

Innovation in Democracy Programme Frequently Asked Questions

At our three readiness events in London, York, and Bristol (23, 26, 27 November 2018), we asked local authorities what it would be useful for them to know about the programme and about submitting an expression of interest. These were the questions, which fall into roughly three categories: the expressions of interest process; the running of the programme; and sharing learning from the programme.

Expressions of interest process

Q. How does the application process work? Is it an expression of interest only?

A. In order to make it as simple as possible, this is an expression of interest process only. Once you’ve submitted, we’ll assess the EoIs here in DCMS/MHCLG and pick the strongest eight to ten.

Q. Are you looking for expressions of interest any particular size local authority: metropolitan borough, county etc.?

A. We’re open to expressions of interest from any sized local authority. In an ideal world, we would like a range of different-sized authorities taking part in the programme, helping to provide a much better evaluation of the way participatory democracy works in different areas and at different levels.

Q. To what extent do local authorities already need to know the issue that they will open up for deliberation for the expression of interest?

A. For the expression of interest, it’s important for us to know that you’ve thought about what a viable topic for deliberation might be, that you’d be willing to put this to citizens and which is important to them, and that senior figures in your LA would support. However, what we absolutely don’t want is an issue where you’ve already decided the outcome - that’s for the citizens to decide! We do know that the exact parameters of the issue may shift a bit as you refine the question and plan the Citizens Assembly in more detail with the Democracy Support Contractor.

Q. Will our expression of interest be discounted if the citizens’ assemblies build on pre-existing processes?

A. Not at all, so long as those processes do not provide fixed policy outcomes and as such render the citizens’ assemblies a tick-box process. For example, if you’ve already opened an issue up to other citizens’ groups and have received recommendations, you might not want to open that issue up again to the citizens’ assemblies.

Q. Could a local authority focus on one particular area within their geographical remit?

A. Yes. It’s important to make issues relevant to the people in a particular place and if that means focussing on one town or area in your local authority, feel free to do so. Focussing on one place might also help with the logistics of organising the citizens’ assemblies, including getting people to and from the venue.

Q. What advice do you have for choosing an issue?

A. It really is completely up to you what issue you choose. What we suggest is finding an issue that people really care about in your area, that will get people wanting to take part in the assemblies and get them to keep coming back. Besides taking housing and planning out of consideration, our only requirement is that you don’t predetermine the outcome of the citizens’ assemblies by ushering citizens towards certain recommendations.

Q. Is there any flexibility in the deadline?

A. Unfortunately not, owing to the decision-making process here in DCMS/MHCLG and the need to get the programme started as soon as possible so that we don’t lose this year’s budget.

Q. Once my local authority has submitted an expression of interest, can we withdraw it?

A. Yes, that’s possible, although we would prefer if you didn’t as it would be unfair on other local authorities who bid but were not successful.

The running of the programme

Q. To what extent would you like to see collaboration with other authorities and institutions in the local area, such as universities, police commissioners, academy schools, etc.?

A. We welcome any collaborations or partnerships that you can form, especially if this will help the citizens’ assemblies to produce better recommendations and result in strong policy outcomes. If you are planning to work with any other local authorities, you will also need to demonstrate that you have their senior level support for participation.

Q. Could we open up the citizens’ assemblies to young people?

A. Yes, we would welcome local authorities creating spaces for young people to be part of the deliberation process. It is possible to run your citizens' assembly just involving young people if it is looking at issues that relate specifically to them. The random selection process would, necessarily be a bit different to an adults' assembly, but relatively straightforward to manage. You might want to consider whether you want to include adults in some or all of the citizens assembly, which will come down to exactly what the issue/decision is. There might be reasons you would want to just include young people, or reasons to have an intergenerational mix. It’ll depend in part on whether the decision has implications for other generations. You could also consider hybrid models that involve older generations for parts of the assembly, but not the whole. The democracy support contractor would be instrumental in thinking these issues through with you during the design phase and working with the you to choose an appropriate recruitment process and assembly design.

Q. My local authority has elections next year: what would that mean for the programme?

A. Normal purdah rules apply and you would need to take these into account. As the decision to bid to be part of IiDP needs to be taken by January, and therefore under the current administration, we suggest that you ensure that you have cross-party support for the principle of participating in the iiDP and for the issue to be discussed so that even if control passes to a different administration, they maintain the commitment to the process. You do not have to start running the citizens’ assemblies themselves until after the election in May so long as they’re completed by March 2020. We suggest that you flag this as a risk in your Expression of Interest and explain how you can mitigate the impact.

Q. If the issue or topic needs to change at any time between the start of the programme and the start of the citizens’ assemblies, is that possible?

A. We would expect the broad issue to remain consistent as we will be using your suggestions as part of our basis for selecting the local authorities to work with. However, we do know that the exact parameters of the issue may shift a bit as you refine the question and plan the Citizens Assembly in more detail with the Democracy Support Contractor.

Q. Will local authorities have to commit to finding resources to deliver the recommendations?

A. When you open up the issue to your citizens, you will be clear internally and with them on what resources you have available for putting their recommendations into practice, so they work within these constraints. If you have no budget to tackle a particular issue, you can still run a citizens’ assembly to explore it as long as you are confident that there are no-cost actions that the local authority and community can take that will address it, that you have non-financial resources that you can invest, or that you are confident of finding other sources of investment to tackle the issue.

Q. How much input from officers do you expect this programme will need?

A. It will vary from one local authority to the next and depending on the issue you open for deliberation. An issue that cuts across departments within your local authority and/or concerns another authority in your area, such as the police commissioner or CCG, may require more time input. The amount of time that LA staff will need to put in to the programme will also vary throughout the process but on average, it could equate to 1-2 days per week. Other staff teams are likely to be involved in addition, for example: staff involved in preparing background info for the Citizens’ Assemblies, Comms, IT etc.

Q. Once the citizens’ assembly has delivered its recommendations, can the local authority then open these up to wider consultation and/or a vote?

A. Yes. Some of the strongest case studies for participatory democracy are those where the government has listened to the citizens’ assembly, understood the magnitude of a recommendation, and opened it up to further citizen deliberation. This is perhaps best seen in the two referenda held by the Irish government following the Irish Convention on the Constitution.

Sharing learning from the programme

Q. How will you share learning between the successful LAs?

A. Our Democracy Support Contractor will set up a peer network of the 8-10 successful LAs. The peer network will provide a space for LAs to support and learn from each other, sharing insights and experiences from the programme to help deliver the citizens’ assemblies and their recommendations.

Q. What support is on offer for local authorities that are unsuccessful in their expressions of interest?

A. We are keen to share the learning from this programme as widely as possible. During the programme we hope to be working with the Democracy Support Contractor to publicise progress and lessons learnt so far. At the end of the programme, we will also be sharing the full evaluation of the programme, with case studies, lessons learnt and exploring how this can be picked up by other local authorities.

Q. What impacts will be measured during the evaluation of the programme?

A. We’ll be looking at several impacts from the programme, including:

* the impact of participatory democratic process on decision-making and policy;
* the impact of involvement in programme for participants;
* the quality of the deliberative process: how far were participants representative of the community; was there enough time / information for meaningful deliberation; scale, reach and impact of online participation?
* the impact on local authorities, including how integrated this programme was with usual democratic and decision-making channels; institutional change; how far has knowledge and expertise in new processes been shared across the organisation?
* the impact on non-participating local authorities.

State aid

Q. What counts as state aid?

A. State aid is any advantage granted by public authorities through state resources on a selective basis to any organisations that could potentially distort competition and trade in the European Union (EU). We don’t envisage this to be a problem for this programme: the funds provided as part of the programme can only be used to cover the costs of convening the citizens’ assemblies and not for any additional commercial activities.