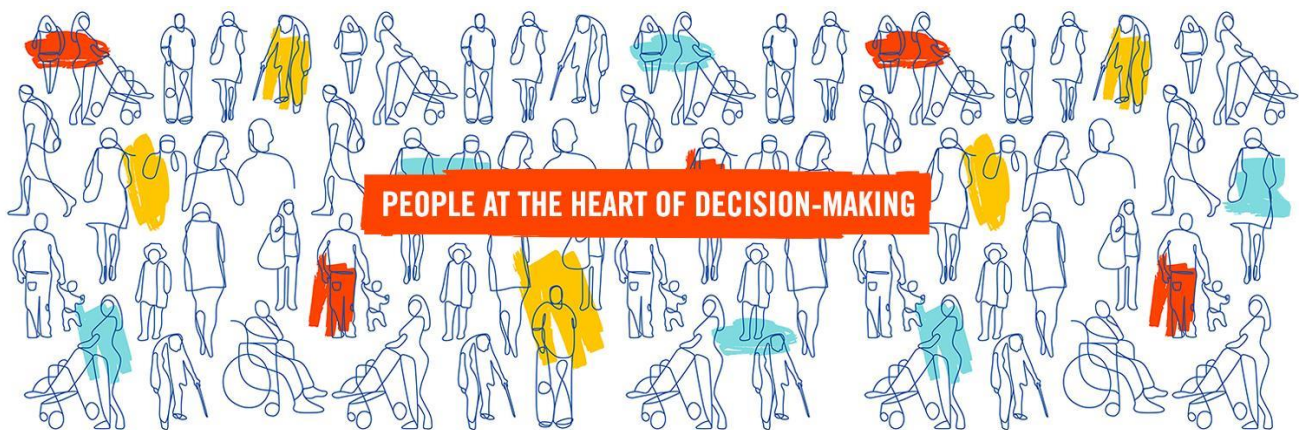




# DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: PRACTITIONERS' ONLINE WORKSHOP

SUMMARY REPORT OF KEY THEMES

APRIL 2020



# 01. Introduction

On 9 April 2020, we convened an online meeting of the Deliberative Democracy Practitioners' Network to discuss deliberative democracy in an age of Covid-19. This report summarises the key themes of the conversation, which explored:

- Checking in on existing processes and plans. What impact is Covid-19 having? How are people responding?
- Sharing learning about the opportunities and challenges of running deliberative processes online. What are opportunities, what might be challenges and what do we need to consider at different phases of the process?
- What are the wider implications for deliberative democracy we need to be mindful of at this time? Collectively what else can we do to support practitioners and deliberative democracy moving forwards?

The following are some of the key themes discussed and the emerging thoughts of aspects we need to be mindful of moving forwards. Thank you to all the participants (See Appendix 1) for their valuable and insightful contributions.

# 02. Inclusion

Online processes may be more inclusive for some – it will offer increased accessibility for those who struggle to be in the room both in terms of travel, needing to be at home for family and caring responsibilities or social anxiety etc. It might also engage younger people more readily too who may be less comfortable in the formats of face to face settings.

This may be the case for some households; however it was clear that inclusion is a key factor to consider in planning and design for online. In particular we need to consider:

- Digital exclusion – broadband access and speeds may affect participation of some geographical, mainly rural households. In addition, the type and depth of engagement of many deliberative processes may be restricted by the type of device people have; Zoom on a smartphone is a different experience than on a computer screen;
- Visual or hearing issues for participants and adaptations that need to be made;
- Supporting people to familiarise themselves with technology;
- Literacy factors if digital is based on written materials or an expectation to write online;
- Acknowledging that people do not always have a space in their home to take part uninterrupted online synchronously;
- Acknowledging that caring responsibilities don't go away if taking part online;
- Whose voices are amplified and whose are diminished online and how is that managed?

As well as inclusion, we need to rethink security, confidentiality, safeguarding and wellbeing for online – something that is taken great care of in face to face practices in looking after our public participants and supporting their participation.

In particular we can foresee, out of the current Covid-19 situation, the rise in mental health issues and anxiety, driven up by social distancing or isolation. This means we might need to slow down in what we expect in processes, to accommodate space for people to deliberate.

For the short term, we have to acknowledge that now might also not be the right time ethically to engage people when they have their own personal struggles and anxieties brought on by Covid-19 to cope with.

## 03. Considerations in different phases of an online process

The main breakout focused on the different phases of a deliberative process. In reality some of the phases blur but it was a useful lens with which to explore the challenges and opportunities.

### Recruitment and on-boarding of participants:

- Online offers an opportunity to reach people we don't normally think about and go where people are; but may raise issues about reaching different or vulnerable groups – it offers opportunities to both be easier and more difficult to do in recruitment.
- Recruitment of participants is often invisible unless the outcomes of a process are questioned. Recruiters can use wide variety of channels to recruit, but if only online is used in recruitment or the participants have to have online to participate it could introduce bias in recruitment.
- Online raises new challenges about how we motivate, reach, incentivise and onboard people to be part of processes. Generally, it would appear that a lot more time, care and thinking has to go into this phase to run online (it is already quite a significant part of the planning for a face-to-face process).
- We need to start where people are and with the tools they will have. People may be dialling in by phone (so will need materials by post); many will be engaging with a smartphone which provides for a very small screen.
- We can think creatively about overcoming the challenges to take part – we can pay for data, provide tablets with information already set up, support people in setting up and becoming familiar with the technology.
- Logistically online is quite a different “ask” for participants for the volume of work undertaken in face-to-face. What might be achieved in a day face-to-face may translate into many more online and offline sessions. How time is it realistic for people to spend on a Zoom call? How much time might we be able to maintain people's participation? Will “life” more easily get in the way and prevent on the day participation in an online experience?

### Learning phase

- The learning phase appears to offer more immediate benefits and potential for going online, in particular in terms of: reaching a potentially larger pool of people and wider expert input.

Additionally, there was seen to be some benefit in doing shorter bursts of session to help with learning as well as potentially curating better inputs from speakers.

- Blending asynchronous and synchronous learning offers different ways for people to learn about the topic and can add value to face to face opportunities.
- But we need to consider how to replicate real time opportunities for participants to challenge speakers and hear other views; in being able to see and respond to reactions to speakers.
- How long can you keep people's attention online, especially at home where distractions can be more pressing – this needs to be considered in the design
  - People need more regular breaks when working online – it is tiring.
  - Information can be presented and people could be brought back for deliberation and discussion, enabling them more time to reflect and consider.
- The design needs to factor asynchronous and synchronous engagement. What can we do asynchronously to maximise valuable time synchronously? What evidence do we have that people will do reading outside of contact time? How will this affect input and deliberation?
- Online, like face-to-face, will work for certain personality types – it may enable confidence and ability to contribute and facilitate discussion between people that might not happen at in-person sessions. But for asynchronous work it may disengage those with lower literacy or writing skills so again a mix of methods and sensitivity and support will be important.

## Deliberation phase

- Can digital platforms promote better listening and better examination of an issue?
- There is something unique about having a mini-public in a room – for participants and for decisions makers. A deliberative moment. Can this be achieved online – or are there other moments and unique aspects that we need to find?
- Online processes will have to work at achieving the connection, humour, insight and shared experiences that can quite naturally come from in-person processes.
- What do people really enjoy about being part of a process and how do we still give them the sense of fun, immersion and social connection online?
- Building rapport and empathy needs to be more explicitly designed and built in to digital / online.
- Will it be harder to get people used to challenging ideas without body language and visual cues?
- There are challenges for facilitators by not being in the room, picking up on body language / atmosphere; closeness of people's faces; there is a need for new ways to interpret / communicate with body language online.
- Online offers the opportunity to slow down and offer better time for sense-making and deliberation before moving on to decisions and recommendations.

## Recommendations and decision making

- There are tools and techniques out there already– it is how we use them. Designing online is more challenging – you lose the nuance you get from talking round a table.
- The danger is that the process becomes more extractive and it pushes people into linear like / dislike functions, rather than understanding the nuance of reasons for choices and the values behind them.
- We need to monitor and be mindful of whether the outcomes / recommendations are listened to by commissioners and decision makers – are they less powerful when the result of an online process?

## Considerations for commissioners and decision makers

- Commissioners might be wary or welcoming of processes moving online – it offers both opportunity and threat to deliberative democracy. Commissioners will have less of a sense of the whole room and can also more easily “hide” behind a digital face; they may also be less trusting of a digital process. Being present, being physically accountable in front of a room is a powerful force.
- Will policy and decision-makers be more encouraged to use deliberative practices now it’s ‘easier’ to convene these events, without the usual cost / travel / venue constraints? Will the potential of cheaper processes make it more palatable? Or will it be harder to convince decision-makers that deliberation online can work when practice is still early.
- Will online be seen as an easier option because decision-makers do not have to “face” the public? Will it make it easier to ignore recommendations when they are not presented by your public?
- Online should not automatically be assumed to be cheaper, but more of the budget will go on actual direct engagement with participants rather than external costs; repurposing the budget for venue, catering and travel to make the online experience comparable. There may be cost savings; but to get close to a face to face process, online will require significant planning, engagement and support for participants to build the group empathy and connection and get to deeper deliberation.

# 04. Thoughts on the Way Forward

## For online practice

- We are all on a learning curve of putting what has largely been face-to-face practice online. But there is an excitement about learning, innovating, experimenting, sharing and trying to truly compare and evidence what online and face to face offers – the strengths and weaknesses of both; and for what point and purpose in a process.
- Having seen what’s possible, we won’t return to business as usual, but how do we create the best NEW normal?

- Offline processes can't be put online without a fundamental rethink – it is not a “drag and drop”. We need to do as we do for any process, design with the aims and purpose in mind and use the tools to serve that purpose.
- We still need to protect the principles and values of facilitation and deliberation when it happens online.
- We need to ensure that deliberation online does not get confused with other types of online engagement. Online deliberation perhaps needs to be seen as an entirely different method, not a replacement of face-to-face citizens' assemblies and juries, but an additional method.
- Online without significant effort may become a useful but largely qualitative research and extractive process.

## **For deliberative democracy and our role as practitioners**

- At the height of the pandemic and as we move out of the current lockdown there is a reality and concern that commissioners are having resources taken away and will lose focus on deliberative democracy as they deal with other pressures.
- There is a sense that government is going to have a lack of capacity and funding to engage around the big questions we face. As practitioners we will need to really support them to understand why deliberative democracy approaches will ensure better and faster decisions in the long term.
- Overall there was a sense that as a community we need to be clear about what benefits online and offline offers and keep working at evidencing both.
- As a community we need to keep the momentum for deliberative democracy and make sure we don't lose the ground that has been gained over the past 18 months.
- There is a huge amount of civic energy at the moment which holds potential for deliberative democracy moving forwards – the new normal will need to be rebuilt and engaging public voice in that process offers the opportunity of a new conversations.
- What are the big priorities facing the country in the future, how do we make the case for public engagement and dialogue to enable better government decisions on things like moving from lockdown? How does the push for public voice in decision making square against the current situation of government making decisions for people?

# Appendix 1: Participants List

Name	Organisation
Alison Crowther	
Amanda Stott	facilitate this! Ltd
Andreas Pavlou	Involve
Andy Paice	Associate with different orgs
Anna MacGillivray	URSUS Consulting
Antonia Bunnin	Abalone Consulting
Bob Bollen	Talk Shop
Carisse Hewer	Carico Projects
Chloe Juliette	Ipsos MORI
Claire Mellier-Wilson	Freelance
Dominic Ward	Involve
Diane J Beddoes	Deliberate Thinking
Fanny Goterfelt	Traverse
Fionnuala Ratcliffe	Freelancer
Gary Austin	circleindigo
Graham Smith	Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster
Hally Ingram	Sciencewise
Harry Carr	Demos
Helen Meech	New Citizenship Project
Jacana Bresson	IPPR
James Wickett-Whyte	Traverse
John Philip Green	The Green Light Partnership
Katie Dunstan	New Citizenship
Karen Saunders	Icarus
Kevin Ditcham	The Democratic Society
Liz Goold	
Lizzie Adams	Involve
Lucy Stone	Agulhas Climate Hub
Madeleine Gough	Involve
Malcolm Oswald	Citizens Juries cic
Marcin Gerwin	Center for Climate Assemblies
Martin Gilbraith	
Mel Stevens	Demsoc
Michelle Mackie	Ipsos MORI

Nicola Morris	Higher Training Limited
Pandora Ellis	The Democratic Society
Paul Carroll	Ipsos MORI
Penny Walker	
Perry Walker	Talk Shop
Pete Bryant	Shared Future
Rebecca Willis	Lancaster University
Rebekah McCabe	Involve
Rhuari Bennett	3KQ
Riley Thorold	The RSA
Rob Francis	Traverse
Rowena Harris	3KQ
Sarah Castell	Ipsos MORI
Sarah Toy	Sarah Toy Consulting
Simon Burall	Involve
Simon Wilson	Wilson Sherriff
Stephen	SJR Strategic Consulting Ltd.
Susan Ritchie	MutualGain
Suzannah Lansdell	Involve
Teele Pehk	Estonian Democracy Artist & Urbanist
Tim Hughes	Involve



# About Involve

We're the UK's leading public participation charity, working to bring about a vibrant UK democracy with people at the heart of decision-making. We develop, support and campaign for new ways of involving people in the decisions that affect their lives.

We were founded in 2003 to “to create a new focus for thinking and action on the links between new forms of public participation and existing democratic institutions”. We've been promoting and practising participatory and deliberative decision-making ever since. We have worked with governments, parliaments, civil society organisations, academics and the public across the UK and internationally to put people at the heart of decision-making.

We believe that democracy should be underpinned by the principles of:

- **Openness** – so that people can understand, influence and hold decision-makers to account for the actions and inactions of their governments;
- **Participation** – so that people have the freedom, support and opportunity to shape their communities and influence the decisions that affect their lives; and,
- **Deliberation** – so that people can exchange and acknowledge different perspectives, understand conflict and find common ground, and build a shared vision for society.

Our work is focused in three spaces:

- **Advocacy and communications** – Making the case for participation and deliberation as core and expected parts of democracy, and ensuring that people in positions of power and influence understand and support their use;
- **Capacity building and standards** – Building the capacity of public servants and practitioners, and developing the body of evidence, principles and standards that support good participatory and deliberative practice; and,
- **Innovation and practice** – Encouraging frequent use of participatory and deliberative processes, and ensuring continuous learning and innovation to improve democracy.

Everything we do is underpinned by the values of:

- **Collaboration** – because change comes when broad coalitions of people work towards a common vision;
- **Equality** – because everyone in society has an equal right to be listened to and participate in decisions that affect their lives. No one should be held back by societal divisions or prejudice;
- **Impartiality** – because we are committed to the integrity of participatory and deliberative processes;
- **Purpose** – because participation must have an impact. We reject tokenistic or ineffectual engagement; and,
- **Quality** – because effective participation requires time, attention and commitment.

Find out more about us: [www.involve.org.uk/](http://www.involve.org.uk/)

# About the Deliberative Democracy Practitioners' Network

Involve established the Deliberative Democracy Practitioners' Network in June 2019 to:

- Build the capacity and capability of practitioners to deliver citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes;
- Facilitate peer-to-peer support and collaboration – sharing ideas, resources and support – between deliberative democracy practitioners;
- Build knowledge, understanding and ongoing learning about citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberative democracy;
- Develop standards and principles for the effective delivery of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative processes.

We want to support and work with the practitioners with skills and interest in this area. If you are a facilitation / deliberative process practitioner and are interested in contributing and learning more, please email [info@involve.org.uk](mailto:info@involve.org.uk) with a brief summary of your interest and experience.