

## An Introduction to Citizens' Assemblies

Why are the circumstances right for a deliberative engagement process?

Sometimes you need a circuit-breaking approach to a long-term problem. Citizens' assemblies are uniquely positioned to solve these long-standing issues because of the way they focus on common ground solutions and working together.



### 01. Circuit-breaking approach

Almost all communities have their own long-standing or wicked problems. Approaches to addressing these vary but repeating those that have failed in the past will likely lead to the same, inefficient results. Citizens' assemblies are a circuit-breaking approach that can hit the reset button, encourage people to listen to different perspectives and focus on new solutions.



### 02. Other methods?

Other engagement methods are available, but they are less likely to achieve agreement on a long-standing issue while receiving broad community and stakeholder support.



### 03. Common ground

Our processes focus on finding common ground between a diverse mix of everyday people. They do this by placing an emphasis on dialogue, not debate. This encourages working together to solve a problem, rather than adversarial methods of engagement.



### 04. Community input

It important to remember that being a part of the assembly isn't the only way of contributing to the process. A good deliberative engagement will provide options for the wider community to contribute their views and help come up with solutions. Participants hear from all sides before forming any views.



### 05. Transparency

A fundamental principle of deliberative engagement is transparency. This will mean all the information presented to participants will be public and members of the community will be able to come and observe the process.

Where has this been done before?

Citizens' assemblies have been used around Australia and the World to solve everything from council infrastructure budgets to how citizens would like to be democratically represented.

#### A. Byron Shire Council, twice

Byron has a reputation for highly engaged community groups that can, at times, make it difficult to hear community-wide perspectives and can lead to public discourse that is highly fractious.

In 2018, Byron Shire Council trialled the use of a citizens' panel to help them solve how they would spend their infrastructure budget. The council had just raised their rates, but their financial capacity still fell well short of community expectations for infrastructure quality. The jury gave recommendations on what should be prioritised and why, Council then acted on all of them.

Following the success of the infrastructure panel, the Council ambitiously asked a new panel the question: *"How do we want to make democratic decisions in Byron Shire Council that can be widely supported?"* The Council committed to adopting all of the recommendations in a 2-year trial, currently underway. Council saw both of these projects as resounding successes because of the way they shared the problem with a wide mix of people and brought them to common ground solutions.

#### B. Democracy in Geelong

In 2016, the Victorian Government dismissed the entire Greater Geelong City Council and committed to consult the community about its local governance model before the next council election. They ran a citizens' assembly tasked with answering questions around local representation, ward structure and aspirational models of governance. They heard from all sides of the issue and weighed up competing evidence.

The Victorian Government acted on the recommendations of the assembly, implementing new methods for mayoral election and wards.

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What do we need to do to ensure the process is fair and balanced?

When making plans for a deliberative engagement process, we need to establish key norms for how the process will operate. These include setting the remit, negotiating authority and engaging key stakeholders to contribute.

### 01. Question Framing

Writing a question is all about sharing the problem. The question should be honest about any trade-off decisions but be broad enough to allow for a range of solutions.



### 02. Funding

These projects require funding by the decision-maker. Cost estimates vary, but they are more expensive than others because the process is thorough.



### 03. Authority

It is necessary to pre-negotiate some form of commitment from the decision-maker to publicly respond to the recommendations. This makes the commitment worthwhile for the participants.



### 04. Recruitment

Democratic lotteries randomly select participants while stratifying for demographics. The group will match the population descriptively for age, gender, geography and education – all in proportion.



### 05. Stakeholders

A steering group (e.g. of local associations and key stakeholders) oversee the planning of the process to ensure all parties are trusting of the approach. The group contributes to a background information document and nominate speakers to inform the participants.



The combination of speakers, background information and the learning participants do throughout the process will ensure all views are considered. Geographic stratification proportionally captures participants throughout relevant communities.

What does a Citizens' Assembly process look like?

When given the right amount of time, a wide range of information and the right incentives to work together, everyday people can find common ground on complex trade-offs.

### A. Regular meetings

Typically, approximately 32 randomly selected participants would meet up to six times over the course of a few months. They learn by critically reading the information kit, hearing from nominated speakers and requesting their own speakers. They explore the issue and reach alignment around key themes to address.

Participants work in small groups to generate possible solutions addressing these key themes. They then work together, through a consensus building process to on recommendations through a consensus building process to agree on recommendations for the decision-maker.

### B. Wider community involvement

It is important everyone impacted by the decision has the opportunity to contribute to the solution. The wider community will be asked to provide input to help address the question. Stakeholders will be formally involved in a steering group that contributes speakers through a nomination process. These speakers will be available for questioning from the participants.

### C. What will come out of this?

The participants will produce a report that they write themselves. This will document the recommendations that they find common ground on, with an explanatory rationale and a record of the evidence they relied on in coming to their recommendations. This report will be sent directly to the decision-making organisation for their public response.

This process will allow people from all over the community to prepare contribute to a set of recommendations that consider the needs and interests of those impacted by the issue and the ideas presented by those within and beyond the community. It emphasises slow thinking, pursuit of common ground and considered decision-making.