



Notes from the citizens' assemblies session at the Low Carbon West Oxford Climate Café meeting, 9th March, 2019

Written by Liz Goold

As part of Oxford City Council's Climate Emergency declaration, it encouraged the Council to '**establish a Citizens' Assembly** made up of a representative range of Oxford citizens to establish the facts and make recommendations for our city'.

Cllr Craig Simmons spoke to the importance of this in his talk. In addition, a small group from the Oxford Democracy Café (ODC) has stepped forward to support the City Council in this endeavour and raise awareness of citizens' assemblies in Oxford more generally and two of its members (Liz Goold and Michel Grandjean) were at the meeting. They were able to support one of the table conversations to explore what this might mean in relation to the climate emergency proposal.

So, what is a citizens' assembly?¹

In brief, a citizens' assembly enables informed and reflective public deliberation and engagement on a complex issue, as part of wider policy decision-making.

The key feature of a citizens' assembly is that it is made up of randomly selected citizens who are representative of the local demographics (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity etc.). Citizens' assemblies can take place at a neighbourhood, regional, national or international scale.

As well as generating concrete recommendations, citizens' assemblies in Ireland (e.g. on abortion) and elsewhere have shown that facilitated deliberation gives participants an opportunity to learn from each other, change their thinking and actively contribute to the democratic process. It also generates wider public awareness of the issues being considered.

Further information on citizens' assemblies is in the attached flyer and via links listed below.

During our session at the Climate Café, everyone had an opportunity to share their questions and express why they joined this table conversation.

Summary of themes/questions raised (in the group and in feedback session)

- Are citizens' assemblies the right tool for such complex and long term issues?

¹ This description is drawn from www.involve.org.uk and guidance produced for the Innovation in Democracy Programme https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762360/Innovation_in_Democracy_Programme_-_workshop_evidence_pack.pdf



- How to deal with the emergency aspect, is the citizens' assemblies process fast enough, with real tangible output?
- How to transform all that energy into actions, short medium and long term, involving people?
- How to ensure its inclusive, empowering, representative? How are people selected? What's the cost involved? Budget?
- Need to be clear what power or influence a citizens' assembly has- realistic expectations and important to manage expectations with citizens
- Who are the recommendations to - and are they binding?
- How to engage Oxfordshire County Council too?
- How to ensure the process independent, efficient, focused...
- How to feedback to wider audience?
- How to monitor the implementation plans, next steps etc?
- Could this citizens' assembly be the first of many, transforming democratic processes? Could be an opportunity to prototype a different way of doing democracy around different complex issues? Many attendees recognised the need to urgently improve our democratic processes
- Needs to be time-bound, clear framework and ensure pre-conditions for success
- Importance of having skilled facilitation to allow for dialogue, participation and exploring of different perspectives
- We might get some push back from councillors, "too expensive, too slow, we already know what to do etc". Need to be prepared for this
- 3E: engage, empower, equalising economy, (and education). Needs to relate to economy, holistic approach- not just climate

Many participants left their email addresses to be kept in the loop with any follow-up. The ODC working group is happy to send round some information in response to these questions and they need to feed into the thinking of the Council about the development of a citizens' assembly.

Signposting to other sources of info was also offered (see below).

All agreed that it will be important to put flesh on the bones of the proposal for a citizens' assembly, so it does not just stay on paper but is progressed and responding to these questions will help.

Also to make links with Extinction Rebellion as having a citizens assembly is one of their key propositions.

There was an overall agreement that this is a real opportunity to do democracy differently (particularly given the Brexit fiasco)- and the importance of citizens saying they want this, therefore awareness raising is key. Also recognised the opportunity and importance this gave to working across and beyond party political boundaries- and the importance of engaging other key players.



What next?

- Important to make sure there is no duplication of effort and to connect up with Cllr Tom Hayes (Cabinet Portfolio Holder for the Environment in Oxford City Council) and the group working within the council on this. This is now happening, as well as following up with Craig. Tom is being invited to the next LCWO climate café and this could include an opportunity for feedback/ test out ideas/progress this further.
- Citizens' assemblies cost money and not in current budget, so may need to lobby to find other pots? Any update at next Council meeting on 29th April? Also a lot of interest in contributing time, support and facilitation skills to help make it a success
- Find out more about citizens' assemblies and spread the word!
- <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-assembly>
- <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/08/how-99-strangers-in-a-dublin-hotel-broke-irelands-abortion-deadlock>

The **Citizens' Assembly for Oxford working group** grew out of conversations at the Oxford Democracy Café <http://www.oxforddemocracycafe.org/>.

We'd love to hear your ideas about how to build support and understanding for a citizens' assembly on the climate emergency and to join up the dots. Please get in touch with Richard Pantlin at richardpantlin@yahoo.co.uk.