Tips for talking about Citizens' Assemblies

Guidance on effective communication of CAs

- Weaving Citizen's Assembly Messaging into Actions
- Avoid jargon
- Messaging Dos and Don'ts
- Challenge the normal
- Harder questions and answers

Weaving Citizen's Assembly Messaging into Actions

It's easier to talk about our central demand when we're doing an action or outreach specifically about Citizens' Assemblies.

But it's important that we talk about our central demand in as many of our actions as possible!

We can talk about our central demand in (nearly) all our messaging.

Similarly we can promote our central demand when messaging around Actions, Campaigns and events in the news.

Running a campaign about Dirty Water? Talk about people being outraged by this situation, and how a Citizens' Assembly would demand a better system.
Joining with other movements to march for Peace? Talk about how wide public opposition for war is, and that a more representative democracy wouldn't have consented to it.

Key Ideas

- Through our demands, XRUK is not saying what should be done to address the climate and ecological emergency - we are saying that the people should decide on what steps need to be taken, and how these should be rolled out to ensure that people are not unfairly impacted.

- Citizens’ assemblies are proven to result in decisions that are informed, fair, long-term and free of undue influence. And by involving ordinary people drawn from different walks of life in the process, the results are more likely to be broadly accepted and to be seen to be in the best interests of the majority, rather than the few.

- A citizens’ assembly can be run to address any issue of broad public concern, so no matter what issue we are highlighting through our messaging, in nearly every case we can meaningfully be calling for a citizens’ assembly.

Why CAs are great! The 4 pillars of CAs

Existing system	Citizens’ assembly

Not representative or well informed: - 1st past the post system means many voters are not represented. - Elected MPs are generally not representative of people from diverse backgrounds. - MPs often vote along party lines with limited knowledge or understanding of the issues at hand	**True Representation and well informed**. - Ordinary people selected from different walks of life to represent the wider population. - Assembly members are informed about all sides of an issue and listen to a broad range of perspectives. They ask questions, evaluate the evidence and check facts in order to weigh up the options, discuss the trade-offs and decide together.
Not independent - Influenced by party funders and vested interests	**Independent and free from vested interests** - Individual citizens much less likely to be subject to influence
Based on conflict with winners and losers - Competition and point-scoring not conducive to cross-party collaboration - Loudest voice often “wins” the argument	**Truly collaborative** - Collaboration, based on respect, active listening and open and honest deliberation - Everyone has an equal right to be heard; there are no winners or losers
Short-term thinking - The electoral cycle incentivises popular, short-term solutions that will win votes - Unable to deliver the long-term, radical ideas that are needed to address the climate and ecological crisis	**Long-term radical solutions** - CA members can think beyond the electoral cycle and propose more radical solutions - Collective wisdom and intelligence of a group of diverse people far outstrips homogenous grouping of elected politicians - Able to break through the deadlock imposed by the current system, and come up with the solutions needed.

Potential hooks for reinforcing the 4 pillars

When our politicians seem disconnected from the public or take decisions that ignore the interests of different groups or communities...
We can explain that CAs are made up of ordinary people from different walks of life (gender, age, ethnicity etc.) randomly selected like a jury. The CA is a cross section of society, a ‘mini public’, a group of people with a range of lived experiences, opinions and attitudes.

When parties’ paymasters and those lobbying MPs are revealed in the media...
We can say that the members of CAs are independent from donors and lobbyists.

When MPs are seen arguing and scoring political points...
We can say that, in contrast, CAs are a great example of collaboration, where people listen to and learn from one another, and work together to develop solutions that are fair and just.

When any short term policy or announcement is made designed to win votes...
We can say that a CA allows long term thinking and enables more radical solutions to be proposed.

Specific examples of linking messaging to our central demand

Situation	Suggested Response

Disillusionment with the political process and polarization of debate	CAs provide a great way to bring people together from different backgrounds and with diverse experiences, and to build bridges.
Protests from sections of society against climate policies	CAs comprise ordinary people from many walks of life and involve them in decision-making, so the results are more likely to be broadly accepted
Further Government restrictions on climate protests / actions	Rather than suppressing the voices of ordinary people, the Government should be involving them in deciding what actions society needs to take
Roll-back or watering down of climate policies	The current system is unable to commit to the long-term policies we need: it's time to let the people decide
Worsening news on the climate and ecological emergency	Our current system is failing us. It's time to let the people decide: demand a UK-wide citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice
Examples of harm by particular sectors/industries	Citizens' assemblies are free of vested interests and can come up with solutions that benefit the many, rather than the few

Download this page as a presentation, with example social media posts.

Avoid jargon

Use simple, positive language

Do say: Selected like a jury and then sorted to reflect the population
Don't say: Sortition/stratified sampling

Do say: A group of people that reflects the diversity of our society
Don't say: Demographically representative

Do say: Informed conversation / honest conversation / finding common ground / listening to each other / learning from each other / working through differences
Don't say: Discussion / deliberation / debate / consultation

Do say: Brave / courageous (decisions)
Don't say: Radical

Messaging Dos and Don'ts

Do's and don'ts for talking about citizens' assemblies

Based on research done for a number of democracy organisations including XR. You can find more detail in Reforming the political system - A Messaging Guide.

Do say: UK-wide citizens' assembly
Don't say: National citizens' assembly
Only the United Kingdom government can pass laws on the scale neeeded to address the crisis. The CA must include all 4 nations - Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

Do say: Publicity and upfront agreement on what will happen with the recommendations
Don't say: Legally binding
To hold a legally binding CA would require an Act of Parliament taking several years. In any case, there is no such thing as legally binding as a future government can always change things. Much more important is public understanding and pressure.

Do say: Different walks of life
Don't say: All walks of life
Although a CA is very diverse, we couldn't possible include every walk of life!

Do say: Politics / political system
Don't say: Democracy / democratic
Democracy has positive connotations for many people, whereas politics does not. The root cause of our problem is the political system, not the politicians. Most people don’t want to get rid of our democratic system.

Do say: The system is old fashioned / Victorian / needs updating / upgrading
Don't say: Democracy is broken
People have some pride in the UK's democratic history and don’t agree that democracy is broken. However, they agree that there is plenty of room for improvement to make it fit the 21st century. Talking about updating or upgrading makes it clear that the system is designed by human beings and can be changed.

Do say: Who will do right by us
Don't say: Who will make the best decision
'Best decision' makes us consider qualifications and competence - that decisions should be left to politicians and elites. "Who will do right by us" implies honesty, sincerity, and who has our best interests at heart. Politicians can’t compete with the public in this way, as trust in politicians is so low.

Do say: We all have a right to contribute to decisions
Don't say: The public are shut out of decisions
Many people say that the opportunity to vote, lobby your MP and stand for election are examples of how ordinary people take part in politics. However, elections are only every few years and we could contribute much more.

Do say: We, us
Don't say: The public, they
We are the public! Don’t separate our interests and experiences from those of the public.

Do say: People like us
'People like us' is a sticky phrase that people recall.

Do say: Teachers, doctors, scientists, shopkeepers. People from different walks of life
Specifying these groups reminds us that we already trust people from our communities with important decisions.

Do say: Like a jury, we all have an equal chance of being selected
Don't say: Random selection
'Random selection' tends to cue 'randoms' i.e. odd, untrustworthy people. In comparison, a jury is understood and trusted by the public.

Challenge the normal

Most people (outside of groups like XR!) follow what they think is 'normal' behaviour. These 'social norms' are therefore powerful obstacles to change.

Dynamic normative messages emphasise changing trends - to encourage people to become part of the new normal.

This means we can get stuck in our campaign to only motivate a few people, while the majority do not change. Even if we try to tell them that the new behaviour is ‘normal’, their everyday experiences will probably indicate that this is untrue.

Dynamic normative messages in our communication may help. **The idea is to create a ‘new’ normal that can coexist with the ‘old’ normal**, which encourages people to change their behaviour without feeling they're operating outside of social norms.

An example of a this would be; "*In the past few years, an increasing number of countries have started to use citizens' assemblies and even more are experimenting*".

This may be much better than a static message like *“Ireland uses citizens' assemblies*".

A dynamic message emphasises a new, changing trend. A static message states that the new trend has already occured, and it is this statement that can conflict with people’s experiences - and thus cause them to doubt that there is actually a new normal!

As Brett Henning says in his TED talk What if we replaced politicians with randomly selected people there's too many citizens' assemblies to count!

Harder questions and answers

Become an expert CA communicator!

You will be asked lots of questions about CAs. Here are answers to help you, and some sample answers for spokespeople.

1. We already have politicians that have been elected, why do we need citizens’ assemblies as well?

Governments have had over 40 years to act on this emergency but they have not done nearly enough. The current political system is unable to come up with the radical, long term solutions that are needed in the face of the Climate and Nature Emergency. So we need a different way of finding solutions.

The emergency can't be solved by one or several political parties, which in our current system are focused on competing and winning elections. We need the whole country to unite behind the significant changes which will have to be made in our economy and society. The assembly can support the politicians by advising on what ordinary citizens think should be done for the benefit of the whole country. It will not be biased by political ideology nor infuenced by lobbying from fossil fuel companies. **A UK-wide citizen's assembly can help enhance representation for the general population**.

> Sample answer - The reality is that the current political system hasn’t been able to tackle the climate emergency to the extent that we need. CAs are a way to help politicians make the decisions that are needed. It’s about having a grown up conversation in which people are informed, they deliberate, they listen and learn, and they come up with recommendations that are solution oriented.

2. The average person doesn’t know what they’re talking about, they shouldn’t be allowed to make decisions

By the end of the citizens’ assembly process participants will know a lot more than the average MP about the issues involved. They will have seen multiple presentations from experts and had the chance to ask questions. **Learning is a central part of the process.**

There will also have been facilitated discussion amongst participants and the time to reflect. Remember that our Members of Parliament are rarely experts on many of the issues they are faced with. **MPs are often too busy to get to grips with something at a level of true understanding**.

Past CAs have shown that ordinary citizens are perfectly able to understand complex issues and can come up with fair and just solutions that work for the common good.

> Sample answer - Many of our current cabinet are looking after portfolios that they have zero experience in. It's unlikely they would get jobs in the fields that they are tasked with overseeing... so in this light it's not fair to say the average person knows nothing... A key aspect of CAs is ensuring that participants have adequate knowledge and understanding of the issues being discussed. That is why learning is placed at the forefront of proceedings. As John Long, who was a member of the Irish CA said, "we're probably the best informed amateurs in the country on this topic at the moment."

3. Isn't this just mob rule?

Citizens' Assemblies are certainly no mob - they're a balanced group of people who are given the space, time and support they need to come up with well-reasoned recommendations. They will be discussing and working with each other around tables in a collaborative manner. They won't rule anything, they will provide recommendations.

It's worth reflecting that currently we have rule by media barons, rich donors, and lobby groups, who have too much influence and power over politicians and political parties. Citizens' assemblies will cut through all that by being open and transparent.

> Sample answer - It's not a mob, it's an informed group selected by sortition. It's not rule - it's recommendations. Mob rule is a 'knee jerk reaction', uniformed and not calmly considered, and often a result of frustration. CAs are about bringing disparate and wide-ranging views to the table in a collaborative process to find common ground. Citizens assemblies are carefully curated, they have well established protocols in how they are run.

4. These assemblies will be dominated by retired busy-bodies and loud people

The selection process (known as **sortition**) is specifically designed to ensure this doesn't happen.

The assembly membership is a representation of our society. To ensure inclusivity, people who may find it difficult to attend will be given support to make them feel able to take part.

The assembly will be run by trained facilitators to ensure that everyone gets a fair chance to speak and the meeting is run in an inclusive manner. Currently the country is run by the 1% with enormous power. In a CA, they will only represent 1% of the assembly.

> Sample answer - The beauty of the CA selection process is that the final group has to be diverse, it has to broadly represent the population as a whole, and there are very careful structures and processes to ensure that one segment of the population doesn't dominate.

5. The recommendations will all end up being written by politically motivated interest groups. What about people like me? What about the silent majority?

The selection process ensures that people from different walks of life are present, and those people are given the opportunity to speak.

It may even be you in the assembly, but if it’s not, it will be someone in a similar position to you.

The recommendations are made by the group for the good of all society - and you are part of that society! Assembly recommendations need to be fair and just - that means including everyone. The citizens’ assembly process gives the reasoning and justification behind recommendations made, so we can all understand.

Sometimes there will be recommendations from the Citizens’ Assembly that you don’t agree with. Unfortunately that often happens in life - when was the last time you agreed with every decision a government made whilst in power? However, Citizens’ Assemblies are our best chance of us arriving at a unifying decision.

> Sample answer - I’m hearing that you have concern that you’ll be made to do something by people you don't know. Well depending on your political persuasion you’ll be living with laws and regulations that were introduced by governments that you didn't vote for. This is a normal feature of life in a democracy. The advantage of a CA is that participants will be acting for the common good … and I would suggest that people from different walks of life, no matter their political allegiance, will be concerned about what happens if laws and regulations aren't changed to help solve this crisis.

6. Politicians will just ignore the results, like they always do. It’ll be a waste of time and money.

Sadly politicians have a track record for ignoring experts, the people, and sensible recommendations - that’s partly why we have the problems we do. Before the CA starts it is important there is an agreement made publicly with the government about how recommendations will be implemented.

It is also key that the public and politicians alike are aware of what CAs are, how they work, and why they are useful. Plus, everyone in the country must know this CA is taking place and why it is so important, as this will create public pressure. **Publicity is crucial for a successful outcome.**

In this case, if those commitments are not honoured, it will cause public outrage.

> Sample answer - You know what, we share your concern. Politicians have a very poor track record in this regard. In a way, it shows why we need a citizen’s assembly because politicians need help in making the right decisions. We also need a commitment from them that they will respond to the recommendations, and that they will take seriously any recommendations that have assembly support. It’s our role as citizens to continue holding them to account.

7. What if the citizens’ assembly comes back with something really stupid? Like Boaty McBoatface? Are you going to support that recommendation?

Citizens’ Assemblies are a highly respected method of bringing people together, giving them the information they need and allowing them to make sensible decisions. Given the importance of the subject we have faith that our fellow citizens will take these meetings very seriously.

There have already been numerous CAs on climate that have come up with good, serious recommendations.

There may be recommendations that XR or some of it's members don’t agree with. In that case we will have to abide with the recommendations of the assembly - that's democracy. But a CA is much better that the politics we've got!

> Sample answer - One of the main reasons XR is in favour of CAs is because they are a highly effective way to engage people in a process where the collective intelligence of the group comes to the forefront. The research on CAs and deliberative processes in general confirms this. Therefore we have confidence and trust in our fellow citizens' ability to come up with recommendations that are fair and just, and developed with the best interest of the common good at their core.

8. Is XR trying to change the government? I thought they were interested in climate change?

The CA will provide recommendations to the existing political system, they are not seeking to replace it. A CA enhances the system.

> Sample answer - Our concern is climate change and the ecological emergency, the impact it is having on the planet and the world's population. Our demands do not include nor require a change of government. What XR wants is for the people to be involved in making the decisions that are going to have major effects on their own lives. The way to do this, we believe, is through a UK-wide Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice.

9. Our current system isn't perfect but it does get things done. We shouldn't interfere - better the devil you know

Our current system is stuck and the clock is ticking. Scientists tell us that we need to take action, and quickly. If our current system was working we would be seeing real action on the CEE.

We change things all the time in our democracies and in our lives - law, regulations, committees and bureaucracy. We believe this change may make a big difference. The political system as we have it today also has not been around forever - change is happening all the time.

> Sample answer - What springs to mind is the saying 'If it ain't broke, dont fix it.' The problem is that it is broken, certainly in respect of the climate and ecological emergency we are facing. The science is overwhelming - this is a life or death issue. We're not suggesting replacing the current system but we are suggesting improving it. In business one of the maxims is 'never a right way, never a wrong way, always a better way', so we're talking here about making changes for the better. And you know we change things all the time, particularly in the field of human health and wellbeing- we went from smoking in pubs to not smoking in pubs, we went from not wearing seatbelts in cars to making them compulsory, once upon a time people could drink and drive - now it's a serious offence, so we make changes all the time, it is a constant of everyday life. All we're asking for is a change here that will allow us to find the solutions we need.

10. What sort of things are recommended by these assemblies?

Previous CAs on climate like the ones in France, the UK, and Scotland have come up with concrete recommendations, some of which are mentioned below.

France:

- Develop alternative modes of transport other than the private car
- To adopt an ecocide law

Climate Assembly UK:

- Call for government leadership – working across political parties
- Independent, neutral monitoring and reporting on net zero progress
- Much more transparency in the relationship between big energy companies and the government, due to concerns over lobbying and influence
- Get to net zero without pushing our emissions elsewhere in the world
- A robust media strategy on the outcomes of the assembly

Scotland's Climate Assembly:

- Tax high carbon resources
- Retrofit all existing homes by 2030
- Decarbonise heating by 2030
- Public transport cheaper or free

11. What you’re proposing is anti-democratic, these people aren't elected.

Citizens' Assemblies are a type of deliberative democracy, which is one of the earliest forms of democracy practised in ancient Greece, regarded by many as the birthplace of democracy.

The word democracy means 'people rule', democracy doesn't mean elections. It means deciding together, which can be done through a CA.

> Sample answer - I’m really glad you raised that, because this is such an important point. The idea that citizens' assemblies are anti-democratic doesn't stack up when we look at the history of democracy. Randomly sorted (sortition) deliberative democracy was one of the earliest forms of democracy used in ancient Greece, which is considered the birthplace of democracy. It’s just that we’re not familiar with this form of democracy because most democratic systems use a form of representative democracy, electoral politics as we know it. It is rule by the people, for the people. What we have now is rule by representatives of the people, but they do not necessarily represent the people at all. Most of us didn't even vote for them. It's a mistake to equate 'elections' to democracy. Democracy is much more than that and needs engagement of the people, not just once every so many years at the ballot box.

12. Would the CA be legally binding, will the recommendations be required by law to be implemented?

The recommendations forthcoming from a CA are not currently legally binding, because this would involve change in law - a process that is long and counterproductive at this moment in time.

There must be an upfront agreement on what the government will do with the recommendations and explain any recommendations they don't implement.

In the end pressure from the public will be the a major influencing factor on persuading government to take up the recommendations.

13. After the CA is over, who checks that something actually happens with the recommendations?

- An oversight body composed of members of the CA could and should be created to monitor the government's progress. This oversight body should be decided on during the CA
- The media
- The people

14. The citizens in the CA aren't elected so they are not accountable, so is it morally right that they should be allowed to make these decisions?

The issue of accountability is an important one. Let’s be clear though, citizens are making recommendations in an effort to solve a crisis. Is it morally right to let things go on as they are?

Politicians are clearly not being held accountable in our current system either. Given the behaviour and track record of many politicians when they enter office, it is clear that the power of the ballot box is far more limited than people believe. **If accountability were truly present in our public life, we wouldn't be in this mess**. Election promises are consistently broken and changed.