

# **SUBMISSION TO BRIGHTON & HOVE CLIMATE ASSEMBLY**

## **Why it is essential to have a long-term action plan for engaging and involving local people in tackling the climate emergency**

We welcome the cross-party Brighton and Hove City Council Climate Assembly initiative. We are excited that the initiative is committed to involving the people who live and work in the city in these important conversations. The signatories of this statement are involved as practitioners, academics, writers and researchers in participatory practice.

We believe that the long term nature of the climate challenge requires a similarly long term engagement of local people, as was recognised in the recommendations from the recently concluded Climate Assembly UK. We are therefore calling for the Assembly to include a recommendation about continuing public engagement in their final reports. In that way, the Climate Assembly can be the start of an exciting new culture of engagement in the city.

### **Introduction**

Most international scientific experts consider that we need to make fundamental changes to the way we live, work and consume in the next ten years if we are to avoid runaway global warming. Action on the climate emergency needs to be part of all our decisions on development and change. The “emergency” is that we have to start making those changes now and keep making them progressively throughout that 10 year period.

This was a daunting challenge even before Covid-19. But now it is even more so. And yet paradoxically, the Covid crisis has also shown us that people can make extraordinary and previously inconceivable changes to their behaviour when they feel that the lives of their family, friends and colleagues are at risk from a genuine emergency declared by the scientific and medical community. It has also given millions of people an opportunity to focus more clearly on what is important to them and to envisage potentially different ways of living their lives.

While there is a decisive role for national and local governments and business to play in tackling the climate emergency, citizens and communities will play a vital part. Councils are uniquely well-placed to support, resource and encourage local communities in managing the social, economic, political and environmental fall-out of the Covid crisis, including starting to tackle the climate emergency.

Significant and very practical changes will be needed to everyone’s lives, and local citizens need to be involved in the necessary decisions and actions.

## **Let's take a current practical example**

During the height of the Covid crisis, there was less traffic on the roads. The air was cleaner. Many more people took to the streets on bikes to enjoy the new found space and to exercise. Government gave large sums of money to councils to install more cycle lanes and many accepted it and introduced them.

What has happened locally (and in many other areas) as we have gone back more to “normal”? There has been uproar and a backlash because the rush to introduce the cycle lanes has in some cases had unintended consequences and local people feel that they were not involved or consulted over the changes. It should be a warning to all those who want to tackle the climate emergency.

To be effective, you have to work much more closely with local people on potential changes to our neighbourhoods and ways of living and working. If not, there are major risks of backlash and conflict and losing precious time on tackling the climate emergency. And time is one thing we can't afford to lose.

## **The need for an action plan for the council on engaging local people**

The nature of the climate emergency requires us to make continual changes over at least a ten year period. While it is impossible to plan and predict all those changes so far into the future, most local councils will want to have some form of long-term plan. And if the plan encompasses such a long period of time, so too will the plans for engaging and involving local people. Councils tend to be focused on shorter time frames, often linked to electoral cycles, which makes achieving the widest possible cross-party consensus on such climate emergency plans so important. And involving local people in developing those plans will be a key factor in that happening.

The climate assembly will be a powerful and independent mechanism, made up of local people (“people just like me”) to help set the scene and the broad agenda for long-term planning to tackle the climate emergency. But as far as public engagement is concerned, it must be just the beginning, not the end, of the story.

We consider that one of its most important recommendations to the Council and other partners in the city is that they should initiate and support a process of continuous involvement of local residents in all the discussions and decisions on tackling the climate emergency.

## **Engagement is more than Information**

Regular communication with local citizens about how the council is tackling the climate emergency is vital. But engagement and involvement are much more than that. Councils and other public agencies don't have all the answers. They cannot simply tell people what to do. They need to accept that the public and other stakeholders will have significant experience and ideas to bring to the discussion. It is about offering opportunities for the public and stakeholders to have genuine influence over decisions and priorities – sometimes allowing them to take those decisions directly.

The more citizens are involved, the more they will understand the complexities of the trade-offs that are needed, and the more they will share in the responsibility and accountability for taking action. It requires careful thought on how to keep the public interested, engaged and enthused throughout the long-term process. It also requires the council being willing and able to listen to what is being said by local citizens, and responding to that – including being willing to change thinking and policies as a result.

### **Identifying stakeholders**

For any public engagement or consultation, it is critical to carry out a thorough and effective exercise in mapping out all the stakeholders on the issue. While there will be some events or engagements with more limited stakeholders, overall it is the general public as a whole that will be the most consistently involved stakeholder throughout the continuous engagement process.

This will mean a much greater emphasis on techniques that can engage the wider public (with special attention to equalities issues and reaching the seldom heard), and to build trust and confidence in this long-term engagement process.

Evidence across the globe demonstrates that young people are leading the movement to get the climate emergency to be taken sufficiently seriously. They have the most to lose if it doesn't happen, and they know it. Many of them are already "engaged". But few local authorities have much experience of engaging young people in decision-making, creating a risk of divergence between young people's engagement and the Council's attempts at public involvement. Young people will be a key stakeholder group throughout the continuous engagement process and the Council should invest significant time to ensure they are fully involved in the wider process.

### **How to involve people**

Due to the nature of this long-term continuous engagement, it is obvious that there will be no one single event, process or technique that achieves what is required. The Council will need to familiarise itself with and use a whole range of different techniques such as opinion polling, representative deliberative events (like Citizens Juries or Assemblies), focus groups, decision-making processes (such as participatory budgeting) and others.

Which techniques, in which order and with which priority and the available budget will need to be developed as part of the action plan on involving local people. In Brighton and Hove we have many practitioners and academics with extensive experience of citizen participation, and who would be willing to help design and support wider engagement.

Many people are distrustful of politicians the elite, and can often feel powerless in the face of the climate emergency - "How can I save the world all on my own?". It's important to stress how things can be better not worse if we tackle the climate emergency in the right ways - "We Need a Better Normal" or "We Need to Build Back Better". Whatever one's opinion of the simple slogan "Get Brexit Done" , there is no doubt that it was effective in achieving its objective! So was the famous "Yes We Can" slogan in the USA. By working together, we can stress the fairness and equality issue: "Together we can rise to the challenge of tackling the climate emergency".

## Key proposals for the Climate Assembly

1. Propose to the Council that it develops a long-term action plan for tackling the climate emergency over the next 10 years.
2. The action plan should include proposals for continuous engagement of local residents, young people and other stakeholders throughout the life of the plan.
3. The Council should commit to a range of methods to work with local people in rising to the challenge of the climate emergency.

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