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Response to the Ministry of Justice Discussion Paper, A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement

Dear Ms Beaumont,

I am the principal investigator of a research group that is examining the possibilities of opening up institutions to greater engagement on the part of the citizens, using a wide range of methods to understand the reasons why people participate and what would cause them to engage further. The project, *Rediscovering the civic and achieving better outcomes in public policy* (<http://www.ipeg.org.uk/research/civicness/index.php>), is co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department of Communities and Local Government, and the North West Improvement Network. We have a number of responses to the Discussion Paper, which emerge from our research. We list and discuss them below, and hope they will be useful for the subsequent decisions the government may make. The views expressed here are broadly held by the team, but they do not represent those of our funders.

1. We welcome the document as an important step forward in responding to the challenges of British democracy in the twentieth century. We agree with the general direction and conclusions of the document, and many of the proposals for democratic innovations. We are engaged in a linked set of projects testing out the practicality of many of these proposals, such as summits/deliberation, participatory budgeting and

e-petitions, which we hope could feed into any further policies as our research findings emerge.

2. Even though we approve of the general direction and proposals of the document, we think it is at times a bit too defensive of the institutions and priority of representative democracy. We find this puzzling because the document acknowledges the problems representative democracy faces and it proposes to open up Parliament (see page 10, para 2). In our view, these new democratic mechanisms are usually complementary with those of representative democracy. They extend rather than challenge existing good practice. The document could be a bit more relaxed about these new channels of democratic participation. It could also defend them on their own grounds rather than see them as a way to shore up established institutions.
3. In relation to (2), we believe that the approach of the document appears at times too 'top down' and could be seen to be as controlling. There is too much discretion to be allowed to core decision-makers about what issues are to be debated (e.g. the proposal on e-petitions being debated in Parliament and the proposal on page 11 that greater consultation can occur 'on policy options on which government has an open mind'). Surely, the government should have an open mind at all times? It is up to the participators to decide what topics upon which they wish to debate.
4. The document is a bit too negative about the current state of apathy. On page 10, the document could acknowledge that there are already a lot of people participating in citizen governance. In a paper forthcoming at *The Public Administration Review*, I estimate this at about nine per cent of the population of England and Wales.¹ One of our researchers, Liz Richardson, investigated the many sorts of community activities that assist collective action in local communities as recounted in her recent book.² Rather than there being an apathetic citizenry, there are signs that the self-organising and community aspects of democracy are in good health, partly as a result of government efforts to stimulate participation. The main problem is with conventional political acts, such as membership of political parties and voter turnout. And regarding the discussion of the causes of the problem on p. 8, we would submit the one important cause of the decline in formal participation has to do with the performance of the political system and its politicians. It is not just societal factors. There is extensive research evidence that suggests this is the case.
5. One of the limitations of citizens' juries is that they do not involve large numbers of people, usually not more than 24. We have research aiming to test the idea that citizens juries may be 'scaled up' to include a wider range and greater number of citizens, using the internet. In our research, we are seeing whether up to 1,000 citizens may get involved at one time. We are working with MORI to test the idea that citizens

¹ Peter John (2008), 'Making representative democracy more representative. Can new forms of citizen governance in the UK open up democracy?', accepted at *Public Administration Review*

² Liz Richardson (2008), *DIY Community Action Neighbourhood problems and Community Self-Help*, Bristol Policy Press.

can deliberate on more controversial issues facing decision-makers, such as youth anti-social behaviour and community cohesion of neighbourhoods. We think the distinction the paper draws between citizen summits and citizen juries may be relaxed a little: summits may be like citizens juries and vice versa. We will be able to report on this by the end of the year.

6. If citizen summits and juries are to be transparent and trusted by the wider public, thought needs to be given to who will set the parameters of their debates, how they will be facilitated, how minority or multiple views will be addressed and how public the debate will be.
7. Petitions. We think that petitions can work for Parliament, but the citizen needs to be clear what is the effect of the petitions and who or what body considers them. In addition, considerable thought needs to go into the design of petition websites, so they maximise the participatory potential. We are working jointly with the Oxford Internet Institute to show that the design of the internet can affect the scale of participation. We aim to find out whether particular features that allow for interaction can have a positive effect.
8. Constitutional issues. Citizens in general are not greatly interested in constitutional issues and do not understand them well. That is not to say that constitutional issues should not be considered, but it is more likely that citizens will be motivated to deliberate on practical policy issues, such as crime, policing, health, education and the economy.
9. A review of comparative experience of Participatory Budgeting (PB) conducted for DCLG revealed the following conclusions. The mechanisms of the PB in Porto Alegre are clear, though complex and not always followed to the letter in PB initiatives elsewhere for understandable reasons given differences in context. Three crucial elements need to be in place for PB to have a transformative impact. One, a political authority committed to delegation; two, civic organisations enable to support a positive response from citizens; and three, the right structure of rules and incentives in the design of the PB process. These elements combined with a long term commitment to the practice could - as in Porto Alegre - be expected to achieve a major impact on politics and state citizen relations. Most attempts to follow the Porto Alegre experience, including those initiatives adopted so far in the UK, have been rather more modest in the goals and considerably more limited in their impact. The simple adoption of PB techniques does not lead to quick-fix changes in embedded political, citizen and bureaucratic cultures. But some successes in empowerment can be claimed in almost all attempts at implementing PB. The secrets of success are local and internal to the design, agency and citizens engaged in PB. To empower the skills and efficacy of citizens through PB requires the practice to be supported, open to all and focused on issues of salience. To achieve an even larger sense of impact at a community level in terms of shifting a sense of political efficacy or fostering cohesion requires the presence of political buy in and salience, in particular. Finally, to have an empowering impact on decision-making, the key factors are less easy to discern but

support/facilitation, political and bureaucratic buy-in should be present.

We hope these points will be useful in the government's deliberations on the responses to this exciting document. If you or your team would like further details about our research, we would be very happy to be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter John', written in a cursive style.

Peter John

For the project team, *Rediscovering the civic and achieving better outcomes in public policy*:

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