

Knowledge: Citizens Juries – a Q&A

What is it?

A group of lay people consider a complex issue together. Borrowing from the terminology of the courtroom, jurors hear from expert witnesses, cross-examine them, deliberate together and finally give their verdict. The jury consists of 12 to 24 people who meet for two to five days and are paid a small sum for their trouble. Unlike a courtroom jury, they actively investigate the evidence. Their verdict comes in the form of recommendations to the council.

Why is it a good idea?

A citizens Jury enables input from a well-informed and representative group of residents. Therefore, the policies it influences are likely to have credibility in the wider public's eyes. In 2008, the City of Wolverhampton Council held one on the issue of budget priorities. From it they learnt that the future prosperity of the city was the most important issue for people. One juror said, "If there are no jobs for the kids, they will leave Wolverhampton." Beneath economic prosperity were 27 other issues listed in order of priority, and the council could plan its expenditure with that in mind.

How can it be done?

The Jefferson Center in the US have put together a [list of components](#) of a good citizen's jury. Probably the most crucial step is the first one: making sure the jury is representative of its community. This can be achieved in different ways. One is by doing a random telephone survey to gauge who might be interested in taking part, then carefully selecting the jury from this list so that its makeup reflects census data for the area (gender, age, socio-economic group, ethnicity). The potential jurors in Wolverhampton were also given an area satisfaction survey to make sure that their opinions were broadly similar to the average, i.e. that they were both positive and negative about the present and the future of their city.

What are the important things to remember?

To avoid bias, it is important that an independent organisation is involved from the start. They will also be involved in choosing the questions for the jury, and selecting appropriate expert witnesses. Once the 'hearing' is over, the jury presents its recommendations to the council, usually in the form of a written report. The council must then show how it has worked these recommendations into its policy decisions.

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