

Olovus briefing: What is a Citizens' Jury?

Summary

From opinion polls and social media campaigns to focus groups and public meetings, community involvement plays a valuable role in many decisions about healthcare provision. Gathering local opinions helps providers to shape service delivery around the wants and needs of those they serve. But recently another form of engagement has been gaining in popularity – the citizens' jury.

Citizens' juries work on the principle that an informed public, when given the facts and time, can contribute new thinking and solutions to some of today's biggest public policy challenges.

A citizens' jury is made up of a small group – usually between 12 and 24 people – who have been selected to represent a cross-section of the local population. Operating much like a traditional jury, it meets over an agreed number of days to listen to key facts about potential changes to public services or policies presented by experts on all sides of the debate. After the information has been presented, the jury deliberates and then makes collective recommendations based on the evidence. These recommendations provide the healthcare provider with an informed view of local opinions from which they can base their decisions.

How it works

A citizens' jury acts as a 'mini public', brought together to consider an issue and reach a collective opinion that is representative of the wider community. This might include issues such as relocating service provision, use of emergency care services or redistributing funding.

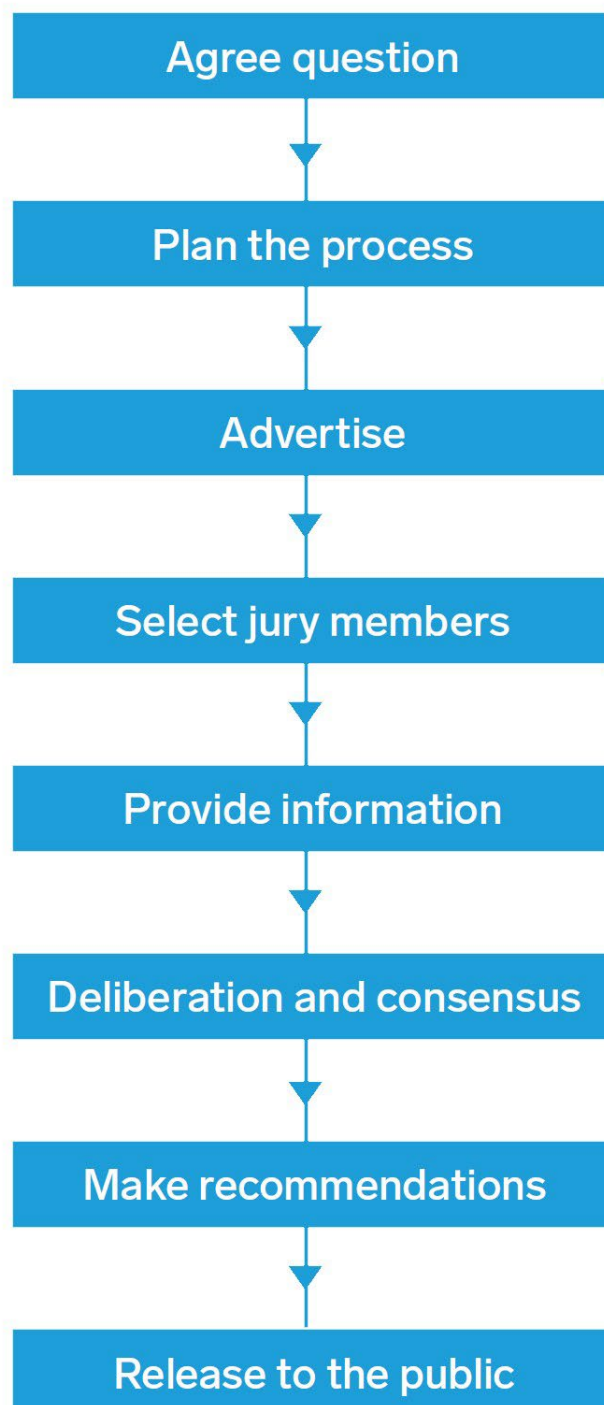
Anyone over the age of 18 is eligible to apply to sit on a citizens' jury and participants are paid for their time. To reach a representative sample of the public, health authorities often advertise on community job websites. A group of people are then selected to reflect the demographics of the area based on characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, political affiliation and education to reduce the chance of self-selection bias and enhance the validity of the process.

Overseen by an independent moderator, the jury sits over several days with the length of the case dependent on the complexity of the policy. The first day begins with an overview so that the jury members fully understand the issue under consideration. It is important that the question being debated is clearly framed, easy to understand and presented without bias.

Next, expert witnesses are brought in to present the key facts surrounding the issue. These witnesses include impartial experts who provide neutral background information as well as representatives from different sides of the debate who present the facts from their perspective. Witnesses are carefully chosen to provide the jury with a balanced and detailed picture.

Following the presentation, time is set aside for jurors to ask the witnesses questions and clarifications. The jury is then given time to deliberate on the information presented. During the deliberation phase, jurors discuss the evidence and work towards developing recommendations or reaching a group consensus.

On the final day, jurors present their recommendations and explain how they reached their conclusion. Finally, these results are fed back to the organisation and a report is released to the wider public.



An impartial process

Once the challenge and question are agreed, the commissioning body has minimal involvement with the event. To eliminate any risk of bias, all aspects of the process – from witness questions to juror support – is overseen by an independent organisation and the jurors are guided by a moderator who makes sure that everyone has an opportunity to put their opinion forward. This keeps the process balanced and independent from the authority that will ultimately make the decision.

Why choose a citizens' jury over other engagement methods?

Health and care providers are continually exploring new methods of high quality, inclusive public engagement and participation. While opinion polls and surveys are an effective method of gathering a large quantity of data quickly and with minimal expense, for more complex questions citizens' juries provide a deeper level of feedback as participants are given the opportunity to explore more of the difficult issues surrounding policies.

Evidence suggests that recommendations made by a representative group of citizens are more likely to be positively received by the broader public. The local involvement and transparency of the process adds an extra level of credibility, which is important when service providers are making decisions on issues that directly affect a community.

Benefits of a citizens' jury include:

- Direct input from a representative sample of local people, including marginalised sections of the population who may not respond to traditional public consultations.
- Managed by an independent moderator to maintain impartiality.
- Thorough investigation of the evidence covering all sides of the debate.
- A transparent process. Jurors' recommendations are made available to the public.
- The outcome is delivered via a formal process giving the commissioning body a clear set of recommendations which can be used to consider, respond and justify their final decision.

There are also benefits for those who take part. Involvement in a citizens' jury provides people with a rare opportunity to learn more about an important issue and to deliberate with a wide-ranging group of people.

In some cases, citizens' juries are a single strand of a wider engagement process. They can be used alongside surveys, social media and online forums to increase public interaction and gain a broader spectrum of opinions across the community.

Note to readers

These notes are intended only to give an overview of complex requirements as general information. Every situation is different. Please seek specific professional advice to inform the action you take on the issues raised in your circumstances. © Olovus.