

How to run a People's assembly

What is a People's assembly?

A people's assembly (PA) or popular assembly is a grassroots form of deliberative and direct democracy, a way for a group of people to collectively make decisions and discuss issues in which everyone's voice is heard and valued.

People's assemblies have been used by civil society and social movements around the world and are a powerful way to collectively make decisions and consider issues for people-powered change. They should not be confused with citizen's assemblies which are more formalised institutional processes where citizens are selected to participate based on a representative sample of the population that the issue affects.

Structure of a PA

There are many ways that assemblies can be held, from mass gatherings where the whole group holds a discussion with the aim of reaching a consensus, to smaller breakout groups whose decisions are integrated into a whole group outcome. Here we present the structure we used for the *Field to Fforc* people's assembly which was informed by Extinction Rebellion's model of People's assemblies.

Within this there are three stages: Information, Deliberation, Integration.

First, a group of people come together around a common theme or issue. **Information**. They start by hearing a number viewpoints and information relating to the theme, this can be from chosen members of the group present, representatives of certain societal groups or organisations relevant to the issue, or other experts on the issues. **Deliberation**. All of the participants then have a chance to deliberate the central question or questions put to the people's assembly, usually in smaller groups. **Integration**. The outcomes of these smaller discussions are then integrated back into the whole group. The people's assembly can come out with decisions, actions, ideas for the group or demands to put towards institutions or government.

In this model not only does every voice get heard, but everyone gets to hear and discuss different points of view with each other. Often when this happens, we are surprised by how much common ground we can find.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the *Field to Fforc* event was online. This meant a shorter event to limit screen time and maintain energy levels. With in-person events there can be more flexibility in how these different stages are carried out and the time they take whether it be over one day or even several.

Key principles of a PA

In the *Field to Fforc* People's assembly we drew upon the three key principles that Extinction Rebellion use¹, you may want to use another source or create key values that suit your event.

Radical Inclusivity. We want all voices to be heard. This means creating a space where everyone feels safe and able to participate, the quieter and louder voices and different identities and abilities. As well as considering the balance of power and personality in the group it is important to identify and minimise barriers to participation such as language and disability. **Active listening.** When someone else is talking this means putting aside the need to calculate a response and giving your attention fully to them. **Trust.** Trust yourself when you speak, trust others, and trust in the process that you have all agreed to engage in.

¹ extinctionrebellion.uk/act-now/resources

How to organise a People's assembly

The central PA question(s)

Developing a central question or questions creates focus for your event and the deliberation in it. What do you want to find out? What issues do you want to raise? What will generate valuable discussion and tease out different perspectives? What will be done with the answer?

Questions put to your PA should be open enough and clear enough that all those attending the PA can understand and contribute their perspectives. They should also be specific enough that it is possible to discuss in the time given and arrive at some agreement. Questions should be related to the proposed outcomes of the PA so that the outcomes of discussion allow you to take defined action on the issue.

The *Field to Fforc* event aimed to bring together a wider range of people across the Cardiff Capital Region and establish a more ambitious imaginary for the future of our food systems. The central question we chose was therefore quite open: What would you like to see change in the Cardiff city region food system by 2040 and what are the main challenges hindering change? Both the speakers and the breakout groups were asked to speak to this question.

Roles and facilitation

Good facilitation is the key to running a PA smoothly and in creating a space where everyone is able to contribute. As well as main event facilitator(s) who will hold the space of the wider event, introducing different sections of the event and facilitating the feedback from the smaller groups, there are also the **breakout group facilitators** for each smaller group. To support the role of the breakout group facilitator is the **notetaker** who records the group discussion on paper or digitally. If possible, it is recommended that you have a group of volunteer facilitators to take on this role so they can be properly trained and can remain external to the group discussion. Having pre-assigned notetakers is also helpful as this similarly frees up PA attendees to get the most from their discussions and ensures consistency with notetaking.

There are many other important roles in running a PA, from the tech person and the invited speakers to the event coordinators. We suggest a core group of organisers/coordinators (ideally 4-6) who meet regularly in the run up to the event and following the event to follow through with outputs and evaluation. This will differ depending on how you plan to run your PA so we focus here on these two key roles in holding the smaller group discussions.

In the breakout groups, ideally each group will have no less than five people and no more than 8 people in it excluding the facilitator and notetaker so that everyone gets a chance to contribute and hears a range of views. In establishing the breakout groups it is good to find some way to ensure diversity within the groups so that different viewpoints on the issue are heard within discussions.

Breakout Group Facilitator

The role of the breakout group facilitator is to hold the space so that the discussion flows, is inclusive, and manages to arrive at some conclusion/agreement. They do not contribute their own perspective but help the group arrive at shared understandings. They ensure that everyone is included and that all voices are heard, managing conflicts, and making sure people do not speak over one another. They also keep track of time within the groups and support the notetaker to summarise the groups' discussion at the end of the discussion time.

Notetaker

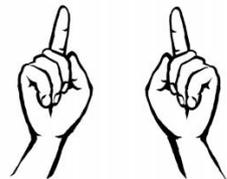
The notetaker is either a volunteer from the group or someone pre-assigned who will record what is said in the breakout groups and seek to identify several main points to return to the wider group with. A notetaker captures the essence of what members of the group say, i.e. not verbatim but brief and not adding own interpretation - trying to put it in their own terms as much as possible. They are able to synthesise the group's discussion to suggest shared points and check agreement within the group. The notetaker also feeds back these points to the wider group making sure to stick exactly to what the group agreed avoiding the natural tendency to voice one's own position.

Hand signals

Most of us are familiar with the simple hand signal of raising your hand if you want to contribute. In addition to these there are a number of hand signals commonly used in social movements and civil society organisations to support participatory discussion². If your audience are unlikely to be familiar with these we recommend sticking with hands up, direct point, clarification/language, and agree.



Point signals that you want to contribute to the discussion.



Direct point is used to directly respond to what is being said. It skips the queue and keeps the discussion directed.



Language (L) or Clarify (C) made by creating a C shape instead, is used to clarify language used.



Agree is used to express agreement with what is being said. Both hands are held up with fingers pointing up and shaken from side to side.

² <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/handsig.pdf>

People's assembly Checklist

To organise an effective People's assembly event it is good to think about planning at least a month in advance. Although sometimes people's assemblies need to happen at the spur of the moment to make a decision within a large group, if there is time available for preparation it can lead to richer discussions and outcomes.

The process we provide here is largely informed by the *Field to Fforc* PA and other PAs on the topic of food and farming held in Wales in 2020 which were all online events. Every people's assembly event will be different but here are some key points which can be adapted to help you consider what is needed at each stage.

3-4 WEEKS BEFORE

- Start to gather a team to coordinate the PA. Identify contacts who are well-placed to help build the event and spread the word, include them in organising.
- Identify the key issue to be addressed in your PA. Identify a succinct and thought-provoking but open-ended question to be answered in the People's assembly.
- Agree on the target audience: which groups are important to include in this discussion? Which are not usually present in these discussions? How can you include them?
- Who are the speakers who can draw people in and inform / inspire them
- Decide upon a date: ask those who know the best day and time to suit your audience.
- Seek speakers who represent diverse sectors, positions and knowledge.
- Set up an online event where people where can register (e.g. Eventbrite).
- Connect with politicians and decision-makers (if relevant to your issue) and discuss how the outcomes of the PA can inform upcoming policy or projects.

1-2 WEEKS BEFORE

- Meet with facilitators and carry out an induction or brief training. Schedule a debrief meeting for some time following the event to get feedback from the facilitators. Ideally give them a facilitators briefing document with all relevant information.
- Brief speakers with key information and timings. Will they use presentations or not?
- Plan your structure and timings for the event. Who is saying what? When are different roles needed to support? What is the tech support needed? Will you have breaks?
- Publicise the event thinking about what audience you are trying to attract. Spend more energy connecting with harder to reach groups. Prepare and send out press releases if appropriate.
- Remind registered participants 10 – 7 days before and the day before. Advise them to arrive come early to get comfortable with tech.

IN THE DAYS LEADING UP TO THE EVENT

- Plan the breakout groups and assign facilitators and notetakers. Make a back-up plan to account for lower attendance than expected, communicate this to whoever is managing the breakout groups to allow last minute changes to be made.

- Check all practical and tech issues are addressed. If using zoom, will everyone have the correct permissions? Is the meeting set up with all the appropriate settings?
- Send out another email to participants with information about what to expect and how to join the event, ideally a day before the event.
- Set up a facilitators WhatsApp group or some other way for facilitators to communicate issues and request support during the event.

DURING THE EVENT

- **Arrival:** Ask speakers and facilitators to arrive early for a tech check and last minute questions/briefing. As participants begin arriving welcome them and provide information to help them settle in, e.g. suggest they update their zoom names with first names and any other relevant information such as pronouns, place or organisation, and let them know if the event will be recorded and how they can choose to not be in the recording.
- **Introduction:** Introduce the organisers of the event and explain the purpose, values, background, outcomes and structure. Give useful technical information to attendees.
- **Speakers:** Introduce speakers and make sure they are aware of keeping to time and how you will communicate if they have gone over time. During the speeches, organisers will allocate participants to breakout rooms so they are ready to go when speeches end.
- **Breakout rooms:** This can be split into more than one section if desired. The main PA question is shared again with participants. Group participants introduce themselves briefly using a clear framing, e.g. name, pronouns, job/role. Facilitators and notetakers coordinate to ensure the discussion does not run over allotted time and that key points are agreed upon. Organisers should leave a period of time specifically for notes to be summarised and main points agreed within the groups. The tech coordinator sends messages to the breakout rooms reminding them of the question, the time remaining, and the outcome requested (eg. 1 key action point, 1 challenge etc.)
- **Integration/Feedback:** Each group has a set amount of time to feedback their main points to the wider group. One or more organisers record and summarise these in the moment to offer an initial synthesis. Ask participants to show their support for statements by using jazz hands or otherwise.
- **Closing:** If there is time you could have a discussion about next step and actions to be taken following the PA to get everyone's input. Close with summary of the main points that have come from the discussions and appreciating everyone sharing their perspectives and time.

FOLLOWING THE EVENT

- Hold a debrief session for organisers to discuss what has been learned.
- Hold a facilitators' debrief session to get feedback on the break group dynamics.
- Send a follow up email to attendees with:
 - Links and information shared in the chat
 - A condensed form of the notes or outcome points of the discussions
 - Link to the recording if you are recording it
 - Any information on how the event will be followed up with either actions, additional meetings, or other outputs.
- Produce additional outputs such as a short report, policy recommendations, manifesto etc. and send to attendees.

Some reflections from the *Field to Fforc* People's assembly

Getting a diversity of viewpoints: Promoting the event and choosing speakers

For the *Field to Fforc* PA it was important that the event represented a diversity of viewpoints from across the food system and society more broadly. We thought about this in selecting interviewees for our short promotional film³, identifying speakers for the event, and choosing where and how we promoted it. We asked both our speakers and our contacts working in different sectors and with different communities to help promote the event. For instance, we distributed flyers of the event in food packages from food pantries across the city and worked with Food Cardiff and other community-based organisations to promote the event amongst their networks. Due to the time limitations for promoting the event and perhaps the existing reach of our institution and partners the event was largely attended by people already actively involved in food system work and engaged with the issues. We identified that marginalised groups were underrepresented and found that some people still felt they were not expert enough to contribute despite the issues affecting everyone. Ideally, a lot of time and energy is given to this aspect of the PA to ensure the right people are in the room (or virtual room) for a meaningful discussion.

Use of technology and structure

We limited the event to two hours which we considered a maximum time to expect people to be engaged online. This meant that we could not expect consensus to be achieved so we emphasised identifying the points of agreement. We also broke up our deliberation and information sections into two parts: participants first heard three speakers (4 min each), then had a chance to discuss the question in breakout groups, then returned to hear another three speakers before continuing their discussion in the same groups to identify three main changes to the food system and one main challenge. This was a good structure, however, as we were running behind we reduced the second breakout group and some groups found this then too short to have a decent discussion. We had one person dedicated to tech and they created the breakout rooms in zoom, adapting to the number of participants who turned up (about half of those registered). We moved facilitators to have some groups with two, one as facilitator and one as notetaker. This worked well. We also used a WhatsApp group for facilitators to communicate any issues during the event.

Feedback from participants

Follow up feedback form was filled out by 16 participants. They commented positively on the clear structure of the event, calm, considered facilitation and a good variety of speakers from across the food system. They particularly welcomed that everyone could contribute in the breakout sessions which were small and well-facilitated. Participants also recognised that it ran smoothly in terms of technology, although some have commented on difficulties of hearing speakers well. People also appreciated the opportunity to learn from others, either in terms of different parts of the food system but also different perspectives on one issue. Some participants felt that more specific discussion would be useful, rather than responding to one overarching question. Others would also welcome a bit more time for discussion but also to allow for networking. They thought that the audience was still largely Cardiff-based and already involved in some kind of activity to transform the food system, so they identified the need to attract others not already engaged in the conversation.

³ <https://youtu.be/xy5KmDL194I>