

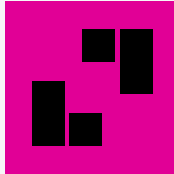
**Innovation
In-depth**

DELIBERATIVE APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

October 2020

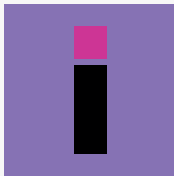
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THE INNOVATION SERIES



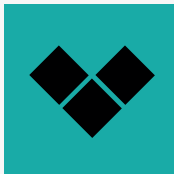
Innovation Exchange

Innovation Exchanges give member councils a space to step away from day-to-day activities and engage with peers from across the country. Each sessions unpacks a big challenge or opportunity facing councils and their communities. Sessions are peer-led and practically focused, so you should walk away with insights, ideas and learning to share with your team.



Innovation Insights

Innovation Insights are a series of rapid write-ups from our Innovation Exchanges. Here, we share the challenges as well as the solutions, approaches and ideas that attendees brought to the session.



Innovation In-depth

Innovation In Depths are a series of briefings which each take a detailed look at a topic inspired by our Innovation Exchanges. These practical briefings share case-studies filled with insights and learning from organisations delivering these innovations.



INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen much worrying about the future of democracy.¹ Are our current systems fit for purpose? Are people alienated by them? Is casting a single ballot every couple of years really the best we can do?

Among this handwringing, one word always seems to crop up to offer hope of another way of doing things: deliberation. Deliberation offers a vision of a much more active and participative democratic culture – and in the way that it is contrasted to the status quo, seemingly embodies John Dewey’s argument that “the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy”.² Good news stories about the power of deliberation to bring people together and solve complex issues abound, such as the citizens’ assembly Ireland ran on the subject of abortion.³

Local government operates at a scale conducive to dialogue between residents who share a locality, so increasingly councils are considering how deliberative methods could work for them.

What is deliberation?

Deliberation simply means⁴ bringing people together in order to weigh up preferences and make decisions. It’s used to increase the legitimacy of political, democratic or policy choices, and to engage populations with important issues. Common deliberative methods include things like citizens’ assemblies (where a group of citizens come to deliberate on a contested issue) and participatory budgeting (where citizens participate in determining the allocation of public funds).

¹ Runciman, D. (2018). *How Democracy Ends*. Profile Books.

² Green, JM. (1999). *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity and Transformation*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

³ Courant, D. (2018). ‘Deliberative Democracy, Legitimacy, and Institutionalisation. The Irish Citizens’ Assemblies’. *ECPR General Conference 2018 and APSA Annual Meeting 2018*.

⁴ Bohman, J & Rehg, W. (1997). *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. The MIT Press.



In the UK, deliberative approaches have been used in a range of policy contexts, including health⁵ and infrastructure.⁶ They have come to be most utilised around environmental issues –and at least 11 councils⁷ across the country have now used deliberation in this area.

Deliberation and the environment

Not so long ago, a common belief among prominent environmentalists, such as James Lovelock,⁸ was that dealing with the biggest environmental challenges, such as climate change, would require the suspending of democracy and a ‘war-footing’ on the part of government.

However, in recent years, this has flipped on its head, and those interested in protecting the environment have come to see more democracy, not less, as being the answer to their problems.

There are a number of reasons for this. These include:

- **Engagement:** Environmental issues are complex, and it has often proved difficult to get the public to engage with them. They are also issues around which swirl a huge amount of misinformation,⁹ much of it deliberately stirred up by special interest groups. Accordingly, some have come to view deliberation as a way in which ordinary people can be encouraged to engage with the environment. What’s more, deliberative approaches necessitate the platforming of, and an engagement with genuine expertise, which can offer a means of cutting through the noise that surrounds policy debates in areas such as climate change. From a local government perspective, deliberation can also help focus minds on the locally specific effects of environmental issues that are likely to manifest in a particular area, such as flooding or drought.

⁵ Dean, R et al. (2019). [‘NHS Citizen and what it tells us about designing democratic innovations as deliberative systems’](#). *LSE Blogs*.

⁶ [‘Citizen’s Juries on Wind Farm Development in Scotland’](#), *Involve*, (2020)

⁷ Vise, R. (2019). [‘Citizens’ assemblies can fuel real climate action, but also hold danger for councils’](#). *The Guardian*.

⁸ Thorold, R. (2019). [‘Democracy versus the climate?’](#). *The RSA*.

⁹ Bäckstrand, K. (2010). [Environmental Politics and Deliberative Democracy: Examining the Promise of New Modes of Governance](#). Edward Elgar Publishing.



- **Legitimacy:** Dealing with the largest environmental problems, such as climate change will require massive changes to the way we all live. The scale of the action that will be required is of a different scale⁸ to what is required to meet most policy problems, so it is perhaps logical, that there needs to be a different level of democratic engagement to make action legitimate. Deliberation allows us to go further than conventional representative democracy⁸. This applies to both national and local action.

- **Practicality:** Environmental issues often play out over very long-time scales, and the political ‘business cycle’ of regular elections on broad policy platforms leaves politicians with limited incentives¹⁰ to engage with them. It is for this reason (among others) that “more than any other academic field, green political thought has struggled with the challenge to link democratic procedure to sustainable outcomes.”⁸ This stark reality has left many environmentalists looking for new and radical approaches to gain democratic purchase, and the current vogue for deliberation is an example of this.

In spite of these pressing arguments in favour of deliberative approaches though, it is worth noting that this kind of work on environmental issues is not without risk. Some have argued⁶ that deliberation can raise expectations about what’s possible on certain issues to levels that can never be fulfilled, risking alienation among people and a loss of credibility on behalf of the convening body.

Others¹¹ have questioned whether deliberation, far from engendering greater action, may actually serve to bog down the process of dealing with massively pressing issues even further – and that now is the time for action, rather than conversation.

And this is all before we mention the most obvious risk that deliberative approaches pose – which is simply that their outcomes can never be guaranteed.

¹⁰ Niemeyer, S. (2013). ‘[Democracy and Climate Change: What Can Deliberative Democracy Contribute?](#)’. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 59(3), 429–448.

¹¹ Tiratelli, L. (2020). ‘[Earth-saving coalitions or very expensive focus groups](#)’. *LGC Plus*.

How to do it?

In order to overcome these risks then, and to harness the potential of deliberation on environmental matters, it is possible to identify certain guiding principles which can be of use. From a local government perspective, these are:

- Make it meaningful:** For deliberation to be a meaningful process, it must be powerful. It cannot be a simple exercise in consultation, or an attempt to rubberstamp plans that authorities have already agreed on. It needs to have the freedom and power to go in its own direction, and trust that it will be taken seriously if it does. Decision makers need to understand that starting a deliberative process means giving up some control. This means that follow-up, transparent next steps and a clear process are all important features to ensure deliberations feed in with clarity and are genuinely designed to shape outcomes.
- Make it Representative:** For deliberation to be an effective tool that enhances democratic legitimacy, it is crucial that it is representative.¹² This means that the group of citizens who engage in the deliberative process must be representative of the wider community, and not just the voices of the 'usual suspects'. Methods for ensuring this include processes such as sortition¹³ – and will be reflected on further in the case study section of this report.
- Make it Informative:** The power of deliberation is that it mixes the decision-making power of ordinary people, with the knowledge and understanding of experts. The process is supposed to be informative¹⁴ – meaning that it needs to have access to the highest quality information on the issues at hand. This means securing access to experts who represent the spectrum of views on a particular issue, and ensuring that what they have to offer is communicated clearly and appropriately to those involved in a deliberative forum, as well as the wider community.

¹² Fishkin, J. (2009). *When the People Speak*. University of Oxford Press.

¹³ https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/what_is_sortition

¹⁴ Fishkin, J & Luskin, R. (2005). 'Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion.' *Acta Politica*, 40, 284–298.



Potential approaches

As alluded to above, there are numerous potential approaches to deliberation – each bringing with it its own strengths and weaknesses. For a fuller picture, a resource detailing the breadth of options for councils interested in deliberation has been put together by Involve.¹⁵

This briefing will outline three approaches that have been used by councils on environmental issues. In each instance, both the combination of methods used, and the specifics of the problem that has been identified differ.

- This means that, taken together, these case studies demonstrate the variety of options that councils have available to them in this space. Local authorities thinking about embarking on similar work should hopefully be able to draw from the details of these, and evaluate what kind of approach would be best suited to their specific circumstances.

¹⁵ <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods>



CASE STUDY 1

Camden's citizens' assembly on climate change

Approach

In Camden, the decision to hold a citizens' assembly on climate change was an example of deliberation begetting deliberation. After holding an assembly on the future of the borough, one of the key takeaways was that residents wanted more deliberative activities, and more opportunities to shape the work of the council.

Further deliberation was then held in order to work out what areas of policy would benefit most from a citizens' assembly, with climate change emerging as the best candidate.

The council then partnered with Involve¹⁶ and the Democratic Society¹⁷ to run an assembly over the summer of 2019, with a group of residents who in their composition, demographically mirrored the borough. The assembly was structured so that it started by giving participants key background information about climate science and the situation in Camden, before moving onto think about pathways to the future and then eventually to coming up with concrete recommendations. There was a major emphasis on hearing the pros and cons of all potential policy suggestions, with thought also being given to costing proposals and thinking about who might foot the bill.¹⁸

Impact

In terms of policy impact, the assembly came up with a 17-point action plan¹⁹, which was subsequently unanimously accepted by the council.

¹⁶ <https://www.involve.org.uk/>

¹⁷ <https://www.demsoc.org/>

¹⁸ Rice-Oxley, M. (2019). 'Britain's first climate assembly: can it fix democracy too?'. *The Guardian*.

¹⁹ <https://news.camden.gov.uk/citizens-assembly-makes-recommendations-for-action-on-the-climate-crisis/>



Those involved in the running of the assembly were pleasantly surprised by the scale and ambition of the plan, and see its adoption as hugely encouraging for Camden's work in this area.

To harness the participative impact of the assembly, the council has been keen to build structures that will allow people to continue to engage with environmental issues, and to continue to have their voices heard. To this end, they have set up the 'Camden climate panel', which will essentially allow the work of the assembly to continue indefinitely at a smaller scale. They also set up and ran a 'Camden Pop-Up Think and Do'²⁰, which was a community space that provided a forum for climate and environmental action. Running for six weeks, the Think and Do hosted a wide range of activities, from cooking and sewing classes, to speeches from local activists. The space has since been re-opened as a community café, offering affordable food and drink, and continuing to host events aimed at promoting climate and social justice.

Challenges

A key feature of a properly organised citizens' assembly is ensuring a diverse and representative body of participants. However, one learning from Camden's experience is that this need for representation and diversity also applies to the experts that you get into to address the assembly. Feedback from assembly members suggests that some groups were disappointed in, and ultimately less engaged as a result of, the predominance of middle class, white voices among the assorted experts.

When reflecting on the experience of running this exercise, one thing organisers did acknowledge is that a formal citizens' assembly is a highly resource intensive and expensive process. It is also something that demands a lot from residents. This is of course not a reason to avoid this kind of work, but it does mean that some councils will find that their circumstances are not conducive to repeating this approach. An example of what could be done instead comes in case study 2.

²⁰ <https://www.camden.gov.uk/pop-up-think-do-community-space-for-climate-and-eco-action>



CASE STUDY 2

Leicester's Climate Conversations'

APPROACH

In Leicester, the drive to use deliberative democracy to unlock climate policy came from council members. There were two main catalysts for this. One was a recognition that in general, traditional council methods of consultation are often not engaged with very widely. Another was that the council had recently declared a state of climate emergency (meaning the council committed to taking action to prevent “climate change becoming much worse”²¹), and wanted to ensure that they had support to embark on potentially radical solutions, and that these solutions had been widely inputted to by relevant groups.

Viewing a traditional citizens' assembly as prohibitively expensive, the council decided instead to design a package of activities that together could add up to a meaningful deliberative exercise.

The centre piece of this was what they called a 'climate assembly'. This differed from a citizens' assembly both in scale, and in a few structural ways. Most significantly, rather than being put together by conventional random selection, they invited applications from people across the city who wanted to take part, and then randomly selected participants from anonymised information in order to achieve as representative a sample as possible.

The assembly then met at an event designed and facilitated in partnership with TalkShop²² and the RSA²³ to discuss the climate emergency in general, and then some specific, more localised topics within that.

²¹ <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council/policies-plans-and-strategies/environment-and-sustainability/climate-emergency/>

²² <http://www.talkshopuk.org/>

²³ <https://www.thersa.org/>



To accompany this assembly, Leicester's package of deliberative activities included:

- **A young person's assembly:** An event similar in format to the general climate assembly, where representatives of local secondary schools (selected by the schools themselves) were invited to come and discuss climate change. It was felt that engaging with young people specifically was important, in the context of the school strikes, and other youth-led environmental movements.
- **Online forums:** They created online forums where residents could discuss specific topics related to climate emergency, such as transport and behaviour change.
- **An online questionnaire:** Which solicited peoples' views on a wide range of issues related to climate change, and also invited them to offer their ideas and policy solutions.
- **Discussions with local anchor institutions:** Discussions with key local institutions and businesses about how they could assist in the city's work on climate change were held on a one-to-one basis.
- **Leveraging community organisations:** Consultation packs were sent out to community organisations who might be able to reach people that the council could not, so that they could run their own events, allow people to express opinions, and feed it back to the council.

Impact

The principal impacts of this deliberative work will come via the councils Climate Emergency Strategy and Action Plan²⁴. These documents have been shaped (and reshaped) by data from the deliberative processes, which had been collated into a series reports and recommendations. Away from policy, the council hopes that a wider impact of the work will

²⁴ <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council/policies-plans-and-strategies/environment-and-sustainability/climate-emergency/>



be to spur local anchor institutions on to come up with their own climate action plans, in collaboration with the council. It is hoped this ripple effect across the city will magnify the consequences of any council policy.

The extent to which deliberation has mobilised community groups and residents to do more on climate is, at this stage, difficult to say. This is principally because this work concluded around the time that COVID-19 struck, which through its own urgency, decreased the salience of other policy issues. Nonetheless, one of the targeted outcomes of this work has been to give participants a greater understanding of environmental issues, equipping them with the tools to take some degree of community ownership of the issue.

Challenges

While undertaking this deliberative work, Leicester encountered two principle challenges:

- Representativeness:** Without the resources needed to run a formal citizens' assembly (in which a representative sample is achieved through a very large scale mailshot-based approach, starting many months ahead of the assembly actually being convened), getting a representative sample of people to take part in the process was a challenge for the council. Some demographic groups were harder to reach than others, and some (such as young people) were more likely to drop out on the day of events, leaving the council in a position where it was too late to make amends. Nonetheless, through extensive advertising and outreach campaigns, they were able to get a decent cross section of residents.
- Online engagement:** Despite advertising it extensively, it proved difficult to get people to partake in the online forums that were set up to broaden out the discussion. Lessons need to be learned about how best people can be attracted to be engaged in such activities, as going online has the potential to enable a much larger group of people to get involved in a deliberative process, increasing its reach in an area and multiplying its mobilising potential.





CASE STUDY 3

Kingston's work on air quality

APPROACH

The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames has recently completed a citizens' assembly on a more localised environmental issue – air quality. Pollution is an important issue throughout London, and in Kingston,²⁵ 2.2 per cent of residents, and three school sites, are exposed to illegal levels of pollution.

Kingston's decision to hold an assembly was based on both the Council's clear aim to tackle poor air quality and their commitment to develop the use of participatory democracy to consult on difficult issues impacting on their residents.

While the assembly itself involved randomly selected individuals, the Council wanted to also enable the contribution of residents with a specific interest in the topic. They were given the opportunity to comment, online, through a community forum and through 'ideas boards' in locations throughout the borough, on what topics they thought it was important for the assembly to consider.

The assembly was designed and delivered by Involve, who worked alongside both the Council and an independent advisory group of air quality experts to develop the content. The advisory group scrutinised the themes that had been suggested through wider community engagement, and advised which academics and experts to approach to inform the assembly on these topics. They also provided comment on presentations prior to the assembly, with the aim of ensuring balanced and unbiased information for the assembly members.

The assembly members were recruited with support from the Sortition Foundation²⁶, and they met for four days over two weekends. Experts gave

²⁵ 'Kingston's Citizens' Assembly on Air Quality – Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames', Local Government Association, (2020).

²⁶ <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>



quick, 10-minute speeches, before interacting with participants in small groups, allowing questions to be answered and discussions to be had.

The assembly also featured 'lightening presentations' from residents of the borough who presented their ideas of how the borough should tackle poor air quality. These three-minute presentations allowed local voices to be platformed by the event, and gave the proceedings a more Kingston-specific feel – something that organisers felt was important.

Impact

The immediate output of the assembly was a series of recommendations, including a mix of short, medium and long-term actions. Specifically, assembly members produced five overarching recommendations, each encompassing a set of more detailed ideas.

These recommendations were presented to the Council in December, and to the overseeing council committee in January. Council officers were then tasked with translating recommendations into a series of workable, practicable policy initiatives which will be incorporated into the council's air quality management plan, which is due for renewal in 2021.

The experience of running the assembly has impacted on the council's internal culture. Those involved report that the experience of participatory democracy, while time and resource intensive, generated enthusiasm for finding new ways to tackle difficult issues.

The citizens' assembly members were energised and committed to developing recommendations for the borough, and some have continued to be involved, presenting the recommendations to the Council and attending meetings with officers to discuss how they might be taken forward. Indeed, the overall positive nature of the experience has generated interest from those working on other areas of policy in the council, and the approach will be considered when addressing complex problems for the borough in the future.



Challenges

Those running the deliberation in Kingston faced two major challenges relating to the timetable of the assembly:

- Firstly, in the run up to the event, the snap general election and ensuing period of purdah significantly limited the ability of the council to deliver wider engagement around the assembly which would have amplified the impact of the debate and generated wider conversations about solutions.
- Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic began just after the recommendations were published, interrupting momentum around the issue.



CONCLUSION

These case studies illustrate a range of approaches to using deliberative forums on environmental matters. They include examples of how citizens' assemblies can be used both on local issues, like air quality, and more macro ones, like climate change, as well as how a range of smaller measures can be bundled to offer a meaningful alternative to assemblies as an approach.

Environmental issues are by their very nature, difficult ones for councils to deal with. Often their scale and implications make them issues that councils do not have the power to 'solve' on their own. It is no surprise then, that many councils are turning to deliberative approaches in order to mobilise a wider coalition behind their environmental work, gaining themselves greater legitimacy to be bold and radical on areas where such an approach is desperately needed.

In many ways, deliberation seems to be the future of environmental policy making.

