

# Using a Citizens' Assembly for carbon reduction discussions:

Reflections for public health teams based in local authorities.

## Purpose of the briefing

Almost every Local Authority in the UK has now declared a Climate Emergency; many have developed carbon reduction plans; few if any of these will deliver net zero within the timescale set. Typical reasons given for difficulties in implementation at a local level are lack of supporting national policies, and a perceived lack of public support for effective actions, together with good evidence of vocal opposition from some groups. Running a Citizens' Assembly is often then suggested, and Public Health teams, with our scientific and research expertise, and our experience in public engagement, are likely to be influential voices in these discussions. This briefing is to provide some information for Public Health teams on issues to consider in such a situation.

## Background

In the UK, we operate under a representative democracy: we elect representatives who then have legal powers to make decisions on our behalf. These powers cannot be devolved and our representatives do not have to act based on the wishes of the majority, or even on the basis of the manifesto of their political party, but they do have to stand for election on a regular basis: if people don't like their policies or actions, they can be voted out. Some empirical research shows that representative systems tend to be biased towards the representation of more affluent classes, to the detriment of the population at large,<sup>1 2</sup> and we know that in the UK, deprivation is correlated with low voter turnout, which may contribute to this silencing.

This lack of representation of some groups is a general cause for concern (and one with which Public Health teams will be very familiar), particularly when there is an important but controversial issue that puts different groups' needs against each other, and where one group is less likely to be heard. Supplementing the process with deliberative processes can help to bridge this gap. In deliberative democracy, people come to decisions based on informed discussion and debate of competing information, arguments, and principles or values. The quality of the process is at least as important as the outcome.<sup>3</sup>

Citizens' Assemblies are a part of this deliberative/participatory approach and allow for a wider range of voices to be heard than is usual within a representative democracy. Typically, the assembly will consist of 20-150 randomly selected people with no specialist knowledge, who are then provided with knowledge and the time and impartial support to understand it, develop their own opinions on it, and debate it. Finally, they are asked to come to conclusions about the public policy questions they have been debating, including their priorities for resolving the problem or mitigating it. These solutions can then be provided to politicians for consideration of whether to implement them, as the legal responsibility for making decisions remains with our elected members.<sup>4</sup>

From a Public Health perspective, deliberative democracy can be very appealing. It should provide a stronger voice to the seldom heard, and it can be a good method of increasing trust and community engagement, and of hearing and responding to lived experiences. However, there are some significant issues to consider before embarking on a Citizens Assembly.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. What is the question?

- Has the question already been answered elsewhere? There have been about 20 Climate Assemblies already undertaken in the UK, including one commissioned by the House of Commons.<sup>6</sup> Public Health can remind local areas that not everything needs to be demonstrated in the locality to be locally valid.
- We should not be involved in panels asking *whether* we should be moving to net zero<sup>7</sup>. That is already the law. Questions of *how* are more legitimate but may already have been answered by others.
- Does the question address matters under the Council's control?<sup>8</sup> If not, what is the purpose of the exercise? How will the recommendations be used?
- Are only some answers or recommendations acceptable to the Council? Does the Council already have a preferred option or approach? If so, what are they hoping to get from the sessions? How open are they to different solutions? There are other (cheaper and/or better) methods for collecting people's opinions (e.g., open consultations).
- What is the range of answers that are expected? Is the question as framed likely to lead to answers in this range?

### 2. How will the learning, deliberations, recommendations and conclusions be built into the Council's strategy, planning and delivery process?

- What resources are available for implementation? Are these likely to be sufficient? If not, the panels should not go ahead.
- What is the link to existing plans and decision making processes?
- Who will make the decision on which recommendations to accept?
- How will decisions regarding the recommendations be fed back to the Assembly?

### 3. Are there sufficient resources?

- Running these events is not cheap. Running a Citizens' Assembly is estimated to cost between £30-150k and take around 4 months to prepare.
- It is crucial that the Assembly is impartial, and it is as important that it is seen to be impartial. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that the Council commissions a specialist organisation to design and run the Assembly, and that the independence of the process is clear.

- To avoid self-selection bias, participants should be paid, and experts may request payment. There are likely to be venue and catering costs, and there will need to be organisational ownership of the commissioning of the process.
- Whether or not the Panel's recommendations are accepted, there needs to be staffing capacity and funding identified to address the problem posed to the Panel. If not, the Panel could be seen as a smoke screen for delay.
- There needs to be a plan for the dissemination of the findings and for engagement of the wider population.
- It is sometimes recommended that Assemblies form part of a continuing process rather than being a single one-off event (this could be a series of events with the same people, or a programme of events bringing in new people as it progresses) although this rarely happens in practice. A decision on this should be made at the outset so that participants are clear on the purpose and the process. The greater the time commitment, the more likely it is that the panel will become unrepresentative.

4. Could the money be better spent (i.e., what are the opportunity costs)?

- For the c 100k, between 20-150 people in your population become better informed on a topic and are able to provide advice and recommendations on it. For this to be useful, you need to have some confidence that their deliberations and recommendations will stand up to scrutiny, and that this then gives some legitimacy to the recommendations produced. You cannot assume that the rest of your local population will agree with the findings of the Assembly (they haven't been through the process and may not respect it) – although repeating the same process with different groups tends to give similar results.
- Currently little work has been done on whether running a citizens' assembly has any impact on the views of others in the local population.
- If, for whatever reason, the recommendations are not implemented, there is a risk of disillusionment among panel members, a potential backlash and negative publicity. The likelihood of recommendations being rejected, and the consequences of this, should be considered at the outset.

The following questions below are usually the responsibility of the people/organisation commissioned by the LA to design and run the Assembly. In order to maintain impartiality, the commissioners should not control these aspects. However, they should understand them and be confident that they are being delivered correctly. Irrespective of how confident a LA is that it can run an in-house Assembly, it is hard to claim this would be independent and there is likely to be an increased risk of bias.

5. How will the panel be selected?

- This approach requires random or quasi-random selection of people with no specialist knowledge of the topic. If the people selected are not representative of the

local demographics, the value of the exercise is undermined, and findings open to challenge.

- The panel needs to include people from different backgrounds, so selection is often stratified by age, education, gender and ethnicity.
- Given that the aim is to include seldom heard voices into the discussion, payment is required to reduce self-selection bias.

#### 6. How will the experts be selected?

- Ensuring that the experts chosen have both the necessary expertise and the willingness to be questioned is essential. There is also a need for flexibility to bring in others if the Panel requires this – or to find additional evidence. Experts are not expected to be neutral, and often people with strong views on opposing sides of the argument will be used. The relative strength of different pieces of evidence needs to be properly documented.

#### 7. How will the panel be run?

- Ensuring that people have time and space to deliberate is essential. Some studies have found benefits from single sex groups; others note the need to guard against group-think. Requiring consensus may limit engagement and can stifle discussion – for some issues, there may be more value from understanding the factors that drive different people's decision making. The facilitators must be impartial.
- Every member of the group is of equal value; everyone needs to be heard.
- The panels need to be properly informed about the purpose of the exercise, including about how their learning and recommendations will be used, and the resources that are available for implementation.

#### **In summary:**

Citizens' Assemblies can be a very powerful and positive tool when adequately run, with a clear question, proper resources for implementation of actions, and a good understanding from participants of how their deliberations and recommendations will be used. They can be a great way of hearing from a broadly representative sample of the public, avoiding the normally high self-selection bias in public engagement, and of facilitating honest, open discussions of controversial or polarising issues. These discussions and the conclusions and recommendations arising from them can be key in understanding different perspectives and in developing better ways of engaging the wider population on difficult issues, particularly those who are typically disadvantaged by other methods of community engagement.

However, they should not be used unless the question(s) under discussion is/are clear and within the Council's remit of responsibility. This should be clarified at the outset to avoid unrealistic expectations that can undermine current and future engagement. Any organisation that specialises in running Assemblies should be able to help with this. There must be a plan to link the deliberations back into the decision-making process and there

must be identified resources to implement whatever plan of action the Council decides to take. The cost of running the assembly must be set against other possible uses of that funding, and there must be plans to link the work to wider public engagement. Finally, they should not be used to delay decision making or to raise hopes of actions that are unaffordable or otherwise impossible to implement.

Eleanor Roaf  
DPH Trafford  
On behalf of the FPH Climate and Health Committee

With thanks for advice to Dr Malcolm Oswald, Director of Citizens Juries c.i.c.

## References

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