

A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY FOR OXFORD

On 28 January 2019 Oxford City Council agreed to 'join other Councils in declaring a Climate Emergency' and 'encourage this 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'.

The Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network (OxCAN) grew out of the Oxford Democracy Café with the intention of supporting the City Council to hold Oxford's first ever citizens' assembly as part of its commitment to deliver this mandate. It is also keen to raise awareness about the role of citizens' assemblies more generally as an approach to doing democracy differently and promoting good practice.

We envisage working with others to inform and inspire Oxford citizens and our representatives to build support, and create the conditions for a properly constituted citizens' assembly for Oxford. We are tapping into the wealth of experience in the UK and further afield about what's involved and some key conditions for success.

So, what is a Citizens' Assembly?¹

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 (eg in terms of age, gender, ethnicity). Citizens' assemblies can take place at a neighbourhood, regional, national or international scale.

As well as generating concrete recommendations, citizens' assemblies in Ireland and elsewhere show 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.

*"I felt empowered and informed – it gave me the language and skills to have difficult discussions.
In a room of 100 people, only a handful ever tried to create division or build walls among us. I think most people want to find things to agree on and to discover common ground – through this we can always learn new ways to go forward."*

Louise Caldwell speaking about her participation in Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on abortion, The Guardian 16 January 2019

What happens?

1. Participants **learn about the topic** through a combination of presentations and facilitated workshops. They hear from 'expert witnesses', including 'neutral' experts, stakeholders and advocates representing all sides, receiving a balanced and complete picture. They are often provided with learning materials that introduce them to the topic being discussed before the Assembly starts.
2. This is followed by a **dialogue phase** encouraging participants to explore their own opinions on

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

what they have heard and develop a wider understanding of the opinions of others. Experts usually participate in this phase to provide additional information and clarification (but not opinions).

3. The **deliberation phase** of the assembly involves participants coming to some conclusions on what they have learnt from the assembly process. Most large assemblies will do this through voting systems but smaller assemblies might use consensus decision-making processes. About two to three weeks later a final report is issued and made available to the public.

What are the conditions for success?

- **Authority** - the citizens' assembly is sponsored by a body with the ability and commitment to honour its recommendations.
- **Independence** - it is run and facilitated by an independent body.
- It is **genuinely representative** – this is achieved by inviting a large random group of people to volunteer, e.g from the electoral roll or the address register. Then participants are chosen at random from the volunteers but stratified so as to ensure that all relevant demographics are included, e.g age, location, gender, education level.
- **Sufficient resources** to operate - eg participants are paid an honorarium for their time; payment may need to be made to expert witnesses and experienced facilitators; other costs include premises, refreshments, selection process, publicity.
- A **live issue with a clear focus** that will engage with and stimulate widespread public interest; and **clear scope** for the recommendations (eg within a defined council budget).
- **Experienced facilitators** support the overall design and create the conditions for participants to share their thinking, contribute to the dialogue, listen and engage with different views and come to agreement.

Want to find out more?

<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-assembly>

<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/citizens-assembly-climate-change-how-would-it-work>

<https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/08/how-99-strangers-in-a-dublin-hotel-broke-irelands-abortion-deadlock>

https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/xr-podcast/episodes/2019-04-29T04_33_29-07_00

About the Oxford Democracy Café

<http://www.oxforddemocracycafe.org/>



The ODC is a place / space for people to come together to discuss issues and ideas about democracy, and how to use them locally and nationally to work towards a better society. All opinions will be heard respectfully, debated, explored and challenged.

The 'Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network' (OxCAN) is an off-shoot of the Oxford Democracy Café. We'd love to hear your ideas about how to build support and understanding for a citizens' assembly on the climate emergency and how CA's can help do democracy differently. Please get in touch with Richard Pantlin at richardpantlin@yahoo.co.uk