

OPENING SLIDE

We are going to start our time together with me giving a talk. We are then going to do a more practical and exploratory workshop together.

If you are an auditory learner (in other words you pick things up by listening or reading) then the talk might suit you better.

If you prefer visual or kinaesthetic learning (in other words you prefer to pick things up by seeing them or doing them) then the workshop is going to be more from you.

But hopefully by offering both – one experience will layer on to the other. And I hope the talk will trigger questions in you which we can explore together in the practical workshop.

So, the idea of spending this time together is to look at the idea of Citizens In Power. How can we move from our current hierarchical top-down models of decision-making, to more democratic approaches? What does it take for citizens to be in power? And by the way, when I say citizens, I refer to the original meaning of the word. Citizens as inhabitant – someone who lives, works or stays in a place – in other words EVERYONE.

So, first up now is the talk. This will be about 20 minutes, so get comfortable. Feel free to move about if you need to – either now or during the talk.

The title for this talk is

SLIDE It's not just who makes decisions, it's how they're made

We are all accustomed to the way that groups wield power. SLIDE

We navigate our lives as members of various groups, from families and social clubs to political parties and online communities. Each of us in this room has experienced [SLIDE] the power of groups. And that means we have also experienced the power [SLIDE] of group-led decision-making.

From the playground at school to the dynamics in our workplaces to the way political groups operate in town halls and parliaments across the UK. Whether a group is appointed or democratically elected, or it just comes together informally, there tend to be three regular characteristics of the way that group-led decision-making works.

SLIDE The first is that hierarchy plays an important role in how decisions are made and who gets to make them. People in groups quickly respond to hierarchy and tend to give way to those who take the lead either because they have the loudest or most strident voices, or simply because they speak first.

SLIDE The second is that decisions tend to be debated using conflict-based discussion models with one argument winning out over others. The word debate comes from the Old French which literally means to beat down, perhaps explaining why even polite debating carries an undercurrent of potential conflict. It's how our politics works, our media and even the governance of our organisations.

SLIDE The third is that diverse perspectives can often be sidelined during the decision-making process because they are perceived to challenge the primacy of the main group or groups. This means that ideas or proposals which suggest a departure from the adopted norms of the group's behaviour will often be excluded which stifles change.

Group-led decision-making, especially evident in political and corporate governance, is fraught with limitations because it often results in exclusion, lack of diversity and decisions that cater to a narrow band of interests.

There are egregious examples of the negative consequences of group-led decision-making in recent history. When closed governance models, led by elite groups, have led to heinous outcomes. Some have been exposed through recent public enquiries into infected blood, Covid-19, Post Office Horizon IT, Grenfell, Windrush and many others.

But in more mundane and everyday examples, group-led decision-making in our workplaces and social settings can hamper progress and obstruct new ideas from getting off the ground.

We probably all recognise the challenge of the current governance model for the third or charitable sector which involves a group of volunteers leading decision-making. There are examples of the model working well with hard-working staff and trustees. But I think there are a great deal more examples of it working poorly.

About 20 years ago in the cultural sector we recognised the damage that unpaid internships were doing to our sector, privileging people from

particular backgrounds. Yet - this is – effectively - how we still run our organisations - with volunteer Trustees.

Our current governance models lead to a lack of diversity among decision-makers. Boards are often made up of professionals from similar backgrounds, leading to a self-perpetuating view of what success looks like – and creating a system that fails to represent the communities, that the organisations are meant to serve.

And because board members typically volunteer a limited amount of time, key decisions about strategy, policy, and leadership are often made without sufficient time, understanding or deliberation.

In the culture of Board, a reliance on debating models, rather than inclusive dialogue, can exacerbate the disconnect between the leadership of these organisations and the broader community that they seek to serve.

Boards are a good example of some of the problems with group-led decision-making.

I would argue that a transition away from group-led decision-making towards [SLIDE] citizen-led decision-making using mechanisms such as citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies, offers a compelling alternative.

Citizens' juries and assemblies are simply ways of making more democratic decisions. They are made up of three key elements.

[SLIDE] The first is authority giving. In which the assembly or jury is given authority for a decision or decisions.

[SLIDE] The second is democratic lottery. In which a representative group of people is selected at random to sit on the assembly.

[SLIDE] The third is deliberation. In which the process of taking part in and making decisions is inclusive and equitable.

We will talk a lot more about these three elements, and what they mean in practice, when we come to our workshop after this talk.

[SLIDE] The approach of citizens' juries and assemblies is persuasive because it promises not just a change in the decision-makers [SLIDE – NO CHANG] but a fundamental transformation in how decisions are made.

SLIDE Rather than hierarchy, the process creates equity; SLIDE. Rather than conflict-based debating, the process uses deliberation; SLIDE. Rather than marginalising difference, the process thrives on diverse perspectives.

Citizen-led decision-making, instead of group-led decision-making, doesn't just diversify the range of voices heard, it enriches the quality of the decisions.

Such a paradigm shift could see the outcomes of decision-making processes reflect the nuanced needs and aspirations of local communities, making a significant stride towards achieving more equitable and sustainable decision-making. It could mark progress away from the current model in which decisions are unduly influenced by the voices and concerns of vested interests and those who already hold the power.

There are examples where this has happened.

SLIDE In 2014, [Romsey Future](#) was launched as a community partnership. In 2019 a citizens' assembly was held in Romsey to answer the question: [How do we improve the area around Crossfield Hall and the bus station to deliver the maximum benefit to Romsey?](#)

Citizens were asked to consider accessibility, appearance and how the area is used as a place to live, work and enjoy. The recommendations fed into the development of the masterplan for the area and in 2024 plans were unveiled to hold a second citizens' assembly to drill into more specific elements of the town centre's development. There is an available case study of its 2019 assembly. [[here](#) and [here](#)]

SLIDE Further afield, in [Gdansk in 2016-17](#) several citizens' panels and assemblies were held including one in response to local flooding issues, which disproportionately affected poorer communities. The assembly on flood defences made 16 recommendations which had over 80% of assembly member support. The structure of these assemblies determined that recommendations with over 80% support were mandatory and a year later a progress report showed that the city authorities had implemented 90% of those recommendations.

There are also examples in the cultural sector in the UK.

SLIDE. In West Cumbria Everyone Here has created the Jury for Joy, a citizens' jury permanently embedded into the organisation that meets twice a year – SLIDE – this is the meeting in May 2024 – that shapes the organisation's programme.

In Nottingham SLIDE at New Art Exchange led by Saad Eddine Said – who is co-director of Citizens In Power – they have created the SLIDE Voice Assembly. This is the world's first citizens' assembly that is now embedded as a permanent feature of the organisation's governance – sitting alongside its executive and board. SLIDE This is one of the first meetings of the Assembly in 2024.

SLIDE In the West of England there is a collaboration called Citizens for Culture. It seeks to develop a cultural delivery plan for the West of England using a citizens' assembly; the approach has the support of the [Combined Authority](#), [Bath and North East Somerset Council](#), [Bristol City Council](#), [North Somerset Council](#) and [South Gloucestershire Council](#). The project seeks to challenge the formation of a conventional top-down strategy by actively engaging citizens in the creation of a cultural plan.

SLIDE There is now a network called the Citizens In Power Network across the UK that brings together Member organisations, Associates and Experts to work together to develop citizen-led decision-making models in all kinds of different situations.

SLIDE Ultimately, we like to see ourselves, as part of a movement, that seeks to create a House of Citizens in place of the House of Lords. Now wouldn't that be fun.