Participatory design as an epistemic practice: Designing for institutional responsiveness in the Scottish Parliament

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Abstract: This paper examines Participatory Design (PD) as an epistemic practice that can strengthen how democratic institutions listen and respond to diverse forms of knowledge. Drawing on the *PARliament Engagement* project, it explores how creative approaches can reveal and reshape the interpretive practices that govern what counts as evidence in parliamentary scrutiny. The research was conducted through a participatory action research process involving ethnographic shadowing, interviews, and co-design workshops with parliamentary staff, creating opportunities for shared reflection on how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and used across scrutiny work. The paper develops the concept of institutional responsiveness to describe how PD can make interpretations of evidence visible, support organisational reflection, and build capacity for more inclusive and accountable decision-making. This positions PD not only as a method of engagement, but as a way of designing the infrastructures through which democratic institutions understand, evaluate, and respond to diverse forms of knowledge.

Keywords: participatory design; institutional responsiveness; epistemic practices; parliamentary scrutiny

1. Introduction

Democratic backsliding across many political systems has renewed concern with how institutions sustain legitimacy and responsiveness (Knospe & Mounk, 2025; Warren, 2025). These challenges are mirrored in Scotland, where declining public confidence raises questions about how institutions listen to, learn from, and act upon public knowledge (Curtice & Birtwistle, 2025).

The Scottish Parliament has committed to strengthening citizen inclusion through its committee inquiry process. Committee inquiries play a central role in scrutinising legislation and policy, but the time and resources available vary considerably, shaping the scope of evidence gathering. Traditional approaches such as public calls for views and oral evidence from expert witnesses often privilege established voices and limit representation of diverse lived experiences. Challenges also remain in integrating insights from these activities into

formal briefings and reports. A hierarchy of evidence persists, with formal oral evidence prioritised over participatory contributions (The Scottish Parliament, 2025; Commission on Parliamentary Reform, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the PARliament Engagement project explored how Participatory Design (PD) approaches could strengthen how evidence is generated, interpreted, and used within scrutiny. Working with the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), the Participation and Communities Team (PACT), the Parliamentary Communications Office (PCO), and the Committee Office, the project examined how creative and participatory methods might enhance responsiveness to diverse knowledge.

This paper builds on that experience to explore how PD can illuminate and reshape how institutions listen and respond. Emerging from Scandinavian cooperative traditions, PD emphasises collaboration, shared ownership, and iterative sense-making (Ehn, 2008). These principles now extend into complex social and political systems, where designers collaborate with diverse collectives to support ongoing participation and reflection (Huybrechts et al., 2025). At the same time, research in design, policy, and governance has highlighted how design interacts with institutional norms, knowledge practices, and organisational learning (Richardson et al., 2025; Kimbell et al., 2022; Bason & Austin, 2022). By attending to the social and material conditions through which knowledge is produced and interpreted, PD can support critical reflection on how institutional settings shape participation and responsiveness.

Building on work in democratic innovation that highlights the need for institutions not only to engage citizens but to learn from participation (Bua & Escobar, 2018; Escobar & Bua, 2025; Saward, 2025), this paper develops the concept of institutional responsiveness to describe how PD can make epistemic practices visible, support organisational reflection, and strengthen inclusive, accountable decision-making in parliamentary contexts.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the conceptual framing, situating PD within governance and introducing institutional responsiveness. Section 3 outlines the PARliament Engagement project and its methods. Section 4 presents three thematic insights, and Section 5 discusses institutional responsiveness and implications for design in democratic governance.

2. Conceptual framing: Participatory design and democratic institutions

This section positions PD as an epistemic practice within democratic governance, examining its role in institutional reasoning, parliamentary knowledge work, and responsiveness. These strands provide the conceptual frame for the PARliament Engagement project.

2.1 Participatory design in contexts of governance

PD emerged from the Scandinavian workplace democracy movement of the 1970s, where collaboration between workers, unions, and technologists aimed to democratise decision-making and technological change. As Ehn (2008) argues, PD was from the outset a political movement concerned with how participation redistributes power and shapes representation. Early projects positioned PD as epistemic as well as practical, grounded in

situated action, mutual learning, and attention to how knowledge is made and shared. Luck characterises this as "collective reflection-in-action" (2008, p.4), emphasising PD's capacity to reveal assumptions embedded in practice.

As PD expanded beyond the workplace, it evolved into an approach for examining how knowledge, values, and authority are negotiated across public and institutional settings. Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren (2012) describe this shift as a move "from democracy at work towards PD in and for open democratic public spaces," where PD is oriented not toward consensus but toward "forceful but tolerant disputes among passionately engaged publics" (p.127–128). This *agonistic* orientation highlights how institutions encounter difference and how interpretive frames shape decision-making – conditions central to parliamentary settings where multiple forms of expertise intersect.

Within PD, *infrastructuring* captures the work of sustaining collaboration across shifting coalitions and temporalities. Rather than denoting a discrete method, it describes how designers cultivate the social and material conditions that enable participation, accountability, and reflection (Huybrechts, Benesch & Geib, 2017; Teli et al., 2020). The related concept of *institutioning* extends this perspective to the organisational realm, foregrounding how design exposes its dependencies on institutional norms and, through reflection, can gradually transform them (Huybrechts et al., 2025; 2024). Institutioning highlights work that "often remains in the backstage when participation on the ground is privileged" (2025, p.57), drawing attention to how institutional practices evolve through ongoing negotiation.

These developments have aligned PD with broader research on design, policy, and governance (Broadley and Dixon, 2022). Hillgren, Light, and Strange (2020) describe design for policy as a form of world-making that re-imagines problems and reconfigures which forms of knowledge are recognised. DiSalvo (2022) similarly conceptualises design as democratic inquiry, a form of civic experimentation through which publics are constructed and institutional assumptions are examined. Within neoliberal urban governance, PD has been shown to reinforce or contest hierarchies depending on how epistemic authority is distributed (Dore, 2023). Meanwhile, Vaz, Koria & Prendeville (2022) have demonstrated (2022) how grassroots design practices can reposition community priorities within institutional agendas.

Across this terrain, design is increasingly valued not as a practice of creating fixed solutions but for its capacity to cultivate reflexivity and negotiation within complex systems (Bason & Austin, 2022; Kimbell et al., 2022). Richardson et al. (2025) propose a typology of instrumental, improvisational, and generative relationships between policy and design, illustrating how design can alternately serve, adapt to, or challenge institutional logics. Their framework captures the tensions that define PD's institutional role: mediating between policy and publics, while supporting reflection on how governance processes and ways of knowing co-evolve.

Taken together, this body of research foregrounds PD's capacity to surface and interrogate the epistemic assumptions that shape institutional practice. In parliaments, where formal procedures privilege particular evidence norms, PD offers an alternative lens for examining how expertise, participation, and institutional reasoning are brought into relation.

2.2 Knowledge, evidence and listening in parliaments

Evidence is central to legislative scrutiny, yet its meaning and use are institutionally constructed. Boswell (2008) has positioned organisations as mobilising expert knowledge both instrumentally to inform decisions and symbolically "as a means of legitimising particular decisions or bureaucratic domination per se" (2008, p.4721). In parliamentary inquiry, evidence therefore performs both analytical and political work. Its credibility is shaped not only by empirical rigour but by how it is framed, presented, and evaluated through formal processes.

Geddes' studies of UK Parliament select committees show how these dynamics structure the routines and reasoning that underpin scrutiny. Examinations of how "legalistic definitions around 'evidence' shape wider beliefs in how to engage with knowledge claims and the practices of undertaking inquiries" (2020, p.40) underscore the tendency for written and oral submissions from recognised experts to be privileged, while experiential and emotional accounts are often undervalued or misinterpreted. Despite efforts to diversify participation, ideals of impartiality and balance continue to elevate formal expertise (Geddes, 2020; 2023). Consequently, committees' aspirations toward inclusivity can be constrained by evidentiary frameworks that marginalise the very publics they aim to engage.

These tensions echo wider debates on democratic innovation. Participatory and deliberative mechanisms have multiplied across democratic systems (Smith 2009; Bua & Escobar 2018), yet their institutional effects remain limited. Hammond (2021) contrasts activation (where institutions control participatory processes) with empowerment (where citizens shape agendas and outcomes), arguing that most initiatives remain activating because established institutional routines shape how input is interpreted. Landwehr similarly describes democratic innovations as "mostly additive" (2024, p.183), operating to correct biases without changing underlying decision-making logics. Such tendencies reflect what Escobar and Bua term "participation without power" (2025, p.14), where institutions invite public input but struggle to convert listening into learning.

These critiques draw attention to listening as a democratic capacity. Capizzo and Feinman (2022) conceptualise "architectures of listening" as the formal and cultural arrangements that "institutionalise listening procedures, create efficient processes for collecting data, and demonstrate organisational investment…building cultures that value listening and act on what they hear and learn" (p.277). For parliaments, this highlights the need to design not only opportunities for engagement but the interpretive and organisational conditions that allow contributions to shape scrutiny.

Saward's (2025) account of design/democracy provides a useful bridge to PD. For Saward, democratic institutions are continually made and remade through acts of representation, imagination, and design. Parliaments are therefore not only arenas for gathering evidence but sites of ongoing design activity, where the material and procedural arrangements of listening shape what can be known and who is heard. This perspective positions PD as a means of cultivating institutional responsiveness by making interpretive practices visible and negotiable within scrutiny.

2.3 Institutional responsiveness

While responsiveness is conventionally understood as elected representatives reacting to citizens' needs, research emphasises how institutions themselves reflect, interpret and

adapt (Christensen 2025; Crewe 2021; Coghill, Lewis, & Steinack 2012). Institutions, as March and Olsen describe, are "collections of structures, rules and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life" (2005, p.4), and that function to filter, translate, and legitimise knowledge and expertise. As Crewe (2021) explores, institutional capacity is sustained through cultural and performative practices as much as formal procedures. Examinations of ritualised parliamentary and council settings demonstrate how credibility is embodied through learned performances of impartiality, order, and collective authority. Such routines can at once stabilise institutional life while constraining change.

Organisational learning theory helps clarify elements of institutional responsiveness. Argyris and Schön (1976) show that while organisations often adjust routines within existing norms, more substantive change requires interrogating the assumptions that guide action. This reflexive form of learning is central to democratic institutions. As Auqui-Cáceres and Furlan (2023) note, such learning depends not only on procedure but on conditions of trust, dialogue, and reflective space.

Responsiveness is also shaped by how institutions learn with others. PD highlights this relational aspect by showing that understanding is co-created rather than transmitted. Mutual learning, articulated by Huybrechts et al. (2024), makes visible the epistemic work that emerges through participation. Mortati (2022) advances this perspective, arguing that "the founding logic of design... needs updating" to address "new issues of participation, power, and control" (2023, p. 25). These insights position responsiveness as a shared capacity cultivated through ongoing engagement between institutions and publics.

Institutional responsiveness can thus be understood as the capacity of organisations to reflect on, interpret, and act upon diverse forms of knowledge through practices that make interpretive work explicit. It encompasses both procedural and cultural dimensions: structures for listening, and norms that value dialogue, reflexivity, and iterative change. This concept provides the analytical frame for examining how PD operated within the PARliament Engagement project.

3. Methodology and case context: PARliament Engagement

Taking place between 2024 and 2025, PARliament Engagement explored how PD could strengthen the Scottish Parliament's responsiveness to diverse forms of evidence within committee scrutiny. This research took place through an Academic Fellowship funded and supervised by SPICe and was conducted by the author as an embedded researcher working collaboratively with staff from SPICe, PACT, PCO, and clerks from the Committee Office. Situated within the Scottish Parliament's broader efforts to deepen democratic participation, evident in PACT's community-based engagement work, regional engagement programmes, and the deliberative People's Panel, the project responded to persistent challenges surrounding evidence hierarchies. Although the Parliament is recognised as a UK testbed for democratic innovation (Elstub, Carrick, & Khoban, 2021), committee witnesses remain dominated by "usual suspects" (Bochel & Berthier, 2021), and while written submissions and oral evidence shape scrutiny, insights from participatory sessions can be difficult to trace, echoing Roberts et al.'s (2020) observation that deliberative systems often struggle to

integrate experiential knowledge into formal evidence structures. Within this landscape, the research examined the extent to which visual and dialogic methods might support committee support teams to reflect on how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and used. The research adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, emphasising cycles of inquiry and reflection through which knowledge is co-produced (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Howard & Somerville, 2014). In investigating how scrutiny might be strengthened, PD provided a creative and epistemic mode of inquiry, using visualisation, generative techniques, and prototyping. Drawing on mutual learning (Huybrechts et al., 2024) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), staff from SPICe, PACT, PCO, and the Committee Office collaborated to reflect on how meaning, credibility, and authority are negotiated within everyday scrutiny work. While the research did not seek to evaluate formal institutional outcomes, it aimed to generate practical insights and experimental artefacts that could support reflection on evidence practices and shape future approaches to parliamentary engagement.

3.1 Research phases and methods

As shown in Figure 1, the project unfolded through four overlapping research phases.

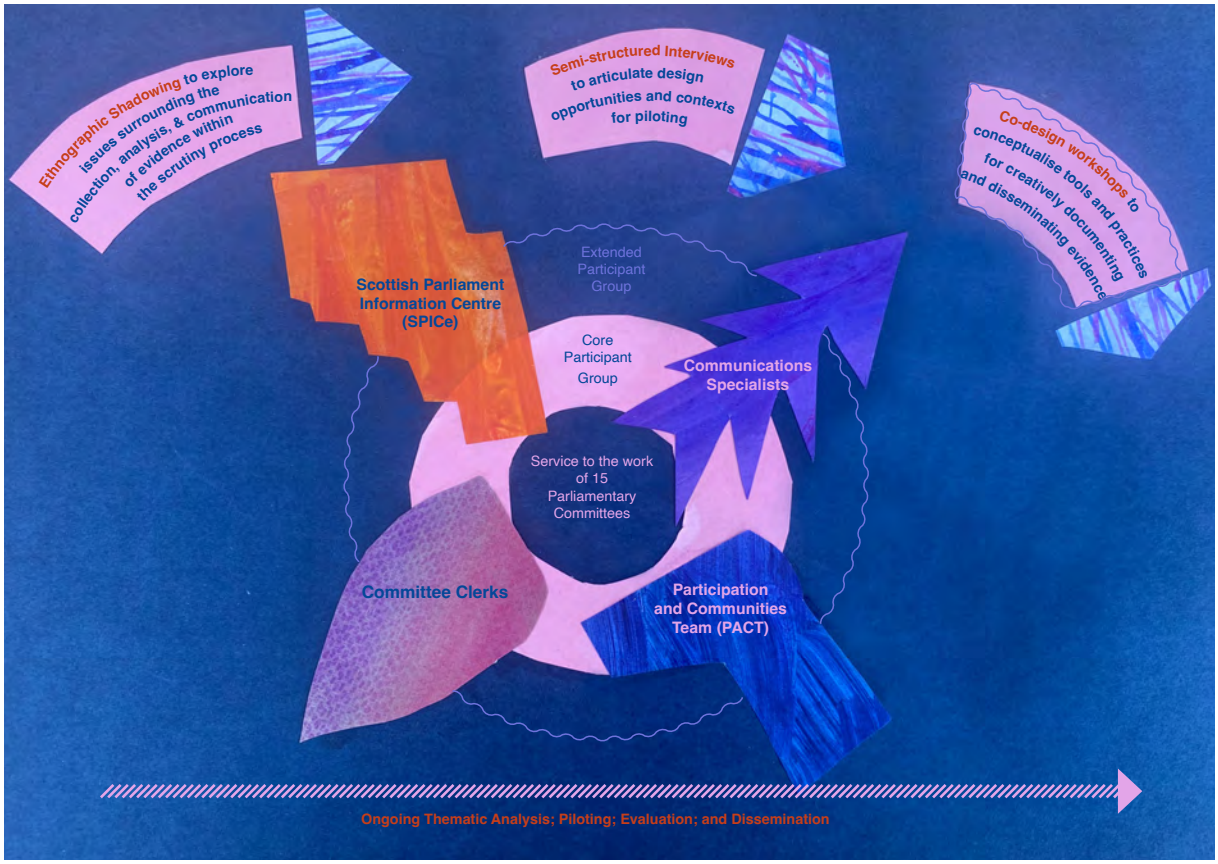

Figure 1 PARliament Engagement Research Approach: phases of the research and corresponding methods and approaches applied to engage with participants, support collaboration, and capture and analyse data (collage). 2024. Cara Broadley.

Phase 1 – scoping and ethnographic shadowing

The initial scoping phase involved immersive observation within the Scottish Parliament's committee structures. Four core participants representing SPICe, PACT, PCO, and the Committee Office were shadowed across meetings and evidence-gathering activities. As illustrated in Figure 2, observational drawing and fieldnote annotations captured how evidence was produced, circulated, and perceived across teams. These observations illuminated the interpretive work of parliamentary staff and the balance they maintain between impartiality, relevance, and inclusivity when coordinating evidence and engagement.

Figure 2 Observational Drawing: exploring practices, relationships, and dynamics surrounding evidence within committees and their support teams (drawing – detail). 2024. Cara Broadley.

Phase 2 – semi-structured interviews

Building on early insights, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with core participants. Questions explored challenges and opportunities in evidence use, cross-team collaboration, and participation. Participants described how certain forms of knowledge are prioritised, how engagement is mediated by procedural expectations, and what conditions might support more responsive practices. Interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify recurring issues and design opportunities. Drawing on themes, a set of eight design briefs was developed, as shown in Figure 3. Each brief distilled a key challenge or question, outlining background context and objectives for exploration in subsequent workshops.

Figure 3 Example of a Design Brief: briefs identified challenges and opportunities to be explored by the extended participant group (photograph). 2024. Cara Broadley.

Phase 3 – co-design workshops

Two co-design workshops brought together approximately twelve participants from across SPICe, PACT, PCO, and clerks from the Committee Office. Structured around the design briefs, these sessions enabled participants to prioritise shared challenges and to explore responses through creative and participatory activities. Using visual mapping, scenario-building, and paper prototyping, participants developed and refined concepts such as new approaches for gathering and synthesising lived experience evidence and prompts to support reflective discussion during committee planning. Each brief served as a springboard for dialogue, supporting parallel but connected strands of inquiry. Figures 4–9 show a range of activities and techniques that supported co-design in the workshops.

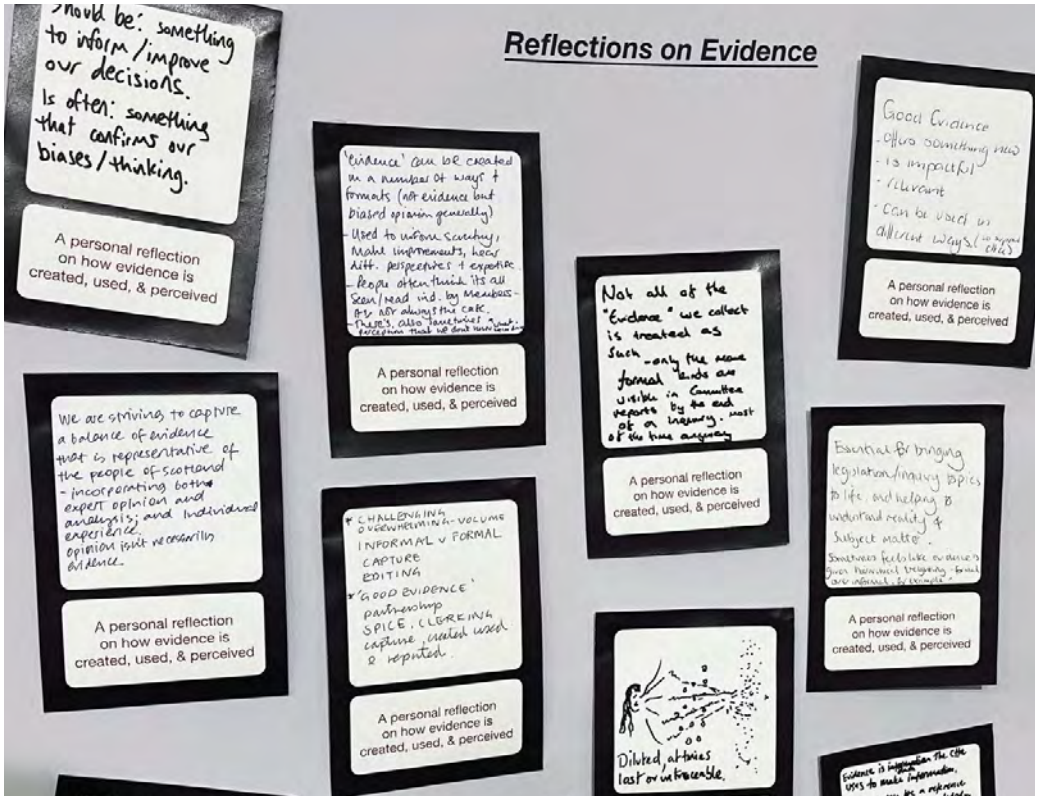

Figure 4 Participant Reflections on Evidence: activity developed to frame individual perspectives in co-design workshop 01 (photograph – detail). 2024. Cara Broadley.

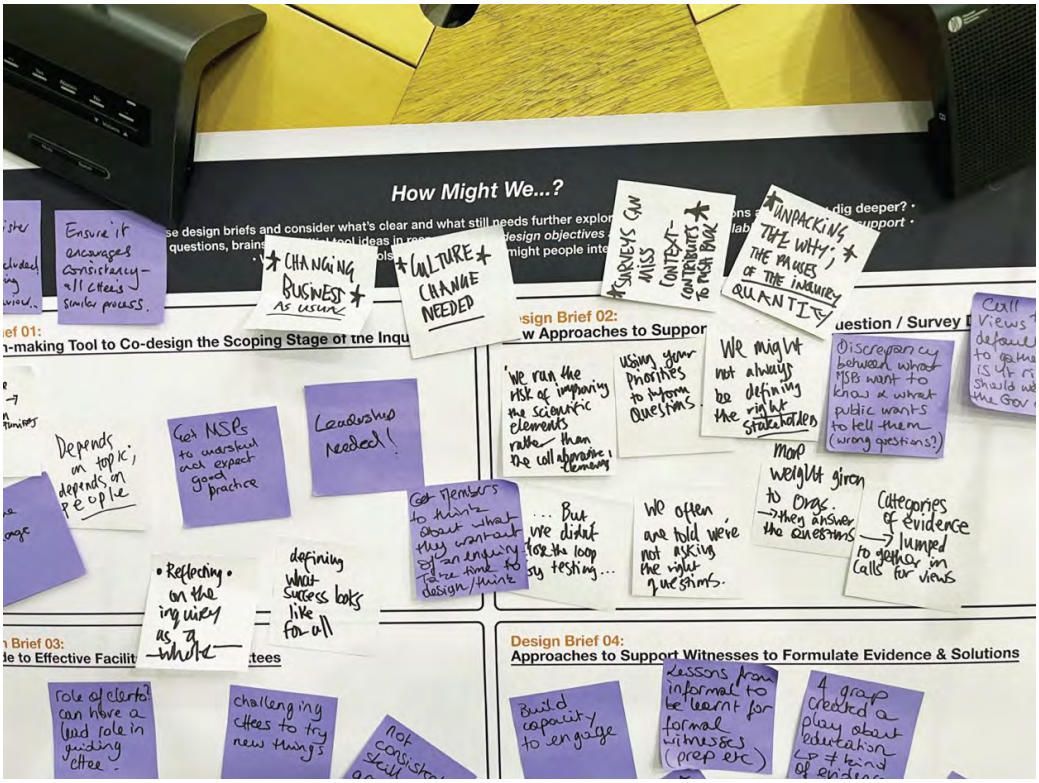

Figure 5 Exploring Design Briefs: ideation canvas used to unpack each of the eight Design Briefs in co-design workshop 01 (photograph – detail). 2024. Cara Broadley.

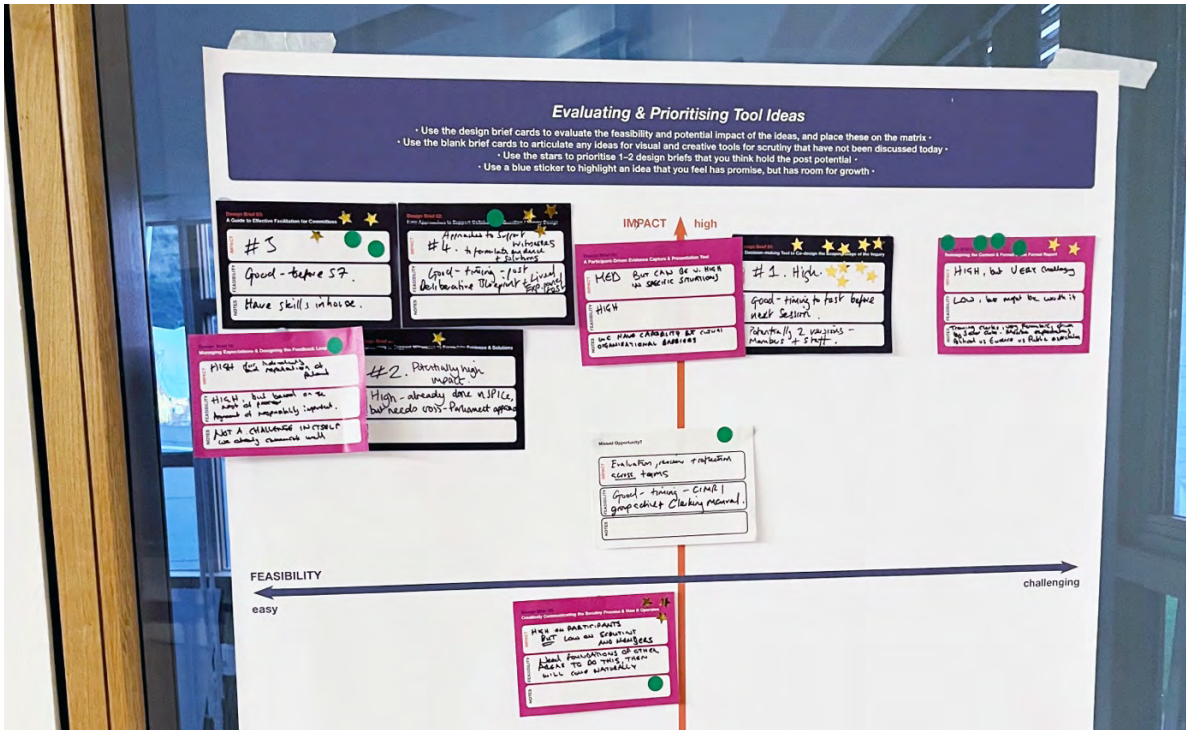

Figure 6 Design Brief Prioritisation Matrix: a tool used in co-design workshop 01 to support participants to evaluate emerging design opportunities based on their impact and feasibility (photograph – detail). 2024. Cara Broadley.

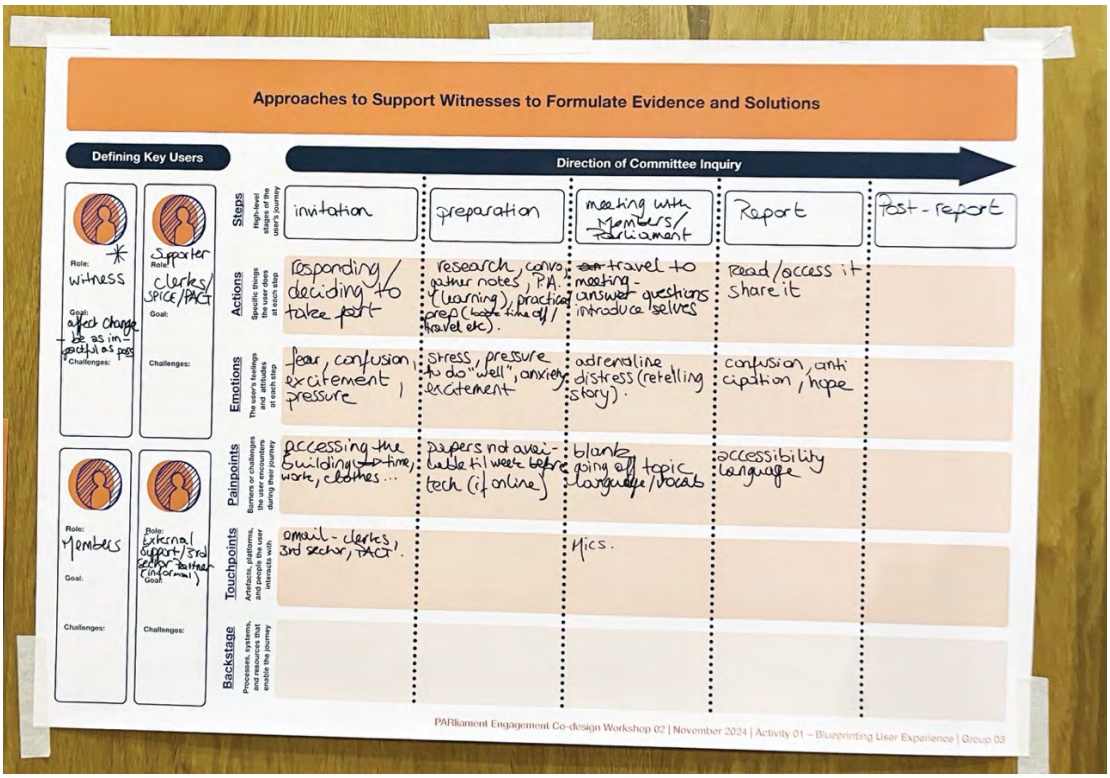

Figure 7 Blueprinting User Experience: a tool used in co-design workshop 02 to enable participants to identify the actions and needs of the people who would interact with their design concepts (photograph). 2024. Cara Broadley.

Figure 8 Developing Mockups 01: participant group paper prototyping an interactive tool to support collaborative planning around engagement and evidence (photograph). 2024. Cara Broadley.

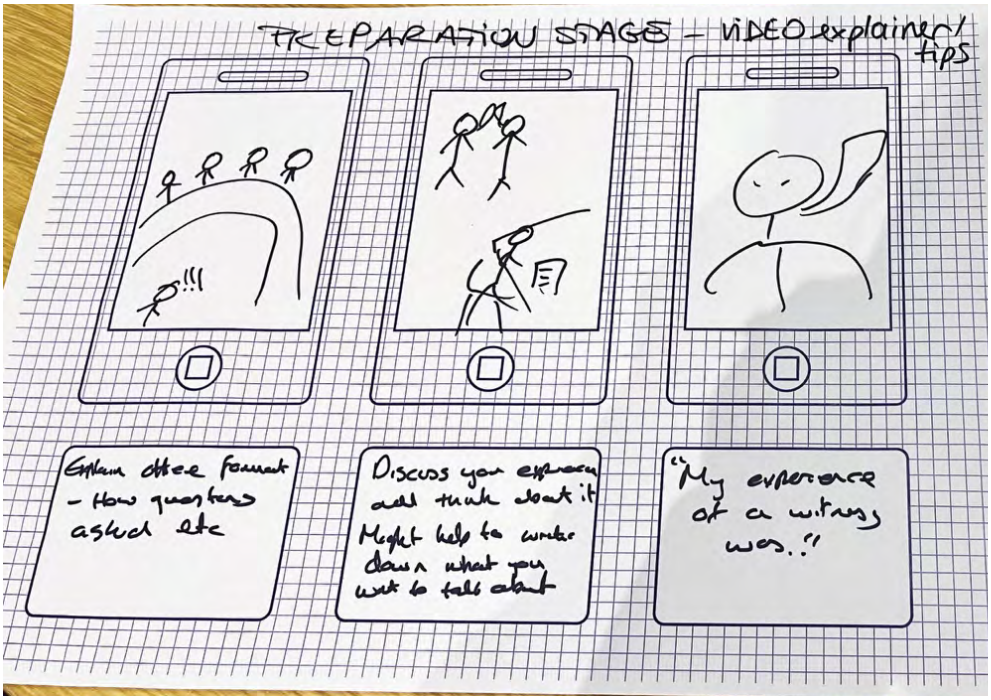

Figure 9 Developing Mockups 02: Participant group paper prototyping an explainer video to more effectively engage communities in committee scrutiny (photograph). 2024. Cara Broadley.

The co-design activity extended beyond the workshops through the prototyping of a zine, developed in response to Design Brief 08 as an approach to communicating scrutiny creatively to diverse public audiences. By incorporating concise narrative, diagrammatic visuals, and plain-language explanations, the zine's purpose was to enhance awareness of what scrutiny is, how it operates in practice, who is involved, how people can participate,

and the difference this can make. Co-designed by participants, this was selected because it could be piloted quickly, used in outreach and engagement contexts, and iterated based on feedback (Figures 10–11).

Figure 10 Extended Co-design Activity: mockups created by participants to envisage the content and form of the zine tool (photograph). 2025. Cara Broadley.

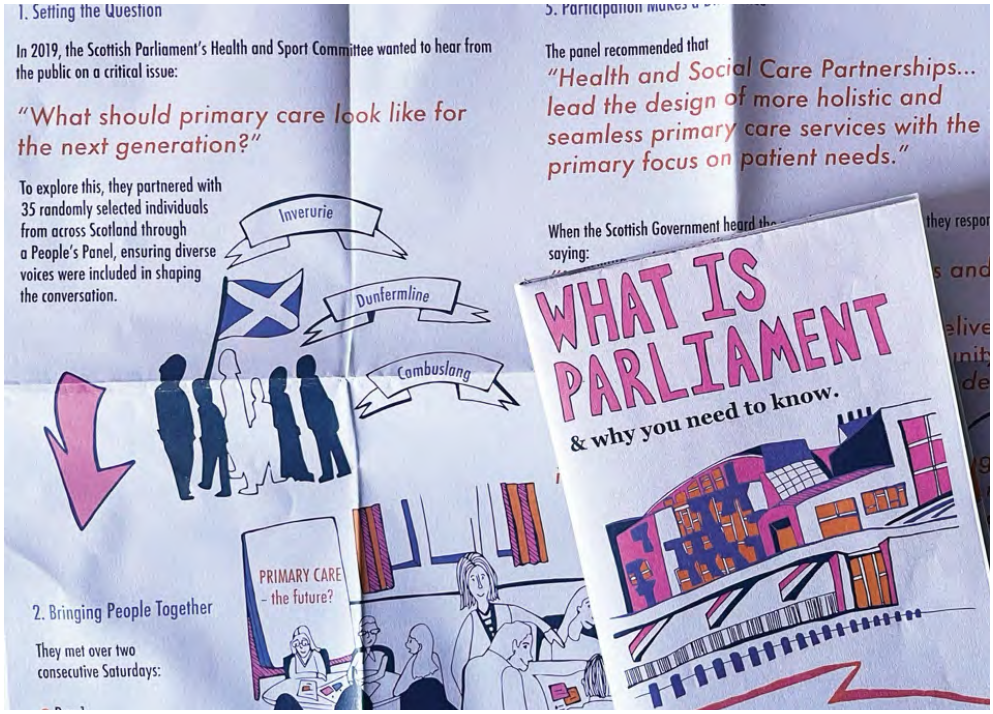

Figure 11 PARliament Engagement Zine Prototype: initial iteration of the zine for piloting (photograph). 2025. Cara Broadley.

Phase 4 – thematic analysis, piloting, evaluation and dissemination

Phase 4 unfolded iteratively alongside the other stages as a process of synthesis, review, and reflection. Alongside the zine, a roadmap (Figure 12) was co-produced as a visual framework linking the project's learning to parliamentary milestones. Designed as an internal planning aid, it outlined how creative and participatory approaches could be developed, tested, and embedded over time. Together, the zine prototype and roadmap became key artefacts for carrying the work forward with the former testing a public-facing communication of scrutiny and the latter guiding the sequencing of future experimentation. These artefacts helped translate the experiential and dialogic aspects of the research into communicable organisational forms. Fieldnotes, transcripts, and visual materials were then analysed and refined into design principles for embedding creative approaches into scrutiny.

Findings were shared internally and documented in a project report (Broadley, Burn-Murdoch, and Black, 2025), co-authored with participants who also supervised the fellowship and reviewed internally prior to publication. The report synthesises the research process, design artefacts, and reflections generated through the project, and was published on the Scottish Parliament's website alongside a blog post communicating key findings (SPICe Spotlight, 2025).

3.2 Analysis, reflexivity, and ethics

Data were analysed through an abductive, iterative process combining thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with close reading of workshop artefacts. Initial codes, shaped by sensitising concepts such as evidence, engagement, listening, and response, were refined through repeated comparison across transcripts, fieldnotes, and visual materials.

Reflexivity was integral throughout. The author conducted the research as an embedded academic fellow working within the Scottish Parliament during the project period. This enabled close observation of institutional practices and collective inquiry, while maintaining an independent research role. Ethical procedures followed institutional and Scottish Parliament protocols: consent was obtained, data anonymised, and confidentiality upheld. The project's small scale prioritised collaboration and organisational learning over formal evaluation. This enabled the generation of situated insights into how PD can foster institutional responsiveness within everyday scrutiny practices.

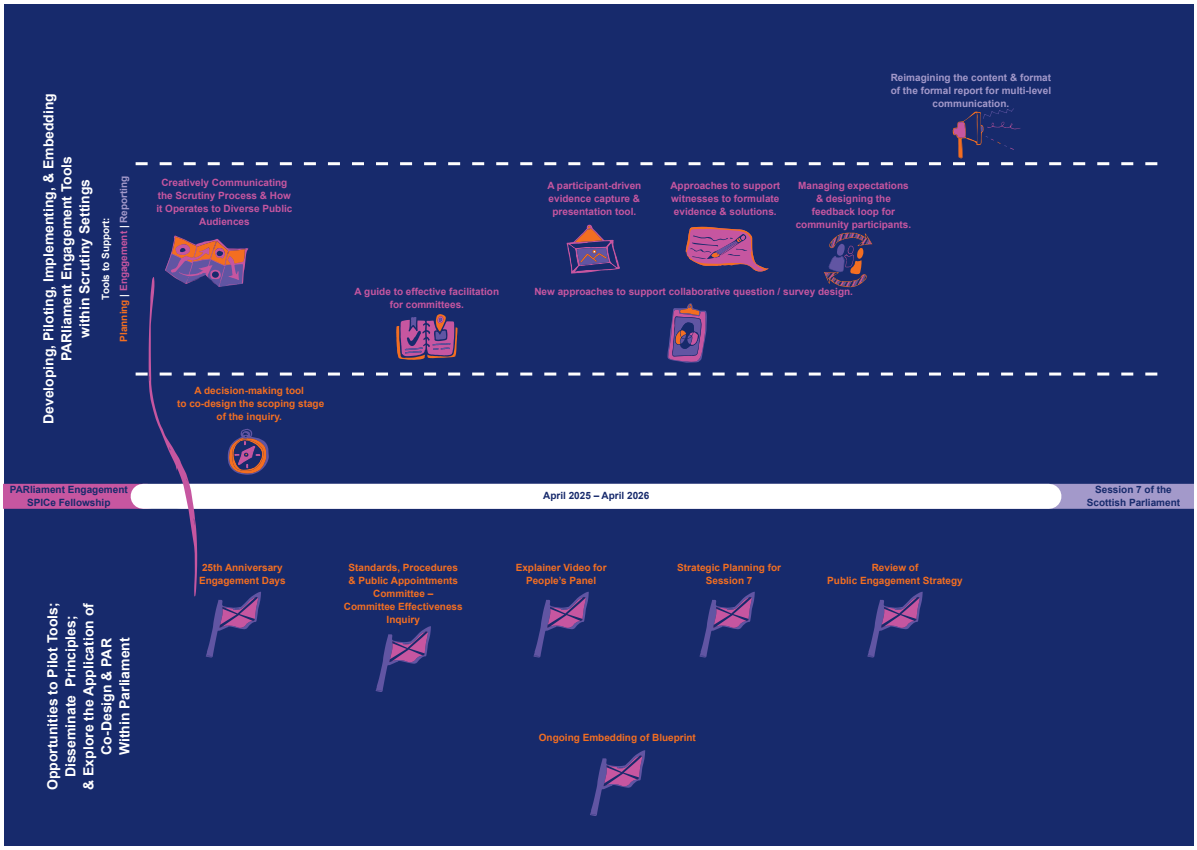

Figure 12 PARliament Engagement Roadmap: artefact co-created as a project output to sequence opportunities aligned to projects and initiatives in the upcoming parliamentary session (diagram). 2025. Cara Broadley.

4. Findings: Manifestations of institutional responsiveness

PARliament Engagement created spaces for reflection, dialogue, and experimentation across committee support teams. Rather than pursuing procedural reform or measurable outcomes, the research highlighted institutional responsiveness as an emergent capacity. Three interrelated themes emerged: rethinking evidence practices; cross-team collaboration and learning; and reflexivity and institutional awareness.

4.1 Rethinking evidence practices

Across shadowing, interviews, and co-design sessions, participants reflected on the complex ways that evidence is constructed, interpreted, and circulated in committee work. While the Scottish Parliament has made substantial progress in broadening participation, tensions persist over what constitutes credible evidence and how different forms of knowledge are valued. These were often framed as cultural rather than structural challenges, echoing the Committee Effectiveness Inquiry's conclusion that "structure cannot trump culture" (The Scottish Parliament, 2025, p.6)

Participants described how formal written evidence can carry disproportionate weight, while other forms such as community visits, informal meetings, or oral evidence risk being treated as peripheral, even though such engagements often offer the most vivid insight into policy impacts. As one participant reflected "it was a really difficult session, but incredibly powerful

in terms of understanding the reality of what the consequences of this legislation could be" (Participant 01).

PD methods had a key role in surfacing these tensions. Observational drawings and participatory mapping activities made visible how evidence moves from witness to briefing to report, and where meaning may be transformed or lost. Through this collective work, participants framed evidence as an interpretive practice, scrutinising assumptions about credibility and exploring how creative approaches might diversify what is valued within scrutiny.

4.2 Collaboration and cross-team learning

A second theme concerns collaboration and the creation of space for shared reflection across the Scottish Parliament's committee support teams. Participants described a shared purpose but a fragmented system of delivery, highlighting that "we all want the same thing: to engage, to communicate the work, and for the committee to succeed. But we all face in slightly different directions. How do you actually make that happen?" (Participant 02). Structured around the design briefs, the co-design workshops enabled participants to visualise interdependencies and discuss practical points of alignment such as handover points, timing, and communication. Design artefacts acted as shared reference points, helping participants negotiate meaning across roles and professional vocabularies. As such, the collaborative and creative nature of the research enabled a surfacing and sharing of situated institutional knowledge, and as one participant expressed, helped to "bring together discussions that usually stay hidden" (Participant 03).

Workload pressures and the rhythm of political time were recognised as barriers here, yet participants emphasised the appetite to experiment and the value of having permission and space to do so. These exchanges represented moments of organisational reflexivity where cross-service collaboration became a medium for questioning institutional routines.

4.3 Reflexivity and institutional awareness

Reflexivity – developing awareness of one's own role and influence – was both a finding and a condition of the research. Observational drawings captured spatial dynamics and relational conditions rarely recorded in formal documentation, prompting recognition of tacit practices and emotional labour within scrutiny settings. Participants articulated the tension between innovation and inertia and that "you can take an idea to a committee five times, and they still say no" (Participant 04). At the same time however, they identified where change is possible, and that "sometimes you find out there isn't actually anything stopping the committee doing something differently and that's when innovation can truly take shape" (Participant 05).

Crucially, it was acknowledged that sustaining such change requires confidence and shared capability:

> "I think it's almost about us starting to build that expertise ourselves in how we have these co-design conversations and how we approach those discussions. You've managed to bring out things that usually stay buried. Now we need to find a way to keep going." (Participant 06)

These reflections suggest moments of organisational learning – questioning assumptions rather than refining routines – and show how PD can scaffold shared interpretation. Collectively, these dynamics position PD as both method and metaphor for democratic practice: an iterative, situated, and relational mode of making sense and responding to complexity in institutional life.

5. Discussion: Participatory design in parliamentary scrutiny

PARliament Engagement illustrates how PD can make the interpretive dimensions of scrutiny more visible, offering ways for institutions to reflect on how knowledge is produced and used. Rather than viewing PD as adjacent to established engagement activity, this framing foregrounds its epistemic role: enabling shared inquiry into the practices and assumptions that shape interpretation and action. Positioned this way, PD becomes a means of cultivating institutional responsiveness, supporting organisations to recognise multiple ways of knowing and reconsider how evidence, participation, and collaboration are enacted.

5.1 Participatory design as epistemic practice: Making interpretive work visible

Section 2 highlighted how PD operates epistemically by exposing how knowledge is produced, negotiated, and legitimised. The project's findings illustrate this directly. Through mapping activities, visual artefacts, and collaborative reflection, participants externalised tacit forms of reasoning that ordinarily remain embedded in everyday scrutiny work. These included how teams judged credibility, balanced competing forms of evidence, and navigated tensions between impartiality and empathy.

In doing so, PD created a shared representational space through which staff could see and interrogate the interpretive infrastructures that underpin scrutiny. This aligns with Richardson et al.'s (2025) generative relationship between design and policy: design does not merely serve existing processes but invites participants to question how issues are framed and what forms of knowledge are recognised. Participants described how visualisation and collective analysis allowed them to articulate aspects of their work that are felt but rarely spoken, revealing the normative and affective dimensions of routine practices. These moments of reflection did not aim to replace existing scrutiny procedures but helped participants consider how routine assumptions (privileging written evidence, treating lived experience anecdotally, or prioritising time-efficient synthesis) shape what evidence comes to mean in practice. The findings support arguments from DiSalvo (2022) and Hillgren, Light, and Strange (2020) that design functions as a mode of democratic inquiry, surfacing taken-for-granted norms and expanding the repertoire of what can be considered legitimate knowledge within institutional settings.

5.2 Participatory design and collective learning: Supporting reflexivity across roles and teams

The project's iterative cycles of inquiry, reflection, and shared interpretation also point toward the relational nature of learning in institutional contexts. The workshops brought together staff from SPICe, PACT, PCO, and the Committee Office to explore how their

practices intersect. Rather than exchanging information, participants collaboratively interrogated how their respective routines shape the evidentiary landscape of an inquiry. This form of mutual learning surfaced important interdependencies. Analytical, procedural, communicative, and facilitative perspectives were placed in dialogue, helping staff see how their decisions affect one another's capacity to act. The zine and the roadmap provided tangible artefacts through which these insights could be revisited or developed further, extending reflection beyond the workshop setting.

Such processes resonate with Mortati's (2022) emphasis on design's role in foregrounding issues of participation, power, and control in contexts characterised by complexity. Learning here emerged not from technical problem-solving but from jointly examining the assumptions that guide everyday judgement. The project therefore suggests that PD can help cultivate the conditions for reflexivity within institutional work, even in the absence of formal reform.

5.3 Challenging evidence hierarchies: Re-encountering credibility and legitimacy

A further insight concerns how PD can enable institutions to critically examine what counts as evidence in democratic practice. As discussed in Section 2, parliamentary evidence norms privilege certain forms of knowledge – formal, written, expert, organisational – and render others (experiential, emotional, community-rooted) peripheral. The project offered a structured environment in which these hierarchies could be examined openly.

Rather than arguing for an alternative hierarchy, PD created opportunities for participants to explore how different forms of knowledge function within scrutiny. For example, workshop maps visualising how evidence is perceived and used helped participants recognise that experiential input often enters the system through participatory engagement but becomes diluted or reframed when translated into formal parliamentary language. Similarly, discussions revealed how a commitment to impartiality can make staff cautious about integrating emotional or narrative evidence, even when it is substantively relevant.

By surfacing these tensions, PD illustrated how everyday practices – inviting contributions, eliciting accounts, synthesising and reporting – actively shape what counts as formal versus informal evidence. This mirrors Boswell's (2008) account of the instrumental and symbolic work of expertise and Geddes' (2020) analysis of how legalistic and professional norms define evidentiary practice.

Subsequent research by Hill O'Connor and Burn-Murdoch (2025) highlights the ethical, practical, and methodological questions committees must ask when using lived experience in scrutiny, emphasising risks of over-consultation, unclear purpose, and limited influence. Their findings point to the importance of carefully designing how experiential knowledge is invited, documented, and used – issues that were frequently surfaced in the PARliament Engagement workshops.

The project created space to recognise that evidence hierarchies are neither natural nor fixed, and to consider how scrutiny might evolve through more deliberate negotiation of diverse forms of knowledge. Rather than treating experiential accounts as supplementary, participants examined how evidentiary value is constructed through everyday practices of eliciting, synthesising, and reporting. This revealed opportunities for greater transparency and reflexivity in how committees judge relevance and credibility, positioning evidence not

only as material to be gathered but as something shaped through institutional norms and relationships.

5.4 Participatory design, institutional responsiveness, and the practice of governance

The findings resonate with broader debates on design in governance (Kimbell et al., 2022; Vaz et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2025), suggesting that design's democratic potential lies not only in participatory outreach but in cultivating institutional responsiveness: the capacity of organisations to reflect on their practices, recognise multiple ways of knowing, and adapt accordingly. Rather than casting design as an external driver of reform, the project shows how PD can be woven into the ordinary conditions through which institutions negotiate meaning and navigate uncertainty.

Three tendencies illustrate how responsiveness took shape. First, the PD activities legitimised interpretive discussion, enabling participants to articulate how evidence is judged, translated, or communicated. Second, mapping and prototyping surfaced interdependencies across SPICe, PACT, PCO, and the Committee Office, supporting shared understanding of how roles and responsibilities shape evidence. Third, working outside live inquiry timelines enabled experimentation without the procedural risk of formal change. Together, these tendencies suggest responsiveness is about cultivating reflection rather than reaction – an orientation that makes interpretive work visible, open to dialogue, and subject to change.

This aligns with Saward's (2025) view of design for democracy as shaping the conditions through which institutions learn to listen and respond. From this perspective, PD supports responsiveness not by prescribing new procedures but by enabling reflective inquiry within everyday governance. Institutional responsiveness therefore emerges as both concept and practice: a way of embedding reflection, mutual learning, and interpretive awareness as routine capacities through which democratic institutions can sustain and renew themselves.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined how Participatory Design can function as an epistemic practice within parliamentary scrutiny. Through the PARliament Engagement project, PD surfaced how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and used within committee work, enabling staff to reflect on evidence practices, recognise interdependencies, and experiment with alternative ways of working. The research shows that institutional responsiveness develops not through rapid procedural change but by cultivating everyday capacities that enable organisations to question assumptions, acknowledge multiple ways of knowing, and create space for interpretive dialogue within operational constraints. PD contributed by legitimising reflection and helping participants articulate tacit, affective, and relational dimensions of scrutiny often difficult to express within formal settings.

For researchers and practitioners, the paper demonstrates how PD can operate inside democratic institutions as a mode of inquiry that mediates between knowledge, participation, and power. Strengthening democratic institutions requires attention to the infrastructures through which listening, interpretation, and decision-making occurs, and institutional responsiveness is a cultural and procedural capacity that develops through

situated practices of reflection, mutual learning, and collective sense-making. PD offers one means of supporting such practices within the ongoing work of democratic governance.

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