

Camden Citizens' Assembly on the climate crisis

Camden Council
Monday 30 November 2020

Summary

In April 2019, Camden Council declared a Climate Emergency. While the Council has helped to reduce borough-wide emissions by 39% since 2005, there's more work to be done. In response to this declaration, Camden Council – with the help of a number of independent organisations – arranged a Citizens' Assembly to decide how the borough as a whole should address the climate crisis. The Citizens' Assembly on the climate crisis sits at the centre of Camden's response to the climate emergency and the aim of the process is to build demographically representative citizen consensus about how the local authority area should address the issue.

Our problem

The Camden Climate Action Plan 2020-25 sets out four main areas that need addressing if the borough is to achieve its aim of achieving Net Zero by 2030: people, buildings, places and organisations. The Citizens' Assembly tackles the first of those areas by looking at how we can help everyone who lives, works, studies and visits the borough to be well-informed and actively contribute to tackling the climate crisis.

Overview

The Camden Climate Assembly brought together a group of demographically representative residents from Camden during July 2019 to develop an approach for how Camden can best tackle the climate crisis. The citizens' assembly met over three sessions to hear evidence, deliberate and make recommendations to the council and the wider community. The citizens' assembly was asked to consider how the council and people of Camden can help to limit the impact of climate change while protecting our natural environment.

Over three meetings and 12 hours, 50 participants heard a range of evidence outlining the facts of the crisis and ways in which it could be tackled. They generated a total of 613 ideas and shortlisted 213 of them before agreeing on 17 actions that should be taken by residents, community groups, businesses and Camden Council.

These measures were split into three groups: those that could be implemented at home, within the neighbourhood and by the Council. They included encouraging and low-carbon dietary choices, fitting solar panels to as many homes as possible, planting more trees, installing more segregated cycle lanes, working to make all Council properties fossil-fuel free and establishing a Climate Emergency scrutiny panel made up of experts and residents.

Timeline / project progress

The Assembly met during July 2019 during which it decided upon the 17 actions. The actions were [presented to a full council meeting on 7 October 2019](#) and received unanimous support from councillors from all political parties. The recommendations set the direction of the [Camden Climate Action Plan 2020-2025](#), which was published in June 2020.

Stakeholders

The process was designed by Involve, an independent advisory group, council officers and the Democratic Society. The latter is a non-profit organisation who helped to run the sessions. Involve was commissioned to advise on the development of the assembly and lead its design and facilitation.

An independent advisory board was tasked with reviewing the content and structure of the assembly to ensure that members were provided with all the necessary information and evidence. Members of the board included: Richard Jackson, Director of Environmental Sustainability at UCL, Dr Joanna Macrae from Climate Emergency Camden and Duncan Price, Director of Sustainability at BuroHappold Engineering.

The Council engaged with a wide range of community groups to maximise the number of voices heard throughout the process and to increase awareness of the need for action in Camden. Groups were consulted to ask for their views on how Camden as a borough could tackle the climate crisis at the household, neighbourhood, council and national levels. An online engagement exercise was completed through [Commonplace](#) to allow anyone who lives or works in Camden to input their ideas to the process. The platform included an outline of the context of the climate crisis at each of the levels as specified above, which was articulated through the use of infographics, making these complex issues easier to understand. The pre-assembly engagement also included engagement with schools to contribute their ideas to the process. The Leader of the Council met with The Sustainers, Camden's sustainability steering group of students from years 8 and 9, to discuss potential actions which could be taken to reduce carbon emissions in Camden. A cross-sector roundtable was also held by the Camden Climate Change Alliance (CCCA), Camden's business sustainability network, to provide a business member response to the climate crisis and input into the process.

Camden has a strong cohort of established environmental community groups, but it was critical for the assembly to be representative of the many and not the few. This was deemed as an essential part of the process to ensure the conclusions from the assembly were sculpted through the lens and lived experiences of residents from all backgrounds, including hard to reach groups in Camden. Residents were selected at random by Camden's Community Researchers who worked tirelessly to recruit participants. The recruitment process was designed to ensure that a representative profile of Camden's population by ward, age, gender and ethnicity was achieved. The result was a panel of participants who were a credit to the diverse nature of Camden. Each assembly member brought a unique perspective and experience of life in the borough and how any ideas and actions formulated during the process would impact on them and their communities.

Whole systems approach

The aim of the assembly was to formulate key ideas and actions which could be taken forward by the Council and community, which will feed into a new Environmental Plan for Camden.

The ideas and suggestions from the community helped assembly members to formulate 17 actions which were put to Full Council in October 2019, many of which were adopted and taken forward into the new Climate Action Plan.

Impact

A recent evaluation of Camden Council's Citizens' Assembly on the climate crisis showed residents feel more confident in engaging with climate discussions and more connected to their community by coming together to discuss how Camden Council should address the crisis.

We believe this project has demonstrated excellence in the face of the Climate Emergency by empowering a diverse and demographically reflective group of residents, with input from the rest of the community, to contribute in the formulation of a plan to tackle the climate crisis. The project has increased awareness of the Climate Emergency in Camden, with a focus on how individuals and communities can help spark local action as well as influencing the Council's operations.

The assembly process was widely praised by participants and this was reflected by 90% of participants attending all three sessions and 76% of participants wanting to continue to be involved in developing and delivering the actions following the assembly. The success of the assembly was also reflected by resident feedback to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gould): one participant has been a carer for ten years in Camden and this was the first time he'd felt connected to his community. Another said she'd started changing her behaviour and speaking to her neighbours and they all offered to volunteer to help make it all happen.

The process has also been widely praised in local and national media, with the Guardian publishing a series of positive articles about the event. Camden Council has appointed UCL Culture's Evaluation Team to provide an independent review of the process to validate the integrity of the citizens' assembly and its findings, this will be published following completion.

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Camden's citizens' assembly on the climate crisis was the first of its kind in the UK. As such, there were elements of the project that worked well and bits that we - and others - could learn from.

Strong leadership and advocacy for the citizens' assembly from senior stakeholders, cross departmental working with Camden and our ability to respond and maintain open dialogue with criticism and negative feedback were all really positive. The involvement of Camden staff as facilitators built capacity and had a positive impact on their motivation in relation to their own jobs. However, the Advisory Group was relatively small and somewhat limited in its engagement, and the involvement of Camden staff in the process initially raised questions over the impartiality and independence of the citizens' assembly.

Crucially, this innovative approach has helped pave the way for local authorities and central government in designing their own assembly processes, through the experiences and lessons learned from Camden's assembly. The process has also provided a key case study for how citizens' assemblies can be useful as a tool to elevate debate, restore the primacy of indisputable fact and return civility and respect to political dialogue for other divisive issues our society is currently facing.

While the Council delivered the project, maintaining impartiality and transparency through the process was seen as a key requirement for success. This was delivered through working with Involve, who provided its expert support on the process design as well as leading facilitation throughout all of the sessions. An advisory group was also established, (comprising three local stakeholders and technical experts) to provide independent oversight of the process. Politicians had an observer-only role, standing back from the process itself.

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