

3.3 WHAT IS A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY?

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A citizens' assembly is a way of giving members of the public a voice in important policy decisions.

The members of a citizens' assembly are chosen using random selection to mirror the population as closely as possible. They usually gather over a number of weekends. During the weekends, they hear from experts and people with experience of the issues at stake. They discuss the arguments and come to conclusions. These conclusions are written up in a report that is presented to policy-makers.

Two basic ideas shape the design of citizens' assemblies. One is that members of the public should be listened to when making big policy decisions. The other is that people should have a chance to hear all the arguments, question experts, and think about the issues carefully before saying what they think.

That doesn't happen enough in normal democratic politics. We're supposed to be able to hear the arguments, work out our views, and say what we think. But, in reality, important issues are often ignored and it can be difficult to tell who is speaking honestly and who isn't. Often we just don't have time to learn about the issues and make up our minds.

Citizens' assemblies are carefully designed to avoid these problems as far as possible. There is time to think things through, and facilitators are there to help ensure everyone's voice is heard.

HAVE THERE BEEN CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES BEFORE?

The first citizens' assembly took place in Canada in 2004. It was set up by the government of British Columbia. It discussed whether to change British Columbia's voting system. It recommended a new system, and this was put to voters in a referendum.

Other citizens' assemblies have taken place elsewhere in Canada, as well as in the Netherlands and Ireland. A citizens' assembly is taking place in Ireland at the moment. It has already looked into the issue of abortion and published a report. It is now examining several other issues. Its recommendations on abortion are likely to lead to a referendum next year.

There have been no citizens' assemblies in the UK organised by government. But there have been some unofficial assemblies, set up by other people. Two assemblies were held in 2015 in Sheffield and Southampton to look at the devolution of powers to English cities and regions. They were organised by many of the same people as are running the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit.

Events similar to citizens' assemblies but on a smaller scale have often been held in the UK and elsewhere. These are sometimes called citizens' juries, as they are similar to juries in criminal trials. In a citizens' jury, a dozen or more members of the public hear the evidence before discussing the issues and making recommendations.