

Citizens' Assemblies: Some Questions and Responses

May 2019

As part of Oxford City Council's [Climate Emergency declaration](#), the Council agreed to 'establish a Citizens' Assembly made up of a representative range of Oxford citizens to establish the facts and make recommendations for our city'. This is now moving ahead:

<https://www.oxford.gov.uk/news/article/1064/oxford-city-council-to-establish-uk-s-first-citizens-assembly-to-address-climate-emergency>.

On Saturday March 9th 2019, [Low Carbon West Oxford](#) held their first climate cafe event '[Climate Emergency - what next?](#)' The conversations included three small groups, one of which explored what the citizen' assembly might mean in relation to the climate emergency proposal. Participants learnt about the key features of a citizens' assembly and also shared their questions.

The following questions were raised and the Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network¹ has put together some initial responses with signposting to further information. We have also put together an [overview](#) of what a citizens' assembly is, and key conditions for success. This is a living document as things are moving fast - and we'll be adding to it as more questions come forward. We hope you find it useful in your own conversations when talking about the Oxford citizens' assembly.

What is a citizens' assembly?

A citizens' assembly is a fairly large body of citizens that come together to deliberate on an issue, all set of issues of local, regional or national importance. Participants are usually selected to create a 'mini-public' that is broadly representative of the demographics of the population.

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

Citizens' assemblies are an innovative way to engage with your community - be it local, national or something in between. Citizens' Assemblies are fair, transparent, inclusive, and effective. They give a profound increase in the legitimacy of decisions by providing solid evidence of the considered endorsement by an informed, representative sample of your community.

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/sortitionfoundation/pages/287/attachments/original/1544622808/10_reasons_to_hold_a_citizens_assembly.pdf?1544622808

Are Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) the right tool for complex and long term issues such as climate change?

Citizens' Assemblies have been used in the UK and other countries – including Australia, Canada, Ireland and the United States – to address a range of complex legal and policy issues including: equal marriage, abortion laws, electoral reform, flooding, how to fund adult social care, constitutional amendments, opportunities and challenges of an ageing population and many other complex issues.

¹ The Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network 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 as an approach to doing democracy differently and promoting good practice.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/citizens-assembly-faq-17-19/>

Done well, CAs can be very powerful, providing policymakers with fresh, citizen-led solutions to often difficult and intractable issues. In April 2019 Scottish National Party conference delegates overwhelmingly backed the plan for a Citizens' Assembly to deliberate on the future of Scotland.

<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/why-scotlands-citizens-assembly-should-use-participatory-futures-thinking-and-technology>

How to transform enthusiasm into actions, short medium and long term, involving people? How do CAs get started?

- Identify issue(s) across the geographic/political area to be addressed;
- Ensure councillor / mayoral / politician support for the creation of the assembly, and an agreement to consider recommendations it may make;
- Identify and secure funding;
- Identify participation experts (within local government and externally - eg Sortition Foundation and Involve);
- Agree size and timescale of the assembly.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/engaging-citizens-devolution/approaches-civic-and-democratic-engagement/citizens>

Questions about the selection process, representativeness and how to ensure it is inclusive and empowers

The use of stratified random sampling increases credibility because it leads to a representative assembly with diverse membership and has the benefit of involving people who may not usually engage in political processes. The deliberative element – through which citizens are given time and resources to learn about, reflect on, and discuss a topic in-depth – also marks it out from other consultative methods which may require participants to give their opinions before they have had a chance to take a balanced look at the arguments.

CAs require sufficient time and investment. For example, Ontario in Canada ran an CA involving around 40 people over a period of 3 months for the equivalent of £43,000. A CA enables citizens to be brought into the decision making process in an engaging way, which reflects the strengths, needs and aspirations of the local population.

The cost is usually funded by public authorities that commission the CA. The CA in Ontario, Canada was funded by the local authority.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/engaging-citizens-devolution/approaches-civic-and-democratic-engagement/citizens>

It is key that there is an independent Advisory Board that selects the experts. There may also be another independent body that holds the design and process of the CA itself. Participants of the CA also have an input into the selection of experts and this includes not just technical expertise but those impacted by the issue itself.

Also to ensure participation from under-represented groups/communities, compensation is often offered for people's time/travel etc.

How to deal with the emergency aspect, is a CA process fast enough, with real tangible output?

CAs can take as little as a few days or several months. Essentially, as long as it is needed to be, depending on purpose, scope and resources. Given the nature of the issue, there needs to be a clear timeline. Preparing the ground well and ensuring ownership are an essential part of this if it is to be a success.

The recent CA in Ireland took 6 months to set up and lasted for 6 months. This CA was tasked to make its conclusions in a report to the Oireachtas - the legislature of Ireland.

The Oireachtas committee held hearings before making its recommendations to the Government. Any proposal to either repeal or replace article 40.3.3 would have to be passed by the Dáil – lower house and principal chamber, and ultimately put to the people in a referendum.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/q-a-what-is-the-citizens-assembly-1.2831437>

Need to be clear what power or influence a CA has - realistic expectations and important to manage expectations with citizens

The CA in Ireland made recommendations to the government and then the issue was put to the people in a referendum.

The CA in Ontario in 2006 on electoral reform recommended a new electoral system. This was put to the people in Ontario in a referendum, but was rejected. There was no change in the electoral system. The Chair of the CA wrote:

"It demonstrated the value of involving citizens in important policy questions. I was privileged to witness the extraordinary capacity of citizens when given the chance to contribute so directly to the democratic process.

The Assembly members constantly amazed me with their enthusiasm and deep commitment to the task they were given. Throughout the eight-month process, not one member withdrew from the Assembly. Members applied themselves to learning about electoral systems. They talked to people in their communities about the work of the Assembly and chaired public consultation meetings. Some members read hundreds of written submissions. Others participated on working groups to advise on the Assembly process or to do more research in specific areas. Many used an online forum to share information and discuss issues between meetings.

By the time the Assembly began its deliberations in February, it had become a community of people who cared about one another and never lost sight of their common objective: choosing the best electoral system for Ontario. Assembly members approached their deliberations with open minds, respect for different points of view, and in the spirit of the best kind of collective problem-solving. They inspired the members of the public who came to see them at work, and they inspired me."

<http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/>

Who are the recommendations to and are they binding?

The recommendations of a CA are normally fed back to the public body that commissioned the CA. The public body is often not bound to carry out the CA's recommendations. Often the recommendations of the CA are put to the people living in the public authority constituency / area in a referendum to vote on whether to accept the CA recommendations.

<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/the-irish-abortion-referendum-how-a-citizens-assembly-helped-to-break-years-of-political-deadlock/>

Many questions around the process to keep it independent, efficient, focused...

A CA is a body of usually 40 - 100 citizens who come together to deliberate on an issue, or set of issues of local, regional or national importance. Participants are usually selected to create a 'mini-public' that is representative of the demographics of the population.

The participants learn about a topic through a combination of presentations from experts and facilitated workshops (although they are also often provided with learning materials that introduce them to the topic being discussed before the CA starts).

This is followed by a dialogue phase which encourages participants to explore their own opinions on what they have heard and develop a wider understanding of the opinions of others. Experts will usually participate in this phase to provide additional information and clarification (but not opinions).

The deliberation phase of the CA involves participants coming to some conclusions on what they have learnt through the CA process. Most large CAs will do this through voting systems, but smaller CAs might use consensus decision making processes.

Needs to be time-bound, with a clear framework and ensure pre-conditions for success

Participants will typically have a set time to complete a CA. They may meet for one weekend a month for a year, or every weekend for a few months – or just a few times. The Irish Convention on the Constitution met for 10 weekends from December 2012 to March 2014. The Citizens' Assembly on Brexit ran for two weekends in late 2017.

<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/what-is-a-citizens-assembly/>

Importance of having skilled facilitation

In CAs – where a group of lay citizens are selected at random to come together to deliberate on questions of public policy – facilitators play a vital role. They can build bridges between 'experts' who are called to give evidence and citizens to create an environment in which compromise can be reached. By keeping everyone on task, being impartial and managing differences to ensure the discussion is constructive, facilitators ensure the views of everyone are heard, as well as offering support to the overall design and process.

<http://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/05/10/why-facilitators-are-necessary-to-ensure-high-quality-public-deliberation-in-citizens-assemblies/>

How to monitor the implementation plans, next steps etc?

The recommendations of the CA on Social Care were fed into the joint inquiry by the Health and Social Care Select Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. The Select Committees' members considered them, alongside other evidence submitted to the inquiry, when deciding on their own recommendations for how adult social care should be funded. The CA's findings will also be published separately on the Committees' website.

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/citizens-assembly-faq-17-19/>

How to feedback to wider audience?

There's potentially a huge range of people (Political parties, City and County councils, MPs, Community Action Groups, Schools, Faith groups, Co-op movement, Press, Universities, Trades Unions, Local businesses, etc) we want to reach. We need to start small and build support through 'critical conversations' with people in a position to influence within their own networks. We hope these questions and answers help.

More viewpoints and resources:

'Extinction Rebellion's call for a CA on climate change is a winning idea' says Sarah Allan, Head of Engagement at Involve (2 May 2019) <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/citizens-assembly-climate-change-how-would-it-work>

<https://citizensassemblies.org/> Marcin Gerwin's downloadable guide is a step-by-step presentation of how to organise a CA, with the primary focus on the city level.

An interesting podcast on CAs from Extinction Rebellion, featuring Matthew Taylor from the RSA, Sarah Allan from Involve and Green academic, Rupert Read

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

An example of FAQ for a citizens' assembly in Northern Ireland

https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/northern_ireland_ics_inclusive_democracy_faq_2019

Illuminating video of a Citizens' Assembly on social care with interviews of those who participated

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-E5tjVWUmE>

Put together by the Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network, an off-shoot of the Oxford Democracy Café

<http://www.oxforddemocracycafe.org/citizens-assemblies.html>

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