

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW CAN POLICY-MAKERS USE THEM?

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Summary

- Citizens' assemblies are representative groups of people, chosen through the lottery principle. They are tasked with examining an issue in depth and making recommendations.
- Such assemblies have been used by many policy-makers in the UK and elsewhere to assist policy design. There are calls for government and parliament to use them more, especially on issues where elected politicians do not have clear existing policy intentions.
- Their success or failure depends on how they are organised internally and how they fit into wider processes of policy discussion and decision.

Background

Citizens' assemblies have recently received [significant attention](#) in the UK. Advocates think they can enable more effective policy-making and help overcome public disaffection with politics. Critics worry that they could weaken the central role of elected representatives, or be biased towards particular outcomes. Making headway in this debate requires clear understanding of how such assemblies work and what role they can play.

What is a citizens' assembly?

A [citizens' assembly](#) is a body of people tasked (normally by policy-makers) with examining a specific issue and making recommendations. Such assemblies typically have 50–150 members, who are carefully selected, using lottery, to be as representative as possible of the wider population.

Assembly meetings generally take place at weekends. A duration of two to six weekends is typical, depending on the size of the topic being addressed, though some assemblies have taken longer.

Members discuss among themselves and hear from a balanced array of witnesses. Facilitators keep the discussions on topic and enable everyone to contribute. Members gradually build their ideas and then agree recommendations, which are presented in a report.

What are citizens' assemblies for?

Confusion sometimes surrounds the role of citizens' assemblies. They can support and enhance existing policy-making processes. Contrary to some suggestions, they could not replace parliament or government: elected, accountable representatives are, and must remain, lynchpins of democracy. Rather, if used effectively, assemblies can illuminate where informed public opinion lies, and help steer discussion away from simplistic headlines towards thoughtful consideration of difficult trade-offs.

Assemblies are often best used on topics where policy-makers do not have fixed views about how to proceed. Issues in the ‘too difficult box’ – where those in power are likely to face opposition however they act – may be especially suited. Assemblies have famously been used in Ireland to examine matters such as [same-sex marriage](#) and [abortion](#) (see below). In the UK, suitable issues might include social care reform, Lords reform, assisted dying, or aspects of climate policy.

Assemblies can be used very early in the policy process, to canvass opinion broadly and encourage wide public discussion. Or they can be used slightly later, to examine specific options. Most assemblies in Ireland have tended towards the former design. The first official UK-wide assembly – [Climate Assembly UK](#) (see below) – came closer to the latter.

Some assemblies have been convened by parliamentary committees, to contribute to parliament’s own cross-party deliberations. Without ministerial buy-in, however, such assemblies risk having little policy impact. Alternatively, ministers could themselves sponsor assemblies. In doing so, they would ideally seek cross-party support, to maximise likely political buy-in to any assembly’s results.

Once an assembly is established, clarity is needed on how it will feed into the wider policy-making process.

How have citizens’ assemblies been used to date?

There have so far been two official citizens’ assemblies at UK level:

- In 2018, two House of Commons select committees commissioned the [Citizens’ Assembly on Social Care](#), which examined how adult social care should be funded.
- In 2019–20, six Commons committees commissioned [Climate Assembly UK](#) to examine how best to achieve the UK’s net zero target.

Both of these assemblies were widely seen as yielding valuable insights. The recommendations of the former fed extensively into a [report](#) by the commissioning select committees. The latter’s report was welcomed at [its launch](#) by the minister, Alok Sharma, and the government’s expert Committee on Climate Change [drew widely](#) on its recommendations.

But neither case has seen much further follow-up. The select committees’ [report](#) on social care received no government response at all, in violation of normal practice. This illustrates the danger of insufficient ministerial buy-in to the assembly process.

Further citizens’ assemblies have been held in parts of the UK:

- The Scottish Parliament and the Senedd have both [established citizens’ assemblies](#) on different issues. The Scottish government is [committed](#) to regularising the use of such assemblies.
- At least 50 assemblies have so far been held (or are planned) by local authorities or combined authorities across the UK – mostly on topics relating to climate change or pollution, but also on matters such as town centre renewal, hate crime, and health and social care. Some have led to [extensive action](#) by councils, while others have shown less visible impact.

The world’s first citizens’ assembly took place in the Canadian province of [British Columbia](#) in 2004. Since then, assemblies have been held in [many countries](#), including Australia, France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The best known to UK audiences are those in Ireland:

- The [first Irish assembly](#) led to a referendum that legalised same-sex marriage in 2015. The [second](#) led to abortion liberalisation in 2018. These assemblies were fitted effectively into the wider policy-making process. Their recommendations were examined by parliamentary

committees and then by ministers, and finally led to referendums. Observers generally agreed that they enabled more informed public discussion and freed policy-makers from what could otherwise have become polarised and unproductive debates.

- On the other hand, some assemblies in Ireland have led to recommendations that were not implemented. Notably, an [assembly on gender equality](#) led to two [failed referendums](#) in March 2024. One factor may have been lack of transparency in how government translated the assembly's conclusions into concrete proposals.

How do successful citizens' assemblies work in practice?

Assemblies can be seen as successful if two main, interlinked conditions are met:

- they are widely acknowledged as fair, with members who are representative of the public at large, and procedures that weigh evidence carefully, giving due balance to different viewpoints
- their proceedings and their recommendations have due impact on subsequent policy-making and on wider public debate.

Building on experience in the UK and around the world, many of the features of assemblies that lead to such success are now [widely agreed](#).

1. How is a representative sample of members recruited?

- The standard practice that has developed in the UK is for invitation letters to be sent to randomly selected addresses. Recipients are invited to express their interest in taking part. A representative sample is then taken from those who reply, using criteria such as age, gender, and education. A fair spread of opinion on the issues the assembly will examine is also normally sought.
- Further measures help to ensure that a wide range of people take part. Members are paid for their time, and receive necessary accommodation and travel expenses. Additional support – such as cover for caring responsibilities – may be offered to minimise barriers to participation.

2. How is a fair process ensured?

- The topic of an assembly is chosen by the body commissioning it. The broader the topic, the more time is needed to enable serious deliberation.
- Assembly meetings are designed and delivered by professionals in public deliberation processes. This involves working out what specific issues, options, and viewpoints should be covered, and how that can best be done. If there is time, assembly members may themselves contribute to programme design, highlighting issues or viewpoints they want to explore further.
- An advisory board, including experts and advocates with different perspectives, guides the process, to ensure that an appropriate balance of different viewpoints is heard.
- Assembly meetings mix sessions with witnesses and discussions among members themselves. Witness presentations and all materials provided to assembly members are public, ensuring transparency. Varied discussion formats are used to help all members contribute, and to enable initial ideas to be explored and gradually distilled into recommendations. These processes are supported by facilitators, who keep discussion on track and allow everyone's voice to be heard.
- When the assembly concludes, its recommendations are presented in a report, which also sets out the thinking that underpins them. This report goes to policy-makers for further consideration.

3. How is due influence on debate and policy-making ensured?

- If an assembly is created but its recommendations are subsequently ignored, money and time are wasted, and public disenchantment may be deepened. Policy-makers should not therefore establish an assembly unless they genuinely want to give its recommendations due attention.
- As noted above, when an assembly is established, its place in the policy-making process should be clear. So ministers might commit to publishing a response to all recommendations and scheduling debate in parliament, with possible follow-up actions. The remit of some assemblies (e.g., [Scotland's Climate Assembly](#)) has allowed members to reconvene after a period to discuss progress with ministers and say whether they feel their proposals have received proper attention.
- An assembly is most likely to have impact if its recommendations are feasible and well considered. The points above about fair process are therefore essential. In addition, discussion of feasibility constraints is normally an important part of the process.

How could citizens' assemblies be used in the future?

Citizens' assemblies have been used in the UK at multiple levels and for multiple purposes, but they have not yet been used by the UK government.

Any such assemblies would complement the existing consultations conducted by government, and the extensive deliberations that take place within parliament, notably in select committees and during consideration of bills. Citizens' assemblies could usefully supplement this work by fostering thoughtful public discussion of difficult issues, allowing complex trade-offs to be acknowledged and explored, and showing where considered public opinion lies.

Ministers might initially choose a topic where they see a need for action, but do not have a settled view on the way forward. They would ideally seek broad consensus on creating an assembly on the issue. Possible topics might include social care reform, Lords reform, or assisted dying.

Ministers would need to invest time and resources in the process – including design, delivery, publicity, and follow-up – to maximise the assembly's chances of positive impact.

Ministers, MPs, and other policy-makers would best see such an assembly as their friend, not their foe. They would listen carefully to the assembly's voice, but not be bound to every recommendation. Their own debates could gain added weight by building on the basis of the assembly's deliberations.

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