

Transport forums give citizens a chance to influence policy

Directly involving the public in policy development promises to deliver better outcomes say Tony May and Morgan Campbell, who consider one of the UK's first citizens' transport forums in York.

Introduction

UK Local Transport Plan guidance requires authorities to consult the public on strategies and implementation plans. [European guidance](#) published last year goes much further in advocating public involvement in specifying problems, vision, policy objectives and strategy in developing an implementation plan and reviewing achievements.

[Companion guidance](#) outlines the benefits of doing so. Participatory planning aims to break down barriers between residents and experts. By being actively involved, members of the public can contribute their experience, help resolve conflicting needs, offer their own ideas and deliberate upon the outcomes and the planning process, thus fostering a greater collective ownership of the Local Transport Plan.

However, there is a paradox: while early participation is beneficial, abstract concepts such as 'objectives' and the use of jargon might deter involvement. Conversely, if participation is left until proposals are more concrete, it is more likely to attract opposition.

The companion guidance advocates the International Association for Public Participation's five levels of involvement: inform; consult; involve; collaborate and empower. While UK guidance expects consultation, European guidance encourages collaboration in which residents are actively involved in policy development rather than simply being informed of, or consulted on, a council's plans.

What is a citizens' forum?

At their core, citizens' forums are an expression of public deliberation, fundamentally rooted in the idea of democracy and the right to participate in decision making processes.

Forums rose to prominence in the UK in the 1990s alongside other deliberative processes such as citizens' juries and



← York has convened a citizen's forum
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[citizens' assemblies](#) all of which involve members of the public in more inclusive decision making.

In response to the UK's climate agenda, cities are developing [citizens' assemblies](#) to deliberate on how to tackle a climate emergency locally. As an example, the [Leeds Climate Commission](#) initiated a 12 person climate jury to report on key issues.

Juries are typically small in number and time limited. In contrast citizens' forums, assemblies and so called 'mini-publics' are larger in size and are more conducive to public participation. Nevertheless, they still need to be "[small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic](#)".

Forums and assemblies share the goal of empowering citizens through civic education and knowledge sharing. For example, in the case of citizens' assemblies for climate change, civic education ensures that the public understands technical climate data and the implications of proposed policies.

The [Greater Cambridge Citizens' Assembly](#) was the first in the UK to focus on transport. It had a budget of £130,000 and involved 53 randomly selected residents over two weekends in discussing ways of tackling congestion, improving air quality and enhancing public transport.

This approach took the vision, objectives and – in part – the strategy as given and encouraged participants to select preferred solutions. It successfully developed a consensus in favour of closing roads, creating a clean air zone and introducing road charging.

York's Citizens' Transport Forum

The City of York Council will develop a new Local Transport Plan in 2020/1 and the York Civic Trust has been advising on the best approach to be adopted. The Trust's '[Principles for Transport Policy](#)' argues the Council needs to encourage public engagement at all stages in the process.

Backed by the Council, the Trust has worked with the York Bus Forum and York Environment Forum to conduct a survey of residents' views on transport problems, expectations and possible policies. The £17,000 survey, funded jointly by the Community Fund, Rees Jeffreys Road Fund, York Business Improvement District and York Civic Trust, attracted [responses](#) from 1388 residents, broadly representative of the adult population, but under representing under 25s and those without degrees.

Over 80% of respondents perceived congestion, air pollution and impacts on climate change as serious problems. Over the next five years 19% expected



↑ Participants discuss the city's transport performance

their car use to increase, while only 11% wanted it to do so. Conversely around half wanted to see their travel on foot, by bike and bus increase while only a third expected it to do so. Improvements to bus services and fares were seen as the most effective ways of discouraging car use, followed by increasing the cost of car use.

York Civic Trust and its co-sponsors were interested to see whether a Citizens' Transport Forum could be established on a low budget and could focus on the earlier stages in policy formulation. Those who responded to a questionnaire were invited to indicate whether they would like to participate in a forum. Just over 30% (440) did so. We also asked whether they had contributed to council policy during the previous year, so that we could focus on those from whom the council did not often hear.

We initially focused on the 325 who had not contributed and invited 202 whose distribution matched the 1388 respondents. We later extended the invitation to the remainder of the 440 volunteers. One hundred residents took part in an inaugural meeting.

The table (below) summarises the demographic characteristics of the 1388 survey respondents and the views of the 440 volunteers and 100 participants. The 440 were largely representative of all respondents but

↓ Table: Characteristics of the three samples

	Survey respondents (1388)	Volunteers (440)	Participants (100)
Female	56%	49%	60%
Age 25-64	61%	70%	51%
Age 65+	34%	26%	49%
Employed	57%	64%	50%
Degree level	61%	77%	85%
Inner York	60%	59%	69%

were more likely to be middle aged, in employment and with a degree and male. In terms of transport they were more likely to find regular journeys difficult and to be concerned about crossing roads and inappropriate parking and less likely to use a car daily.

Surprisingly the actual participants differed from the 440 volunteers from whom they were selected. They were more likely to be female, over 65 and have a degree, to live in inner York and were less likely to be employed. They were more likely to be concerned with air pollution, climate change and inappropriate parking, and less likely to use a car daily, to expect to use one more in the future, or to find regular journeys difficult.

Recommendations from the forum

The Citizens' Transport Forum met in February in three identical three hour sessions of around 35 participants divided into five groups, each with a volunteer facilitator. Councillors and council staff attended as observers.

Each session was divided into three sections, dealing with problems, policy objectives and possible strategies.

We summarised relevant points from our survey and York's current Local Transport Plan and invited groups to discuss each topic and provide feedback. Facilitators recorded all points made, which were collated into a draft report and sent to all participants for comment.

Thirty percent responded, commenting also on the structure of the forum. The budget for the meetings was £1300, supported by substantial voluntary input.

The final [report](#) demonstrates remarkable consistency between the 15 discussions. The forum argued that the council needs to produce a holistic, bold and visionary Local Transport Plan which achieves significant behavioural change. The plan's key objectives should be reducing congestion, air pollution and impact on climate change while also increasing safety, public health and equitable access and liveability.

It was said that the council should set targets for each objective and regularly inform the public of progress. The key strategy elements should be improving public transport, walking and cycling, reducing car use and the need to travel and promoting sustainable

communities, using a hearts and minds approach to encourage users to change their travel habits.

Conclusions and next steps

Evidence from York shows that it is possible to establish a citizens' transport forum on a small budget and that a prior survey can help to identify forum participants who are able to advise on objectives and strategy through knowledge sharing, drawing on their own experience and learning from others. They were able to reflect on the survey results and deliberate on current council policy.

Collectively, this participatory approach empowered participants to think critically about approaches which benefit all members of the population and in particular to consider the needs of those voices not represented in the forum.

However, if the Forum's findings are to be seen to reflect the needs of the community as a whole, its members need to be drawn from as wide a cross section as possible.

Failure to do so risks the resulting strategy not proving to be as inclusive as its participants would wish. In the case of the York Forum we need to expand our coverage of younger adults, frequent car users and residents without degrees.

We also know [elsewhere](#) that low income residents, single parents and those experiencing precarity in employment or housing are less likely to respond to surveys and have the time to participate in such forums. We have developed proposals for seeking their views, for which we are awaiting funding.

We expect the City of York Council to incorporate the Forum's recommendations and our survey results into its process of Plan development, and to consult the Forum again at the key stages advocated in the European guidance cited above.

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