

What Is Deliberation?

'Deliberation' is long and careful discussion crafted towards making a decision. Deliberative processes emphasise the importance of reflection and informed discussion in decision-making. This allows people to adopt more nuanced positions on the issues at hand, with a better understanding of the trade-offs inherent in a given decision.

For deliberation to be effective, it is important that sufficient time and resources are provided for people to familiarise themselves with the various aspects of a question, discuss and reflect on the issues away from the simplistic sloganeering of political campaigning. The outcome of a deliberative process should be one in which people feel more able to make an informed decision on a given issue.

Citizens' assemblies are a form of deliberative democracy: processes through which citizens can engage in open, respectful and informed discussion and debate with their peers on a given issue.

A citizens' assembly is made up of a representative group of around 50 to 200 citizens, who are chosen at random from the general public, like a jury. The selection of members is stratified to ensure that participants are as representative as possible of the general population according to certain criteria – usually gender, age, ethnicity, geographical location, and social background. For this reason, citizens' assemblies are also referred to as 'mini-publics'. Random selection of members means that the wider public can be confident that members are fellow citizens, just like them, and are not representing special interests.

Members of the assembly meet over a number of weekends – from two weekends to twelve or more – to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues. The topics debated by an assembly are generally set by government or parliament, though members can sometimes choose their own agenda.

A citizens' assembly will typically go through three phases:

1. In the learning phase, participants get to know each other and how the assembly works and what its aims are. Relevant facts about the issue at hand are presented to the participants, who get to ask questions of experts and access background and contextual information.
2. During the consultation phase, campaigners from each side get to present their arguments, and be questioned on them. Sometimes, the assembly might run a public consultation during this phase to understand what the broader public thinks about an issue.
3. In the deliberation and discussion phase, the participants deliberate amongst themselves. Generally, assembly members will make recommendations to government or parliament at the end of this phase. In some cases, if these recommendations are taken up, they will be put to the people in a referendum (as in the case of Ireland). But it is usually up to elected politicians whether or not to follow the assembly's recommendations.

It is essential for a citizens' assembly to be balanced in terms of the information presented to participants. Generally, the organisers will set up an advisory board comprising of independent experts and campaigners from both sides of the issue to vet the information given to the participants. The assembly's speakers should be carefully chosen to give equal representation to all sides of the debates. Participants should be carefully seated to ensure a balance of views and perspectives on each table. The table discussions should also be facilitated to ensure that everyone's views are heard, but the facilitators are barred from discussing the issues raised.

Citizens' assemblies emphasise two important areas of democracy: the participation of ordinary citizens in decision-making; and careful, thoughtful discussion of the arguments for and against different options. Citizens' assemblies aren't just focus groups or consultations though. The goal isn't to just hear what people already think – but for the members to engage in serious, informed reflection on important policy matters with people they may never normally meet.

Citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes can strengthen and supplement representative democracy, not only by giving politicians insight into informed public perspectives on complex policy issues, but also by building trust in the political process.

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland will consist of a group of around 100–120 Scottish citizens, randomly selected to be broadly representative of the adult (16+) population of Scotland in terms of socio-demographic variables and political attitudes/views, and an independent chair. Recruitment will be undertaken by a skilled and experienced independent organization over the course of the summer. MSPs, MPs, MEPs, councillors and members of the House of Lords, political party staff, public appointees and senior public and civil servants will be ineligible to sit on the Assembly, as will representatives and officials of relevant advocacy groups. Participants will receive an honorarium of £200 per weekend and travel, accommodation and other reasonable costs (e.g. child care) will be covered.

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland will meet for six weekends between autumn 2019 and spring 2020. Participants will come together to consider and help find consensus on the future of Scotland, addressing the following broad questions:

- What kind of country are we seeking to build?
- How can we best overcome the challenges we face, including those arising from Brexit?
- What further work should be carried out to give people the detail they need to make informed choices about the future of the country?

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland will be conducted according to the following seven principles:

- Independence from government: including through the appointment of an impartial and respected convener or co-conveners, an arms-length secretariat, and expert advisory groups.
- Transparency: at all levels of the operation of the Assembly, from the framing of the questions, to the selection of members and expert witnesses, through to proactive publication and live-streaming of deliberative sessions and clarity about what the outputs will be used for.
- Inclusion: extending not just to those invited to take part as members, but also to the operations of the Assembly itself.
- Access: the wider public must be able to see and comment upon the work of the Assembly, and stakeholders must feel that they and their interests have a route into the Assembly.
- Balance: the information used to build members' (and the wider public's) learning must be balanced, credible and easily understood.
- Cumulative learning: embedded into the design of the Assembly, to ensure members develop a rich understanding of the issues considered and have time to do so.

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- Open-mindedness: the Assembly will be a forum for open-minded deliberation between participants, ensuring the public see it as a genuine process of enquiry, and to help ensure that it receives an open-minded response from the parliament and government.

The Citizens' Assembly of Scotland will appoint two co-conveners to ensure gender balance and a mix of skills. They will be responsible for:

- Stewarding the Assembly, by overseeing the planning arrangements in order that the Assembly delivers its remit.
- Convening meetings of the Assembly, by hosting them and contributing to them.
- Representing the Assembly, in the media and in public, and speaking on their behalf

A Secretariat will be established to help the conveners ensure the efficient running of the Assembly. The Secretariat will be staffed by a mixed team of civil servants and people with direct experience in running Citizens' Assemblies. A range of advisory groups will also be established.

Citizens' Assemblies around the World

The first citizens' assembly was established in British Columbia in 2003, where 161 ordinary citizens deliberated on the issue of electoral reform.

The most well-known citizens' assembly is that which took place in Ireland between 2016 and 2018. The Irish Citizens' Assembly followed the model of its predecessor, the Convention on the Constitution, which ran from 2012 to 2014 and whose recommendations had led to the 2015 marriage equality referendum.

The Assembly was composed of a chairperson, appointed by the government, and 99 ordinary citizens 'randomly selected so as to be broadly representative of Irish society' in terms of age, gender, social class, and regional spread. Members debated on a number of topics, including removing the country's constitutional ban on abortion, a recommendation which was put to a referendum in May 2018 and supported by 66% of the population.

Further Information

To stay updated on developments, follow the UK Citizens' Assembly's Twitter account at [@UKAssemblies](https://twitter.com/UKAssemblies)

More information on the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland is available at www.citizensassembly.scot

You can find more information about the citizens' assemblies the ERS has helped run in the UK at www.citizensassembly.co.uk

For more information about the Irish experience, please visit www.citizensassembly.ie