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The kingston borough Citizens’ assembly on air quality

Participedia Link: [Kingston Borough Citizens’ Assembly on Air Quality – Participedia](https://participedia.net/case/6076)

**Brief Description**

In 2019 the Kingston Borough Council worked with Involve and the Sortition Foundation to organise a deliberative body that would help tackle the issue of poor air quality in Kingston (London). The assembly spanned the period of two weekends (four days) and was composed of a representative sample of 40 citizens that were selected at random.

(Involve 2020, pg. 10)

**Problems and Purpose**

Citizens’ assemblies are usually used when there are important regional or national concerns that need to be addressed. These involve the facilitation of rational discussions amongst residents with the goal of producing a set of recommendations that can inform policymakers. With air quality becoming an increasingly severe issue in the borough, the Kingston Borough Council commissioned a citizens’ assembly with the goal of generating five recommendations that could be used to tackle the issue. The results of which will hopefully be used to guide future policy decisions.

**Background History and Context**

Air quality has become an increasingly severe issue, especially in urban areas such as Kingston, primarily due to the high concentration of C02 emitting vehicles. More specifically, 2.2% of the residents in Kingston are exposed to illegal levels of air quality and every 1 in 16 deaths of residents over the age of 25 are estimated to be the result of air pollution.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Kingston Borough Council sought to address this by organising a citizens' assembly in 2019 that would inform future policies. Citizens' assemblies are still relatively rare in the UK and consequently this case in 2019 was the first time that the borough had utilised the innovation. As of the time of writing there have been no new cases of citizens' assemblies in Kingston. However, the Royal Kingston Borough Council does plan on initiating an ‘Open Democracy Programme’ of which will be informed by the lessons learned from the Kingston Citizens’ Assembly.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Organizing, Supporting and Funding Entities**

The Assembly was primarily organized by Involve[[3]](#footnote-3), of which is a charity that aims to involve the public more in decision-making and other political processes. Involve was responsible for the facilitation of the assemblies over the two weekends and the drafting of the final recommendations. The Sortition Foundation[[4]](#footnote-4) is a not-for-profit company that provides participant selection and stratification techniques to governments and other clients. In this case they were responsible for selecting and recruiting a random sample of 40 residents to participate in the assembly. Assembly members were paid £300 in vouchers to cover the time costs of participating and were also paid travel expenses. The Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thymes[[5]](#footnote-5) commissioned the citizens’ assembly and received the recommendations produced by it. As for the funding, none of the reports published mention what the organizational costs were or where the funding came from.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The Sortition Foundation was responsible for the selection and recruitment of assembly members and did so through the use of a civic lottery sent to 7,000 households. The households that received the invitation were then able to register their interest in participating in the assembly. The Sortition Foundation then took a randomly selected sample of participants from this pool that was to be broadly representative of the Royal Kingston Borough population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, geography and socio-economic group. To encourage participation assembly members had their travel expenses paid for and were given £300 in vouchers to cover the time costs of participation. The Sortition Foundation recruited a total of 40 assembly members, 38 of which aged between 17 and 79 completed both weekends.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The following table provides the demographics of the assembly members[[7]](#footnote-7):



The assembly was also overseen by an independent advisory group, which was tasked with providing advice and oversight to ensure the citizens' assembly's plans, evidence and materials were accurate, balanced and unbiased.

Members of the advisory group included:

* **Professor Marta Blangiardo**, professor in biostatistics at the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Imperial College London (UK)
* **Stephen Moorcroft**, Director of Air Quality Consultants Ltd
* **Professor Prashant Kumar**, Chair in Air Quality and Health, the Founding Director of Global Centre for Clean Air Research, at the University of Surrey (UK)
* **William Hicks**, PhD research student at King's College London (UK)

**Methods and Tools Used**

The assembly took place over the period of two weekends and utilised the following techniques: expert presentations, Q&A sessions, and discussion sessions.

Expert presentations are often used by democratic innovations to inform participants about the topic being discussed. In this case a series of expert presentations were given to assembly members that covered different aspects of air pollution and the solutions to it. These presentations are effective at informing large groups of people simultaneously but are less effective at answering the questions that individual participants might have due to the size of the presentations. However, Q&A sessions are often used alongside these presentations so that participants can ask questions directly.

Q&A sessions were used in this case to allow participants to directly engage with experts on the issue and obtain valuable information that can be used in discussion sessions. These sessions took the form of experts going to individual tables and talking with assembly members and answering any questions that they might have had. These smaller group sessions were effective at answering the questions of assembly members as the experts weren’t divided amongst too many people. However, one issue that may arise from Q&A sessions is that experts have a certain level of authority that can influence and coerce the decisions of the assembly members.

Discussion sessions were at the centre of the assemblies and involved small table discussions of around 8 people per table. These were held on every day of the four-day process and were designed to inform assembly members, gauge their opinion and produce a series of recommendations that could be used to inform future policy proposals. These methods are effective at encouraging people of different demographics to engage with each other. An added advantage of these sessions is that they are a cheap and effective way of gaining valuable insight into what the public think and generating new ideas. However, the effectiveness of these sessions is subject to the kind of participants involved as particularly loud and domineering members may dominate the discussion, especially if there are no facilitators.

**What went on: Deliberation, decisions and Public Interaction**

Before the assemblies took place the Royal Kingston Borough Council collected ideas for how air quality can be improved in the Kingston Borough through an Air Quality Forum in July, its 'Let’s Talk' engagement portal and a number of "ideas trees" placed in community spaces throughout the borough. Furthermore, the Royal Kingston Borough Council held a call for evidence from the 9th of September to the 9th of October, during which it asked for suggestions on what evidence should be presented to speakers. Overall, 27 submissions were received which were reviewed by the independent advisory group and the Royal Kingston Borough Council when selecting what evidence and witnesses to present in the assemblies. Following this, citizens assemblies were held over a period of two weekends over the months of November and December (2019). Assembly members were arranged into small groups and sat at separate tables (there were are around 8 people per table). The days proceeded as follows[[8]](#footnote-8):

Day 1

The goal of the first day was to inform assembly members about the air quality issue in Kingston, the impact of poor air quality and develop views on what the key impacts that need addressing were. To achieve this a series of expert presentations were given that informed participants on the current situation of air quality in Kingston and the impacts of poor air quality. Following this, two local community members then gave presentations about their experiences with the poor air quality in Kingston. The speakers from the presentations then rotated around the tables in a carousel format and answered the questions that assembly members had. Assembly members would then have discussions amongst their tables in which they discussed the impacts of poor air quality and developed a list of key impacts that needed to be tackled.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Day 2

The goal for the second day of the assembly was for participants to learn about what was currently being done to tackle the issue of air quality in Kingston, understand the different solutions available to tackle air pollution and to start thinking about what solutions could be used in Kingston. At the start of the assembly a member of the Royal Kingston Borough Council delivered a presentation highlighting what the council was currently doing to tackle the issue. Various experts then rotated around tables and gave Q&A session to participants on the various aspects of air pollution and its impacts. These topics included sustainable and active transport, transport infrastructure and urban planning, and the environment and energy. Towards the end of the session an expert gave another presentation on what assembly members should consider when thinking of potential solutions. The day ended with assembly members being asked to produce a long list of potential solutions that had been presented and would be discussed on the following weekend.

Day 3

The goal of the third day was for participants to hear the views of the wider community and agree on five themes that would be the focus of the assembly’s’ recommendations. A presentation was given by members of the Royal Borough of Kingston Council and the Suffolk Council that gave a recap of the previous weekend and clarified questions that had been asked. Eight community members then gave brief presentations on their ideas for tackling the issue of air quality in a lightning talk format. The speakers then rotated around the tables to discuss their ideas and answer the questions that assembly members had. The assembly was then asked to agree on five key themes to be the focus of their recommendations, based on the list of potential solutions created on the previous day. Assembly members were asked whether they would rather vote on the final 5 themes or decide using a consensus, the members chose to do it using a consensus. Individual tables then reviewed the draft and made alterations; these final drafts were discussed in a plenary until five themes were agreed on through consensus.

Day 4

The goal for the final day was for participants to come up with recommendations on how to collectively tackle the issue of poor air quality and agree on the recommendations to be included in the report. At the start a presentation was given by experts that highlighted the things assembly members should consider when choosing the recommendations. Assembly members were then asked to develop five recommendations on how to collectively reduce air pollution, this was achieved by rotating assembly members so that everyone could have a say. Each table then took one recommendation and further refined and finalise it, including the actions that would need to be taken. The finalised recommendations and actions were then presented to the whole assembly and assembly members were asked to give their preferences for recommendations through a secret ballot.[[10]](#footnote-10) The results were then presented to assembly members and they were asked to develop three key messages to be sent to the council, residents and other organisations about the five recommendations.

After the assembly an online survey was emailed to the participants in which they were asked about their level of support for the individual actions. A threshold of 80% response rate was agreed with the assembly to be included in the report. Over 90% responded and the results were therefore included in the report.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Influence, Outcomes and Effects**

Overall, the initiative was successful at achieving its goal of engaging the local population and getting them to propose a series of recommendations that the council could use to inform future policy decisions. The recommendations provided have since been used to inform the upcoming action plan for Kingston and other relevant policy areas.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, since the action plan has not yet been published, we do not currently know the precise impact that the assembly has had on it (if any). Furthermore, the lessons learned from this initiative are being used to assist in the design of the upcoming ‘Open Democracy Programme’ which is being developed by the Kingston Borough Council.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, this initiative is also upcoming, so we do not currently know what effects the assembly might have had on it. Whilst the effects of the assembly on the government are currently unknown, there is evidence that the assembly has had a positive impact on the participants themselves. The presentations held during the assemblies often provided information on what residents can do in their personal lives to reduce air pollution.[[14]](#footnote-14) This may encourage participants to become more proactive in tackling air pollution. Furthermore, after being asked questions about what they thought about the assembly, participants said that they found these presentations highly informative.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is further confirmed by an expert who attended the assembly as they found that participants worked hard to absorb information and was impressed by the questions asked.[[16]](#footnote-16) Overall inferring that whilst we do not currently know the effects of the assembly on the local government. We do know that the assembly has been highly effective at informing citizens.

**Analysis and Lessons learned**

This initiative selected its participants using a civic lottery that was sent to 7,000 residents at random, participants would then register their interest and from this pool a representative sample of 40 participants was taken (see table in participant recruitment and selection section). The sample taken was highly representative of the population and therefore suggests that the initiative was highly inclusive as the views and opinions of different groups was represented. However, one issue with this method of participant recruitment is that it is also highly exclusive as if you did not receive an invitation then you were unable to participate in the assembly. This means that only a small segment of the borough got the opportunity to participate, even though the results could have a substantial impact on the health of citizens and the environment. A potential solution to this issue could be to adopt a method from the Irish Citizen Assembly which permitted residents that were not part of the random sample to apply to join.[[17]](#footnote-17) This would increase inclusivity as it would allow citizens that were not originally selected to join if they are interested in the topic. It’s also worth noting that the assembly members were paid to participate and had their travel expenses covered. This would have made participation more attractive to poorer citizens who may not usually have the time or energy required to participate, of which increases the inclusivity of the innovation.

Moreover, this initiative was designed to serve a purely advisory role in informing local policymakers and therefore participants lacked a certain level of popular control. Whilst their recommendations may be considered when policies are being made, these are by no means binding and can be easily ignored by those with authority. However, the assembly being primarily advisory doesn’t necessarily have to diminish popular control as participating in the process alone can grant popular control outside of the assembly. Goodin and Dryzek (2006) mention that initiatives that are purely advisory can have positive effects that go outside the legal sense. The first of these effects is through the provision of a psychological boost as they gain valuable information, skills and insights that may help them participate in other political processes. Secondly, they highlight that groups that have gotten together on a consultive process will be better equipped to bring political pressure to other political issues too. This suggests that whilst the assembly had limited popular control over whether their recommendations got used, they have gained popular control over other issues and may even pressure the council into implementing their ideas (Goodin and Dryzek, 2016, pg. 16). Furthermore, participants did have some control over the process itself as they were asked whether they would rather recommendations be voted on or agreed on by consensus. The participants chose to do so by consensus, and this was the method used, suggesting that participants did have some level of popular control over how the assembly made decisions.

Furthermore, the initiative was highly successful in informing the participants on what they would be discussing and can therefore be considered to have a high degree of considered judgement. This was primarily achieved through expert presentations and Q&A sessions in which participants could engage with experts in small groups. These small groups also served to increase considered judgement as it meant that assembly members would actively engage and discuss the topics with each other, meaning that they would have been exposed to a variety of different perspectives. The recruitment mechanism may have served to increase this as a representative sample was taken meaning that the small group discussions aided in getting assembly members of different backgrounds to engage with each other. This shows how increasing inclusivity can have positive effects on other democratic goods such as considered judgement as it facilitates the discussion amongst a diverse group of people. Furthermore, the facilitator lead presentation at the start ensured that participants had a sufficient understanding of what was expected of them and the effects their contribution would have. Facilitators also ensured that all citizens got a turn to speak and present their own idea when deciding on the final recommendations. This will have increased considered judgement as every member of the assembly had the opportunity to have their opinions heard.

Overall, the innovation was a closed-door initiative which meant that residents who were not selected to become assembly members were unable to directly observe or engage with the initiative, of which limited transparency. However, the assemblies were recorded and uploaded to YouTube which did enable non-members to observe the process electronically through this channel. The primary reason that the initiative is relatively untransparent, however, is that participants cannot currently see how their recommendations are being used. The recommendations serve a purely advisory role to The Royal Kingston Borough Council and can therefore be completely ignored. Whilst an action plan is being drafted, it has not yet been released so participants do not currently know how their recommendations have been used. However, once published the innovation could be considered to have a relatively high degree of transparency as participants will be able to see the results of their work.

Similarly, the efficiency of the initiative is also hard to measure as the available reports do not mention the organizational costs of running the assemblies. In terms of time however, the initiative was largely efficient as the innovation only spanned the period of two weekends and therefore wasn't too obstructive to the time of organizers or participants. This time period also seems to have been effective as out of the initial 40 participants selected 38 of them completed all four days[[18]](#footnote-18) which suggests there was a very low drop-off rate. However, after being asked how they felt about the citizens' assembly one participant mentioned that she would be interested in participating more in the future if the assemblies were shorter.[[19]](#footnote-19) This indicates that it may be beneficial to host smaller one weekend assemblies as the turnouts may be larger due to the lower levels of commitment. This is supported by Morell who highlights that citizens will benefit more from democratic innovations if they "occur fairly, frequently and across a variety of issues" (E, Morell 1999, pg. 27). Inferring that hosting these assemblies more frequently and across different issues would increase efficiency as participants would get more from their time spent at them.

The innovation also exhibits a relatively high level of transferability, both across countries and levels of government. This is because the initiative serves a purely advisory role to policymakers so expanding it to higher levels of government could be achieved without granting an unfair level of power to assembly members as they would not have any legally binding power. However, the innovation may struggle to scale up as this would need more organization and subsequently funding, of which may be difficult to obtain, especially in poorer regions/countries. Furthermore, this assembly was focused on reducing air pollution, of which is a largely uncontroversial issue in the UK. However, the innovation may be less effective when considering more controversial topics. This is because the innovation relies on open-minded discussion, more polarised topics may prove challenging as participants may be less open to understanding each other’s viewpoints. Overall indicating that whilst the innovation is relatively transferable across levels of government, it may be less transferable across poorer countries/regions and topics.

In conclusion, it is difficult to evaluate the full impact of the innovation as the final action plan and ‘Open Democracy Programme’ have not yet been published by the Royal Kingston Borough Council. However, from the impact observed on the participants it seems that the innovation has been fairly effective at promoting democratic goods, primarily considered judgement and popular control as participants appeared to come away more informed than when they began and reported that they felt as though they had an impact on policy.[[20]](#footnote-20) As for what might be done to improve future uses of the innovation, one improvement could be to allow citizens outside of the civic lottery to request to join. This would improve inclusivity as everyone that is affected by the proposed actions could have a say in them. Overall, the Kingston community seems to have been positively affected by the innovation and would therefore likely benefit from an increased use of it.

**See Also**

involve – <https://participedia.net/organization/220>

Sortition Foundation – <https://participedia.net/organization/6583>

Citizens’ Assembly – <https://participedia.net/method/4258>

Civic Lottery – <https://participedia.net/method/154>

Deliberation – <https://participedia.net/method/560>

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Kingston Council, (2021). Citizens’ Assembly on Air Quality – What did people think? [Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQc--ekD6mY&list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn&index=11> [Accessed 15/05/2021]

Participedia, (2021). The Irish Citizens’ Assembly. [online] Available at: <https://participedia.net/case/5316> [accessed 17/05/2021]

**Notes**

1. Local Government Association (2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Local Government Association (2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.involve.org.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.sortitionfoundation.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.kingston.gov.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A comprehensive list of participants can be found at Involve (2020, pg. 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A full table of the below results can be seen at Involve (2020, pg. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Videos of the assemblies are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The results of which are available at Involve (2020, pg. 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A template of the ballot can be seen at Involve (2020, pg. 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The list of recommendations and actions can be seen here alongside the support that each recommendation receive is available at Involve (2020, pg. 11-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Local Government Association (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Local Government Association (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. An example of one of the expert presentations is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ShDUOrt7ZE&list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn&index=7> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A video of assembly members giving their thoughts on the assembly is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQc--ekD6mY&list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn&index=11> (Kingston Council, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mason, M (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (Participedia, 2021). Available at: [The Irish Citizens' Assembly – Participedia](https://participedia.net/case/5316) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Involve (2020, pg. 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQc--ekD6mY&list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn&index=11> (Kingston Council, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQc--ekD6mY&list=PLFTvX2Jlo3Mj2ljKpGLR0rE0Ux37GeCTn&index=11> (Kingston Council, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)