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# Deliberative Democracy: How can it support us in our work?

Workshop at Kellogg College, University of Oxford  
18th May 2023

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## Summary and key learnings



Kellogg College  
University of Oxford



Global Centre on  
Healthcare & Urbanisation

NUFFIELD DEPARTMENT OF  
**PRIMARY CARE**  
HEALTH SCIENCES

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# Introduction and background

Elected members and officers from local authorities in Oxfordshire were invited to a half day workshop on deliberative democracy at Kellogg College on 18th May 2023, organised and funded by the University of Oxford.

Recent years have seen an increased interest in, and practice of, citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies. This was, therefore, an opportune time to convene a space for local councils to come together to explore the potential benefits, dilemmas and implications of deliberative democracy.

The workshop facilitation was led by Liz Goold, an independent facilitator, with experience of running citizens' assemblies, supported by breakout facilitators. The workshop drew from experiences of citizens' assemblies and juries run locally, as well as across and beyond the UK, and the design of the event incorporated some of the qualities of deliberative processes. The intention was to create the conditions for informed dialogue and generative learning to stimulate further conversations and experimentation, rather than aiming to reach definitive conclusions or decisions.

The aims of the workshop were:

- To raise awareness of the opportunities and challenges that deliberative democracy presents, drawing on promising practices of recent citizens' juries and assemblies, including local examples and lessons learnt, and
- To facilitate dialogue and discussion amongst councillors and officers on the potential application and implications of deliberative democracy for local authorities.

Sixteen people took part on the day, with 4 councillors and 7 officers from Oxfordshire county council, including the Chief Executive and Leader, and 1 councillor and 4 officers from Oxford city council.

This short summary outlines the workshop programme and main take-aways, followed by an appendix with key learnings.

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# 1. Perspectives from external commentators on deliberative democracy

The first part of the workshop involved three commentators who brought academic and practitioner perspectives on deliberative democracy, focusing on:

- Principles and characteristics of deliberative democracy (Prof Alan Renwick, University College London)
- Promising practices and learning from citizens' assemblies and juries across and beyond the UK (Pete Bryant, Shared Future)
- Impact of citizens' assemblies and systems change (Claire Mellier, Iswe Foundation).

This led to a lively discussion where participants explored questions with the commentators and with each other in mixed groups of councillors and officers from different councils. Themes from these deliberations included: strengthening local democracy and trust; handling polarisation; using sortition to recruit diverse citizens; accessibility and cost; embedding these approaches in how councils work; and impact and follow-through at personal, institutional and systemic levels. Notes on these discussions are provided in the Appendix A.

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## 2. Exploring local examples of citizens' juries and assemblies

The second part of the workshop involved a closer look at two local examples of deliberative democracy: the Oxford Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, sponsored by Oxford city council in 2019; and Street Voice - a citizens' jury on climate change, transport and health, organised and funded by the University of Oxford in 2022. This session offered an opportunity to hear the lived experiences of assembly and jury members and of the organisers through a facilitated conversation using a 'fishbowl' method. It involved a small group discussion in an inner circle, with the rest of the group listening from an outer circle.

Jury and assembly members and organisers spoke compellingly about their experiences, for example, their learning and sense of purpose and agency from the process itself. They also highlighted the power of being part of a diverse group of individuals, provided with the space and facilitated support to hear and work through different views.

*I was struck by the contrast between the atmosphere and quality of dialogue in standard consultation compared to the citizens' jury\**

Jury and assembly members offered recommendations to local authorities who are considering this approach. They suggested, for example, being clear on the scope, the importance of follow-up and harnessing the motivation and learning of assembly and jury members, and encouraging accessible, informal and enabling spaces, in contrast to their experience of rigid and adversarial processes within the Council, such as the format of scrutiny committees. Powerful examples were shared about the catalysing and ripple effects of the assembly, in members' own working lives, communities and networks, raising discussion about how this might be nurtured and amplified in the future.

This proved to be an impactful conversation, both for those taking part in the fishbowl discussion, and for those listening on the outside. Further reflections and recommendations from this conversation can be found in the Appendix B.

The final session brought together officers and councillors in single organisation groups to reflect on the implications of what they had heard and discovered – both for their local authority and for them as individuals.



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## 3. Implications for local authorities: Key take-aways and looking ahead

The feedback during the final session and in the evaluation surfaced some key take-aways for both councils, including:

### **i) The power of connecting with citizens at an emotional level** (key messages from County Council Group 1)

Participants were struck by the emotional openness and engagement of the assembly and jury members. Participants felt that currently, it was hard to enable emotional engagement with existing council processes. They also commented on how far perspectives can shift through this kind of engagement.

There was a recognition that any narrative for change needs to engage at an emotional level, connecting with a sense of purpose and vision. How might deliberative approaches help here?

*People are more inclined to come along when focused on emotional engagement instead of oppositional argumentation.*

### **ii) The way councils work** (key messages from County Council Group 2)

*Although we need to be under scrutiny, it does not mean local authorities need to align with clinical rigid structures.*

Integrating learning from deliberative processes can influence the way councils work, with citizens and internally, for example:

- Creating informal environments for engaging citizens, and creating conditions for more collaboration and dialogue rather than adversarial debate in scrutiny processes;
- Bringing citizens' voices into respectful and meaningful spaces through deliberative and facilitative processes and using creative methods;

*We could try to facilitate emotional integration with bureaucratic integration.*

- Engaging citizens much earlier in the process;
- Prototyping smaller scale deliberative processes around more focused issues and building this into the planning process.

One concrete action proposed by the county council was to incorporate the learning from the workshop into the new 'Future Council Governance Group'.

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## 3. Implications for local authorities: Key take-aways and looking ahead (continued)

**iii) Building on experience, knowledge and motivation of existing assembly members, and incorporating deliberative approaches into public engagement policy** (key messages from City Council Group)

Given the city council had already run its own citizens' assembly pre-Covid, it was felt important to re-engage and follow up with the original assembly members. Taking forward the development of a biodiversity strategy (which arose out of the citizens' assembly) was seen as a possible opportunity. There was also a desire to include deliberative approaches more formally in public engagement policy, whilst recognising the timing and choice of topic was crucial.

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## 4. Closing reflections

The workshop generated an appetite to think about how to take things forward differently, turning talk into action, and to consider ways of embedding deliberative democratic processes into current ways of working. The positive energy and mood in the room was striking, as indicated by the closing words as the workshop ended, which included: *reflective, inspired, energised and hopeful*.

In summary, the workshop concluded that deliberative democracy processes are a promising way to enliven democracy by engaging a wide range of citizens in deliberations. They demonstrate the importance of creating spaces to learn, experiment and follow through to connect citizens more deeply with democratic processes.

We would like to thank all attendees, commentators and facilitators for bringing their curiosity and energy to the workshop. We hope that it has seeded conversations that will enable deliberative democracy to bring citizens into local democratic processes in the coming months and years.

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# Further references

(including those written by external commentators)

Click on the titles for a link to the documents.

**Involve** (2021) [Blog: So you ran a citizens' assembly: Top tips from local authorities](#). Learning for local authorities by Involve.

**KNOCA** (2023) [Summary of workshop on supporting participants as follow-up to Citizens' Assemblies](#).

**KNOCA and Involve** (2023) [Innovations in subnational climate mini publics in the UK](#) (includes a list of useful case studies)

**Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network** (2020) [Summary of learning from Oxford Citizens Assembly](#)

**Shared Future** (2020) [Climate Assemblies and Juries: A people powered response to the climate emergency](#). Handbook on climate assemblies and juries by Shared Future.

**Claire Mellier and Rich Wilson** (2023) [Review of global citizens' assembly on the climate and ecological crisis](#), Carnegie Europe.

**Claire Mellier and Stuart Capstick** (2023) [Citizens' Assemblies and Systems Change \(Draft\)](#), Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations. (Final briefing paper forthcoming, to be published here: <https://cast.ac.uk/publications/>).

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# Appendix A

## Key themes and learning points from the session with external commentators

### 1. Why deliberative democracy?

- Democratic discourse is problematic, sometimes characterised by polarisation, simplistic discourse and breakdown in trust with elected representatives. Deliberative democracy can offer a way to involve the public in contentious policy issues and in creating conditions for good quality deliberation.
- It involves the random selection of participants by sortition to reflect the make-up of the community in question, the presentation of information from a wide range of perspectives, facilitated deliberation, and generates recommendations and a mandate for action by decision-makers.
- As long as there is confidence in the process, clarity about how the outputs will be used and the recommendations are respected (i.e. responded to, not necessarily all implemented), deliberative processes can build trust between citizens and decision-makers.

### 2. Some principles of good practice

- Set a remit and overarching question that are focused and clear, with no pre-determined answer and one that the council can respond to.
- Design the process in line with the endorsed methodology, to make for informed, considered and balanced discussion.
- In the planning stages, consider how to respond to the outputs, how to follow-through, and how the process will feed into decision-making by local government and other stakeholders.
- Backtracking from commitments or cherry-picking recommendations by the commissioning body risks damaging trust.



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## Appendix A / continued

### 3. Informing policy and decision-making on complex issues

- Deliberative democratic processes can focus on a wide range of complex policy issues, such as climate, transport, health inequalities, place making, town centres, hate crime, social care, democracy, budget-setting, fracking, biodiversity and health and well-being. Citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries may be commissioned by local authorities or other bodies, such as Universities. They can take place at different levels, e.g. town council, borough, city or county council, national (e.g. Scotland's climate assembly or the UK citizens' assembly on democracy), cross-system, or at the international level (the global climate assembly that fed into COP 26).
- Accountability matters. Some local authorities promise to respond in a certain time-frame. Others, like the Scotland climate assembly, reconvene the assembly to consider Parliament's response and to hear the assembly's feedback. Some bring assembly members back on a regular basis to hold the local authority to account on recommendations agreed. In Gdansk, Poland, recommendations automatically became legislation if they received more of 80% of the assembly members' vote.
- Citizens may be involved in setting the agenda and shaping the process - for example, choosing the themes they would like to explore more deeply, requesting further evidence and co-producing the recommendations.

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## Appendix A / continued

### 4. Hearing citizens' voices and ensuring representation

- Sortition is generally used to select the jury or assembly members. This involves sending invitations to a large number of randomly selected households to reach people who might not normally put themselves forward to be involved in consultations, so everyone has an equal chance of being selected. Of the people who respond, members are selected against demographic and attitudinal criteria to match the population of the area as closely as possible.
- Barriers to participation are lowered by, for example, paying people for their time, choosing an accessible venue and covering travel expenses (if face-to-face), providing technical support (if online) and meeting caring costs, to make the process as accessible as possible.
- Citizens' juries and assemblies may not be perfectly representative – some barriers to participation may be difficult to overcome – but they tend to be much more diverse than many traditional forms of consultation.
- Importantly, they bring together people from different walks of life who learn about each other's perspectives and needs, which may subsequently shift or open up their own perspectives.
- Communication and recruitment methods for deliberative democracy differ from those employed in market research in that, for example, participants are treated as citizens rather than consumers.

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## Appendix A / continued

### 5. Embedding citizens' juries and assemblies in councils' work

- It is important that the process is well understood by elected members, officers and the public to ensure ownership and follow-through of any outcomes.
- Support and capacity for communication, implementation, follow-up and evaluation should be built into the planning process from the outset.
- Citizens' juries and assemblies can help politicians understand their citizens' views and concerns more fully, enhancing rather than challenging representative democracy.

### 6. Resources: time and cost

- The cost to the council can be substantial and will vary from case to case. It is important to budget the costs of participants' time and expert facilitation, and include design, follow-up and communication.
- The budget for the Street Voice citizens' jury was just £15k but substantial pro bono time was provided. Other recent juries have cost around £40-50k, and citizens' assemblies upwards of £80k, reflecting their larger scale. Costs can be reduced by running the process online or hybrid. This can have advantages and disadvantages. But cutting costs by reducing the number of days must be balanced against the risk of reducing the time for deliberation, opportunities for relationship building and the quality of outcomes.
- The time investment for participants is significant but their time is reimbursed, and can be carried out over shorter evening sessions rather than whole day-long sessions at weekends. Holding some sessions online can make it easier for certain people to attend, such as those with caring commitments.
- Participants often greatly enjoy the process and experience a sense of purpose, so giving their time to it can be positive. In turn, the intrinsic learning, relationship and trust building, and ownership, for both citizens and councils, offer another form of value and sustainable benefit that arguably goes beyond the costs involved, and may well save time, money and emotional labour in the longer term.

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## Appendix A / continued

### 7. Handling polarisation

- Ideally deliberative democratic processes would be used before opposing and entrenched views are set in. Juries and assemblies can be effective in reducing division and disinformation and in shifting the discourse.
- A well-publicised and well-communicated citizens' assembly can be used to counter polarised discourse.

### 8. Creating impact at personal, institutional and systemic level and investing effort in engaging the wider public

- Impact can take various forms, e.g., personal impact, institutional impact, and systemic impact. It is important to include a systemic lens, both in framing the overall question and in mapping and understanding visible and invisible power dynamics and systemic blind spots, as they can impact on the process and outcome.
- Paying attention to the wider ecosystem that citizens' assemblies operate in - prior to, during and following - is key to sustainable impact. Using existing networks and ties with local, regional, national and international communities and groups can help to create a ripple effect at a more systemic level, not just staying with the event or the group of assembly members.
- Engaging people in the democratic process and changing people's perspectives on key issues creates impact that is often missing in traditional evaluations of deliberative processes.
- Raising awareness of deliberative democracy and the issues that these processes address with citizens, politicians and other stakeholders is also a way of building sustainable impact. Innovative examples, like the use of the web tool, Polis, allows for engagement with the wider community, and includes feedback loops to inform a deeper engagement with assembly members. In the Global Assembly, there were parallel community assemblies using materials used in the assembly, helping to raise awareness and understanding.

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# Appendix B

## Key learning points and recommendations from the assembly and jury members and organisers in the ‘fishbowl’ conversation

### 1. Learning from the process itself

- It felt powerful to engage with a truly diverse group beyond the ‘usual suspects’.
- The sense of agency and meaningful purpose that came with being involved in pioneering this model of a democratic process around a critical issue, and the learning through the process, felt as important as the outcome.
- Payment allowed for more inclusivity.
- Deliberative democratic processes offer the potential for strong and oppositional views to be understood and reconciled.

*It contrasts with discussions online where people shout at each other; it's a humbling and faith-restoring experience.*

- Members spoke of the power of imagination and creative thinking to help mobilise and to connect at an emotional level.

*This sense of coming together as a group, where all are longing for a more hopeful future, is very powerful.*



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## Appendix B / continued

### 2. Scope

A balance needs to be struck when defining the scope of a deliberative democratic process. If the scope is too wide, the focus and number of recommendations is unwieldy. However, if the scope is heavily pre-determined, it can restrict the ability of members to co-create solutions.

For example:

- Assembly members can play a role in the co-creation of recommendations.
- It is important to be clear about the sphere of influence of the council - what it can and can't do – and to consider the other players that need to be involved in effective action.
- Global perspectives and issues of social justice are important contexts in which to consider local issues and should be included in the information brought to deliberative processes, the framing of the overall question, and in understanding wider systemic impacts.

### 3. Supporting follow-up and ripple effects

- The capacity, motivation, understanding and knowledge that is built up during these processes, and the desire to contribute beyond a jury or assembly process itself, is a key asset and needs harnessing.
- Follow-through in a timely way is seen as key, alongside enabling the ripple effects to spread beyond the jury and assembly itself, through knitting together with existing networks and groups for wider, more sustained impact and ownership.

*See it as a multiplier effect, from one network to broader networks.*

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## Appendix B / continued

### 4. Integrating into a council

- It is important to consider the timing of any deliberative approach involving local authorities, so that any recommendations work with the rhythm of planning and decision-making cycles.
- There can be a mismatch of styles when presenting recommendations to a council committee. Interacting with council decision-making processes can be deflating for jury and assembly members. How might council internal processes adapt to enable citizens to engage more meaningfully?

*The deliberative and flexible ways of doing things in the citizens' jury contrasted with the rigid and adversarial arena of the scrutiny committee.*

## Appendix C

### Key themes from the evaluation forms

Feedback from this Workshop on Deliberative Democracy showed that participants rated their experience very highly and felt that it had met its aims.

#### What participants appreciated

- Hearing the voices of the citizens' assembly and street voice jury participants - their passion, and their honest and reflective feedback on the jury and assembly.
- The shared learning, cross-pollination and expertise of great academic and expert speakers with accessible theory and practice examples from local to global in scope.
- The well-facilitated space, the show-and-tell nature of the workshop, with room to think and discuss with a highly engaged group, and opportunities to talk with emotional clarity.

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## Appendix C / continued

### What could have been done differently

- More time to articulate different views, for opening presentations and for the group to process, and greater emphasis on take-aways and on diffusing, systematising and deliberating in existing fora with one-off projects as additions. An additional session.
- More interactivity (like the fishbowl) rather than speakers speaking one after another from the front.
- The juror and assembly members were considered to be very articulate but perhaps not representative of all members.
- The attendance of more councillors would have been beneficial.

### Main take-aways and insights

- **Engagement with experience of citizens** – Valuable insights into the impact on participants and how the deliberative democratic processes can activate citizens; the value of reconnecting with assembly members; the need to engage with residents earlier in the process of change; to do “with”, not “to” our communities and citizens.
- **How we work** - The importance of informal spaces (including room layout), that are rare in the council; putting voices into spaces through deliberative and facilitated processes to aid representation.
- **Application, integration and follow-up** - Better knowledge on deliberative democracy and citizens’ assemblies with ideas for implementing them in the council and feeding into scrutiny. Potentially incorporate them within the new county council ‘Future Council Governance Group’; opportunity and appetite to reflect on how to turn talk into action and do things differently; how to facilitate emotional integration as well as bureaucratic integration.

# Appendix D: Programme

## Deliberative Democracy Workshop - Kellogg College, Oxford

18th May 2023, 12:30 - 4:30pm

### Aims:

- To raise awareness of the opportunities and challenges that deliberative democracy presents, drawing on promising practices of recent citizens' juries and assemblies, including local examples and lessons learnt.
- To facilitate dialogue and discussion amongst councillors and officers on the potential application and implications of deliberative democracy for local authorities.

Timing	Session
1pm	<b>Getting started and introductions / framing the afternoon</b>
1:30pm	<b>Opportunities and challenges of deliberative democracy - Commentators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduction to rise in Deliberative Democracy and Citizens' Assemblies/Juries (Prof Alan Renwick, Constitution Unit, University College, London)</li><li>• Examples/Promising practices (Pete Bryant, Director, Shared Future - online)</li><li>• Impact of Citizens' Assemblies/Juries and systems change (Claire Mellier, Iswe Foundation)</li></ul>
2:30pm	Tea break
2:45pm	<b>Taking a closer look through learning from local examples: Street Voice citizens' jury and Oxford citizens' assembly on Climate Change</b>
3:40pm	<b>Implications for Local Authorities</b> How might this approach support us in our work? Possibilities and potential, dilemmas and constraints
4:20pm	<b>Key take-aways and next steps</b>
4:30pm	Review and close

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