



# Innovation in Democracy Programme Evaluation

**Executive Summary**

**Sally Brammall & Kandy Sisya**

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## Introduction

This report brings together the findings of an evaluation of the Innovation in Democracy Programme that took place from November 2018 to March 2020. This national programme involved the delivery of Citizens' Assemblies in Greater Cambridge, Dudley and Test Valley, alongside broader support for the participating local authorities.

All three Citizens' Assemblies took place in the second half of 2019, at a time of significant political change in the UK. Brexit talks were ongoing, and during the programme, the 2019 General Election was announced, meaning that the assemblies had to navigate purdah.

While Citizens' Assemblies were still a relatively new phenomenon in the UK context, throughout the programme, several new Citizens' Assemblies were also being implemented, including the [Climate Assembly UK](#) and the [Citizens' Assembly of Scotland](#). At a local authority level, at least [8 Citizens' Assemblies were organised for 2019](#), four of which were devoted to the topic of climate change. The context creates a new, evolving field of practice; some precedents to build from; and a sense that the participating authorities were pioneers with peers to learn from.

Citizens' Assemblies are defined by Involve as:

*A body of randomly chosen citizens who are representative of the local demographics (e.g., in terms of age, gender, ethnicity). They are brought together to hear from experts from all sides of the debate and deliberate on an issue/issues over a series of events. The aim of the discussions is for participants to reach a consensus on the best way forward on the issue; this will be presented back to the commissioning body (in this case, the local authority) as a series of recommendations. Citizens' Assemblies can take place at a neighbourhood, regional, national or international scale.*

## Innovation in Democracy Programme

The Innovation in Democracy Programme (IiDP) was commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MCHLG).

The programme offered expert support plus £60,000 to cover costs to the selected Local Authorities to design and hold a Citizens' Assembly on an issue of local importance. The programme's aims were:

- To increase the capability of local people to have a greater say over decisions that affect their communities and their everyday lives.
- To encourage new relationships and build trust between citizens and local authorities.
- To strengthen local civil society by encouraging participation in local institutions.

## Participating Local Authorities and their questions

Local Authority	Citizens' Assembly Question
Greater Cambridge Partnership	How do we reduce congestion, improve air quality and provide better public transport in Greater Cambridge?
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	<p>What can communities and the Council do together to make Dudley and Brierley Hill town centres places that are vibrant, welcoming and somewhere that we are proud of?</p> <p>How will we know we are making a difference in: 12 months; 3 years; by 2030?</p>
Test Valley Borough Council	Building a vision for Romsey: How do we improve the area around Crosfield Hall and the Bus Station to deliver the maximum benefit to Romsey?

## Evaluation framework

The framework for this study is shaped by an interest in two distinct stakeholder groups and two types of questions (a process study and an impact study).

### The two stakeholder groups were:

- i) Residents and stakeholders in the issue
- ii) Local government and decision-makers about the issue

### In relation to each of these groups, we were assessing:

- The quality and implementation of the **process**
- The **impact** and learning from the Assembly

That simple framework sets up the thinking for the areas to explore within the study. A set of six questions or evaluative areas are explored from perspectives across the framework above.

- **Topic:** Was the question sufficiently challenging, carrying enough viable options to foster debate and deliberation in the Assembly?
- **Reach and representation:** To what extent was the purpose, activities and outcomes of the Citizens' Assembly communicated and made transparent to a wider public? Was the Citizens' Assembly membership representative of the local authority's area?

- **Deliberative process:** To what extent did participants feel they engaged in well-informed, open-minded, well-facilitated deliberation?
- **Independence and impartiality:** Do participants agree the available experts, evidence and information was balanced?
- **Relationships and impact on participants:** To what extent has this programme increased feelings that participants can influence decisions in their local area?
- **Outcomes:** How helpful is what was produced? To what extent have the recommendations from the Citizens Assembly been implemented?

Alongside the above, the evaluation sought to capture learning from across the breadth of the programme related to the challenges and solutions to holding a Citizens' Assembly in local government.

## Key findings

- Participants generally felt that the IiDP Citizens' Assembly topics were highly important for their local areas: on a 6-point scale, the importance of the issue was rated as 5 or 6 for 73% of participants at the start of the Assemblies. Whether from the outset or over the course of the Assemblies, the participants were strongly invested in the Citizens' Assemblies topic discussions.
- Participants gained a stronger awareness of the authorities' ongoing and future work, and the in-person connection provided opportunities to ask questions and challenge any areas which were felt to be unclear or omitted.
- Participants and authorities were beginning to navigate and redefine the boundaries of their relationship to each other, in the new format of engagement provided by the Citizens' Assembly.
- Participation in the Citizens' Assembly process has some positive impact on an individual's perception of their ability to influence decisions in their local area. From weekend one to weekend two, the percentage of people increased from 76% to 84% agreeing with the statement: *"When people in this local area get involved in their local community, they really can change the way their area is run"*.
- Overall, 65% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *"I think there will be improvements as a result of this Citizens' Assembly."* For many participants, there was cautious optimism, with the concerns linking to the likelihood that the recommendations would be taken on board, alongside reservations about the level of buy-in from senior decision-makers.
- Overall the assemblies were successful and positive experiences for those involved, and through the process, the independence and the representative nature of the

Assemblies, a key theme that ran through all of the feedback was one of credibility and authority.

- Experience of the Assemblies were positive for the majority of the participants. Based on qualitative interviews and observations, that potential positive impact can be seen in:
  - The development of personal skills and knowledge
  - An increase in the sense of personal efficacy and social capital
  - A growth in respect for and awareness of the local authority's aims and workstreams.
- The authorities and the elected members were all positive about the significance of the Citizens' Assembly recommendations to their ongoing work on the issue, some citing specific actions that had already taken place.
- Now that the assembly recommendations have been produced, the overall success of the Citizens' Assemblies for participants and local authorities will be judged by the degree to which those recommendations are implemented. As the Assembly topics link to longer-term plans, some extending into the next decade, this presents a challenge for how the authorities demonstrate that the recommendations are being implemented.
- Although it is too early to fully evaluate the impact of the Citizens' Assemblies in each place, several drivers were identified that support the likelihood of overall success:
  - The drive, motivation and upskilling of the local authority staff members involved, supported by new networks of contacts.
  - The fact that Citizens' Assemblies have been recognised as a genuine, high-quality process by participants and decision-makers.

All of this highlights movement in the relationship between citizen and government through these processes. One resident described it as:

*"A great opportunity, the way they did this process – it was like we were in government. [The] public have put faith in our representatives, to take our proposals towards the council. [It] gave us the confidence to give feedback and raise issues to the local authority."*

A member of the one of the local authority teams saw that shift too:

*"I think the overall ... process has been worthwhile in terms of building trust with the community... the feedback we've had from people is that they felt that was kind of a shift in the way the council was engaging."*

The contrast with other recent democratic experiences was felt by one resident:

*"Taking part in it, particularly at a time when national politics was so fraught and there was such a feeling of disenfranchisement, to take part in local democracy that's really deliberative...[I] think this is what it should be like, get involved and make a difference."*

## Recommendations

Based on the experience of this programme, there are six key recommendations for other authorities to consider, so as to ensure as much positive benefit as possible from using Citizens' Assemblies in their areas.

- **Do a self-assessment on your organisation's experience with participatory approaches.** A Citizens' Assembly is likely to be more effective, as well as easier to implement if there are Council colleagues that can support or help champion the approach internally. A similar exercise should be undertaken with elected members – a briefing activity may be helpful to gauge levels of awareness and enthusiasm for the Assembly concept and its key features.
- **Do not underestimate the time involved in selecting the topic and refining the question.** As shown in this evaluation, the focus of the Assembly question shapes the overall content, nature of the deliberation and the recommendations that are ultimately produced. Are you looking to explore an issue or are you (and community stakeholders) ready to test some real options?
- **Invest in the Assembly to ensure the credibility of the recommendations for decision-makers.** This study showed that the quality of the organisation and facilitation provided the Assembly with an authority that was respected by both participants and elected members. While some compromises may be possible, cutting corners too far on any of these aspects may undermine the overall credibility of the results, which will, in turn, lessen the likelihood of achieving the aims of the Assembly.
- **Carefully craft and establish the narrative that wraps around the Citizens' Assembly.** In the IiDP Citizens' Assemblies, the short lead in time was a weakness – affecting the ability of the authorities to clearly and prominently position the Citizens' Assembly in the context of their overall strategic aims.
- **Do not expect that a Citizens' Assembly alone will significantly affect relationships with the wider community.** Make use of the opportunities presented by the process to expand the reach and build on the positive impact of the Assemblies. Ensuring the visibility of the Assemblies and their output is a key part of this, but also consider issues like how to involve residents who were interested in taking part but were not selected or explore alternative ways to engage stakeholders that are likely to support this work. This could include facilitating Assembly activities such as a 'walk and talk tour' or 'lived experience zones'.
- **Choose the lead team (that will take responsibility for designing and holding the event) carefully.** Organising an Assembly is time-intensive and for the best results, requires a set of core skills. The staff that are involved in running a Citizens' Assembly will see a significant shift in the nature of their day-to-day work. Recommendations from a Citizens' Assembly are also highly likely to have implications for the work of other teams and functions within the authority. It is important to consider the connections between the lead team and other internal stakeholders?

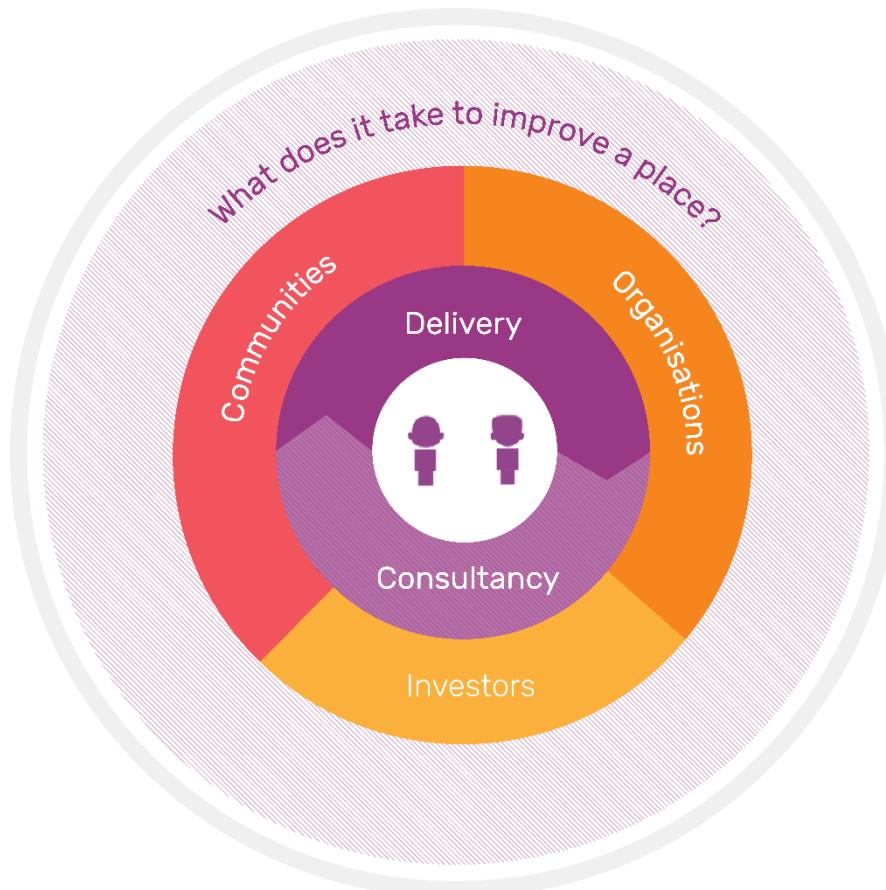
## About Renaisi

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Working from our London offices (in Hackney, Haggerston and Lambeth), Renaisi does three complementary things:

1. Help people to learn, work, and connect with their communities.
2. Work with institutions across the UK to understand and increase their impact.
3. Generate learning from across our work to explore the question: what does it take to improve a place?

By working with all the people and organisations that can turn a place into a thriving community, Renaisi has a unique insight and ability to spark change.



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