Citizens’ Assembly Websites: Practical Guidance

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Introduction

When running a Citizens’ Assembly, it’s vital to ensure that all the information around it is easily accessible online.

A dedicated website can help you to publicise, recruit, inform and communicate during the whole process, from planning to sharing of results. But beyond that, along with offline communication, it helps support two of the most crucial standards suggested in Marcin Gerwin’s well-regarded list for Citizens’ Assemblies: Visibility and Transparency.

It can also help with the further standards of Impact: making clear from the outset what will result from the outcome of the Assembly; and Openness: providing a forum where everyone can contribute to the process.

Here we discuss two pillars of a Citizens’ Assembly website: its design and editorial principles; and the information that should be included. Together with examples of notable sites from previous Assemblies, we hope this information will help you plan and implement an effective site. We focus here on principles and content, rather than technical requirements or implementation details.

This is version 1.1 of this document - an online commentable version can be found at:
https://research.mysociety.org/publications/citizens-assembly-websites
Design and editorial principles

Lay the foundations for your website by giving good consideration to its design and the principles it will adhere to. This process may take longer than you had anticipated, but always pays off in terms of increased engagement, effectiveness and inclusivity.

Design

Ideally, the design of the site will convey the importance and civic nature of the undertaking. Consider giving a consistent design to all materials around the Assembly, from the website to printed material, such as invitations.

Discoverability

- Make sure you know where any previous online discussion or decision making processes around the topic have been, and make sure there are links from there to the Assembly site.
- If there’s an obvious platform on which previous deliberation or consultation has happened, consider whether your new site should be added as a section or minisite there rather than creating a new standalone entity, so that a record of the wider process is kept together.
- Ensure that the website has a short memorable URL if possible; or if not, you can use a URL shortener to create a short, meaningful URL when sharing the link with the public.
- Link from your institutional site: if you need to book space on the homepage or in news bulletins/page banners, do this well in advance.
- Use your social media accounts to engage followers and get them talking about the Assembly, before launch and during the whole process.
- Share the URL of the website at any relevant events or places before the Assembly takes place: you might wish to print flyers or posters.
- Consider the use of Google Adwords, or ads on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to lead people to the site.
- If the assembly information is being hosted on a microsite detached from the official institutional website, make sure the official website has a small page to mention and link to the external site - this is helpful for reassuring people receiving invitations that it is an official project.
Accessibility

Making sure that as many people as possible can access your website is always important; but in a
democratic process like a Citizens’ Assembly, it’s all the more crucial. The same principle should
apply as for the Assembly itself: you’ll need to make an extra effort to ensure that the site is
inclusive, both for disabled Assembly members and for disabled members of the wider public.
There is some guidance online which will help you check that your site is adhering to the best
standards of accessibility:

- GOV.uk’s service manual has a good set of resources for testing that your site is accessible,
either manually or automatically.
- The US government’s digital agency offers a helpful checklist.

Plain language

Many of the concepts around Citizens’ Assemblies will be unfamiliar to the majority of the people
who visit the site. Always bear this in mind and try to put yourself in the position of someone who
is new to the whole area, avoiding specialised jargon where possible.
Guides to clear writing include:

- The Plain English Campaign’s resource, which includes free guides and tools
- The Government Digital Service guide on writing well for your audience
- Adam Cronkright and Simon Pek’s paper on communicating around sortition (the process
  of selecting the members of a Citizens’ Assembly).

Transparency

Content should be as clear and transparent as possible about every aspect of the Assembly, from
the way it is run to how binding the results will be.

- There are many digital tools which can help facilitate a Citizens’ Assembly, including some
  which invite input from the wider public or stakeholder groups. Your site should make
  clear how such input will be used — if at all — in the decision-making process.
- Include a brief history of the matter under discussion, including an explanation of why a
  Citizens’ Assembly was decided upon as a solution.
- Explain the process by which Assembly Members will be picked, and any measures you
  have in place to ensure that the membership is balanced and inclusive.
If the assembly is on a contentious issue, there may be greater interest in the procedural details of the assembly administration process. If your organisation is subject to Freedom of Information requests, these requests may expand the scope of material that needs to be published. Planning to publish more material (e.g. the areas invitations were sent to, success at meeting stratification criteria) earlier, rather than holding back for the main report, helps reduce unexpected work.

**Evaluation**

Using an analytics system such as Google Analytics or Matomo on your site will allow you to measure how many people visit it. This can be invaluable when assessing the success of the site after the assembly has been run.

**Data Protection**

If you are collecting people’s email addresses and other personal information, ensure that you are adhering to your wider organisations’ general GDPR principles. Ask your Data Protection Officer or equivalent to advise on:

- Identifying your legitimate interest in data collection
- Asking users’ consent
- Storing users’ personal data
- Responding to future requests for deletion

As when handling the personal data of assembly members themselves, these points will also need to be considered in regard to the evidence submitted by non-assembly members, especially where it is of a sensitive or personal nature (for instance, personal testimonies, or names of recommended speakers).

While there is no problem with holding personal information (as long as it is being handled appropriately), different principles should apply when information is published. For instance, the Irish Citizens’ Assembly process did not allow anonymous submissions, but allowed personal and identifying details to be redacted on request for “personal stories and sensitive submissions”. This may involve additional fields in data collection.

Additionally, you may seek recommendations for people to give evidence to the Assembly. You should decide and make clear in advance whether you will publish the names of the people who
are recommended (recognising that you may need to cease doing so if they object), or whether you will seek their permission before doing so.

If working with external partners who are managing the recruitment and administration process, the organisation will have to regather consent from participants to directly contact assembly members.

**Archiving**

The website serves as a useful archive of the process, evidence and outcomes of a Citizens’ Assembly, so you should plan to host it for the long term, not just for the immediate period around the Assembly. That may mean that you need to decide which information, if any, will no longer be relevant after the Assembly has taken place, and make plans to remove it.

**Information to Include**

While the site needs to give a good overview of the Citizens’ Assembly process, it is important not to pack it so full of information that people will be overwhelmed. We outline in the following sections the information that we think is key to include before, during and after the assembly.

**Before**

- Basic information, in plain language, explaining what a Citizens’ Assembly is
- What decision this Assembly is going to contribute to, and how its conclusions will be used in that decision (for example, advising some other body; being directly implemented)
- What the process leading up to a Citizens’ Assembly has been, and why you are having one
- Who commissioned the Assembly, and who is running it
- How the Assembly members will be chosen / how they were chosen
- A timeline of the process: what will happen when
- Who is on the advisory board (once you know)
- Information on accessibility and how citizens can access extra support to take part, such as large font materials, BSL interpreters, an induction loop, etc. Invite potential participants to get in touch to discuss their individual needs, and make a commitment to meet them
- A privacy statement including your commitment to GDPR and explaining the channels should anyone who has submitted personal information wish to withdraw their consent
- A code of practice or principles outlining the behaviour you expect from members, online and face to face
- Information on the procedure to apply to be an observer, and rules for observers.
- FAQs: to ensure that these really reflect the questions people have, give visitors a chance to add queries in a comment, and then regularly add them, with the answers, to your FAQs

**During**

- There should be some information on who the members of the Assembly are. You’ll need to decide what information you think is appropriate to share, given the context of the Assembly. More complex information such as names, bios and photos will require more planning (and consent from Assembly Members) than overall demographic information for the assembly as a whole
- The evidence that is presented to the assembly: this is very important for transparency and will include any slides used and videos of presentations
- To the extent possible, something that gives a flavour of the Assembly members at work, such as photos, a short edited video, etc.

**After**

- Once the Assembly is over and a report has been written, it is crucial that this is easily accessible on the site too. Consider offering it in a variety of formats, including PDF, plain text and Kindle/ebook versions. A short page on the website itself covering the summary of the conclusions will make the results easier to access via search engines and more accessible on mobile devices
- Information or resources that give a sense of the experience of being part of the assembly - for example, blog posts from members or interviews with them
- Some way to track the implementation of the recommendations into policy, following the assembly - this can be a link to another site.
Beyond the basics

This guide has explored the basic information that should be included on a Citizens’ Assembly website - however depending on other decisions made about the assembly, this might be just the start of its usefulness. The website is a focal point for how the assembly relates to the public - and this can address how the assembly receives information from the public as well as information about and from the assembly that is shared with them. This may involve a website requirement as simple as listing an email address where people can submit comments, or it could involve integrating sophisticated ways of submitting and viewing submissions. In our previous report covering digital tools that can be used as part of a Citizens’ Assembly we discuss various approaches for involving the wider public using online processes.

A principle we suggest is that you consider the digital tools you use and how you use them to be part of the overall process design. Focus on what you want to achieve in the process overall, and then examine which elements could be achieved online in order to guide your selection of tools.

Possible venues for digital tools might include:

- If the complete set of stakeholders is not known you might use digital tools as a means to identify stakeholders and experts.
- If there’s only a broad mandate for the assembly rather than a clear question, or you don’t know how the wider public relate to the arguments, you could use digital tools to involve them in question and agenda setting.
- If the arguments around the issue are not well known, or are complex, argument mapping tools might be useful.
- If a fair judgement of the issue requires some understanding of the feelings of people who won’t necessarily be represented in the assembly or might find it hard to give evidence in person, you might consider digital tools as a way of collecting lived experience testimony to balance with argument.
- If the issue is of widespread interest or controversy, you might need digital tools to manage and present the volume of submissions from the wider public to the assembly in a meaningful, digestible way.
Example material

We include here a set of recent Citizens’ Assembly websites, with links to specific information within them, as examples of ways of providing some of the information listed above. Inquiry websites share the requirement for transparency and openness around evidence and process, and also contain good examples of meeting these requirements.

Irish Citizens’ Assembly

Useful example information:

- Principles, and rules and procedures for the Assembly (including accessibility statement)
- Submissions received, and rules and statistics as to how they have been handled
- Data protection policy
- Information about advisory group and their terms of reference
- Information on procurement and costs

Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit

Useful example information:

- FAQ
- Full and summary reports, accompanied by video explaining the assembly
- Schedules and speaker information
- Form to ask a question
- Voting results

Citizens’ Assembly for Northern Ireland

Useful example information:

- FAQ
- Blog posts from a member and observer, and facilitator, describing the process in detail
- Personal experience quotes from members

Grenfell Tower Inquiry

Useful example information:
Evidence as video and transcripts, and with key documents presented alongside

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