

HOW TO ORGANISE A CLIMATE ASSEMBLY: FAQs

So, you think you want to organise a climate assembly?

Where are you on your journey?

Are you trying to promote the idea of a climate assembly? Are you thinking about commissioning a climate assembly?

Or has the decision been made to run an assembly and you are trying to find guidance about what to do next.

Below we offer some responses to Frequently Asked Questions. As part of the work programme of the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), we will collaborate with members of the network to provide further guidance, building on research and other evidence.

1. If you are thinking about running an assembly, here's some questions for you to consider carefully...

Are you sure you want to run a climate assembly?

Climate assemblies are only one way of organising citizen engagement and participation on aspects of the climate crisis. Make sure that you are choosing to organise a climate assembly because it fulfils your purposes rather than because you are attracted to the method. Too often people run inappropriate participation exercises which create more problems than solutions.

What is your primary purpose of engaging citizens?

Climate assemblies (and citizens' assemblies more generally) are a really good way of hearing the informed judgements of citizens who resemble the diversity of the broader population. They generate recommendations from everyday people who have learned about the issue and the views of their fellow citizens. A climate assembly is a deep (rather than broad) form of participation. It involves a relatively small number of everyday people who go through an intense process of learning, deliberating and coming to recommendations.

If your primary purpose is to engage a larger number of people in learning about or taking action on climate change, a climate assembly is not the best approach.

It's also a really bad approach if you have already made a decision on what you going to do!

What political conditions need to be in place for a climate assembly?

There is no point organising a climate assembly when you already know what you want to do. Climate assemblies work well when the scope for policy development is still open. This can be at different stages of the policy cycle – for example, a climate assembly can be used to generate policy recommendations or to appraise policy options.

Climate assemblies organised by civil society organisations can be used to increase pressure on politicians to act and to show the willingness of citizens to make the necessary tough judgements.

Citizens' assemblies have often been used to break political deadlock – where politicians cannot agree or do not know how to progress or are concerned about the willingness of people to support action.

Assemblies commissioned by public authorities need a degree of support from across the political spectrum that this is a good approach to take. If major political actors who can exert a veto are not willing to participate, this can cause a problem. That said, sceptical actors often participate in the process once it is up and running – they do not want their perspectives to be ignored!

How can I build political support for a climate assembly?

One of the best ways to overcome scepticism or hostility to citizens' assemblies is to organise briefing sessions with organisers, observers and participants of climate assemblies in other countries. Politicians, civil servants and civil society organisations are more likely to listen to people like themselves who have direct and positive experience of assemblies.

Stressing the non-partisan and diverse nature of members of assemblies selected by stratified random selection can help, along with the creation of an advisory or steering group that includes members of different political persuasion and with different views on the topic.

How do I begin?

Bring in expertise early, both on climate policy and deliberative processes.

Assemblies are generally organised by independent specialists in deliberative processes so that they have a degree of independence. Advisory bodies are usually created which oversee the process to ensure its independence and fairness.

Independent specialists are typically commissioned through competitive tender. This allows you to make judgements between different approaches and designs proposed by vendors.

Check out “Key features of a climate assembly” to learn more about governance options.

How do I select the question for the assembly?

The assembly needs to be relevant to the current political context. No point running an assembly on an issue that has already been decided.

The question needs to be one that is recognised as important by people on different sides of the political fence. It must not be openly biased towards one way of thinking.

It needs to be open to different solutions and answerable!

It needs to be tested with people of different political persuasion and interests in the topic.

How much does it cost?

Climate assemblies are not cheap. If you are not willing to pay for a good quality assembly, then don't do it.

It costs money for a robust random selection process. Travel, accommodation, honorariums and providing support for members are not cheap. Developing a good design takes time and energy. Even if you are online, you need to include budgets to support those members without relevant equipment, skills or confidence.

Participants need time to work through what are often complex and controversial issues. As a rule of thumb, many practitioners talk about at least 40 hours as a necessary time period to deal effectively with challenging issues.

Skimping on any of these items means that you undermine the process.

Really, can't I do it cheaply?

No!

Does it have to be random selection?

Yes! Random selection ensures that you have a diverse body of everyday people rather than those who are already politically engaged. It gives the assembly independence from vested interests and political parties.

Can my organisation not facilitate the process ourselves to save money?

It is unlikely that your organisation has the necessary skills and experience. But even if you do, having the assembly run by the public authority or civil society organisation that has an interest in the outcome means that its legitimacy will be too easily challenged.

What are the success factors?

We know a lot about what makes citizens' assemblies work well. And it is not all about the assembly itself. Good design and organisation of citizen engagement is only half the battle.

Of equal (if not more) importance is the attitude and preparedness of the commissioners. Work needs to be put into preparing your organisation and others to be responsive to the recommendations of the assembly. This is not just about the few people directly involved in commissioning the assembly, but those politicians, civil servants and other organisations that may be potentially affected by the assembly's recommendations. Do they know it is happening? Do they know why it is happening? Are they ready to integrate the outcomes of the assembly into their work?

Where can I learn more about climate assemblies?

The aim of KNOCA is to be a place where we can learn what works best in the organisation and delivery of climate assemblies. Read more on our website. Join our events. Organise events yourself under the KNOCA banner. Work with us to make climate assemblies work well.

2. If you are organising a climate assembly...

Quite a few guidance documents exist. We've listed some below. These focus on the general approach to organising citizens' assemblies or juries. Much of the practice is fairly standard – for example, how to recruit members, how to ensure an independent process, how to support drafting of recommendations – although some important differences exist across assemblies (see “what is a climate assembly”).

Some issues are potentially distinctive for climate assemblies, for instance:

- should we select members based on their attitude to climate change?
- how to frame the climate crisis?
- how much knowledge on climate science and ethics is necessary and how should it be presented?
- what does “balance” mean in the presentation of knowledge on climate?
- should assemblies focus on specific aspects of the climate crisis or try to deal with its interconnected elements?
- how can we embed the possibility of systems change within assemblies?
- how can we link the work of climate assemblies to broader social action?

We do not have complete answers to these questions. This is one of the reasons why KNOCA exists. Collaborate with the network to help us work out how best to respond to some of these challenging issues.

3. Useful guides

Peter Bryant and Lucy Stone. 2020. Climate assemblies and Juries: A people powered response to the climate emergency (PCAN) <https://www.pccities.org.uk/sites/default/files/Shared-Future-PCAN-Climate-Assemblies-and-Juries-web.pdf>

newDemocracy. 2019. Enabling National Initiatives to Take Democracy Beyond Elections, UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/newDemocracy-UNDEF-Handbook.pdf>

Marcin Gerwin. 2018. Citizens' Assemblies. Democracy the Works (Open Plan Foundation) <https://citizensassemblies.org/>

OECD. Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions (OECD) <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>