# Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network

## SUMMARY OF LEARNING FROM OXFORD CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON CLIMATE EMERGENCY (March 2020)

At the beginning of 2019, Oxford City Council (OCC) declared a climate emergency and proposed having a citizens' assembly to help address it. Oxford was the first city in the country to do this. It was also the first time for Oxford City Council to use this form of participative and deliberative democracy.  It was a bold step and the Council should be applauded for having the courage to take it.

There is now increasing interest across the country in the role that citizens' assemblies have to play in renewing democracy, and in addressing the climate emergency- the two critical issues of our time. OxCAN[1]  (Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network) has followed the progress of the Oxford Citizens' assembly from the outset and as a member of the Advisory Group (AG), as observer and in collaborating with other interested groups, such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) Oxford and citizens' assembly (CA)  practitioners eg, Sortition Foundation and Involve/DemSoc. The following is a summary of what happened and some of the key learning and messages coming out of this citizens' assembly from the perspective of OxCAN, drawing on our experience[2].  The focus is mainly on the process of the Citizens' Assembly itself, whilst recognising the issue of climate emergency will inevitably have an influence on this. With this in mind, the Citizens' Assembly Project team of XR Oxford have also been consulted.

The main aim of this summary is to document OxCAN's learning from the experience of the Oxford Citizens' Assembly, so it can be shared and used with others, within the Council and for others wishing to run citizens' assemblies in the future on the climate emergency and other complex and critical issues of our time. We have used the criteria of the draft quality standards for citizens' assemblies from Involve[3] to provide a basic framework and guide. We have expanded on or added to these criteria (for example, follow-up and Impact) where we think this can contribute to further learning and practice. We also hope this summary (and a wider and more detailed reference document that it is based on) can feed into the evaluation that is being coordinated by CAST[4]. We recognise this is a snapshot in time and inevitably a partial view but hope it can help contribute towards building a fuller picture that will be useful for the Council and others.

**A summary of what happened[5]**

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[1]OxCAN (Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network) grew out of the Oxford Democracy Café (ODC) and was set up around the same time that Oxford announced a citizens' assembly. For further information see  http://www.oxforddemocracycafe.org/oxcan-flyer.html   OxCAN had a seat on the Advisory group (with ODC deputising), as did XR Oxford (having a citizens' assembly is XR's 3rd demand).

[2] This also included informal feedback from some Assembly members afterwards

[3]  https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/news/when-citizens-assembly-not-citizens-assembly-towards-some-standards. These draft standards have been developed by Involve drawing on their own practice and other international standards. (e.g Marcin Gerwin https://citizensassemblies.org/standardy/ and the forthcoming OECD guidelines).  They were developed after the Oxford CA took place, so have been applied retrospectively but we see a value in testing the Oxford experience against them, given these standards are likely to have considerable influence in the development of citizens' assemblies in the UK. They are still in draft form and are also in the process of being revised, so need to be read with this in mind.

[4] CAST (Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations, School of Psychology, University of Cardiff).

[5] more detailed information on the Oxford citizens' assembly can be found here https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20011/environment/1343/oxford_citizens_assembly_on_climate_change/3

In January 2019, Oxford City Council declared a climate emergency and proposed a citizens' assembly to look at ways to address it.  Around the same time, OxCAN (Oxford Citizens' Assembly Network) formed through the Oxford Democracy Café, and XR Oxford formed a project team for the Oxford CA. In February/ March, OxCAN met with the lead member for Zero Carbon Oxford and officers to discuss good practice and signpost to Involve and Sortition as specialists in the CA member recruitment, design and delivery of CAs. Ipsos MORI were confirmed as the overall facilitator. In May, the Council announced the advisory group for the CA, chaired by the Leader of the Council. OxCAN and XR Oxford were invited to take part alongside other stakeholders. It met three times from July through to September to confirm the main question, topics and speakers, and dates for the CA.  The topics and scope of the CA were announced via press releases and on the Council website. The overarching question was framed as: **'*The UK has legislation to reach 'net zero' by 2050. Should Oxford be more proactive in seeking to achieve  'net zero' sooner than 2050 and what trade-offs are we prepared to make?'***

Five key topics were agreed: **Buildings, Renewable Energy, Transport, Waste and Biodiversity/ Offsetting**. A range of scenarios were developed by the Council around each topic (from limited change to more radical change) for Assembly members to deliberate and give a steer on. The Council wanted the key messages from the CA to shape the recommendations going to the Cabinet to then inform the budget and strategy for 2020-2024, so the time-scale was tight. As well as giving a steer on what the Council/citizens could do, there was also a desire for the  CA to give the Council some 'teeth' in influencing other key players/carbon emitters, like the universities and big businesses. **Recruitment** took place via an online panel established by Ipsos MORI and some on-street recruiting took place in August, resulting in 50 members being selected (although only 44 took part in the end). Criteria used included, age, gender, ethnic background, post-code and disability. Educational attainment or attitudes to climate change were not included. OxCAN and XR Oxford promoted the CA and engaged members of the public at an XR outreach event on the climate emergency at the Natural History Museum in Oxford and mailshots/meetings.  The Council issued promotional fliers that were displayed in public places around the city, just prior to the citizens' assembly.

The CA took place over two weekends: **28 and 29 September and 19 and 20 October 2019.** At the end of the citizens' assembly, **90%** of Assembly members said Oxford should go faster than 2050, with majority support for the more radical scenarios. The Ipsos Mori report came out on 22 November. The key messages and recommendations from the CA were shared with the Council Cabinet, who then gave their response[6] in December, setting out steps to become a net Zero Carbon Council and City.  Their response fed into  the Council's overall draft strategy and budget for 2020-24, where **pursuing a zero Carbon Oxford** was proposed as one of four interconnected strategic priorities. Following consultation, a Full Council meeting in February 2020 debated and agreed the proposed strategy and budget.[7]

**What next ?** A **sustainability strategy and Zero Carbon Oxford plan** are currently being developed to take forward the above.  Plans are underway for a **Zero Carbon Oxford Summit** to help launch a **Zero Carbon Oxford partnership** to ensure collective emissions reductions, particularly amongst the big carbon emitters. A **Youth Climate Summit** is also being planned. A **Zero Carbon Oxford Board** has been put in place in the Council to coordinate progress and accountability across the five CA themes in a joined up way, with a commitment for the Council to become net zero by 2020. A follow-up meeting coordinated by **Oxford low carbon community action groups**, with contributions from the Council and Assembly members has also recently taken place, building on and leveraging the  existing community resources and experience, along with the Citizens' Assembly, in service of a net zero Carbon Oxford.

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[6] See this link for outline of recommendations and Cabinet response
https://www.oxford.gov.uk/news/article/1275/city_council_responds_to_oxford_citizens_assembly_on_climate_change_and_outlines_19m_climate_emergency_budget
[7] council_strategy_2020_2024_consultation

| USING INVOLVE DRAFT STANDARDS AS A REFERENCE[8] | OXFORD CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON CLIMATE CHANGE[9] OXCAN'S SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNING |
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| 1. CLEAR PURPOSE | <ul><li>Ensure the purpose is clear with an **open, compelling question** (not just yes/no) and sufficient stretch, using up-to-date and accessible language.</li><li>Ensure the purpose (and this approach to deliberative democracy) is **shared** amongst key players and has **sufficient weight/mandate** from senior political leadership and cross-party support to help ownership of policy recommendations and hard choices.</li><li>Build a clear picture/narrative of how the CA is part of a **longer-term journey** and the underlying reasoning for choosing this approach.</li><li>Make sure that what is **in and out of scop**e with Assembly members is clear from the start, as well as making links to existing policy decisions/processes, so you are not re-inventing the wheel.</li><li>Build the design around the purpose and make sure it is **'fit for purpose'** ie does the design and approach fit with the nature of the issue you are trying to address – and does it give **sufficient steer** around possible outcomes?</li><li>Be clear about how the purpose links to **evaluation and impact from the outset** - how you will know and how will any evaluation be utilised? (see below)</li><li>Build in **communications and citizen engagement** from the outset ie if the purpose of the CA is also about raising awareness of the issue and this different approach to democracy, then this needs to be built in before, during and after - it's not just an add on.</li><li>Build in some **mapping/systemic thinking** of the wider context and stakeholder world/relationships in the planning and with AMs (Assembly Members), particularly given the scale and complex nature of climate emergency.</li><li>Explore and be explicit about your underpinning **Theory of Change and values** in relation to the issue you are seeking to address (eg individual and system change?) and this approach to democracy (eg transparency, co-creation?), as this will inform the design and approach and ultimately effectiveness of recommendations.</li><li>**Clarify expectations** with AMs about the purpose of a CA from the start, including the initial invitation (and how a CA is different from a consultation/focus group) - this may include some awareness-raising beforehand.</li><li>Have the active engagement and visible presence of the **Leader and a lead councillor** to champion the process throughout, plus a public commitment to the CA/public as to how it will inform policy/budget. This will give the CA the necessary weight and authority, as well as reassurance for AMs that it is being taken seriously. It is also important to **navigate different political (party) interests internally**, particularly any councillors who may feel threatened.</li></ul> |

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[8] See footnote 3 for Involve's standards and essential and desired criteria. . We have used these as a reference, as well as expanded on them, where we feel our experience can add to learning. More recent guidelines have also been referred to eg, https://medium.com/@PaulVittles/a-transparency-audit-checklist-for-citizens-assemblies-citizens-juries-and-other-deliberative-472651539e73

[9] We see 'Climate emergency' as more accurate and this was proposed at the AG but the Council chose to stay with 'climate change'

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| 2. SUFFICIENT TIME | • Ensure there is sufficient **lead-up time** to allow for far-reaching and collaborative communication, engagement, planning with key stakeholders, community groups/civil society and citizens, as well as follow-up time built in afterwards.<br>• Ensure a citizens' assembly is scheduled to inform the **budget cycle** and policy recommendations in a timely way, particularly given the urgency of the climate emergency.<br>• Ensure a briefing and awareness-raising on the key issues around the climate emergency is built in beforehand with key officers/councillors (and facilitators) as this will have implications for the design and approach.<br>• Build in more time within the agenda and the overall duration of the citizens' assembly for **meaningful absorption** and reflection of the scientific and technical information, as well as the **emotional processing** of implications given the scale, seriousness and complex nature of the climate emergency.<br>• Build in more time for **co-creation** of new thinking and ideas to allow for ownership and creativity/innovation.<br>• Given the above, the CA ideally needs to be over **3 weekends or 2 weekends and a day**, whilst bearing in mind budget and AMs' time. |
| 3. REPRESENTATIVE/ Reflective of local populace | • Have a **clear sortition** process, where possible, rather than selecting members through an existing online panel to ensure it is as reflective of the population as possible. Be consistent and transparent with those not selected.<br>• Include **educational attainment** as a criterion, particularly given the make-up of Oxford, to avoid over-representation of educated and middle-class people.<br>• Be intentional and inclusive in engaging with others from outer estates/deprived areas as part of any communications and engagement strategy to **ensure social inequalities/bias is not reinforced.**<br>• **Over-recruit** for more than you need to accommodate drop-outs- and follow up to find out why individuals have dropped out (eg is this an issue to do with inclusion?).<br>• **Think about how follow-up/engagement** can be done with those who were not selected but did express energy and interest? |
| 4. INCLUSIVE | • **Proper compensation** underpins the weight and seriousness that the Council gives to this and sends an important message to AMs' that their time is valued.<br>• Ensure **care support needs** (implicit and explicit) are clearly sought out and spelt out eg ensure care provision is made explicit and the welcome of carers is attended to.<br>• Use opportunities to mix and build relationships with AMs in informal spaces and at the beginning of the process to create the **right conditions** for people to feel included eg a participatory exercise that maps visually where people live in the city<br>• Accommodate **different learning styles** and address barriers to inclusion, including speakers avoiding jargon.<br>• Create opportunities for AMs to share what they already know at the outset, that their **knowledge, experience and expertise** is valued as well as that of other 'experts'. |
| 5. INDEPENDENT | • Build trust and confidence among the Assembly members through the use of **impartial facilitation** – so it is not seen as being influenced by the Council in any way.<br>• Ensure the **Advisory Group is properly used** and has sufficient time/support to play its role, in relation to advising on the context, content and process – eg make sure it has sufficient time to feed back on speakers to ensure a variety of opinions and how the design fits with the purpose. |

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| | • Clarify and contract the **roles of the Advisory group and the steering group** upfront and their relationship to each other and ensure the latter is not overly influential.<br>• Given the complexity and political nature of the climate emergency, think about **how experts might be best used** to help navigate/support the design without bias.<br>• Create **more opportunities for co-design with AMs in** developing scenarios, so it is not seen as too influenced by the Council. Encourage and provide a clear process for submission of ideas from citizens beforehand as well, to broaden ownership.<br>• Consciously engage councilors from other political parties in the process/AG to broaden ownership. |
| 6. OPEN (incl communication and engagement) | • Be **timely and open about the recruitment process**, including clear communication about what citizens' assemblies are about.<br>• Use **live-streaming** and recording of sessions to make it more accessible to others, and publicise this well.<br>• Plan for a **proactive and wide-reaching communication and engagement strategy**- before, during and after. Work with other players/collaborators who can harness local networks, as well as using usual local media channels. This needs to be through conversations/ 2-way feedback and building connections/collaboration, not just 'rolling out' information in traditional ways. |
| 7. GENERATIVE LEARNING | • Create space for methods that allow for more **visionary/ creative thinking** (eg 'time machines', writing letters from the future) that can allow for more motivation and ownership towards the way forward – encourage a pull forward to the **society/future we want to create** This will help generate energy and a sense of hope in support of change that in turn can inspire others (eg the common theme from AMs' of hearing birdsong again was very powerful for many).<br>• Allow more space for **co-creation and development of ideas** from the group to allow for more ownership and new thinking to emerge, drawing on the group's collective intelligence and experience.<br>• Ensure the design and facilitation supports **different ways of knowing** and learning styles - not just 'head', but also heart and will. It's not just a factual journey but engages feelings/values. **Minimise power points** – encourage pictures, graphic recording, visualization, story telling.<br>• Give space and support to develop **dialogue and generative/critical thinking skills** and processing of feelings amongst AMs where possible, which in turn, can build capacity.<br>• Ensure **speakers are well briefed** on the purpose and approach of the CA and their input is tailored to the AMs' task and fits with the flow of the design.<br>• Use '**mix and match' methods** that allow for learning to be shared and developed across the group e.g World Café. |
| 8. STRUCTURED DELIBERATION | • **Small group facilitators** are key for the effectiveness of the CA as they help create safety and openness and expression of different views in a respectful way,-enabling AMs to **respond to issues and feelings** as they emerge, while keeping to the overall design.<br>• Allow for sufficient **flexibility and iteration in the design** to flex and accommodate new ideas from Assembly members.<br>• Link scenarios to wider benefits and other stakeholders, like the NHS - show hidden costs and how they contribute to net zero carbon.<br>• Create space for the **development of AMs' own scenarios**, otherwise it can feel too restricting and can lose creative ideas/ownership.<br>• Ensure **facilitators, councilors and officers are well briefed** and have the necessary awareness- of the climate emergency and this approach to deliberative democracy. Make sure these basics are also covered in the speakers' briefing and with AMs. |

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| | • Build in space and processes to help gather and **build on the collective learning and wisdom in the room** - not just traditional feedback- eg large group methods like World Café, Open Space. |
| 9. **COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING** | • Be explicit and clear about **criteria for making decisions** at the outset (majority vote, consensus etc) since this influences the process used in the CA, and can impact the end result. |
| | • Have **fewer binary questions** and more questions that allow for weighting as this is more likely to give a fuller sense of AMs' views. |
| | • Have Assembly Members be part of **shaping recommendations** and **feeding back to councilors** directly for ownership/impact- and offer the support for this to happen. |
| | • Ensure the **Advisory Group has a role in feeding back** on the report and the process collectively for accountability and learning, not just as individuals - and build in a collective way for AMs to do the same. |
| | • **Distill key messages/sense-making** from the CA in a report that is **accessible, proportionate and user-friendly**, both in content and tone. Visuals and stories can really help. This in turn supports accountability and can help to make a clearer link with respect to the Council's response and in raising awareness with citizens. |
| | • Acknowledge minority views in the reporting but avoid giving this disproportionate weight when there is overwhelming support for a certain direction of travel (eg 90%) as this can set a different tone. |
| 10. **EVALUATED** | • Commission and fund an **external evaluation from the outset** that is linked to the CA's purpose and is made public- needs to get beyond a 'satisfaction survey'. |
| | • Build in **attitudinal assessment** beforehand as well as afterwards to see the extent to which understanding and awareness of AMs has shifted - a key part of CAs. And make sure this is visible in any reporting. |
| | • Ensure **impact, follow-up and the process used are included** as part of any evaluation and those involved (including advisory group) are clear on how to input into it - this includes impact on AMs, as well as policy. And opportunity cost? |
| | • Ensure **capturing of learning is encouraged** from all those involved, not just the council's perspective, and this is made available to other Councils/practitioners/citizens to help build better practice and raise awareness of the role that CAs can play in addressing the climate emergency and in promoting deliberative and participatory democracy. |
| 11 **FOLLOW-UP** (OxCan's addition) | • Build in **follow-up resources and signposting** at the end of the CA to build on the energy and enthusiasm created. |
| | • Create a **story or narrative coming out of the CA t**hat is accessible to citizens and inspires and enlivens discussion and action - this could be in picture/storyboard form as well as words. |
| | • **Build on the 'social capital' and momentum** of the AMs whilst it is there, including sharing key messages/ recommendations at Council meetings and holding commissioners to account afterwards and shaping follow-up activities. |
| | • Have **follow-up events/workshops** with AMs soon after to build on their awareness and interest and see them as ambassadors on the climate emergency, and this approach to democracy/engaging citizens in other critical areas. Explore smaller CAs or other forms of participatory democracy on other themes that combine flexible approaches to wider participation, as well as deeper deliberation. |
| | • Collaborate and co-create follow-up with existing community action/campaigning groups engaged in working towards net zero carbon, building on their networks and experience and encouraging engagement of AMs in these. |

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| | • Ensure **follow-up is part of an overall communication and engagement strategy**, engaging the wider public and key stakeholders, otherwise it may create a vacuum where other demands or mis-information/political agendas dominate.<br>• **Convene and connect up proactively with other key players and stakeholders** who can support the above and be part of a broader **movement for change.** What might this mean for the proposed Zero Carbon Oxford Summit and related initiatives?<br>• Build in this follow-up phase as part of the commissioning/planning of the CA from the outset, so not seen as 'one-off'. |
| **12. IMPACT** (in progress)<br>(OxCan's addition)<br>This needs to be linked to the CA's purpose – these are some of the areas/questions that we see as relevant for Oxford CA | • **Policy, strategy and budget** - ensure the recommendations feed into the strategic priorities and budget of the Council with clear governance mechanisms and feedback to coordinate and hold to account in a cross-cutting way in the Council and with other stakeholders/community, campaigning groups.<br>• **Culture** – how does this way of working on a joint issue inform/shift the relationships between councillors and with officers, across service areas, the Council's relationship with citizens/other stakeholders? How is it informing the way the Council works internally and externally in relation to the climate emergency, and other complex systemic issues?<br>• **Influence-** how are other key players impacted by the recommendations and to what extent does the CA give the Council more 'teeth' in influencing their policies and practices and enhance its convening power to bring stakeholders together for collective action? How will you know?<br>• **Deliberative and participatory democracy** - how might this approach be used to tackle other complex critical issues that the Council is grappling with? How much are AMs/citizens asking for more deliberative and participatory democracy as a result of this CA? What other approaches might be combined to allow for wider participation, as well as deep deliberation?<br>• **Citizens** - how are the Assembly members making different decisions and changing behaviours in everyday life and engaging others as a result of being part of the CA? What wider influence/impact has the CA had on citizens' individual behaviour and choices and engagement with community and systemic change? How might AMs become part of a broader coalition for change – working with existing groups and networks? |

**Concluding remarks**

This was a bold experiment, both in participatory and deliberative democracy and in tackling the climate emergency, and the Council should be congratulated for their commitment in taking this on and being innovative, particularly in a time of austerity. Whilst there were some areas to improve on, particularly around communications/community engagement, selection/ recruitment and giving more time, we feel it was certainly worth doing. It was clear that many Assembly Members found it a meaningful and stimulating experience and they took their responsibility very seriously, with **84%** saying that this approach to engaging citizens should be used on other complex issues that the Council faces. It is clearly evident that the citizens' assembly findings have informed the Council's strategic priorities, budget and plans for implementation, accountability and follow-up. Although the Council is only responsible for 1% of carbon emissions in the city, the Citizens' Assembly has given it 'teeth' to influence some of the big carbon emitters in Oxford, such as the universities and bigger businesses. Follow-through, sustaining momentum, two-way communication and building on the awareness raised in collaboration with others key stakeholders and community/campaigning groups will be key, if the citizens' assembly is to have sustained impact into the future.

We hope this summary will contribute to wider learning and practice, both for Oxford City Council and other Councils/ commissioners and CA practitioners in addressing the climate emergency and increasing the use of citizens' assemblies, as well as other forms of participative and deliberative democracy. We recognise that learning and practice is continually evolving and we welcome feedback and further conversation in support of that. Since writing this, we are now in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic which will have far reaching implications and it does raise questions about the role of digital deliberative democracy into the future. Whilst recognising the devastating impact that Covid-19 will have for many, it is striking that the vision of many Oxford CA members of 'hearing bird song again' is now happening…