this sense, the skills and methods developed through assemblies may travel to other policy domains, extending their influence beyond the immediate process.

Assembly members themselves were also identified as active users of the process outputs. Beyond their role as participants, they can act as advocates and messengers, endorsing and disseminating recommendations within the wider community. This communicative role is particularly important in reinforcing the legitimacy of the process, especially given that assemblies are perceived as involving "non-usual voices" and operating with a high degree of procedural integrity.

More broadly, Dunfermline leaders pointed to a potential user group comprising organisations seeking to develop or fund proposals. Assemblies may offer a way to co-produce initiatives

with communities, potentially increasing their attractiveness to funders. However, this remains a hypothesis rather than an established practice, indicating an area for future policy experimentation.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of residents and the wider public as indirect users. While not all are directly involved in the Assembly, their endorsement of the recommendations can reinforce the legitimacy and uptake of outcomes. Planned dissemination activities, such as public events, were seen as key moments in determining how far this broader uptake extends. But also, critically, they were mentioned as having an 'oversight role', making sure the recommendations are followed through.

At a different scale, participants contrasted ultra-local assemblies with national-level processes, noting that the latter may feel too distant or abstract, particularly in large populations. This reinforces the specificity of ultra-local assemblies as tools for place-based engagement, where proximity enhances relevance and potential use.

Across these categories, a recurring issue concerns the conditions of uptake. Effective use of assemblies depends not only on the quality of the process but also on the presence of supportive infrastructures, organisational readiness, and shared understanding. Where these are absent, there is a risk that attention shifts away from the substance of recommendations towards debates about the robustness of the process itself.

Overall, the findings suggest that ultra-local assemblies do not have a single, clearly defined user. As the workshop attendees jokingly stated: "It is for anyone in the market for dialogue". Instead, they operate within a distributed ecology of actors, each engaging with the process for different reasons, ranging from advancing specific agendas to building confidence or strengthening relationships.

4.3 Lessons for implementing ultra-local deliberative assemblies

The workshop surfaced a set of lessons that emphasise the importance of early design choices, institutional alignment, and sustained engagement in ensuring that ultra-local deliberative assemblies achieve meaningful impact.

A first lesson concerns the need to establish the right processes and infrastructures from the outset. Dunfermline leaders stressed that assemblies cannot be treated as standalone interventions; their effectiveness depends on pre-existing capacities within institutions and communities. The resource and organisational demands of running such processes are significant and should not be underestimated, particularly in contexts where capacity is already constrained.

Closely related is the importance of grounding the process within the community from the very beginning. This includes involving community groups and representatives in the 'operations group' design of the Assembly, ensuring that strong and diverse voices are present early on. Workshop participants highlighted that this grounding was not incidental but the result of deliberate early conversations about the role of the Assembly within the local participation culture. Importantly, the Dunfermline leaders mentioned that involving community members was critical for "getting the language right" of how to engage with the wider resident group.

Relatedly, the involvement of external expertise is also flagged as a relevant component of the operations group. They provide the element of capacity building but also adding a buffer between community members and institutional actors. In this case, expertise was mentioned in relation to deliberative expertise. That is, expertise in process design and facilitation. But also, future processes can consider the role of subject-matter expertise in the operations group.

A fourth lesson relates to public awareness and agenda-setting. Building visibility and legitimacy requires that topics emerge, at least in part, from community concerns rather than being entirely top-down. This not only strengthens the relevance of the process but also generates a form of public pressure that can prevent the outputs from being reduced to “just another document sitting on shelf”. In this sense, awareness-raising is not only communicative but also political, creating conditions for accountability.

Another central lesson concerns the need to plan for open-ended advocacy as part of the design of the process itself. This includes identifying next steps early on, securing buy-in from decision-makers such as elected representatives and heads of service, and embedding mechanisms for follow-up. Examples discussed include designing a one-year review from the outset and developing simple tracking tools to monitor progress on recommendations.

Participants also emphasised the value of adaptive and responsive process design. Incorporating active feedback from Assembly members during the process allows organisers to adjust and improve the experience in real time. Similarly, selecting contributors who resonate with the community was seen as crucial for ensuring that deliberations translate effectively into meaningful and actionable recommendations.

Across these lessons, a consistent theme is that the success of ultra-local assemblies depends on their ability to balance bottom-up legitimacy and grounding, with the political literacy of understanding the language and levers of political power. In practice, this insight involves broadening what we take to be the requirements of design as a practice that exceeds just what happens when citizens arrive at the table.

Design should include all the initial grounding practices. In the case of Dunfermline, this meant extensive outreach activities, including in-person consultations, social media scraping and polling for setting the agenda, as well as working in the streets to get awareness and support for the Assembly.

Design should also include all the advocacy practices. This may entail creating post-Assembly accountability mechanisms, like year-on reviews, organising debrief forums, and follow-up mechanisms. But also, it should involve pre- and post-Assembly buy-in and political awareness of the process to secure that key actors are willing to then help support recommendations through the messy pathway towards change.

A remaining gap emerging from the workshop relates to the limited availability of tools to systematically engage a wider range of actors within the participation ecology in ‘using’ the outputs. While local businesses, charities, and social groups were frequently identified, both in internal discussions and in the Assembly itself, as potential drivers for implementing recommendations, we observe that it is still difficult for the local governments and the Assembly itself to help dock outputs beyond the public system.

This points to a broader challenge around ecological coordination. From the perspective of local authorities, it is not always clear how to translate Assembly outputs into forms that resonate with, or can be taken up by, actors beyond the public sector. There is therefore a potential need for new or adapted policy instruments that explicitly aim to bridge this gap – creating interfaces through which recommendations can be shared and operationalised across the wider ecosystem of local actors.

At the same time, the discussions suggest that this challenge may not be addressed solely through additional policy instruments, but also through reconsiderations of Assembly design itself. More deliberate efforts to decentre institutional actors and create direct channels between Assembly processes and non-governmental stakeholders could open alternative pathways for implementation.

This would imply moving beyond a model where local government acts as the primary conduit for uptake, towards more distributed forms of ownership and action across the participation ecology. Throughout the internal sessions and even during the Assembly, we observed alignment with this vision. However, there is still more experimentation needed for ultra-local assemblies to find more robust mechanisms to implement this distributed vision.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Dunfermline New City Assembly represents a landmark moment in Scotland's local democratic history. It is not the first Citizen Assembly designed at the local level, nor the first democratic innovation designed in Scotland. However, the Dunfermline Assembly does represent a novel approach in adopting an ultra-local, ecological design to deliberative processes with the potential of scaling beyond the city and possibly even beyond Scotland.

The recommendations set out below are addressed primarily to the Electoral Reform Society, Fife Council, and the Scottish Government, but carry lessons for any institution considering the adoption of ultra-local deliberative processes. They are organised under the overarching themes of this evaluation: the quality of the deliberative process itself, the impact and sustainability of the process, and finally, the broader question of how deliberative assemblies can be used and scaled.

5.1 General Assessment of the Deliberative Process

The Assembly demonstrated a high overall standard of deliberative design, and the recommendations below are intended to share lessons and strengthen what was already a professionally executed process.

The selection of participants was conducted in a systematic manner, following the procedures of democratic lottery by an experienced and credible external organisation (the Sortition Foundation). As a result, the final composition of the Assembly members is a descriptive sample of key socio-demographic characteristics of the city.

Our evaluation found that the process design was conducted in accordance with quality standards for deliberative mini-publics, such as ensuring compensation, adapting to citizens' needs, and offering diverse methods for engagement. The delivery team included highly renowned practitioners in the field but also involved local actors with significant knowledge of the local context.

In this vein, the success behind the design lies in the combination of external expertise in deliberation and ultra-local considerations, such as facilitators being recruited from the city, engagement with community representatives, the use of community spaces (namely, the Abbeyview community hub) and working with local volunteers for scraping social media data and conducting polling.

We recommend that future processes continue to combine external expertise in deliberative democracy with local expertise in the community.

Importantly, during the evaluation of the Assembly, we inquired about the level of political engagement. We observed that most participants engaged primarily through the traditional channels of representative democracy (e.g. through elections). Other, more direct mechanisms, such as contacting the government or through social mobilisation, were less prevalent. Relatedly, more than 50% of respondents in our evaluation survey said that they are not at all, or only slightly knowledgeable about how councillors make plans and policies. In that sense, the Assembly composition reflects a segment of the city that is largely not actively engaged in local institutional decision-making.

This is relevant insofar as the findings show that high-quality deliberation and decision-making can come from local actors who are not already experienced in actively influencing political systems, and that assemblies can offer spaces for those who have sat further away from decision-making.

We recommend that future processes continue to create space for those who are neither “the usual voices” nor “the loudest voices,” as highlighted during the process.

5.2 Impact and sustainability

Our evaluation assessed the impact of the Assembly on participants and on policy, as well as key dimensions of its sustainability (institutional sustainability, civic energy sustainability and capacity building).

We found that the impact of the Assembly on participants was very positive. It increased their trust in local councillors, and improved their understanding, knowledge and awareness of the local economy, economic policy, community building policy and policymaking process of Fife Council. Overall, these results point towards increased self-efficacy, supported by greater hope in the community and political institutions, and they remain one of the strongest arguments in favour of more deliberative assemblies.

We recommend that more citizen assemblies are run across Scotland to increase people’s trust in democratic political institutions, in their communities and in themselves.

The Dunfermline New City Assembly offered a unique opportunity to explore how opportunities for impact emerge during the process, rather than its path being predefined. We identified a key role for facilitators and the process design to increase the “impactfulness” of recommendations through various mechanisms. Two examples include the facilitators’ critical approach to recommendations as they emerged, which allowed them to introduce prompts to make them more concrete and forceful; and the integration of council staff into the Assembly organisation permitted live information sharing that shaped the participants’ framing of recommendations. This responsive approach to recommendation production could be expanded in the future by more explicitly grounding the deliberations on the participation ecology to expand the impact imagination of participants beyond the obvious actors (the council and the political parties).

We recommend that the participation ecology work done by citizen Assembly organisers is more explicitly used during the recommendation drafting stage with the goal of opening avenues for impact beyond political institutions.

We also recommend that organisers and evaluators adapt their frameworks to capture impact as created and focus on assessing how the process internally and externally produces opportunities for impact that were non-existent at the start.

Our evaluation highlights the importance of using observation as an ownership-building strategy. The ERS invited a diverse pool of political and policy actors to observe the process as it unfolded. By witnessing the quality of deliberation, the effect on participants, and the nature of the emerging recommendations first-hand, these actors developed early familiarity

with the Assembly's outputs before it had formally concluded. The implicit goal is a smoother terrain for the journey that recommendations will need to travel after the final weekend, and we had some preliminary evidence of it: most observers with political or policy responsibilities informally remarked that the recommendations were "not unrealistic and doable". In short, structured observation can function as a form of pre-implementation groundwork, reducing the distance between the Assembly and the actors best placed to act on its outputs.

We recommend that future assemblies follow Dunfermline's example and adopt structured observation strategies as a deliberate tool for ownership-building. This means proactively identifying and inviting relevant political and policy actors to observe sessions, with clear guidance on their role so as not to interfere with the deliberative process. Observation should be treated as part of the impact strategy, not an administrative afterthought.

The community-based model for recruiting facilitators represents a genuine and admirable attempt to build local democratic capacity. However, we observed that a trade-off exists between capacity-building oriented interventions (like recruiting non-professional, local facilitators), and the quality of facilitation. The uneven quality of facilitation observed across tables, including instances of facilitators driving conversations too much or not distributing conversation more equally across participants can pose a risk to deliberative integrity. This result is, of course, expected as deliberative facilitation is a skill and a mindset that requires work to develop. And, importantly, this observation refers to specific instances into what was generally a high-quality process.

Future processes should invest more into practical, hands-on facilitator training, including perhaps mock deliberation sessions and structured feedback on behaviours that undermine open dialogue. In that sense, despite the relevance of written facilitator guides and between-session coaching, preparatory training (especially for but not restricted to local actors with limited experience in deliberative facilitation) before citizens arrive at the table is a necessary investment. Not only is facilitation quality integral to the legitimacy of the process and experience of citizens, but also, it helps build up assets and resources locally than can be activated for future processes.

We recommend that future processes continue to build capacity by engaging local actors as Assembly facilitators, but more investment is needed in practical training beforehand. We also recommend that peer-facilitator recruitment processes are designed to attract people that, regardless of their professional experience, are willing to facilitate rather than lead conversations.

Survey evidence showed that a significant proportion of participants left the Assembly with only a moderate understanding of how their recommendations would be used. In an open-ended, ecologically grounded process like Dunfermline's, some ambiguity is inherent and arguably desirable as recommendations are not merely addressed to the council but to a wider ecology of actors. However, our evaluation shows that this complexity should be communicated clearly and early, rather than introduced predominantly in a post-Assembly session on the final day.

For example, future iterations could introduce a short, plain-language briefing at the outset of the process that sets out examples of how a range of actors may use the Assembly's outputs and the mechanisms through which these outputs will be tracked and reported. The

promise of a follow-up meeting and well-defined accountability sessions, which were highlighted by participants as a critical driver of trust, should be formalised and carried on into any future iterations.

As we argued, a more meaningful model for sustained engagement of participants would need to create structured opportunities for former Assembly members to review progress, ask questions, and potentially escalate concerns. It is still unclear how the Assembly could continuously engage in citizen-led scrutiny, but this seems to be a clear horizon of work coming from both citizens and the civil servants behind the process.

We recommend that future processes clarify political impact more by combining accountability sessions and direct opportunities to hear from powerholders, as well as highlighting how various actors beyond the state can implement recommendations.

5.3 Uses and scalability of “ultra local” deliberative assemblies

The Dunfermline Assembly offers important lessons about the conditions under which ultra-local deliberative processes can generate durable impact. Its distinctive character, deep rootedness in a local participation ecology, sustained institutional backing, and an open-ended rather than issue-specific mandate, makes it a useful model for other Scottish cities and councils to consider, though not one to be replicated uncritically.

The workshop with Fife Council community engagement leaders surfaced a strong consensus that assemblies are most effective when they are not treated as one-off participatory exercises but are integrated into existing governance instruments. Locality Improvement Plans and Community Plans offer natural entry points. Having those instruments in mind is key for locking-in ‘safe’ hosts for the recommendations.

Beyond these instruments, there is the potential to influence multiple policy instruments and actions across sectors in a way in which the Assembly operates at the integration level. However, integration requires that leadership buy-in is secured before the Assembly begins, not after recommendations have been drafted.

This work that has naturally been conducted by the Dunfermline team should be formally recognised as part of the design and preparatory stages of future processes. Future processes could, for example, identify named institutional champions at both officer and elected member level at the design stage and should explicitly map how the Assembly’s outputs will connect to existing planning and budgetary cycles.

We recommend that future processes invest early on in designing mechanisms for political buy-in and political championing from local leaders.

One of the most significant challenges for any ultra-local process identified in the ‘uses of local deliberation’ workshop and throughout the evaluation is the difficulty of translating Assembly outputs into actions that can be taken up by actors beyond the public sector, such as local businesses, third-sector organisations, community groups and social enterprises. At present, local government acts as the primary (and often sole) conduit for uptake, which constrains the reach and ambition of Assembly recommendations. The Dunfermline Assembly

team are already conducting co-production workshops with wider partners, and therefore more learnings can come from this in the future.

Future assemblies should invest in the design of dedicated dissemination and co-production events that bring non-governmental actors into contact with the Assembly's outputs at an early stage, before recommendations have been passed to the council alone. This may entail the development of new or adapted policy instruments, such as community-facing action plans or funding frameworks, that explicitly bridge the gap between public sector and wider ecological implementation. Advancing in this direction would not only be beneficial but would be a meaningful and frontier contribution to the field of deliberative democracy.

We recommend that future processes invest in new policy instruments and network-building initiatives that allow for non-governmental actors to take an active role in the implementation of assembly outputs.

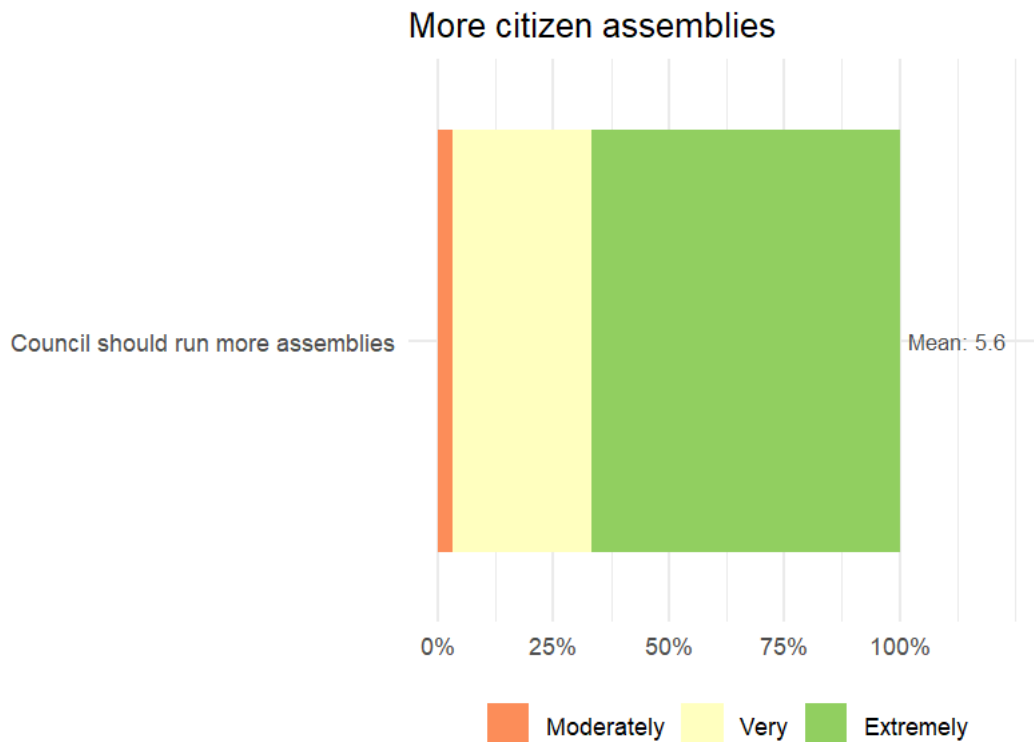
The Dunfermline Assembly derived much of its distinctive character from the prior investment made by its organisers in understanding and connecting to the local ecology of participation. Community representatives were involved in the operations group; facilitators were recruited from within the city; venues and language were chosen to reflect a genuinely local sensibility. This level of ecological grounding cannot be parachuted in. Rather, it builds upon sustained efforts.

Any attempt to scale or replicate the Dunfermline model must begin with an equivalent investment in understanding the participation ecology of the target community. This includes mapping existing organisations, relationships, and community dynamics; conducting early outreach to identify trusted intermediaries; and building the operations group around those who are already embedded in that ecology. Skipping this stage in the name of efficiency risks producing a technically competent but ecologically disjointed process. That is, a process that generates recommendations without the relational infrastructure needed to carry them forward, especially beyond the immediate institutional actors that initiated the assembly.

We recommend that future processes take ecological grounding of assemblies as a pre-requisite for their success and scalability.

These recommendations reflect the evaluators' conviction that the Dunfermline New City Assembly has demonstrated not only that ultra-local deliberation works, but that it can work remarkably well under the right conditions. The task now is to learn rigorously from this experiment, attending as carefully to what did not work as to what did, and to build the institutional and ecological foundations that will allow the next iteration to go further.

Overall, the assessment coming from members of the Dunfermline New City Assembly is very positive. As shown in the figure below, participants are clearly supportive of the need to run more deliberative processes.



From our observations and interviews, we observed that even if limited policy changes are perceived, Assembly members say they would still value the space and how it simultaneously allowed them to better understand their community, get into dialogue with people from different walks of life and in doing so, experience a different kind of democracy in play. In that sense, we conclude that there is value in these processes as “schools for democracy” in themselves that need to be recognised.

As valuable as it is, the learning and energising experience of taking part in the Assembly should not distract us from the fact that most participants will measure the success of the Assembly against the implementation of proposals. This highlights that there is additional political value in how this process can serve an articulating role in future policy decisions. Much of this work is still unfolding, and, therefore, our evaluation cannot thoroughly account for what has happened as a result of the Dunfermline Assembly. We can say that tracking this work and its fruits is needed in order to justify the value for money that ultra-local deliberation has, especially under increasing budgetary constraints.

From our evaluation, we see good reasons to be hopeful and, importantly, good reasons for the 'Dunfermline model' to be adopted by more cities across Scotland and the world.

References

- Agger, A. (2021). Democratic innovations in municipal planning: Potentials and challenges of place-based platforms for deliberation between politicians and citizens. *Cities*, 117, 103317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103317>
- Bianchi, I. (2025). The democratising capacity of new municipalism: Beyond direct democracy in public–common partnerships. *Policy & Politics*, 53(2), 403–422. <https://doi.org/10.1332/03055736Y2024D000000033>
- City of Dunfermline. (2025). Dunfermline’s Top Community Issues. *City Of Dunfermline*. <https://cityofdunfermline.co.uk/chronicles/dunfermlines-top-community-issues>
- Ercan, S. A., & Hendriks, C. M. (2013). The democratic challenges and potential of localism: Insights from deliberative democracy (Pt 1). *Policy Studies*, 34(4), 422–440. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2013.822701>
- Escobar, O. (2019). Facilitators: The micropolitics of public participation and deliberation. In *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance* (pp. 178–195). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433862.00022>
- Falanga, R. (2024). Democratic innovations: Is the local scale (still) the ideal laboratory for democracy? *Local Government Studies*, 50(6). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2024.2407010>
- Gąsiorowska, A. (2023, October 1). *Understanding the policy impact of Citizens’ Assemblies: A dispatch from Gdansk | Deliberative Democracy Digest*. <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/understanding-the-policy-impact-of-citizens-assemblies-a-dispatch-from-gdansk/>
- Goñi, I., & Vives, E. (2025). *Dunfermline New City Assembly Ecological Evaluation Report*. LSE Consulting, Fife Council, Electoral Reform Society, Scottish Government. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/assets/documents/Dunfermline-New-City-Assembly-Ecological-evaluation-report.pdf>
- Merida, J., & Frances, F. (2025). We are more, but we understand each other less. Progress and constraints of PB as a strategy for democratic deepening in the emergence of

'new municipalism'. *Contemporary Politics*.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2025.2558615>

People Powered. (2026, January). *Citizen's Assemblies Impact Data Research Brief 2025_final.pdf*. Google Docs.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qBcJsEXgpvEKSoiLHY7gU5F6erV_6wJe/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook

Schneidemesser, D. von, Oppold, D., & Stasiak, D. (2023). Diversity in Facilitation: Mapping Differences in Deliberative Designs. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1096>

Yi, C., & Qiu, X. (2025). From local government to local governance: A systematic literature review and future research agenda. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 84(1), 102–124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12644>