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Summary

1. Climate Assembly UK provides an exemplar of how to run an exercise in thoughtful public engagement on a complex and sensitive subject, and of how to present findings to maximise the insights available to policymakers. It shows that such an exercise can be moved online.
2. The Assembly has influenced and will influence the design of other similar exercises. It has shown the value of public deliberative in helping Government and Parliament make policy effectively.
3. The Committee on Climate Change has engaged very closely with the Assembly's recommendations. Government ministers have also engaged positively.
4. The responses of Government and Parliament should be based on two key principles:
 - a. a citizens' assembly is there to *assist* Government and Parliament, not replace them
 - b. its recommendations deserve to be taken very seriously.

Government and Parliament should therefore scrutinise the Assembly's recommendations carefully and systematically:

- a. The Government should publish a point-by-point response. Where it does not propose to implement a recommendation, it should set out its reasoning.
- b. The Committee should monitor how Government and select committees respond.
- c. The Assembly should be reconvened in September 2021 to hear the responses of the Government and select committees and say where it believes further action to be needed.

Introduction

1. The Constitution Unit, housed in the Political Science Department at University College London, conducts timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions.
2. I am the Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit and an expert on citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberative democracy. I led the project that ran the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit in 2017, and I was a member of the Advisory Board of Climate Assembly UK.

Question 1. Has Climate Assembly UK (both its process and recommendations) been helpful to your work (or the work of your organisation), and if so, how?

3. Climate Assembly UK has provided an exemplar of how to run an exercise in thoughtful public engagement on a technical, complex, and politically very sensitive subject. In particular:
 - a. It ran a highly developed learning programme for Assembly members, including presentations and Q&A sessions with a wide variety of experts and stakeholders, offering a broad and balanced range of perspectives.

¹ I am grateful to Robert Liao for research assistance in completing this evidence submission.

- b. It achieved this in significant part through excellent planning by the organisers and exceptional commitment and engagement from the expert leads. All of those involved in these roles deserve high praise. Ensuring appropriate resourcing for such planning and expert guidance will be important for future exercises of this kind.
 - c. A further crucial underpinning of success was the Assembly's Advisory Board. I served on this, but its success came from the inclusion of representatives from stakeholder organisations with very diverse perspectives. Plans for each part of the Assembly were presented to the Board and discussed in depth. Feedback given by Board members was overwhelmingly positive, and suggestions for amendments were taken very seriously by the organisers.
4. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Climate Assembly UK was among the first deliberative exercises in the world to move to online operation. It did so with remarkable speed, and it demonstrated the feasibility of this approach. Similar methods have subsequently been taken up and further developed in other projects.
5. The final report of Climate Assembly UK again provides an exemplar for how to present the findings from such an assembly, in order to maximise the insights that are available to policymakers. Some citizens' assemblies – such as those in Ireland – publish only voting results. The wealth of information in the report on the reasoning underlying the Assembly's conclusions goes well beyond that, and ensures that members' voice can be fully heard.

Question 2. What impact has Climate Assembly UK had across your sector, and more widely?

6. I comment only on impact on democratic processes, which I know best. The points set out above have provided lessons for running citizens' assemblies and other similar exercises, which have had effect and will continue to do so. Other assemblies have now been run online: for example, the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland moved online and Scotland's Climate Assembly conducted all its business online, as have local assemblies in places such as Brighton and Hove, or Adur and Worthing. Some of these have tackled the topic of climate change. In my own work, I will be leading a Citizens' Assembly on Democracy later this year, which will similarly draw on many of these lessons.
7. In addition, Climate Assembly UK has demonstrated the value of public deliberative processes in helping Government and Parliament to make policy effectively. The positive reception was evident in the Commons debate on 26 November 2020. Anthony Browne, for example, said:

We have a lot of work to do. Tough action needs to be taken, but we are a democracy and we need to take the people with us...If we do not take the people with us, it might give rise to the anti-environmental populists that we see in other countries. This is why the Climate Assembly is so important, and I thoroughly welcome its report. These are members of the public considering the issues carefully and coming up with their own recommendations. It really shows just how sensible the British public are. They accept the need to tackle climate change. They know it is a real problem. They are not trying to resist it, and they support practical measures to do it, but they want to do it without sacrificing quality of life, because we do not need to. They do not want to stop going on holidays or living the lives they lead, and it is that pragmatism that is so essential.²

² [HC Deb, 26 November 2020](#).

Question 3. How do you perceive Climate Assembly UK to have affected the work of Government since the Assembly's report was published (10 September 2020)? To what extent do the Government's actions since then reflect Climate Assembly UK's recommendations?

8. The Committee on Climate Change has engaged with the recommendations of Climate Assembly UK very deeply. Its *Sixth Carbon Budget* cited the Assembly 64 times, drawing extensively on the Assembly's recommendations regarding both the speed and the modalities of transition to net. In a media interview, CCC Deputy Chair Baroness Brown said, 'we've based our advice very, very strongly on the outputs from the Climate Assembly'.³ At the launch event for the *Sixth Carbon Budget*, the CCC's Director of Analysis, Mike Thompson, said:

The assembly's a really helpful thing for us, because in a way we were a little bit blind before about what are the changes people are prepared to make, and what the Climate Assembly tells us is that actually, if you take the time to guide people through this, to explain why the changes are needed, to explain the sort of things that need to happen, they're really supportive of action, and actually we were surprised by how supportive they were of lots of the things that we were thinking of already.⁴

9. The positive engagement of Government ministers is also welcome. At the Assembly's own launch event in September 2020, COP26 President Alok Sharma said, 'this report will help to shape the work that we in government are doing over the next critical 14 months'.⁵ Speaking in the Commons on 26 November 2020, current BEIS Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said:

Citizen engagement—the engagement of our people—is absolutely necessary if we are going to achieve the net zero carbon emissions target that we have set ourselves.... Public engagement of this kind, as I have said, is absolutely necessary. We completely agree with the spirit of the Climate Assembly's recommendation on greater citizenship involvement.... The Government will continue to engage with the public on the changes that are needed to develop our ambitions on net zero and to listen very attentively to feedback.⁶

Question 4. What would a good response to Climate Assembly UK from the Government look like? What would a good response from Parliament look like?

10. This is an important question, and it is very welcome that the Committee is asking it. The responses of both Government and Parliament should be based on **two key principles**:
- First, **a citizens' assembly is there to assist Government and Parliament, not to replace them**. Some activists have suggested the opposite, and that a citizens' assembly's recommendations should be implemented automatically. But this would damage the democratic process. Decision-makers must be both representative and accountable. Only Parliament, and the Government based in it, can meet both requirements.
 - Second, however, **a citizens' assembly's recommendations deserve to be taken very seriously**. Such an assembly provides unique insight into how people trade off competing values and priorities once they have had a chance to consider the issues in great depth. Parliament has decided that net zero emissions must be achieved by 2050. It is well known that that will involve tough choices, and that success will require keeping members of the public on board. But there was been limited information on

³ BBC Radio 4 World at One, 9 December 2020.

⁴ Committee on Climate Change, *Sixth Carbon Budget*, [launch event](#), 9 December 2020.

⁵ UK Parliament, [Climate Assembly Final Report launch event](#), 10 September 2020.

⁶ [HC Deb, 26 November 2020](#).

what options people will be willing to bear. Climate Assembly UK changes that. It is a tremendously valuable resource for policymakers.

11. Given these two principles, Government and Parliament should scrutinise the recommendations made by Climate Assembly UK carefully and systematically, and should respond to each in turn. Having asked the Assembly members to do this work and having welcomed the report and committed to taking it seriously, the six select committees and ministers should now follow through on that. Doing so should involve three core elements:
 - a. First, **the Government should publish a point-by-point response to Climate Assembly UK's report.** Where it does not propose to implement a recommendation, it should set out its reasoning openly and honestly. Members of Climate Assembly UK based their recommendations on careful consideration of a range of evidence. The Government would not be taking those recommendations seriously if it rejected them without equivalent analysis.
 - b. Second, **the BEIS Committee, working with the chairs of the six sponsoring committees, should monitor how both the Government and parliamentary select committees respond to each of the Assembly's recommendations.** Having sought a formal response from the Government, the Committee should hold ministers to account for how they respond. It should monitor which recommendations select committees have considered, and whether they have done so fully. The chairs of the six sponsoring committees should work collectively to ensure that all the recommendations are given proper attention.
 - c. Third, **Climate Assembly UK should be reconvened an appropriate period after the publication of its report in September 2020, in order to hear the detailed responses of the Government and the select committees and indicate where it believes further action to be needed.** This would be done in the same collaborative and deliberative spirit as the original Assembly, enabling ongoing thoughtful dialogue among MPs, ministers, and Assembly members as to the best path forward. This might best be done one year after publication of the Assembly's final report—hence, in September 2021—which would allow a stock-take ahead of the COP26 summit in November. If significant matters remained outstanding at the time of this review, it could be repeated after one further year.
12. These are not outlandish suggestions, but are becoming accepted as best practice if citizens' assemblies are to become embedded in and strengthen existing democratic decision-making processes. For example:
 - a. Many of the local citizens' assemblies held throughout the UK—including the three assemblies held as part of the Government's own Innovation in Democracy programme—have been followed by detailed responses from the local authorities concerned. The Conservative-led Test Valley Borough Council published an official response to its citizens' assembly on Romsey town centre,⁷ detailing how the assembly's proposals would shape their South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan. Similarly, the multi-party Greater Cambridge Partnership published an official response, detailing policy objectives and responses to each of the policy measures identified by assembly members.⁸

⁷ Test Valley Borough Council, [council meeting](#), 2 September 2020.

⁸ Greater Cambridge Partnership, ['Response from the Greater Cambridge Partnership'](#), 9 July 2020.

- b. Follow-up citizens' assembly sessions designed to scrutinise implementation are part of a system for enabling deliberative public engagement in the policy-making process that has recently been implemented in Belgium's German-speaking region, Ostbelgien,⁹ and similar processes have been mooted elsewhere.¹⁰

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⁹ ['The Ostbelgien Model'](#), *The Alternative*, 21 May 2019.

¹⁰ E.g., Ieva Cesnulaityte, ['Citizens' Councils in Vorarlberg'](#), *Medium*, 25 June 2020.