

In partnership



“We have power as a community”

A journey to action with
the Community Assembly

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with contributions from Reanna Bowen, Amina H and Mark Wilson

December 2021



Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend thanks to all those who contributed to the thinking and approach in this work. A special thanks to all participants of the Community Assembly, and in particular a thanks to Reanna Bowen, Amina H, Bernard Kilpatrick and Mark Wilson for authoring sections of this report and other publications.

We would also like to thank those that gave their time to share research, evidence and guidance with the Community Assembly, and those attending the Sharing Event. Thank you to the RSA Birmingham Fellows Network, who supported the project in its early stages. Thanks to our advisory group for their considered guidance, and thanks to the Oak Foundation for making the work possible. Thanks to Friendship for bringing to life the findings and outcomes of the Community Assembly.

And finally, to colleagues Chris Gaisie, Ruth Hannan, Amanda Ibbett, Ahmed Shaal, Riley Thorold and Hannah Webster at the RSA and all those contributing behind the scenes.

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REALISING



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Our purpose

Uniting people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

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A global community of proactive problem solvers.

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Our home and the neighbourhood we live in affects our ability to live a good life. Whether it's the affordability of housing determining how much money we have to spend, or the quality of housing impacting on how long and how well we live, or the connectivity of our neighbourhood to the things we need (like schools and jobs) affecting the opportunities we can access – where we live interacts with almost every aspect of our daily lives.



Executive Summary

Despite this, the role that we get to play in the decision-making that happens about our home or about the neighbourhood we live in can be underwhelming. Even where there are opportunities for the everyday resident to get involved, processes like community consultations or neighbourhood planning often fail to make room for meaningful participation for all. Instead of empowering and enabling residents, extractive interactions, unsatisfactory efforts to engage all residents, a lack of trust and relationship building with residents, and poor accountability can lead to residents feeling ignored, patronised and even more disengaged.¹

In the UK, although not many people feel able to influence and have a say in local decision-making processes, more and more, residents and communities want to.² Findings from our recent research also suggests this is true within the specific context of our homes and local neighbourhoods.³ To build on this, the RSA set out to investigate whether deliberative approaches could be used to explore and respond to realities and challenges people might face in the specific place they live, to improve on things like our economic security and wellbeing.

The RSA built on the citizens' assembly model to work with a small and diverse group of residents in Nechells, Birmingham, in what we called the Nechells Knows Community Assembly. Residents took part in eight group sessions over two months to explore the question: "**what do we need from our home and neighbourhood, now and in the future, for everyone in Nechells to live a good life?**". Their recommendations were put forward in a final participant-led Sharing Event, to a range of stakeholders who play a role in what happens in the neighbourhood.

Bringing the citizens' assembly model to

the neighbourhood level meant introducing some changes to the standard approach, but it also meant different individual and community level outcomes including:

- An increased sense of community power, with residents now actively taking steps to follow up on their recommendations and to be more involved in what happens in their neighbourhood.
- A range of stakeholders that might not have previously invested as much time and resources into the neighbourhood – from the local council to large businesses – taking steps to engage more and better with residents.
- Greater connections and a better understanding, amongst a very diverse population of residents, of the different needs and aspirations within the neighbourhood.

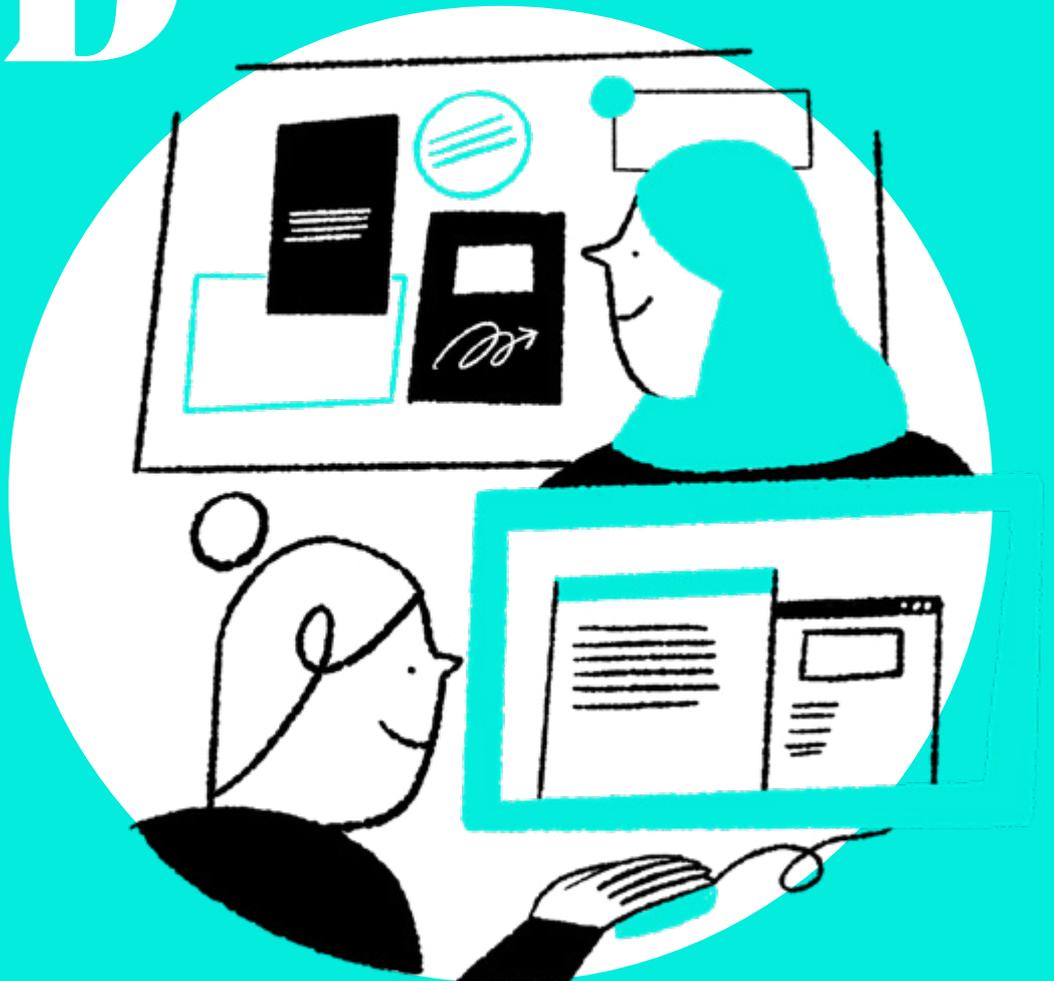
This report brings together insights from the RSA, and reflections and direct contributions from the residents taking part in the Nechells Knows Community Assembly. We consider some of the methods, outcomes and learning that we can take forward when we think about how the citizens' assembly model can be used at the neighbourhood level.

- 1 Thurber, A, Collins, L, Greer, M, et al. (2018). Resident experts: The potential of critical Participatory Action Research to inform public housing research and practice. *Action Research*, 18(4). Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1476750317725799; and Collins, P. (2015). Neighbourhood planning: local involvement. *People power*. Available at: www.isurv.com/info/390/features/8650/neighbourhood_planning_local_involvement.
- 2 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Office for Civil Society (2017 (2020)). *Community Life Survey*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey--2
- 3 Webster, H (2019). Making home. *The RSA and One Manchester*. Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/images/blogs/2019/10/rsa-making-home.pdf.

WHAT

WE

DID



The approach

Working with Oak Foundation in Birmingham, we wanted to see whether a deliberative process could be used to explore and respond to realities and challenges people might face in the specific place they live. We drew strongly on deliberative methods, and in particular the citizens' assembly model, to work at a more localised level and to address the specific challenge of residents playing a more active role in decision-making around their homes and neighbourhoods.

Deliberative methods provide a space for participants to weigh up a variety of information on a challenge, to discuss with others taking part and to develop their thinking together, before forming a view. The approach typically results in a set of actions and recommendations presented to a local public service body, and in some cases is supported by an accountability mechanism to ensure actions and recommendations are taken forward. What should come out of a deliberative process is that people feel more able to make an informed decision on the challenge.

Reflecting on the lack of opportunity for residents' meaningful participation around their homes and neighbourhood, deliberative methods open up a space for residents to explore their needs, preferences and values. It helps to expand beyond the 'usual suspects' of policy and decision-making to increase representation and redistribute power.⁴ By creating space for residents to lead the conversation, it has the potential to bring issues that might be overlooked or underplayed to the forefront, and draws on the knowledge and experience of local residents.⁵ Deliberation itself can improve community connections and individual feelings of self-esteem, or even provide people who take part with new skills.⁶

Box 1: What is a citizens' assembly?

Citizens' assemblies are a type of democratic method that has been used around the world to empower citizens and solve difficult challenges. A citizens' assembly brings together a diverse group of the public who are selected at random but chosen to broadly reflect the demographics of the local community, to deliberate on and make recommendations about a specific challenge.

Citizens' assemblies are distinctly diverse, deliberative and lengthy. While the citizens' assembly itself should be professionally facilitated, participants should leave the process as experts in their own right, with recommendations being made by assembly members themselves. You can find out more about where and how citizens' assemblies are used in our handbook *How to run a citizens' assembly*.

The aims

In this work, a citizens' assembly model was scaled down for working at a more localised level, and to suit the needs or the experience of the place we were working, to deliver what we termed the Community Assembly. In doing so, we wanted to explore three objectives:

- Building our understanding: what could we learn about what residents think of the relationship between their home, their neighbourhood and living a good life?
- Developing inclusive practice: how could deliberative methods and facilitate resident-led recommendations that might improve their homes and neighbourhood? What kind of impact could be achieved?
- Evaluating our approach: does working at a more localised level allow for residents to play a more active role in decision-making at the local level? Are the outcomes the same as the typical citizens' assembly?

4 Wampler, B and Touchton, M. (2018). Designing institutions to improve well-being: Participation, deliberation and institutionalisation. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58: 915-937. Available at: ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-6765.12313.

The methods

The RSA brought together a diverse and broadly representative group of residents living in Nechells, Birmingham to host and facilitate the Nechells Knows Community Assembly (hereby the Community Assembly). Together, they deliberated around the question: “**what do we need from our home and neighbourhood, now and in the future, for everyone in Nechells to live a good life?**”.

We drew strongly on methods and principles used in a citizens’ assembly, to support the Community Assembly with balanced and thorough deliberations. We facilitated inclusive spaces to ensure everyone’s voices was heard, and that people got to interact with others in the Community Assembly. They were presented with a range of evidence and supported to share and reflect on their own and others’ experiences and views, for them to learn and develop their thinking together and come up with a series of recommendations – almost 50 – across different themes they collectively chose to focus on.

These recommendations were a mix of ones that residents could catalyse themselves, ones that need some external support, such as funding or advice, and ones that needed to be taken up by other stakeholders, like the local council or local organisations. Their recommendations were put forward for consideration in a final participant-led Sharing Event, to representatives from the local city council, grantmakers, large organisations and businesses operating in the neighbourhood, and other local residents.

Following the formal close of the Community Assembly, the RSA continued to engage with and support participants, to ensure a gradual close-out process that considered the different individual level

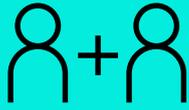
and community level outcomes of the process. We conducted closing interviews and evaluation surveys with participants, to understand how their experience of the Community Assembly had been and the impact it had had on themselves and their community. These, along with facilitated self-reflection by the RSA, have been drawn out into key learnings, shared at the end of this report.

48

Recommendations generated

- 5 Chaskin, R, Khare, A and Joseph, M. (2012). Participation, Deliberation, and Decision Making: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Mixed-Income Developments. *Urban Affairs Review*, 48(6): 1-44. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1078087412450151. Also see Wagenaar, H. (2007). Governance, Complexity, and Democratic Participation: How Citizens and Public Officials Harness the Complexities of Neighborhood Decline. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 37(1): 17-50. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0275074006296208.
- 6 Chaskin, R, Khare, A and Joseph, M. (2012). Op cit. Also see: Kearns, A and Whitley, E. (2020). Are housing and neighbourhood empowerment beneficial for mental health and wellbeing? Evidence from disadvantaged communities experiencing regeneration. *SSM Population Health* 12: e100645. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827320302822

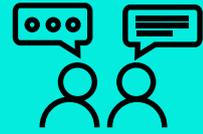
Figure 1: How a citizens' assembly is run



Residents are brought together to consider what should be done on an issue



They hear evidence from a range of people about the topic



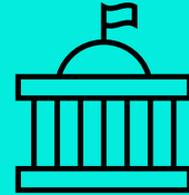
They get to discuss evidence they hear and have plenty of time to think



Facilitators help participants explore the evidence and discuss options



Over time, the group arrives at a series of recommendations



The recommendations are considered and responded to by the commissioning body

18

Number of local stakeholders invited to respond to the recommendations

8

Sessions done with each resident taking part

245

Hours contributed by residents taking part

Working at the neighbourhood level

The specifics of the project objectives, the overall question and the context introduced some departures from the standard approach that other citizens' assemblies have taken. The RSA worked with residents in Nechells for several reasons, including a notable lack of political and financial investment despite its proximity to the city centre, a diverse population experiencing some segregation, and a mix of housing tenures and types in the local neighbourhood.

Importantly, given the historic lack of engagement and investment in Nechells and with its residents, there was a much greater opportunity for social change and impact at the individual and community level. While the neighbourhood is a ward and is formally represented by a MP and a local councillor, Nechells was missing active political representation. The residents we worked with frequently referred to their neighbourhood as 'forgotten' or 'left behind', themselves identifying a need for an alternative means for the community to come together and make their voices heard.

Working at a more localised level meant working within a much smaller population than is typical of other citizens' assemblies, which tend to happen at the local authority level or higher.⁷ The Community Assembly was scaled down to work at the neighbourhood level, and in the case of Nechells, this meant working within a population of roughly 13,980 people.⁸ Although this didn't have too much impact on the practicalities of hosting and facilitating the Community Assembly, it did likely have some impact on the types of outcomes it achieved, which is discussed later in the report.

Unlike most citizens' assemblies, the Community Assembly was not

commissioned by a local authority body, such as the local council or central government services like the UK's National Health Service.⁹ Instead, the Community Assembly was funded by Oak Foundation who supports and funds work that address the structural causes of housing insecurity, to create opportunities to build strong communities where everyone can thrive and live dignified lives.¹⁰

Recommendations coming from a citizens' assembly would typically be directed at those commissioning the assembly. In this case, the lack of political representation in Nechells and the opportunities presented by being commissioned by an independent funder, introduced the most significant departure from a typical citizens' assembly. Instead of going to a single commissioning body, a range of stakeholders were invited to respond to the recommendations with the intention of maximising the potential for recommendations to be accommodated and implemented.

7 For example see: [Camden Council Neighbourhood Assembly](#), or [Romsey Citizens' Assembly](#).

8 Including roughly 10,500 adults. For more information see: www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/15486/nechells_profile.

9 There are some other examples of this being done, eg [Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland](#) which was organised and funded by civil society organisations in 2018.

10 For more information about Oak Foundation, please visit: oakfnd.org/programmes/housing-and-homelessness/.

A bit more about Nechells

As told by the residents themselves

Amina

Nechells is a very green and a beautiful place to live in. It's quite a big area with a variety of communities, cultures and businesses. A lot of us have grown up and lived in Nechells for a long time and it's nice to see familiar faces. I like living in Nechells because it's located in a very convenient part of Birmingham with several bus routes and the city centre is a few minutes' walk away.

Some years ago, there was a greater sense of community in Nechells. There were many services that met the needs of the people in the area such as a neighbourhood office, a library and a community centre. But services closed down and some were replaced with other services. For this reason, I think Nechells somewhat lost its feel or sense of community. Though it has changed over the years, it is a place many call home.

Reanna

Nechells needed something like a Community Assembly because previously there was no open dialogue occurring about what the community needed to progress. Around Birmingham generally in recent years there have been many developments to prepare the city both for the upcoming Commonwealth Games in 2022 and the installation of HS2, however despite being very near, Nechells has been left out.

I think that many of the residents here have wanted to start to create change and voice concerns but did not have the knowledge of how to do this. Or, indeed, know the correct organisations to ask for help from. The Community Assembly was able to facilitate this conversation. This allowed us to not only discuss the issues within Nechells that were important to us but allowed us to gain an insight into how to practically achieve these goals.

Mark

Nechells has great transport links, trains and buses for public transport and is also close to the M6 and A47 major road networks. We have good local shops, lots of various places of worship, good health care with doctors and pharmacies. We have lovely pockets of green spaces though they are small. There are also a couple of good local pubs left, though a few have closed down or are not so nice.

It's a great place live to with a good sense of community and neighbourly spirit. It is also close to the city centre with great transport links. That said the area does have issues with social deprivation, unemployment, housing, and a health problem with lower-than-average life expectancy rates.

Nechells does not have enough green space. There is no major supermarket in walking distance which restricts shopping choice and availability of fresh healthy food stuffs. There is lots of industrial land, major roads and railway lines that cut through the area. The area has a bad reputation over many years and that is an unfair reflection of what daily life is really like.

Nechells is facing some real challenges and has done so historically over a long period of time. A bad reputation from lots of flats and high-rise blocks, high unemployment, drugs and alcohol issues, litter and fly-tipping. The area also has a high percentage of transient residents who don't stay long. Those who do stay enjoy the more positive aspects of the area and the community spirit, but the area could do with investment and an all-round boost.

HOW IN WENT



Developing collective thinking and deliberating

The Nechells Knows Community Assembly were asked to deliberate around the question: “**what do we need from our home and neighbourhood, now and in the future, for everyone in Nechells to live a good life?**”. In discussions, the most common ideas about living a good life emerged around ideas of happiness, being content, having a sense of purpose, having a worthwhile, satisfying and fulfilling life, and being peaceful. The second most common idea was having friends and family close by or in easy reach.

Participants also commonly discussed ideas like feeling safe and secure, doing things they enjoy and having things they want, having good physical and mental health as well as being able to live a healthy life, having access to open and green spaces and nature, being in a place where there are low rates of crime, having good access to transport and services like shops and GPs, having a good job, not worrying about bills or debt, and having access to opportunities.

“Initially, when I joined I didn’t know what to expect from the whole thing... I just thought it was going to be something we attend, and just listen to people talking about communities and watch videos and stuff. I didn’t expect that we’d actually be talking to each other, you know, as neighbours or people from the same community and discussing how we could improve Nechells”



“I think it was good, because we were able to come up with like, diverse ideas... there was a lot of links between them. So, even though we had like different priorities, they all sort of came together in the end”.



When thinking about what residents need from their home and neighbourhood to live a good life, the Community Assembly grouped their discussions into the following priorities:



Making sure residents have a say in the changes happening in their neighbourhood



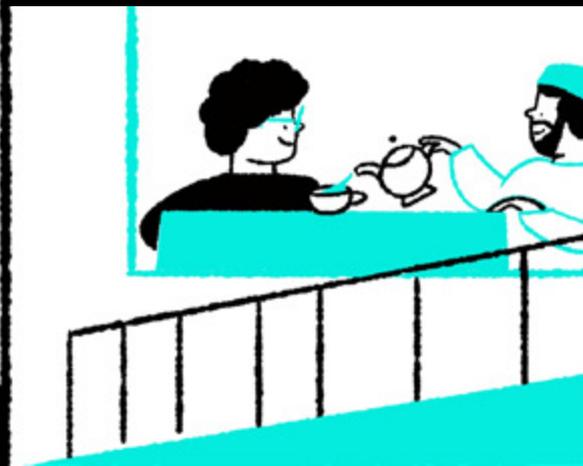
Having and being considerate neighbours



Helping residents to feel safe and secure in the place we live



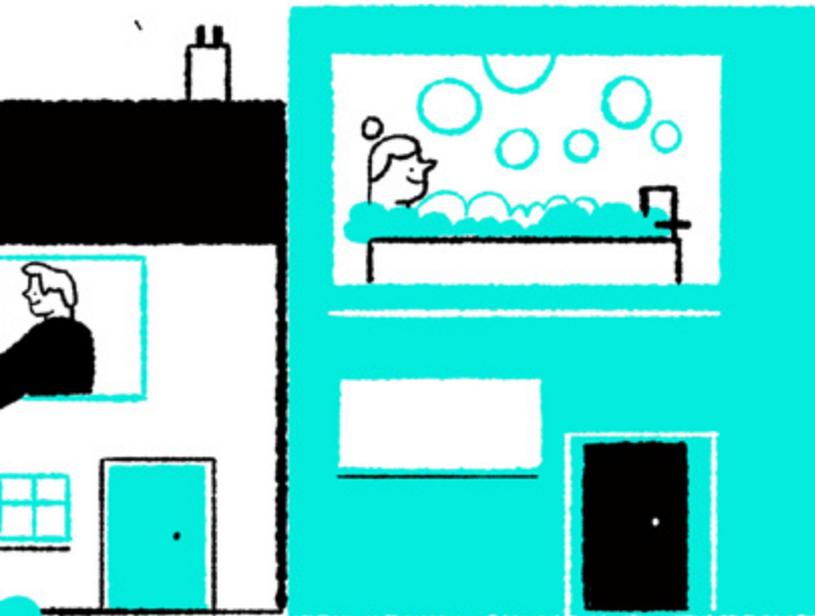
Creating enough inclusive spaces for the community to come together



Sharing the great things and having a positive narrative about where we live

♥ NECHELLS

Making sure we can all afford the basic necessities like heating, water and electricity



Having enough local facilities around us, like good transport, GPs, shops and nurseries



Making sure our streets are walkable and safe for us to use



Our homes and neighbourhood being clean and well maintained



Creating lots of opportunities for us to access our outdoor spaces, green spaces and nature



The Community Assembly's recommendations for Nechells

When thinking about what is needed from their home and neighbourhood to live a good life, the Community Assembly discussed recommendations across the following areas. Their recommendations were put forward in a final participant-led Sharing Event, which was designed to create a different type of space to convene decision-makers and maximise the potential for ideas and recommendations to be heard and supported.

A range of stakeholders supported the recommendations with some identifying specific ways in which they could support the recommendations to begin to be implemented. This included stakeholders from the local council, local housing associations, a large local construction company, a housing-focused community union, locally operating organisations and grantmakers and local residents. Outside of the Sharing Event, offers were also made from locally embedded third sector organisations and a community researcher programme being run by a local university.

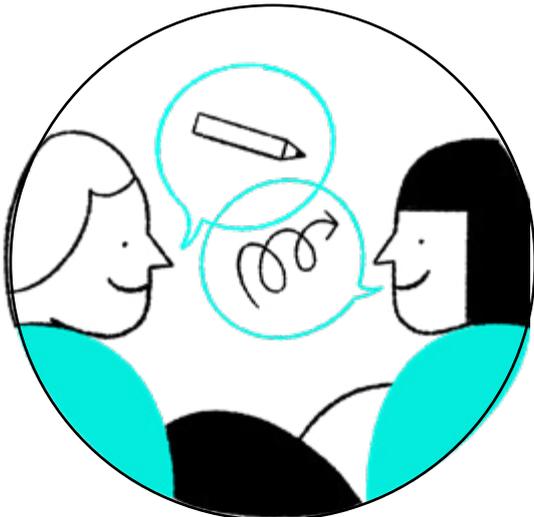
“Yeah, I think it was beneficial for us as a community to present our ideas to a wide audience of people that could actually have an impact on the agenda. There is lots of funding out there for communities, so it's really nice to know that there's a lot of [ways] they could help residents. The Sharing Event was a good overall aim for us to have as well as a group, so we knew what we're working towards throughout the eight weeks”

The Community Assembly's recommendations for Nechells



Amplifying resident voices:

Nechells residents need to come together to put our voices forward and have a say in the changes happening in the neighbourhood. Our recommendations include having inclusive and accessible residents groups, creating spaces for residents to share their ideas like a democracy cafe, and having more council-led and resident-led consultations to get feedback and prioritise resident voices.



Everyone in Nechells working together:

Everyone who plays a role in Nechells should come together to help to keep it a great place to live. Local politicians need to engage with residents more, and residents and local organisations should work together to do good things for Nechells. Local decision-makers should ask Nechells how they can create better connections with its residents. Local businesses can help to support activities the residents and local organisations do for the neighbourhood.



Making sure the neighbourhood knows what's going on:

Residents in Nechells need to be better connected to each other. With some funding and support, residents could create local newsletters, community noticeboards and social media. It should be accessible too, for example by translating things into commonly spoken languages. The local council should help residents to create a directory of activities, events and available spaces in the neighbourhood, so everyone can get more involved.

The Community Assembly's recommendations for Nechells



Having a neighbourhood that is nice to look at:

The place we live should be clean and well-maintained. Residents want to find ways to work together with the council to prevent flytipping and rubbish. Our recommendations include the council asking residents where to put more bins and recycling bins, creating easier ways to report rubbish, or getting rid of the charge to remove bulky items. Residents can help to create local campaigns, or with some funding and equipment, help to clean up and brighten up the neighbourhood.



Creating different community spaces for residents to come together:

There needs to be more inclusive spaces for the community to come together. With some funding and support, residents can hold events like a Community Funday, have a local market, or create a community garden. Facilities like basketball courts and outdoor gyms can contribute to better health too. Residents could organise a community skills bank, and local organisations and businesses could provide equipment for people to do things in the neighbourhood. We recommend that the council helps us to release unused local spaces for use.



Making our streets safer and more walkable:

For our health and wellbeing, streets should be safer and more walkable for pedestrians. Our recommendations include the local council working with residents to identify where more speed bumps are needed, where better lighting could be used and where more crossings would be useful. With some support and funding, residents and local organisations could also work together to make streets nicer to use.



Creating a more positive narrative about Nechells:

All of these things would help to create a more positive narrative about Nechells, both within and outside the neighbourhood. But residents can also work with local newspapers or local organisations to share good news and inspirational stories about the community. With some funding and support, residents could come together to make the neighbourhood more visually appealing. Residents and funders can work with local schools to design street signs and artwork.

Outcomes

The impact of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative approaches is typically measured against the degree to which the recommendations that come from the process have influence on public policy. Beyond this, it can also be measured by how deliberation might impact on internal culture and practice around decision-making (for example, in local councils), as well as on the participants themselves and the wider community.¹¹

Without being funded or directed by a local authority or other decision-making body, the Community Assembly could not follow that typical route to impact. However, lots of great outcomes came out of the Community Assembly, including some unexpected ones, creating exciting channels for impact. One of the most positive, immediate and still evolving outcomes of the Community Assembly was a clear sense of building community power and community organising throughout the process, and an active interest from most of the group to stay engaged in trying to make positive change in their neighbourhood.

Although we had built into the process mechanisms to redistribute potential routes for recommendations to be supported by a wider range of actors, we did not expect the participants to be such a prominent potential route themselves. This has had an effect on the different individual and community level outcomes and impact that the Community Assembly has or could produce.

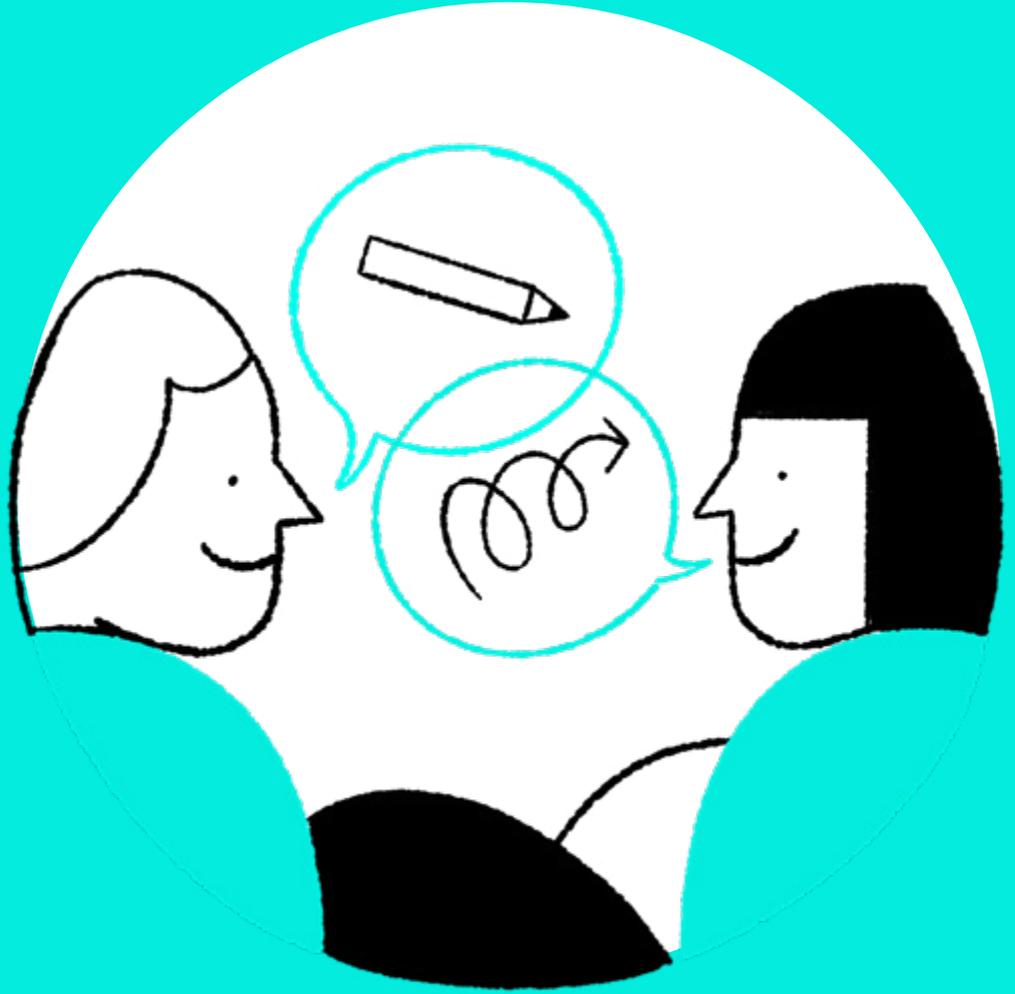
11 The RSA et al. (2020). How to run a citizens' assembly: A handbook for local authorities based on the Innovation in Democracy Programme. Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/iidp-citizens-assembly.pdf.

Individual level outcomes

- Participants wanting to be more involved in community activities and matters related to their neighbourhood in the future.
- Participants feeling more engaged and knowledgeable about how the home and neighbourhood we live in impacts on us.
- Participants feeling more engaged and knowledgeable about the different needs and aspirations of other residents in Nechells, including residents from a range of backgrounds.
- For some participants, gain in skills such as increased digital inclusion and speaking at public events.
- For some participants, access to further opportunities such as the opportunity to become a community researcher with a local university.
- Participants leaving with a more positive outlook and attitude towards their neighbourhood.
- Greater connections built between participants and residents, including new opportunities to engage with other residents, for example through a new resident group or via social media.

Community level outcomes

- Increased sense of community power and cohesion amongst participants.
- Increased attention and investment in Nechells, for example by residents themselves, and a key locally-operating company organising an event to engage with residents following the Sharing Event.
- Activities and actions coming from the Community Assembly leading to positive impact on individuals, households or the local community, including more engaged and connected residents, and more residents being able to live a 'good life'.
- Residents more able to share their collective voice and have greater influence over decisions made in their neighbourhood by a range of relevant stakeholders.



WHAT

WE

LEARNED

The citizens' assembly model can help to build a sense of community power

As well as recommendations where they needed local stakeholders to play an active role or make a change to processes and policies, participants actively identified recommendations that they felt residents and the local community could achieve either themselves or with some guidance or resources. Since the Community Assembly has ended, they have gone one step further by taking steps to actually catalyse some of those recommendations.

While there is still potential for influencing and impacting on local public policy and decision-making through a more resident-led mechanism, this could be a slower and less straightforward route for implementing recommendations than if a local decision-maker was directly accountable, as is typical of a citizens' assembly. It also depends on the ability of residents to continue to self-organise and hold onto that sense of community power.

In this case, working at a neighbourhood level with residents more invested in a shared purpose certainly created the right conditions for an increased sense of community power. If a better balance can be found between much needed accountable mechanisms for implementing recommendations coming from these types of processes, as well as a means for building a sense of community power, deliberative processes can go further to achieve its benefits around empowering and enabling citizens to re-engage with the democratic process and their communities more generally.

“[Residents] want somebody to stand in the local elections as an independent, to represent the residents... someone in the [Community Assembly] might be interested. It has given us this group of people that are actively interested in the community so, who knows what will grow from it”

“I hopefully think something will come out, and I use ‘hopefully’ with a capital H... certain people in groups who have a lot of the same amount of knowledge... I think a few might fall away but others [are] looking to do something with it”

“I’ve lived here for years in Nechells, but it’s not something I can actually go and speak to someone about... it’s not the type of conversation you can have with people. So, here you could actually find out what people really wanted to happen in Nechells”

Space and time to develop thinking collectively is valuable

All participants said that having a dedicated time and space that deliberative processes offers, helped them with their individual and collective learning, and facilitation supported them to develop their thinking together. Most participants noted learning from each other and the value of having different people in the room to share different views and experiences, especially where they might have not interacted with residents of certain backgrounds before.

Many also found it affirming to see that similar priorities and issues were coming up across the Community Assembly and valued the shared experiences that working within a neighbourhood might bring. As well as learning about different perspectives, some participants also found out more about their neighbourhood, for example learning some of its history from longer-standing residents, or about existing facilities and activities in the local area.

“I forget sometimes, like an elderly point of view, and the disabled point of view... and there was someone who said their parents didn’t really speak very good English. I never really took [those things] into consideration”

Consider how the process might influence the direction of discussions and decisions

The makeup of the group affected what was discussed and prioritised. Although the Community Assembly was diverse across a number of factors, shared experiences (or lack thereof) meant that some discussion points and themes – typically more extreme ones like insecure private renting tenancies, poor quality housing conditions and utility poverty – got left behind as only one or two people experienced them.

When learning, deliberating and making recommendations, having foresight of the process also influenced where participants focused their energy. For example, in knowledge that discussions would lead to recommendations presented in the Sharing Event, where the Community Assembly felt they wouldn't be able to see change, things were deprioritised. For example, 'being able to afford the basic necessities like heating, water and electricity' or 'having good transport links' were seen to be outside any scope for achievable change.

When deliberating a question or an issue that so strongly draws on people's own experiences, we should think more carefully about what representativeness and diversity means, and what criteria we can introduce at the selection stage to get a diversity of voices in relation to the challenge. Facilitation can help to draw attention to different ideas and experiences in a more equal and impartial way, but that needs to be balanced with allowing the process to be 'by the people, for the people'.

“For me, where I live in the tower block that I live in, our actual homes are just so disgusting... housing and housing conditions are obviously very important to people in my block. There was a lot of focus on the outside environment and whatever. But, you know, people don't know how bad the conditions are. So, I thought it was really interesting to see the different priorities that people had”

Presenting evidence is not as straightforward when the question is so personal

A standard stage of any citizens' assembly process is the learning stage – often done by introducing a balanced set of evidence from a range of people, including knowledge experts and people with lived experience – to help participants make informed recommendations. Being at the neighbourhood level, there is less available research and evidence on Nechells. Instead, the participants' learning and discussions were supported with resources in the form of videos about housing, neighbourhoods and broad concepts related to 'living a good life' such as wellbeing, economic security and social value, with examples from across the UK.

Given the highly localised context, with the question so strongly drawing on people's own experiences, we struggled to identify the right type of evidence. This was evident by the mixed feedback from participants. Many were also more drawn to evidence related to Birmingham rather than other neighbourhoods or cities. As well as presenting research and evidence from other parts of the country, it might have been beneficial to introduce learning in different forms. For example, using provocations such as hypothetical narrative scenarios to help contextualise evidence and data.

“I’ve been in Nechells all my life so it’s been more or less what’s been going on [here]. I did think the videos they were showing weren’t that relevant because I was from different areas of the country”

“The videos are really interesting. Particularly hearing about [another neighbourhood in Birmingham] ... I found really interesting. I could relate to it”

“There was a lot of people that turned up and gave us some really positive feedback. And the fact that the politicians didn’t turn up is kind of a catalyst for people doing things”

Engaging a wider range of stakeholders on recommendations widens opportunities

In the absence of any active opportunities for participation in local decision-making or actively engaged political representation within Nechells, expanding the audience for the Community Assembly’s recommendations meant an opportunity to offset this and engage a wider set of relevant stakeholders. The intention was to increase the possibility for different recommendations to be picked up by different, and potentially more relevant, stakeholders.

The Sharing Event highlighted to stakeholders that residents actively want to be more engaged with things going on in the neighbourhood, and it has already resulted in some tangible increased attention and investment.¹² That said, as there was no requirement to attend or

commit to recommendations, and given it was a fairly small-scale event, some key stakeholders were missing. For example, neither the local councillor nor the MP responded to the invitation to attend the Sharing Event, although that could have been due to a number of reasons.

As well as exploring whether accountable mechanisms for implementing recommendations can also accommodate and enable more community power, it would be interesting to experiment with expanding out accountable mechanisms to a greater set of stakeholders than just the commissioning body of a citizens’ assembly or similar activities.

“Yeah, I think [the Sharing Event] was very effective. But it’s one of those things you don’t really know how [it will] affect you until you get to stage two... A lot of people said they’re interested but then it’s all about, will they? Time will tell if they will”

¹² For example, the local council has made contact with residents to work more closely with them on some of their recommendations, and a key locally operating business has organised an event specifically for residents following the Sharing Event.

It ain't over 'til the residents sing

When the RSA set out to host and facilitate the Community Assembly, while we had some ideas of the direction it might take, we didn't entirely know what to expect. This is how a participant-led process with no pre-determined outcomes should be. But it does mean ensuring that you have the means to support whatever outcomes do emerge. So, while the Community Assembly had a formal end date, particularly given the outcomes of this process, engagement with and within the Community Assembly is still ongoing.

Of participants, 91 percent said they would recommend taking part in something similar. And 100 percent of participants said that having taken part, they wanted to be more involved with their community. Participants have continued to meet as a self-organising group, to follow up on some of the recommendations, while others have accessed opportunities facilitated by the RSA, that would help them to be more active residents in their neighbourhood.¹³

“I think that when I heard the other residents and what they brought up it made me more aware of it and made me take more notice... I must have gone out with my eyes closed or something”

“I think I've started to look up and look around a little bit more when I'm out and about, you know, take notice of things... So yeah, it has changed my experience”

If you would like to get in touch with the residents of Nechells, to support any of their ideas and recommendations, please contact nechellsactiongroup@gmail.com.

¹³ For example, the self-organising group are being supported to become a constituted group in order to access local funding, and some individuals have become RSA Fellows or community researchers with Birmingham City University.



“I think we realised that we do have power as a community. There are things that we can do. We don’t have to wait on the council, we can organise meetings as a group”.

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ISBN 978-1-911532-71-2