

Southampton's Citizens' Climate Assembly

Southampton City Council
Thursday 30 January 2025

Summary

At the end of 2023, Southampton City Council ran its first ever citizens' assembly. Recognising the challenges the city faced in tackling climate change and supporting the transition to sustainable travel, the assembly focussed on climate change and transport. It was run in partnership with the University of Southampton, University of Oxford and public participation charity, Involve.

CLlr John Savage, Cabinet Member for Green City and Net Zero, said, "The Climate Assembly was able to inform the Council of the direction of travel, that a truly representative assembly group could determine, irrespective of political colour. By working in this way, the council and assembly members have highlighted the importance of co-production in developing fair and ambitious outcomes for residents of Southampton."

The problem

Southampton is a bustling port city, with almost 1 million residents and many more tourists visiting to sail off into the sunset on the many cruises leaving its shores. However, many journeys in the city are made by car, causing air pollution and hindering the council's climate ambitions.

Nationally, reductions in transport emissions are stagnating, with climate targets at risk as a result. Southampton sees this trend at a local level, with 29% of the city's emissions coming from transport, and with limited reductions in recent years.

Southampton knew residents were keen for action on this area specifically, as a result of the recently formed [Climate Commission](#). So, with a [new corporate plan](#) committing the council to be a net zero city by 2035, the time was right to tackle this challenge head on. With upcoming opportunities such as the Local Transport Plan, residents decided to lead a Climate Assembly on the future of personal transport in the city, focusing on the ways in which people use transport in their personal lives and for their commutes.

The solution

Recognising the importance of this assembly, Southampton City Council worked together with the University of Southampton, the University of Oxford and the charity Involve to deliver a wide, democratic, and cutting-edge citizen engagement programme.

Before the assembly in June and July 2023, the council, universities and Involve hosted five civil society events in different parts of the city and online. The purpose was to collect feedback on the remit of the assembly and the

question the assembly would answer. [Read in full what the civil society events told us here.](#)

These civil society events were independently facilitated by Involve. All the events started with Southampton Citizens Climate Assembly (SCCA) team members presenting information on what a citizens' assembly is, before inviting participants to share their views on what an appropriate overarching question would be.

Through this preliminary process, the council were able to develop the following final question put to the assembly:

'How do we ensure an accessible, affordable and connected transport system in the city, whilst reducing carbon emissions and meeting climate targets?'

Once the question was decided, the council recruited assembly members, by working with the Sortition Foundation to select residents through a lottery that would result in a group of participants that fairly represented the diversity of the City.

They used a process known as a 'sortition' to select the assembly members, the gold standard internationally. 8,000 letters were sent to addresses in Southampton that were selected without bias from the Royal Mail's postcode database. This gave everyone with an address in Southampton an equal chance of receiving an invite to take part.

37 assembly members were recruited to reflect the local population in age, gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, whether or not they have a disability, and where they live in Southampton.

Assembly members were given a £340 gift of thanks, to make the assembly accessible to all and in recognition of their time. The project also covered travel and any additional costs such as childcare.

Once all members were recruited, the assembly took place over five days, across three weekends, in November and December 2023. Assembly members were guided through three stages:

- **Learning:** Assembly members learned about the topic from a range of local and national transport specialists, academics, members of the public, and each other.
- **Deliberation:** Assembly members discussed the information they had heard, weighing up potential ways forward in a workshop format with independent and trained facilitators.
- **Decision-making:** Assembly members worked together to create a long list of recommendations and a vision statement, voting to make trade-offs and arrive at a consensus.

With a host of speakers from the Council, Southampton University, Charities, University of Oxford and more.

Throughout the process, there was strong commitment from both Leader Cllr Satvir Kaur and her now successor Cllr Lorna Fielker, as well as from wider political leadership and administrative leads at the council. Representatives from each party were also included on the advisory panel.

Timeline

Southampton Climate Assembly design workshop - May 2023

A design workshop between representatives from the University of Southampton, the University of Oxford, Involve, and the City Council took place to work on the overall shape of the assembly.

Initial scoping meetings with the City Council - June 2023

This meeting brought together organisers from across the City Council to finalise the scope of the process, how it would feed into council decision making, and logistics such as venue, and accessibility.

Invitations to Civil Society Events - June 2023

Invites were sent to key local organisations to co-host civil society events, to ensure local organisations and residents could inform the design of the assembly.

Civil Society Events took place - June and July 2023

Three events were held in person in different areas around Southampton, and a further two online. Information

was compiled into a briefing note that was used to inform the design of the assembly, which can be read in our Civil Society Events page.

Advisory group formed - August and September 2023

An Advisory Group for the assembly was sought out and invitations sent. The advisory group supported:

1. The legitimacy of the assembly by showing balance of interests, viewpoints and parties;
2. The inclusion of marginalised and minoritised groups, particularly those disproportionately affected by transport issues;
3. the implementation of the assembly recommendations.

Invites to citizens sent - September 2023

The Sortition Foundation sent invitations to a broad range of randomly selected citizens, aiming at obtaining a representative sample of the population of Southampton. The assembly facilitators were recruited and trained, and a number of 'observers' were also invited. The broad shape and design of the assembly and outputs were finalised.

Participants confirmed and the assembly begins - November - December 2023

Weekend one and three took place in person, with weekend two online.

Final briefing - March 2024

In March, an event was held with senior leaders from the Council and stakeholders to hear from assembly members about their experience and the recommendations they made. A full briefing was delivered to the City Council with the results of the assembly.

Stakeholders

130 residents in total

- 75 people attended preliminary civil society events to inform the assembly's remit and question
- 18 people shared their experience of transport through an online platform on the Climate Assembly website (from which 4 were invited to share their experiences in the assembly)
- 37 residents, recruited to reflect the local population of Southampton, took part in the assembly itself

University of Southampton: The majority funder of the assembly, conducting research during the assembly with results forthcoming, but these looked at:

- **Door knocking** of households who received an invitation letter, to evaluate if this boosted recruitment
- **Different kinds of expertise:** Lay speakers who had been differently affected by transport decisions were included to evaluate a more inclusive process of building knowledge
- **Impact evaluation** through surveys and interviews with assembly members to understand their opinions and the impact of the assembly Research results are forthcoming.
- The university also provided some members of the support and facilitation teams for the assembly, with relevant training provided by Involve.

University of Oxford: In partnership with Involve on a British Academy Innovation Fellowship. The research aimed to understand more about ways to increase the impact of citizens' assemblies. Funding from this fellowship allowed Southampton to carry out and evaluate innovative approaches to increasing impact, including:

- Holding civil society events to influence the assembly's remit and question
- Additional meetings with the council about taking recommendations forward
- Briefings on the assembly recommendations for Councillors, senior officers and transport team.
- A launch event to raise the profile of the assembly and its recommendations with key attendees from the council and across the city.

Impact

The assembly produced three outputs aimed at informing the next iteration of the council's Local Transport Plan:

1. **Vision statement:** Assembly members voted on the following vision for the future of transport in Southampton: *People in Southampton use public transport and active travel (walking, cycling etc) as their main ways to get around.*
2. **Recommendations on priority actions:** Assembly members agreed on, and drafted, [ten priority recommendations](#) for how the council and others should go about delivering this vision, including a focus on a metro-style public transport system complimented by safe, accessible, and ubiquitous active travel infrastructure. They were supported to do this independently. Each recommendation includes a title, a rationale (i.e, assembly members' explanation of why they made the recommendation) and suggestions about how to communicate the recommendations to other members of the public in Southampton (i.e, what messages and messengers to use).
3. **Ideas on funding:** The assembly put forward ideas about how to fund their vision, for the council to consider alongside current funding avenues.

Lessons Learned

Through this project the council learnt a host of lessons about public engagement, partnerships and co-production. These include:

- The civil society events helped ensure that residents understood the scope for making a difference. This is why, for example, the assembly did not cover emissions relating to the seaport, airport and other commercial vehicles, where the council has less direct control.
- Assembly members valued their involvement in the project, all rating their experience as either good or excellent, agreeing that the assembly represented the diversity of the City, and that they were respected by others and able to safely express their views. This excellent feedback is due to the well thought through process of engaging the public, recruiting the members, and rewarding members for their involvement. Without this, the assembly would not have been the representative body it was.
- Work of this kind requires partnership, as few councils have the expertise in house to deliver a project of this kind. Therefore, working with local anchor institutions such as universities, and seeking out expert organisations such as Involve, is vital to the success of the project

For more lessons and top tips on how to deliver citizens assemblies, and other public engagement activities, see UK100 and Involve's joint [toolkit on inclusive climate engagement](#).

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This was a unique and enhanced citizens' assembly process where the Universities of Southampton and Oxford contributed to the costs and the process to help better understand how assemblies can have positive impacts for councils and their residents. The total cost of the process was £172,000. The University of Southampton was the largest contributor (67%), followed by the council (23%) and the University of Oxford (10%). The University of Southampton also contributed time to the assembly's work in kind and without payment.

Next steps

Since the assembly, SCC has sent regular updates to members of the Assembly to inform them of how the Council is using the recommendations. Members have been invited to consultation events and forums to share their experience and insight into future travel plans. Moving forward, the Council will:?

- Involve the Citizens' Assembly members in work on the next Local Transport Plan (timeline set by central government but potentially in 2025) ?
- Share the Assembly's recommendations with key organisations and stakeholders across the city?
- Use the Citizens' Assembly model as a guide for future engagement

The council aims to share the assembly outputs with businesses, communities and other key organisations in the city, encouraging them to consider the recommendations and use them to guide their own decisions.

Links, contacts, and credits

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