

How We Did It: The first citizens' assembly on hate crime



Citizens' assemblies are fast emerging as a golden deliberation tool for councils wanting to meaningfully engage with their communities.

In 2020, London's Waltham Forest became the first local authority to use this forum to find answers for tackling the hate crime they feared was on the rise locally.

In the first of our ['How We Did It' event series](#), the council's **Laura Butterworth** unpacks the complex but rewarding reality of making a citizens assembly happen.

Watch Laura's talk at the 'How We Did It' event

Why a citizens' assembly?

We were seeing hate crime rise across London, and there had been a few significant issues in our borough.

We knew we wanted to be leaders in Waltham Forest in tackling the issue, but we also recognised it would require action not just from the local authority, but from the police service, the health services, the courts and the community itself.

Quite often when we're talking about a crime, we turn to those who experience it to come up with the solutions.

Perhaps by doing this, we miss an opportunity to work with those who are privileged enough *not* to experience hate crime, and to explore what their role can be in stopping hate crime and how we need to come together and act in solidarity with each other.

A citizens' assembly felt like a really good way to get to that shared solution.

How did you organise it?

We had about seven months to get an assembly together.

We commissioned [Involve](#) and [DemSoc](#) to support us with it because we'd never delivered something like this before.

Using their wealth of experience around setting these things up, we sent out 10,000 letters to people in our community asking them to express interest. We got about 500 people come back, which was much better than we were expecting as it's usually about a 1% hit rate.

After that, people were asked to give us more demographic information. Then [the Sortition Foundation](#) worked with us to randomly select 45 members who were representative of our community.

We then had individual conversations with each assembly members about their needs, and we did a huge piece of pre-engagement work with stakeholders and the community around hate crime.

Where and when did it happen?

The assembly took place over two-and-a-half weekends in 2020, late March, just before Corona hit. That was the last thing any of us did face-to-face for a while.

The venue was a really beautiful school in our borough – it looks like a bit like a Harry Potter school. It's grand, and the rooms are very nice and big. We knew we wanted somewhere where people would feel comfortable and a bit special.

That was what we were trying to get to – we were wanting to hear from different voices.

Who ended up taking part?

My lead councillor has been a councillor for a long time and is really well known in the community – he has a number of family members who live in Waltham Forest.

I always recall him walking in on day one. He said to me, "I have never before walked into a room in Waltham Forest and not known anyone".

I think there was something powerful in the fact that we were able to achieve that. That was what we were trying to get to; we were wanting to hear from different voices.

There's absolutely a role to play for the people who have been engaged in this issue for a long time, but we wanted the deliberative bit to be about citizens who weren't necessarily already engaged in this issue.

How did you prepare people to take on such a sensitive issue?

We were really conscious about making sure that people felt safe, and that it was a safe space as far as possible.

We had advocates and therapists on hand in case anyone was triggered by the conversations, and we had a wellbeing room, a low sensory room and a prayer room.

We had one-on-one conversations with all the assembly members a week or so before the assembly happened, to make sure that we had understood their accessibility requirements and talk to them through what to expect to the assembly.

There was a lot that could have gone wrong – we had a risk register an arm's length. However, we were really delighted with how harmoniously and respectfully everybody did work together on such an emotive issue.

By day three, walking into the room it was incredible to see that everybody was so familiar with each other. It looked as though these people had known each other forever!

I didn't expect this to happen. But I think we put so much effort into building the sense of being welcome in the space, by that point everybody was getting along really well.

This isn't just a good idea of a hate crime officer or community safety officer – this is from our residents. I think that's the power you can never undermine.

What went on?

The first couple of days were setting the scene.

We provided the evidence from pre-engagement surveys, and we had a young people's group who presented research about how young people feel about hate incidences and hate crime.

We had academics and other experts come and talk about hate crime, and the police talk about investigating hate crime and what that meant to them.

We also had people from other boroughs and organisations who had delivered campaigns around hate crime so we could look at the best practice going on around the country. And so the assembly members had something to draw on in terms of services and campaigns that work.

A really powerful part was our 'lived experience carousel'. We had 10 people who had experienced hate crime, and the assembly members broke into small groups to talk with them.

We made it quite informal – everybody had coffee and cake and sat in lounge chairs. It was just an opportunity to speak personally with someone about what it meant to experience hate crime and the impact it had on their life.

The members said that that was a key moment for them. Among the 45 residents, there were those who had experienced hate crime and others who didn't think it happened very often, and were shocked to hear the prevalence and impact it had on peoples lives.

We divided people into smaller groups who would take on different issues and rotate. Each had their own table facilitators: 50% of those were DemSoc and Involve staff and the other 50% were council staff who had been trained up, which built our capacity internally to be able to do more of this sort of deliberative democracy work.

It was incredible to watch. It was some of the most meaningful conversation and co-production I've seen.

How did this turn into decisions being made?

Channelling all this into a group consensus – that was the magic bit.

There were points when I was thinking: we're hearing all this information and these people are getting to know each other, and that's all going really well, but how is this going to become a set of recommendations?

At points this felt a long way from happening. You have to have a lot of faith in the process.

I think you could get quite wrapped up in the process of a citizens' assembly, and not think about what the end output is. DemSoc kept us really focused on framing the question.

What did the assembly recommend?

The assembly made [six recommendations](#) in total.

First they created a vision for Waltham Forest – what was the sort of borough they wanted to be part of? The idea of a 'welcoming borough' came out – where communities are in solidarity with each other.

They also created a statement about what they felt the definition of hate should be in Waltham Forest. They created their own definition which was much broader than the current law. It basically said if anyone felt harassed or threatened because of their identity or who they are, then that should be considered hate.

Once the vision and statement worked out, it became much clearer to think about the recommendations, and what was needed from different agencies and different parts of the community to make that happen.

One of the key recommendations was to encourage a 'bystander approach' – it was about how we build the capacity of our community to respond to hate incidents, interrupt incidents and step in. That was really powerful.

How did you make sure the recommendations were seen through?

Under each of the recommendations were very clear actions for each of the agencies. I think that's really helped us to make sure that the programme of work that hinged on the assembly has gone really well.

One of the ways we made sure that we were held to account was creating a citizens' assembly panel.

About 15 of the members stayed on board, and we now meet with them quarterly and report back on how we're achieving their recommendations. They really hold us to account because they gave up five days to make these recommendations, so they feel incredibly strongly about them.

Having a set of recommendations really gave us a mandate. That's really helped with some of the lobbying we've needed to do: with police, the Crown Prosecution Service and others, saying: these recommendations are created by our residents; we have this absolute mandate to make this happen. This isn't just a good idea of a hate crime officer or community safety officer; this is from our residents. I think that's the power you can never undermine.

We now have a program of work called 'No Space for Hate' that's got an annual budget and reports directly to our cabinet.

We've now also got a communications citizens panel who help us with our communications campaigns and a newly established crime and community safety citizens panel.

Our politicians have really embraced the recommendations. It's about sharing power, which could create some nervousness, but for us that wasn't the case at all.

In fact, it just emboldened them further to make sure these recommendations happened.

What would you do differently next time?

Accessibility was really important to us. We offered childcare, we offered taxis for anyone who couldn't get public transport. It was about those one-to-one conversations before the assembly to really assess what would help people access it.

But we got some things wrong. For example, we sent 10,000 letters out which offered a translation or British Sign Language (BSL) service. But, of course, if you're blind and receive that letter, you wouldn't know it said those things. Also whilst the live broadcast could be watched with captions it didn't include BSL.

I also don't think citizens assemblies are necessarily the best setup for people who are neuro-diverse. There's a lot of conversations going on at once and bright lights. We had some low-sensory areas where people could take some time out, but they weren't the spaces where the deliberation was happening.

We are always working to make things as accessible as possible, this is an ongoing practice that we need to continuously build on.

How has it changed the council, and people's relationship with you?

It made assembly members a lot more confident in the council in general – the fact we were sharing power with them, letting their voices be heard and taking on these recommendations

I think it has really reshaped our whole engagement approach with our residents.

It made assembly members a lot more confident in the council in general – the fact that the council were facilitating this, sharing power with them, letting their voices be heard and taking on these recommendations, not knowing what they'd be.

And we had our chief executive, key politicians, and directors speak at the beginning of the assembly saying, 'We back this' and 'We'll be here at the end for you to hand us the recommendations'.

Assembly members also came to our council cabinet to present the report's recommendations, and it was a beautiful moment.

There were loads of unexpected or unintended outcomes. Like assembly members who had never been involved in any kind of civic activity before really wanting to be involved in more things. Lots of those 45 members are now in other panels and some of our cultural activities.

Lots of them said that they wanted to be involved because they really wanted to make a difference, and they felt this was the first time anyone had asked them to be involved in something.

I thought this was really interesting, as sometimes we think there's lots of opportunities for people to be engaged in these kinds of things, but we haven't asked the right question in the right place.

Top Tips:

Overestimate prep time

Don't underestimate the planning needed for a citizens' assembly and for onboarding its members beforehand.

It wasn't as simple as just sending out invitations and getting people to turn out that day. I would give yourself six months at least to prepare the actual event.

Be totally transparent

Anyone could have applied to witness the assembly, and we did have quite a lot of stakeholders join to witness.

This was really important for transparency, and it's helped the community to buy into the recommendations that came out of the assembly – as they saw the conversations actually happen.

We also live broadcasted so people could watch from home.

Put on a good lunch

I can't overstate how important it is that there's a good lunch. You need people to feel really valued.

They're there to be the experts, and we need them to feel respected and welcome.

We had a really nice lunch space and we made sure there were sofas and bean bags so people could take the time out.

It's a huge load to take on and it's no mean feat spending eight hours of your weekend debating these issues and absorbing all this information. So we wanted to make sure that when people had a break, they *really* had a break.

Laura Butterworth is Head of Violence Reduction at London Borough of Waltham Forest.