



THE CENTRE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

CLIMATE CHANGE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

This briefing is designed as a resource for professionals interested in citizen participation to address climate change, and for those with a wider interest in public engagement with climate change.

Key points

Citizens' assemblies offer the potential for careful and in-depth decision-making about how to achieve emissions reduction

Because citizens' assemblies are comprised of representative groups of the public, their recommendations are likely to reflect the broader concerns of society

We should be alert to the ways in which the proposals arising from citizens' assemblies are influenced by the presentation of information and structuring of debates

Public engagement with climate change is required beyond the formal process of citizens' assemblies, so that people better understand and can help shape low-carbon transformations

CAST is a global hub for understanding the social science of climate action.

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What is a Citizens' Assembly?

A citizens' assembly is a model of decision-making in which a group of non-expert citizens (typically around 50-150 people) work to arrive at practical and policy-relevant recommendations, in response to complex social issues. The format entails learning about issues in detail through expert presentations, with deliberations and exercises designed to help participants share, discuss and debate ideas.

Key features of a citizens' assembly include ¹: randomly selected and demographically representative participants; carefully designed questions; extended deliberation (often over several weekend sessions); expert input, with opportunities for participants to ask questions; professional facilitation of discussion; voting on key recommendations and decisions; and an advisory or oversight panel to ensure rigour and transparency.

Why a Citizens' Assembly?

A citizens' assembly is particularly appropriate for addressing difficult social issues where both formal evidence and people's values are relevant to decision-making, and where there may be many potential routes to action.

Citizen involvement has the potential to improve the quality, legitimacy, and feasibility of policy outcomes². Deliberations are carefully structured and occur over an extended period of time and so constitute much more than just a snapshot of public opinion or 'knee-jerk' response to controversial topics. Where assembly members are representative of wider society, the process has the potential to reflect the views of the public, had they too had the opportunity to consider issues in such detail.

Why a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change?

Tackling climate change is both a highly technical challenge and a morally complex problem. There are many ways in which a low-carbon society can be accomplished, but scientific analysis alone cannot draw conclusions about which approaches should be implemented and which rejected. For that decision to be made, people's involvement in the design and endorsement of suggested pathways is crucial. At the same time, people's judgements about what are fair, reasonable, effective and appealing strategies require some level of expert input. Advice from experts is necessary in relation to different options and their feasibility, in order that participants can provide an informed opinion.

There are likely to be some win-wins in the move towards a low-carbon society, such as new job opportunities or healthier lifestyles. However, there will inevitably be trade-offs that are not favourable for everyone. Controversial areas for reform could, for example, include restraints on incumbent and powerful interests such as the fossil fuel industry, as well as changes to pervasive and established ways of life such as reliance on private cars.

There has been progress towards decarbonisation in the UK, but the majority of this has occurred through changes to energy supply and energy efficiency. Other sectors have seen little or no progress; emission from private cars, for example, have been constant since the early 2000's³. However, to achieve net-zero carbon emissions, we cannot avoid addressing areas which are front and centre of people's lives, such as food, travel and material consumption⁴. There is a need for citizens to be involved in shaping advice to policy-makers, precisely because of the difficult but urgent nature of the transition to a low-carbon society, which will significantly affect people's lives. While representative democracy remains essential to climate policy-making, the deliberative approach of a citizens' assembly enables more substantive input by citizens into decisions that may have profound and long-lasting implications. This ability to gauge people's perspectives on low-carbon transformations underpins a large and growing number of deliberative processes emerging at local and national levels, in the UK and beyond.⁵

What does social science tell us about citizen deliberation on climate change?

More than a quarter century of research in the social sciences has shown that people's views on climate change are bound up with their values, politics, culture, education and experiences⁶. Public opinion on climate change fluctuates over time in response to current events, media reporting and societal discourses⁷. It is important to include a diverse set of views and values within public deliberations and, ultimately, the decision-making process. But it is also important to recognise that people are highly likely to bring a range of pre-existing assumptions to bear on their deliberations about climate change, especially with regards to preferences for strategies to address it.

As well as acknowledging a range of viewpoints, deliberative processes should be attentive to the substantial body of research that shows that people's perspectives are sensitive to the way in which climate change is communicated. Studies have shown that even apparently small differences, such as using the phrase 'global warming' rather than 'climate change', can affect people's responses⁸, as can the visual imagery used to illustrate and communicate climate change⁹. Differences between people in their values and politics can in turn lead to inconsistent responses to the same material, for example where this concerns matters such as social justice or national security¹⁰. Overall, the existing research suggests that there are no 'neutral' ways of representing and communicating climate change. Citizens' assemblies on climate change, in particular, need to pay close attention to the way information is framed and communicated.

Strengths and limitations of citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are designed to provide specific practical proposals that can be implemented by government. This ability for people's views to directly inform policy-making is one of the clear advantages of citizens' assemblies, as is their basis in a democratic and representative ethos. The focus on outcomes and recommendations does mean, however, that many of the underlying reasons for citizens' proposals – and the conditions attached to them – may be less evident. This matters because a particular suggestion can be based on a range of different justifications; there is a risk that policy-makers may be left to attach their own interpretations to why citizens' assembly proposals favour one strategy over another.

Were citizens to support congestion charges in cities, for example, this could be for numerous reasons, including concerns about air pollution and health, the perceived advantages for public spaces from reduced traffic, the belief that transport emissions are an important sector to address in relation to carbon emissions, the sense that congestion charges are an effective or equitable solution, or because this measure has been convincingly argued for by an expert witness or communicated in a certain way. Previous research has shown that there is a diverse range of reasons underpinning public participants' preferences for different policy responses in relation to energy and sustainability¹¹. It is important that citizens' assemblies enable people to outline their reasoning for specific proposals, and the values that drove discussions (e.g. a health versus financial focus), and that these are reported alongside recommendations. This can help ensure that policies are implemented in line with people's values, and limit the risk of misinterpretations.

Where the detailed workings of the deliberative process are open to independent researchers and other interested parties, this can also aid understanding of the basis of citizens' decision-making. In addition, there is a need for research to compare and contrast the different methods and terms of reference of the growing number of national and local processes. Other researchers have argued that comparable deliberative exercises, on other topic areas, have been undermined by risks of bias and undue influence¹² and so it is important that climate change deliberations are carefully scrutinised. More detailed attention to citizens' assemblies will enable us to better appreciate which themes and proposals are recurrent despite the diversity of approaches used; and which may be linked to particular contexts or techniques. While citizens' assemblies have many advantages for informing policy-making, more widespread public engagement is also needed to ensure that people are able to participate effectively in the social transformations needed for a future low-carbon society.

References

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3. Committee on Climate Change (2019). [Reducing UK emissions: 2019 Progress Report to Parliament](#).
4. In the foreword to the Committee on Climate Change's 2018 Progress Report to Parliament, then Chair Lord Deben stated: "[W]e have reached a critical moment. We must now step beyond the well-trodden path into every sector of the economy."
5. [France initiated a citizens' assembly on climate change](#) shortly before the UK process began. In the UK, local assemblies or 'citizens' juries' have occurred or are planned in several towns and cities, including [Oxford](#) and [Leeds](#).
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Suggested citation: Capstick, S., Demski, C., Cherry, C., Verfuërth, C. and Steentjes, K. (2020). *Climate Change Citizens' Assemblies*. CAST Briefing Paper 03.