

Citizens' Assemblies: Briefing for Barnet Labour

Context

On 25 May the [Barnet Post](#) reported that "Cllr Rawlings said a citizens' assembly would be set up to monitor the council's climate action plan and "make sure all residents benefit from green growth and nobody is held back"."

The 2022 Barnet Labour manifesto says: "We will tackle inequality, establishing a Citizens Assembly on Sustainability which will ensure all residents benefit from green growth, and that nobody is held back".

The manifesto also says: "We will hold a Citizens Assembly on Climate Change & Biodiversity to co-produce and monitor delivery of an ambitious Sustainability Strategy and Climate Action Plan with local people, community groups and businesses to achieve our net zero targets, ensuring that all residents benefit from green growth, and nobody is held back". And "Here are some of the targets and ideas we want to feed-in to the Citizens' Assembly process" (a detailed list follows).

Involving the community in co-producing and monitoring delivery of strategy is a good thing. However, a Citizens' Assembly usually involves individuals chosen to represent the community who then reach conclusions about what should happen which then feeds into strategy development. Community groups and businesses may provide expert input to the assembly but are not assembly members.

Climate change, biodiversity and climate justice are all inter-connected elements of sustainability that have many aspects to explore and reach conclusions on. It is not clear what a Citizens' Assembly would focus on.

A key learning identified by an independent review of Camden Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change was that "clarifying the intended aims of any such activity (both internally and externally), before it takes place, is vital. The nature, scope and boundaries of engagement needs to be clearly defined; this should ideally include both its expected output and the mechanisms through which this will be achieved. Without clearly communicating this, alongside transparency around levels of power and agency for those involved, residents' expectations may be unrealised, effectiveness of the outputs reduced, and trust in the council and its processes undermined".

It seems clear that the first steps should be to define the nature, scope and boundaries of Barnet Citizens' Assembly (or assemblies), consider how the outputs from the sustainability strategy workshops are used and how the process fits with other community engagement.

Doing this with input from council officers, community groups and key stakeholders may help to ensure there are realistic expectations, early buy in to the process and a well-defined scope.

This document aims to inform development of a Barnet citizens' assembly (and/or other deliberative and participatory engagements) by providing an introduction to the topic and extracts from, and links to, best practice guidance and case studies.

Introduction to Citizens' Assemblies

What is a citizens' assembly?

According to [Climate Assembly UK](#) "a citizens' assembly is a group of people who are brought together to learn about and discuss an issue or issues, and reach conclusions about what they think should happen.

The people who take part are chosen so they reflect the wider population – in terms of demographics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, social class) and sometimes relevant attitudes (e.g. their views on climate change).

Citizens' assemblies give members of the public the time and opportunity to learn about and discuss a topic. Participants hear from, and question, a wide range of specialists. These can include, for example, academics, researchers, people with direct experience of the issue, other stakeholders and campaigners. Through this process, they hear balanced evidence on the issue, before discussing what they have heard with one another and deciding what they think.

Citizens' assemblies usually last for two or more weekends and have forty or more participants. Independent facilitators are there at all times to help ensure everyone's voice is heard. The conclusions of the citizens' assembly are written up in a report that is presented to decision-makers".

A Citizens' assembly or an assembly of citizens?

UK public participation charity 'Involve' [highlights different approaches](#) and expands on Citizens' Assemblies.

"Not all assemblies of citizens are citizens' assemblies – and neither do they need to be. There is a vast [toolbox](#) of public participation methodologies that can be used to involve people in decision-making in a variety of ways.

While it's important that standards do not curb innovation, it's critical that methods are not watered down beyond recognition. A citizens' assembly is a specific democratic tool to be used in specific circumstances. Their power comes from their robust process, which gives a representative group of the public time and support to engage with a topic in depth. But this process makes them time and resource-intensive compared to many other methods of engagement, so citizens' assemblies should be reserved for the really knotty issues that require challenging trade-offs to be made.

Where these circumstances exist, a citizens' assembly can make a substantial contribution to helping to resolve an issue — but it must be properly resourced and well run to enable it to succeed".

They also provide [draft standards](#) for Citizens Assemblies:

1. Clear purpose
2. Sufficient time
3. Representative
4. Inclusive
5. Independent
6. Open
7. Generative learning
8. Structured deliberation
9. Collective decision-making
10. Evaluated

Involve also provide a [Citizens' Assembly tracker](#) which lists assemblies held between 2018 and 2021. While Citizens' Assemblies typically involve 40-250 participants, [Citizens' Juries](#) involve 12-25 people, take less time and so cost less money.

Citizen Assembly: Council Case studies

Use of Citizens Assemblies by councils has grown over recent years and this provides the opportunity for Barnet to build on lessons learned. The following provides some examples of council activity.

Blaenau Gwent

Friends of the Earth have recently provided case studies about council actions on climate change. They highlight a [Citizens' Assembly held in Wales](#) where "Blaenau Gwent Council joined forces with local and national organisations, as well as volunteers from the area, to deliver a citizen's assembly for the relatively small sum of £50,000.

The assembly's recommendations included creating an integrated transport system throughout the authority area, more help for people to train in green construction, and a programme of woodland preservation and restoration.

The assembly process was designed, launched and managed by the Blaenau Gwent Public Service Board Climate Mitigation Steering Group. The group's members include the council, environmental action groups, housing associations and electoral reform organisations.

The assembly creators worked with the Sortition Foundation, who are experts at bringing together groups of local people reflecting an area's different attitudes and social and ethnic backgrounds. The foundation selected a group of 50 assembly members, and in March 2021 these members took part in 23 hours of online climate literacy sessions on key issues like housing, transport and nature".

The case study summarises lessons learned from the assembly as follows: *“The council found it challenging to complete this work within the budget, which limited its capacity to make the sessions as engaging as possible. As a result, some people taking part said they felt rushed during the learning, deliberation and recommendation phases of the assembly. If the council was to run an assembly again, it would create more time for people to take on board information on specific themes.*

Running the assembly was a tough administrative challenge. Creating a design team, as well as appointing project managers, would have helped”.

Council information on the assembly and a link to the final report can be found [here](#).

Camden

Camden Citizens’ Assembly on the climate crisis was held in July 2019, According to the [council website](#) *“over three sessions, Assembly members considered evidence from climate scientists, environmentalists and community energy practitioners, before developing their proposals on how Camden should address the climate crisis”.*

An independent review of the Assembly by UCL found that *“Participating in Camden’s Citizens’ Assembly on the Climate Crisis was a positive experience for almost everyone involved, resulting in improved knowledge and confidence, changed behaviour and a stronger sense of connection to Camden. However, this is not the point of a citizens’ assembly – they are deliberative processes aiming to build consensus and legitimacy around responses to contested policy issues. As such, while there were many aspects that worked well in the planning and delivery of Camden’s climate assembly, this evaluation has also exposed aspects which did not work so well”.*

One significant issue identified was a *“lack of criteria to develop ideas in reference to, or compare them against, during the assembly itself”* which led to *“a lack of transparency in the pathway from the initial ideas, to the final recommendations and the emerging workstreams”.*

In summary the report says *“Above all, clarifying the intended aims of any such activity (both internally and externally), before it takes place, is vital. The nature, scope and boundaries of engagement needs to be clearly defined; this should ideally include both its expected output and the mechanisms through which this will be achieved. Without clearly communicating this, alongside transparency around levels of power and agency for those involved, residents’ expectations may be unrealised, effectiveness of the outputs reduced, and trust in the council and its processes undermined.”*

Lambeth

According to the [council](#) *“Lambeth held an independent citizens’ assembly on the climate crisis, to come together and work towards a consensus on how we reduce the borough’s carbon emissions”. “The assembly was made up of 50 randomly selected Lambeth citizens, who reflect the population of Lambeth. Participants heard evidence from different groups, including climate experts and local campaigns”.*

The [process](#) involved *“10 weeks of online workshops to develop solutions to the question: We are facing a climate crisis: How can we work together in Lambeth to address climate change and its causes fairly, effectively and quickly?”*

Recommendations *“reflected key principles that members wanted future decisions to be based upon including fairness, speed, effectiveness, accountability and community engagement.”*

Newham

Newham are the first council to have a permanent Assembly which will consider different topics over time. The [council website](#) says *“Newham’s residents have decided that ‘greening the borough’ is the issue they want England’s first permanent Citizens’ Assembly to discuss this summer.*

Newham Council wrote to 10,000 households selected randomly inviting them to register for a place on Newham’s Citizens’ Assembly. Fifty people from those registered to take part have been selected randomly to join the Citizens’ Assembly to discuss and recommend ways the Council should help make Newham a better, happier and healthier place to live

The theme itself reflects the importance of parks and green space to residents, particularly following the challenges to mental and physical health since March 2020. This first Citizens' Assembly will therefore examine how we can make the borough's green spaces more attractive and enjoyable for people".

Newham provides an example of an assembly focusing on more specific questions to explore rather than considering a large topic such as climate change.

Southwark

[Southwark council](#) held a Citizens' Jury on Climate Change, made up of 25 people *"the Jury sat for three months and has now given its recommendations for changes to help Southwark meet its Climate ambitions. Key requests are for improving walking and public transport, helping make homes more energy efficient and easier to keep warm, working with businesses to cut carbon emissions and helping everyone in Southwark to take steps that will tackle climate change".*

The Jury question was *"What needs to change in Southwark to tackle the emergency of climate change fairly and effectively for people and nature?"*

"The jury met over eight sessions: six online Thursday evening sessions starting on 25 November, 2021, and ending on 3 February, 2022. Two daytime sessions were also held on 4 December and 22 January. Lunch was provided and all participants received £330 in vouchers as a thank you for their time".

The Jury concluded that *"There must be rapid and decisive implementation of the action that is needed. This action must be taken by the council and others; it must be bold and must be more than gestures. With the council blazing the path and leading by example and propelling the movement to change.*

The council must look beyond its own immediate power at the same time as bringing all of its own departments together with a real sense of holistic purpose. At the same time we believe legislation must exist to enable the council to take the action needed."

The council makes clear the relationship between the Assembly and the development of a plan: *"Although there were 47 residents who took part directly in the Assembly, every resident, business, and organisation can get involved in the next stage: developing the recommendations into actionable and measurable targets for the borough to commit to."*

Perspectives on effectiveness of Citizens' Assemblies

In May 2021 Think tank [New Local published an article](#) that highlighted the role of assemblies in untangling challenging issues and the importance of enacting recommendations

"Citizens assemblies are going on in a whole range of places, tackling a whole range of issues. They've been national – on the future of social care; or on climate change assemblies in Scotland. There have been regional exercises on how Bristol can recover from Covid-19; whether assisted dying should be allowed in Jersey; how to help people have a healthier relationship with alcohol in the Wirral. And there have been hyper-local initiatives –like Test Valley's assembly on the regeneration of the area around a local bus station.

These public deliberations are seen as a way to untangle some of the knottiest and most divisive issues we face, building knowledge, empathy and passion among the public and to ultimately hand policy makers fresh – and pre-endorsed – ideas".

"Assemblies typically take place over days or weeks. Participants don't go straight into debating an issue; they build expertise first with the help of experts and people with first-hand experience...Because of the level of detail, citizens assemblies are particularly suited to 'wicked issues'... the policy dilemmas that can't be explained in a slogan or leaflet, where politicians are often genuinely at a loss as to how to tackle them, and need the public onside".

On the effectiveness of assemblies:

"A report from UCL's Constitution Unit found that out of 13 local citizens assemblies in the last 18 months, nine councils had taken 'significant steps' towards implementing the recommendations. It's a good proportion, given that the 18 months also contained a global pandemic.

Romsey, Waltham Forest and the Wirral are all enacting their citizens' recommendations. Last year, Camden became the first council in the UK to commit to policy change based on the climate emergency action plan put

forward by its assembly, including making all new buildings carbon neutral and increasing the number of segregated cycle lanes, with Leader Georgia Gould telling LGC that they were the “future of democracy”.”

A [Local Government Chronicle article](#) highlights an important element of assemblies saying: “Brett Hennig, director of the Sortition Foundation which has been helping to organise citizens’ assemblies, claims a benefit of this model is that it “sidesteps the influence of powerful and vested interests”.

A 2021 [blog by the Constitution Unit](#) reported that “councils that have invested in running an assembly have generally followed through with action”.

A follow up [blog in 2022](#) “summarises the evidence so far from local citizens’ assemblies in the UK – with 23 at the time of writing having completed their work and published reports. Through examining assembly reports, council websites and minutes, it can be seen that the broadly positive picture found at the start of 2021 continues. Of the most recent assemblies, the majority have focused on climate change, except for Bristol’s focus on COVID-19 and the numerous assemblies held by Newham. Where assembly reports were still in progress a year ago, these have since been published, and there has been significant follow-through in many cases”.

Citizens’ Assembly Guidance

As part of the UK Government's 'Innovation in Democracy Programme a handbook was produced on “How to run a Citizens’ Assembly. A copy can be downloaded [here](#).

Extinction Rebellion have called for a national “Citizens’ Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice to break the deadlock and to put fairness and justice at the centre of its decision-making”. They have also published a [guide to Citizens’ Assemblies](#) and a [youtube video](#) explaining how an assembly works – both can be found here.

Conclusion

The manifesto and recent announcements about a Citizens’ Assembly has raised expectations within local groups. Early engagement by councillors and lead council officers to develop the plan for the Assembly and other engagements is highly recommended to ensure focus is on achieving the best outcomes.

Climate Assemblies seem to be best used to explore issues where there are multiple stakeholders and views and where solutions need trade-offs and buy in.

There are probably many actions that the council can progress to improve sustainability that do not need to wait until a climate assembly has deliberated.