

# **Closing the Gap: Establishing a ‘feedback loop’ for effective parliamentary public engagement**

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## **Abstract**

Are chosen parliamentary engagement initiatives effective? Do they add to the quality of democracy? And how can they reach a wider audience? These are key questions which, when answered, can improve a parliament’s engagement strategy significantly. This article illustrates that the answers to these questions can be found by establishing a comprehensive feedback loop, through which a parliament can not only improve the quality of engagement, but in doing so, boosts participation. This study draws on the data derived from research conducted for the IPU Global Parliamentary Report (GPR). More precisely, this specifically concerns a focus group, a parliaments survey, as well as a number of interviews which were conducted to get individual, and in-depth accounts of engagement practices. The findings from this data suggest that through careful evaluation, impact assessment, and transparent reporting of findings, parliaments can fine tune engagement practices and generate more concrete incentives for engaging. Additionally, a number of guidelines are presented on how best to establish, as well as maintain, a public engagement feedback loop.

Keywords: Public Engagement, Youth Engagement, Impact & Evaluation, Feedback.

## **Introduction**

Parliamentary public engagement is an ongoing dynamic interaction between citizens and parliaments. As detailed in the Global Parliamentary Report (GPR) (2022) of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) this dynamic is further conceptualised as a spectrum consisting of five stages of engagement, namely informing, educating, communicating with, participating alongside, and consulting the general public. This article elaborates on the findings of the GPR specifically pertaining to the process of evaluating and improving engagement initiatives in all five of these categories.<sup>1</sup> It draws on the data from a focus group on youth engagement, the GPR parliaments survey of engagement practices in 69 parliamentary chambers, as well as a plethora of exploratory interviews.

The GPR parliaments survey indicates that the vast majority of the world’s parliaments have been

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<sup>1</sup> I assisted in compiling the GPR as a research assistant through data collection, analysis, and writing of case studies.

engaging with its citizens in a multitude of ways. This increasingly common practice of public engagement, however, is not often closely evaluated and reflected on. More precisely, only 34 per cent of the parliaments surveyed had evaluation indicators, the vast majority of which were parliaments from relatively high-income countries. Moreover, even when systematic monitoring is a common practice, it tends to focus on details of the administrative processes rather than the impact of engagement itself. Solveig Jónsdóttir, Director of the Research and Information Department at the National Parliament of Iceland, called impact evaluation a “mostly anecdotal” rather than a systemic, consistent practice. This subsequently, makes optimizing the engagement initiatives challenging.

Such optimization is essential, not only to ensure efficient use of parliamentary resources, but also to ensure the *supply* of engagement, is meeting the public’s *demand* for engagement. More precisely, a recurring pattern throughout the GPR is the challenge parliaments face to engage seemingly disengaged minorities, such as rural communities, as well as young individuals. Bruno Lencastre, Chief Technical Advisor at the UNDP, attest that this is almost a universal experience when he states that: ‘almost all over the world it is super challenging to get young people to participate.’ Yet especially with the youth demographic, the lack of interaction with parliaments and politics more generally is not the result of apathy or lack of access. On the contrary, youth is increasingly politically active through grassroots initiatives (Loncle, Cuconato, Muniglia, & Walther, 2012). In an interview with Ysabel Vargas, a youth activist from the Philippines, she lauded the youth’s response to the challenges this demographic faces during the Pandemic. She stated: ‘the Covid-19 pandemic, really proved that the youth is already ready. We are already taking charge. There’s lots of relief initiatives, successful initiatives for youth here in the Philippines that has been completely youth led.’ Another example of grassroots youth engagement is the School Climate Strikes which occurred across the Western world (Shelley, Mireille, David, 2020). During the youth engagement focus group, Professor James Sloam of Royal Holloway University, emphasised how it is up to parliaments to adjust their engagement initiatives to the interests and topics salient amongst these key demographics: ‘It is the issues we need to connect with because as we’ve seen with the climate strike, young people are interested in politics. It’s just about mainstreaming their political interests.’

Considering the under-25s seem to deeply care about their future and are therefore closely engaged with political topics, it is strange that the engagement with parliamentary institutions amongst this demographic continues to dwindle (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Pitti, 2018). The GPR identifies this as a mismatch between supply and demand in parliamentary public engagement practices. More precisely, the lack of evaluation and impact assessment processes in place as part of a parliament’s engagement strategy, can lead to suboptimal engagement practices, which do not incentivise participation to the degree they could. This article introduces the concept of a feedback loop in parliamentary engagement and illustrates that such a loop can assist in matching engagement supply to the public’s demand. It does not

only optimize the use of resources in engagement, but also incentives and maximises participation. Additionally, five key steps are set out to assist in the establishment and maintenance of a public engagement feedback loop.

### **What is a feedback loop?**

A feedback loop is a circular stream of communication and assessment between parliament and the public involved in an engagement initiative. Figure 1 sets out the four basic stages of this loop as engaging the public, evaluating the engagement, assessing the impact of engagement, and disseminating the findings of engagement to the participants, as well as the wider public.

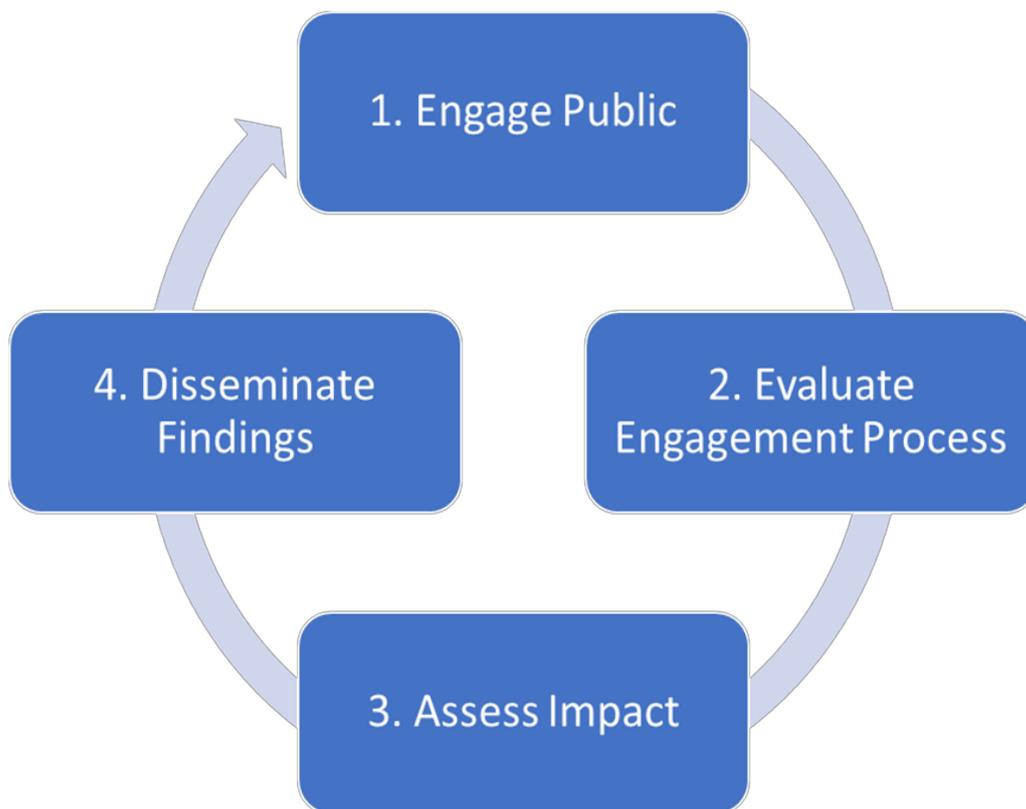


Figure 1: Basic Feedback Loop

As detailed in the introduction, engagement can take on many forms which have been conceptualized into five categories. A feedback loop can be a useful tool for optimization regardless of the type of public engagement. Hence, the engagement initiative itself is where the loop commences. The subsequent stage of the loop is evaluation of engagement. Warburton, Wilson and Rainbow (2009) stress that as parliamentary public engagement has become an increasingly common practice, ‘the need to assess

the effectiveness of different approaches, to increase accountability and to learn from experience becomes more important' (Warburton et al. 2009, p.1).

These authors stress that evaluation does not need to be a major research exercise. Instead, at its most elementary level, a successful evaluation strategy should aim to answer whether an initiative succeeded, e.g., in meeting its targets or objectives; and whether the process worked as anticipated, thus detailing what happened and whether it was a desirable experience (and if not, explain why). Evaluation is then closely followed by impact assessment. This is the contribution of parliamentary engagement to an observed outcome. As defined by the OECD:

'Impact is the extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects. Impact addresses the ultimate significance and potentially transformative effects of the intervention. It seeks to identify social, environmental and economic effects of the intervention that are longer term or broader in scope' (OECD, 2021, p.11)

Yet all this can be challenging to identify, especially if the engagement initiative runs over a long period of time. Moreover, the impact of a singular initiative can be multifaceted. This can be the impact 'on participants, on the quality of policy, on policy makers or on others involved' (Warburton et al., 2009). Nevertheless, attempting to define public engagement impact is an essential part of the feedback loop, as this information is required in order to complete the circle.

The final stage of the feedback loop namely concerns dissemination of the results generated by evaluation and impact assessment. Primarily, this concerns communicating the findings with the participants of the public engagement initiative, yet dissemination can also be to a wider audience as well. Since this stage implies reconnecting with citizens who participated at an earlier stage, it can therefore be referred to as closing the feedback loop. Closing the loop by informing participants cultivates a feeling of genuine engagement and influence over the decisions. It also creates a culture of responsiveness and learning that make interventions more adaptive and effective.

## **Data & Methods**

The research for the GPR covered a wide range of public engagement themes and as such, relied on a diverse research and data collection strategy. This article highlights a common theme found across chapters and case studies, and as a result, it draws on a wide range of different data. The three main types of data are listed in detail below.

### **Focus Group**

On the 23rd of September 2020, a diverse group of practitioners, academics, MPs, and parliamentary staff

from five different countries joined in a Zoom call to discuss their national experiences with youth engagement. The focus group had a duration of two hours, and was lead and guided by Maya Kornberg. The participants included Iqra Khalid, an MP from the Canadian national parliament; Jagdish Ayer, the president of the association of youth organisations Nepal; Yahya Almulla, Assistant Secretary General for Committee on Sitting Affairs of the Bahraini parliament; Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Professor at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, and creator of a parliamentary university module; James Sloam, Professor at Royal Holloway University London, specialising in youth engagement; and Clarisse Imaniriho and Ernest Kamanzi, both youth representative MPs from the Rwandan National Parliament.

### Interviews

Through the vast network of the IPU and UNPD, the GPR research team identifies a wide array of actors to interview individually on their public engagement experiences. There exploratory interviews were semi-structured and aimed at identifying areas and themes of public engagement which were of interest. With regards to specific case studies such as those pertaining to youth engagement and impact & evaluation practices, snowball sampling was applied by asking interviews for references to possible other suitable candidates to interview on these themes. The data used in this article draws on the findings from a number of these interviews, all of which are listed in table 1.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role (at time of speaking)</b>	<b>Country</b>
Bruno Lancastre	Chief Technical Advisor at the UNDP	Timor-Leste
Francis Ametepey	Member of the Open Government Youth Collective	Ghana
Josephine Watera	Member of the Monitoring and Evaluation Division- Parliament of Uganda	Uganda
Madimesta Moleka	Section Manager, Provincial and Municipal Liaison – Parliament of South Africa	South Africa
Simon Burall	Senior Associate of Involve	United Kingdom
Solveig Jónsdóttir	Director of the Research and Information Department – Althingi, Parliament of Iceland	Iceland
Tara Jane Kopens Lee	Manager of Select Committee Education and Engagement – Parliament of the United Kingdom	United Kingdom
Tumi Mogorosi	Analyst of The Strategic Plan Implementation - Parliament of the Republic of South Africa	South Africa

Ysabel Vargas	Member of the Open Government Youth Collective	Philippines
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Table 1: Interview Participants

**Parliaments Public Engagement Survey**

Finally, a comprehensive survey was sent out to all 179 IPU member parliaments. The survey items covered many aspects of public engagement, including impact and evaluation. This was predominantly covered by the question: 'Does your Parliament have the following planning documents or procedures?: Indicators or processes for monitoring and evaluating public engagement activities.' Respondents were asked to answer this question by ticking 'Yes' or 'No', which was followed by an open question to further elaborate on these processes where applicable. It should be noted that out of all 279 IPU parliaments, 68 responded. This is a response rate of 24.4%, which in turn was skewed towards European countries.

**Why establish a feedback loop?**

**Streamlining Engagement**

Previous research established four main incentives for parliaments to establish a public engagement feedback loop (Warburton et al., 2009; Rowe, Horlick-Jones, Walls, & Pidgeon, 2005). Initially, it aids in clarification. When a feedback loop is in place, and a common practice, it forces the designers of the initiative to define the objectives of the exercise very concisely, as they search for practical ways to assess success ex post (Warburton et al., 2009). This is the case, as without a clear objective, evaluation, and a feedback loop in turn, is not possible to maintain. As stated by Simon Burall:

‘The reason that it's very difficult to evaluate public engagement often, beyond all the normal problems of evaluation, is because many bodies, not just parliaments, that commission public engagement do not clearly state their objectives.’

The second incentive is learning. Maintaining a feedback loop directly implies an emphasis on understanding. With a process in place which streamlines engagement data collection and assessment, parliaments obtain crucial information and tools to reflect of public engagement practices and learn from past experiences. According to Tumi Mogorosi, Analyst of The Strategic Plan Implementation at the parliament of the Republic of South Africa: ‘the biggest incentive [for evaluating public engagement] is to show the usefulness of the information collected’. A feedback loop develops “hard evidence and knowledge about ‘what works’ and what impacts different approaches can have” (Warburton et al. 2009, p.3). It thereby increases the general understanding of human and organizational behaviour (Rowe et al. 2005). Josephine

Watera, member of the Monitoring and Evaluation Division at the Parliament of Uganda, states: ‘we need to understand the dynamics, accessibility and affordability of whatever tools that we use to engage with our communities’, and this can best be achieved through public engagement evaluation.

The third incentive is the subsequent improvement of engagement initiatives. Through evaluation, parliaments become aware of the actual nature and impact of their engagement practices, which in turn inform design changes to optimise the completion of an initiative’s objective. Moreover, such improvement can ‘ensure the proper use of public or institutional money’ (Rowe et al., 2005), and hence can increase the efficiency of public engagement.

The final incentive as identified by the literature is accountability. By closing the feedback loop, and thus fully and transparently reporting on what has been achieved, parliament can be held accountable for its public engagement practices (Warburton et al. 2009). As reiterated by Josephine Watera, evaluation holds parliament “accountable for the results that we see” and enables it to “learn from the implementation of the activities that we have actually completed”.

### **Incentivizing participation**

In addition to the incentives for establishing a feedback loop as identified in the literature, the GPR research brought to light another major advantage of a public engagement feedback loop. This specifically pertains to the final stage, the reporting of impact subsequent to engagement, also referred to as the closing the feedback loop. This stage namely has the potential to boost participation in engagement initiatives.

More precisely, a key challenge with public engagement, is the perception of participants that engagement is without a clear objective, or point. Tara-Jane Kerpens-Lee, who at the time of speaking served as Manager of the Select Committee Engagement Team at the Parliament of the United Kingdom, observed that once an engagement initiative had concluded, participants were too often still saying: “We came, and we said this, and it was great. But we don’t know if it is going to go anywhere.”

This is especially apparent amongst young citizens. Francis Ametepey, a Ghanaian youth activist stressed that: ‘if you don't have a clear follow up mechanism, then our activities or agreed plans will not be productive going forward and will get lost in the process.’ And similarly, Ms. Vargas emphasised: ‘There is always this problem of follow through every summit [...] there's this lack of tangible output that comes out of it that when you go back, there's no real support.’ With youth engagement, this lack of follow through can lead to the perception of engagement as tokenism. Tokenism describes a type of participation in which the young individual is merely included superficially and is not truly valued for the contributions they could make. Instead, in such instances young people are often included with ulterior motives, such as personal gain or to improve public perception of an initiative (Hart, 1997). Such perceptions of tokenism, or lack of follow through all round, is likely to deter participation in engagement initiatives. Francis Ametepey illustrates this dynamic with Ghanaian youth parliaments specifically, when he states that: ‘They are not

operational because we, young people, believe it's actually not a national agenda, but that it is politically driven'.

In contrast, by disseminating the impact of engagement to its participants and beyond, parliaments can establish a transparent circle of communication between the parliament and its engaging citizens. Such a closed feedback loop indicates to the public that engagement is taken seriously, and that the input provided by participants is closely considered. By providing a window into the engagement process and its objectives, parliaments can give citizens a clear incentive to engage.

Thus, in sum, a feedback loop serves two distinct functions. Internally, it encourages the evaluation of engagement and impact which allows parliaments to improve their endeavours so to employ resources efficiently and maximise the useful output for policy making. Simultaneously, doing so will also serve an external function, where it encourages transparency which acts as an incentive for citizens to engage and participate with a clear objective.

### **Building a Feedback Loop**

The aforementioned has defined a feedback loop and established why it, as a common practice, can stand to improve parliamentary engagement practices. This following section, in turn, will detail five different lessons learned from the GPR research on how best to execute a public engagement feedback loop.

#### **1. Define the objective of the engagement initiative ex ante.**

As the aforementioned has emphasised, defining the engagement objective prior to commencing an engagement initiative, forces a certain degree of clarity and organization. Objectives can be as simple as identifying the type of engagement (informing, educating, communicating, consulting, participating), or be as detailed as specifying the desired impact, such as raising awareness on specific topics, or facilitating citizen-driven change to legislation. Yet when doing so, there are two things to keep in mind. First and foremost, the objective should be realistic, achievable, and measurable (Warburton et al., 2009). This sets the feedback loop up for success. Second, Warburton et al. (2009) encourage careful reflection on objectives to surface assumptions, as 'to help ensure there are no hidden objectives or unstated hopes for the exercise that need to be made explicit to avoid them affecting the 'sense' of whether the exercise has been successful' (p.5).

Once an objective has been defined, organizers of an engagement initiative can then move on to establish what data needs to be collected in order to measure whether the objective has been met. These metrics of success can be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative measures can include the number of people who participated in the engagement, demographic information showing the diversity of the audience

by gender, age, location and background, and information about financial results. Qualitative data speaks to the experience that people had with the engagement. This can include satisfaction rates, as well as information about what impact the engagement had on people, what they gained and how they intend to use the experience in the future. Qualitative metrics should also focus on what parliament gained from the engagement experience, and in particular on any changes that resulted from the activity. Feedback from community members is an important part of the assessment exercise. By planning the data collection of different types of data, parliament enables more thorough evaluation at a later stage.

As the above elucidates, the planning stage of an engagement initiative is crucial, as it enables the feedback loop. Without a defined objective, and measurable metrics of success, systematic evaluation is impossible. As reiterated by Simon Burall:

‘If you don't have three things, one, sustained engagement, two a really good baseline to work from and three, a really clear understanding of why you think the engagement that you're going to be doing is going to have the impact that you want it to have, you can't possibly evaluate. You have to have a clear theory of change between your engagement and change you want. [...] If there is not a clear understanding and a clear statement of why the public's voice will make a difference, you shouldn't be doing the engagement in the first place.’

## **2. Clearly communicate the objective to manage expectations.**

Naturally, there are limits to the impact and objective public engagement can have. This is especially true when considering that any form of change, adjustment, or improvement in a democratic system is a slow and deliberative process. Yet, due to a lack of thorough understanding of the role of parliament, at times the expectations of the public can be unrealistic. Josephine Watera emphasises how citizens' demands do not always match with what Members of Parliament are able and intended to do. Instead, they expect:

‘Other things which are not necessarily the roles of members of parliament, but because the public has this different perception, the level of engagement is actually different. When you'll reach out to communities and find that communities think that members of parliament are more available to help at community level (think weddings and burials) [...] they will not care that the engagement was intended to be at national level, in parliament to pass laws and actually represent their voices that way.’

These expectations of what parliament, and its engagement initiatives are capable of can fuel disappointment amongst its participants. Such dissatisfaction can unnecessarily influence evaluation practices, especially if participants feedback is a source of information during evaluation. Naturally, this is

a broader issue exacerbated by a lack of education of the functions of parliament. Nevertheless, Parliaments and other public engagement entities can at least manage these expectations directed at specific engagement initiatives by stating the defined objective upfront. It is thus within the power of parliament ‘to ensure that those involved are not deceived as to the impact of their contribution (Rowe et al. 2005, p. 332). In this way, data collected for evaluation will not be biased because of mismanaged expectations.

### **3. Institutionalize the task of evaluators.**

The role of evaluators, or the civil servants executing the feedback loop is of course essential. As detailed by Rowe et al. (2005): ‘Preferably, proper contractual arrangements should be established, setting out, for example, the bounds of the evaluation and extent of evaluator access to relevant processes and information’ (p.339). This implies that evaluation processes need to be included in formal job descriptions and tied to remuneration. Not only does this institutionalize the feedback loop by attributing responsibility for evaluation to specific employees, but it also clarifies the scope of the task and access to information in explicit terms. Tumi Mogorosi does stress that the institutionalization process of the feedback loop initially can increase workload. She emphasises that in order to justify this change, employees ought to be kept informed throughout the different stages of the feedback loop, in order to understand the contribution that they are making:

‘The thing about institutionalizing monitoring and evaluation, thus the putting in place of a proper sort of annual reporting system, [...] it initially is like this extra piece of work of which employees don't know why they need to spend so much time documenting what is done. [...] And so, it's building them into the reporting cycle and for it to not just be a one-way process where they keep submitting information and don't know where it goes. It should not be that the only time they might hear about it, is if they missed the target or if something has gone wrong.

Ensuring evaluators are invested in the process, aids the institutionalization, as well as the durability of a parliamentary engagement feedback loop.

### **4. Extrapolate across engagement initiatives to identify patterns**

In turn, with a robust and institutionalized evaluation procedure, parliament can extrapolate across initiatives to identify trends over time. As stated by Tumi Mogorosi, the evaluation system of the South African parliament has been about ‘creating a system where we collect information, and we maybe find data that we can use to help understand trends better.’ Awareness of these trends can assist in the design of

future endeavours, as well as help assess the longer-term impact of engagement activities and approaches. Josephine Watera elaborates of the patterns she has been able to identify based on the Ugandan public engagement evaluation strategy. She illustrates how the intensity of engagement and participation varies over the course of a parliamentary term:

‘There are times when the public has more interest in parliament, for instance during the budgeting period at the beginning of the parliamentary term, because this is a new parliament and people have been just voted in. [Citizens] are excited for the energy that we have, the new parliament. And thus, the level of engagement at that time is higher. We need to grab these nice opportunities to engage the public.’

And similarly, the incentives for MPs to engage with the public, and thus the nature of public engagement can also vary within this period:

‘At the beginning of a parliamentary term, it's more about service, e.g. ‘This is what parliament is doing’, ‘This is what laws are passed’, ‘these are the proposals in the House’ etc. Yet as parliament gets into its fourth, and final year, getting members to engage with the citizens changes its strategy, now it's more about elections. The members are engaging, to an extent, to be able to win the vote to come back to parliament.’

The knowledge of such patterns can be extremely valuable, as it allows parliament to time and tailor initiatives to achieve the intended objective with much more precision.

## **5. Close the feedback loop.**

Findings from the GPR indicate that even when public engagement is evaluated and parliament can therefore show demonstrable impact, participants are not often kept in the loop with regards to their own contribution. Madimesta Moleka, Section Manager, Provincial and Municipal Liaison at the Parliament of South Africa, highlighted this point:

We are big on inviting [citizens], interacting with them and so on, but we don't have the same zeal and energy, in the form of institutional energy, to equally go back to communities and give them feedback at the same pace. Except that we share the report, we put the report on the website. I'm saying, we went to these communities to talk with them, so it is only logical that we need to go back.

Yet as indicated prior, disseminating the results of engagement evaluation can be instrumental in boosting parliamentary accountability, as well as participation in future initiatives. Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Professor in Public Engagement at Leeds University, stressed in the youth engagement focus

group that when a feedback loop is closed, ‘that’s where a young person can see: Actually, there was a point of doing that. There was a point, someone is listening to that.’ This was reiterated by Professor James Sloam during the same focus group, when he said that: ‘There has got to be a conclusion to what this engagement is actually going to achieve in the end.’

By providing a clear objective for, or output of engagement, and providing substantiated reasons for unincorporated inputs, one closes the feedback loop. It is therefore apparent to participants that their engagement is taken seriously from the start, that it is valued, and that it will have an impact in benefiting them or their peers directly. An example of closing the feedback loop comes from Estonia, where the parliamentary petitions system dictates that the relevant parliamentary committee must inform the person who submitted the petition within 30 days as to whether it will be taken up, and if not, why. This gives the petitioner the chance to amend the petition based on the feedback and resubmit it.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the GPR research, the simple feedback loop as depicted in figure 1 can be expanded to include the five key lessons reported in this article. Figure 2 shows this improved feedback loop which emphasises planning of engagement as the start of the loop. During this stage the objective and the metrics of success are defined. With these matters in mind, engagement initiatives can be executed with transparent objectives, whilst facilitating collection of the relevant data. Subsequently, the information is then employed by evaluators to assess the success of an initiative. These findings, in turn, are then disseminated to the original participants, as well as the broader public, to indicate a clear objective to engagement and incentivise future participation.

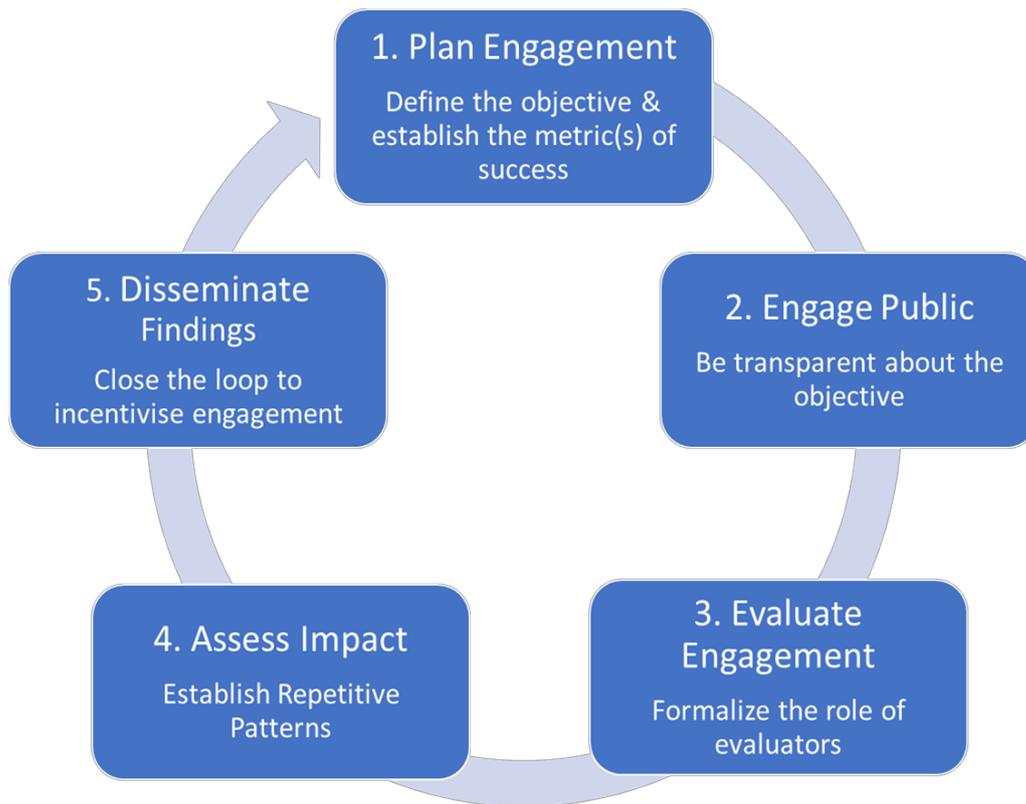


Figure 2: Expanded Feedback Loop

With a public engagement feedback loop, parliaments establish a process of continuous learning and improvement. This does not only allow for the efficient use of public resources, but it also communicates to citizens that engagement is valued and worthwhile. In this way, parliaments can match supply to the demand of the general public and optimize their public engagement strategy.

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