

Citizens' Juries and Spatial Planning - A Formula for Change?

Edmond Grace



The National Planning Framework (NPF), published in 2018,¹ sets out to shape the future growth and development of Ireland up to the year 2040. While accepting Dublin's key role, the aim is to facilitate a relative shift towards the regions with 50% of new growth envisaged in the main urban centres (Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway) and 50% in smaller towns and rural areas. Some 40% of new housing would be within existing "urban footprints"; this would be facilitated by making state owned land available on a structured basis and by legislating for enhanced powers of compulsory purchase. The emphasis is on the interconnected nature of the built environment and the resulting need to ensure balanced development. The NPF makes reference to "quality of life and place" which includes accessible services and care for the natural environment and cultural heritage.

The recently published Expert Group report² on the forthcoming (2024) revision to the NPF contends that implementation of NPF (2018) remains at an early stage. It recognises that tension and conflict are an inevitable part of ambitious projects such as the NPF and that this must be planned for. It also questions whether the NPF (2018) is even detailed enough to actually guide decision making. The Expert Group notes "the very strong enthusiasm" for planning and sustainable development that exists among community groups, businesses, and development bodies in Ireland, but it also calls for greater investment in advocacy. It acknowledges the need for "a collective 'buy in' to the importance of spatial planning" and asks whether a "consultative forum" might contribute to this process.³

The "deliberative wave"

Such a forum would be very much in line with the emergence of what the OECD refers to as "representative deliberative processes" in many countries throughout the world. A report published in 2020⁴ by the OECD refers to 289 such processes held across 18 countries over three decades. 144 of these processes have taken place in the European Union, eight at EU level and the remainder in twelve different Member States. These events were conducted primarily at the local and regional level (80%). Ireland, with its Citizens' Assemblies, has played its part but the country is unique in focusing almost exclusively on national events. Given the emphasis in both the NPF and the Expert Group Report on the importance of 'place', which is necessarily local, Ireland might have something to learn from looking at the wider international picture.

The 2020 OECD report is subtitled, '*Catching the deliberative wave*'. At several points the report makes reference to how this 'wave' has been building since the 1980s:

Public authorities at all levels of government have been using Citizens' Assemblies, Juries, Panels, and other representative deliberative processes. In these processes, randomly selected citizens, making up a microcosm of a community, spend significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to develop informed collective recommendations for public authorities.⁵

Twelve different types of process are identified in the 2020 OECD report, but the citizens' jury approach (also dubbed the 'citizens' panel') has been used on no fewer than 115 occasions across ten different countries, making it by far the most widely used of the different processes that are currently in use. A citizens' jury is typically smaller than an Irish Citizens' Assembly, with an average of thirty-four members, though it can be much larger. It tends to be a lot less time-consuming, averaging 4.1 working days, and are often more varied in duration, lasting from five weeks to two years⁶. In Ireland we have had the experience of the PeopleTalk citizens' jury⁷ that was established in 2013 by Galway County Council, which had twelve members and sat for two years.

1. [Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework](#)

2. Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2023) '*Report of Expert Group for the First Revision of the National Planning Framework*', 07 September, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1924f-report-of-expert-group-for-the-first-revision-of-the-national-planning-framework/>

3. *ibid* p. 17

4. Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions, *Catching the Deliberative Wave*. OECD, 2020, [Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave | en | OECD](#)

5. OECD 2020, p.3. (see note 4.)

6. OECD 2020, p.39 (see note 4.)

7. *Enabling Citizens, A Two Way Street*: Edmond Grace. An Analysis of Participation Between Citizens and the Public Service

The terminology can be confusing. What are called ‘citizens’ panels’ were used in the 2020-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe, though they only functioned at national and European level and were remarkably similar in size to the Irish Citizens’ Assemblies. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyden stated that she envisaged them becoming “a regular feature of our democratic life,”⁸ though it is hard to see this happening if it is kept at national and European level. If such an approach to democracy is to become “regular” it will inevitably have to include a local dimension.

Sortition vs. The Vote

The use of lottery - or “sortition” - is a central element to the design of many forms of representative deliberative process. In the modern world, sortition is a novelty, but for most of European history, beginning with Ancient Athens, sortition was considered the norm in democratic politics. Aristotle⁹ saw elections as oligarchic; to fight an election you had to have access to resources which were only available to the wealthy. Sortition, on the other hand, meant that any citizen could be chosen to serve in public office.

Selection by lottery is no guarantee of competence on the part of the individuals selected and the Athenians were aware of this. They put in place vetting procedures before final appointment and ensured continuing accountability afterwards, including the possibility of dismissal. The Romans made little use of sortition and when the practice re-emerged in the medieval city states of Italy it was combined with voting, with ultimate decisions being taken by vote. With the passing of time, sortition gradually lost ground to election¹⁰ and, finally, to ducal dynasties.

In the 18th Century, both Montesquieu and Rousseau noted Aristotle’s identification of sortition with democracy and both expressed a preference for the ‘aristocratic’ process of elections.¹¹ Sortition essentially began to disappear from view with the emergence of the nation state in the 17th Century, and it is probably no accident that, among the American and French revolutionaries, democracy was not typically a fashionable word. The revolutionaries did talk about equality even if, in the U.S., slavery continued and in France workers were not allowed to organise.

The equality argument, however, took on a life of its own, particularly in relation to the vote. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the name of equality, the vote was extended to the entire adult population - male and female, rich and poor, throughout Western Democracy. The high point in this development came in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which speaks of “the will of the people... expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage.”¹² The vote was now unrivalled, and it seemed as if Aristotle’s association of sortition with the democratic process had been definitively cast aside. Yet in recent years sortition is firmly back on the agenda. The implications of this for the future of democracy have yet to be fully worked out but a very definite momentum - a ‘deliberative wave’ - has gathered. The revision to the NPF is taking place against this background of the re-emergence of sortition.

Representative deliberative process

The 2020 OECD report speaks of “this time of complex change”¹³ in which democratic structures are failing to deliver. In every OECD member state, between 2007 and 2018, confidence in national government declined. In 2007 the level of confidence in government across the OECD was 50%, but by 2018 it had dropped to 15%. In Ireland, confidence in government in 2007 was decidedly high compared with other OECD members, at 70%. Since then, there has been a larger than average drop, and by 2018 Ireland had reached the same level - 15% - as everyone else. Two years later, in 2020, the Edelman Trust Barometer showed that, in the 28 countries surveyed, 66% of people did not have confidence in the ability of their current government leaders to address their country’s challenges. Only a small minority, about 10% of respondents in the OECD report, agreed when asked if their government takes the views of people into account in ‘formulating social benefits.’ In Ireland, that minority was larger at 20%.

8. State of the Union Address, 2022 - https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493

9. The Principles of Representative Government, Bernard Manin (Cambridge,1997.), pp.8,11,14. [Athenian democracy - Wikipedia](#)

10. Manin (1997), pp.6–62

11. Manin (1997) p 73ff.

12. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations](#) Article 21.3

13. OECD 2020, pp.20-21

The 2020 OECD report set its study of representative deliberative processes against a wider background of “polarisation, populism, and pessimism.” It speaks of the “left behind” who are in revolt against inequality and globalisation. These cohorts tend to be under-represented in decision making and are “disproportionately affected by lower-wage migrant fluxes.” The report uses the term “dissatisfied democrats” to describe people who are unhappy with the current state of democracy, but are enthusiastic about all forms of political participation, including those which are more active and deliberative.¹⁴ According to the report, people today, more than ever, “want to have a greater say in shaping the policies that affect their lives beyond the opportunity to vote every few years.”¹⁵

The OECD report argues the case for representative deliberative processes.¹⁶ Unlike other public participation exercises, which tend to be adversarial, and grievance focused, the deliberative process provides a space for learning and for the development of informed recommendations. When people have been given the time and resources to learn, deliberate, and develop considered recommendations, they can bring greater legitimacy to the making of tough decisions. When they are given the opportunity to participate in a deliberative process, they see it as a sign of respect for them as citizens. In the deliberative process, people from excluded categories can be given a standing which is not possible elsewhere. Finally, deliberation can be an effective way of overcoming ethnic, religious, and ideological divisions as people from different backgrounds meet and, with the help of professional facilitators, listen to each other.

The Value of Place

The focus on better regional balances in the NPF review across the three regions - Eastern, Southern and Northern and Western - is done with a view to channelling growth away from a congested and overcrowded Dublin region and providing opportunities for development in other centres. Four cities are identified as key metropolitan areas - Limerick, Cork, and Waterford in the South and Galway in the West - with a number of towns singled out because of their regional significance, including Sligo and Athlone in the West, as well as Letterkenny in relation to the North West Corridor, and Dundalk-Drogheda for the Dublin-Belfast Corridor.¹⁷ This emphasis on the regions is with a view to furthering their development and ensuring the better management of Dublin’s growth.

The implementation of the Framework will involve extensive reallocation of land use, especially with regard to housing, both in the redevelopment of urban sites and in supporting village-living through more focused housing policies.¹⁸ The issue of housing is particularly fraught in Ireland. Housing is needed urgently, but Ireland needs to learn from past experience, when new suburbs were built with disproportionate attention to housing stock. Key supporting services, including schools and transport links, were disregarded. The effect on local communities was long lasting and harmful.

As well as being an urgent need, housing is effectively a test case for a form of government which looks beyond the immediate to a more long-term perspective. The involvement of citizens in the area of planning is probably the surest way to redress the loss of confidence in government that has taken hold throughout the Western world as mentioned above. By far, the most common topic dealt with by the processes examined in the OECD report relates to urban planning.¹⁹

Adopting citizens’ juries as a feature of the implementation of the NPF would be in line with best international practice. Their role would be particularly valuable, given that decisions at local level can often prove controversial, as will also be the case with the decisions needed to bring about another major objective of the framework - the creation of a more sustainable living environment with less car dependency. The emphasis on the value of place is linked to quality of life and to the recognised elements which go to supporting it, including access to health services, education, good living conditions, employment, retail services, and leisure.²⁰ The infrastructure needed to sustain these elements will no doubt be welcome, but it is vital to recognise that

14. OECD 2020. pp.20,21

15. OECD (2020), pp.20-21. (See note 4)

16. OECD (2020), pp.26-27. (See note 4)

17. NPF, p.21. (See note 1)

18. NPF, p.74. (See note 1)

19. OECD 2020., p.73.

20. NPF, p.80ff.. (See note 1)

determining the location of schools, hospitals, roads, and areas of leisure and nature preservation will not be a frictionless exercise. All of this could have the potential to compound public distrust of government unless it is used to provide an opportunity to invite citizen participation and build public trust in the role of government. This could, in turn, play a crucial role in improving national spatial planning, as our population grows, and environmental issues become more challenging.

Commanding Respect

One feature of sortition in the contemporary world, which distinguishes it from versions from earlier times, is that it is consciously designed to produce something like a microcosm of society. In Ancient Athens, every citizen was a male with military training and any random selection of citizens was more than likely to be representative of that cohort. By comparison, the population of the modern nation state is so vast and the life circumstances so diverse that there is no guarantee that a group of randomly selected citizens would be representative. The representative deliberative process of our time sets out to ensure that those selected reflect the diversity of the population from which they have been selected on a randomised basis. Attention is paid to factors including gender balance, age, regional distribution, and socio-economic diversity (usually through assessing educational attainment and employment). Marginal groups are also deliberately included and facilitation, which is a key feature in the representative deliberative process, is designed to ensure that no voice is overlooked.²¹

The Irish experience is presented in the OECD report as providing evidence that when citizens are given the resources and time to learn about issues and deliberate with the help of skilled facilitators, the final recommendations can have a unique authority²². When the Expert Group document emphasises the need for ‘buy-in’ and advocacy, there can hardly be a more effective form of advocacy than inviting representative groups of citizens to engage directly in the decision-making process related to the revision of the Planning Framework and to its implementation. Judging from the experience to date, those invited from the general population to participate in public decision-making are likely to respond with enthusiasm and with a positive determination to contribute.²³ Their recommendations are likely to command respect and trust which no public administrator and no elected politician could hope to equal.

A Question of Focus

One key difference between the modern and traditional forms of sortition is that in Ancient Athens those appointed by sortition had decision-making powers, either as individual public officials or as members of councils, or of court juries in cases which typically dealt with political issues rather than individual disputes. Modern deliberative processes tend to be advisory, and one criticism of modern forms of deliberative democracy is that the entire exercise may just be a matter of show, in which much is made of the deliberative process, but the recommendations are quietly forgotten.

Any effective response to the recommendations of a deliberative process depends on the fit between the matter to be addressed and the final decision to be made. The issue must not be too broad (or vague) or too narrow (or insignificant) and it should not lead toward a predetermined answer. In Ireland, there was an excellent fit between deliberation on same sex marriage and on the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution pertaining to abortion and the Constitutional referendums which followed. The fit is not so clear, for example, in the case of the Assembly on Gender Equality which made 45 recommendations and the Assembly on Biodiversity which made 159 recommendations.²⁴ One problem with very numerous recommendations is that it is tempting to select and highlight those which appear more palatable and less controversial and to ignore the rest, notwithstanding that some of the ‘rest’ may be crucial to overall success. To be effective in commanding attention, the deliberative process needs to focus on one critical issue, such as the Dublin Region Citizens’ Assembly which couched its recommendations around the overarching proposal for an elected mayor for greater Dublin.²⁵

21. NPF, p.118. (See note 1)

22. NPF, p.109. (See note 1)

23. NPF, p.110. (See note 1)

24. <https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/ReportonBiodiversityLoss.pdf> pp.13-32

25. https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/report_dublincitizensassembly_final_lowres.pdf

The 2020 OECD report makes the point that the subject matter to be submitted to a representative deliberative process must be of “broad concern”.²⁶ The issues of same sex marriage and abortion were the subject of intense public debate in Ireland but the same cannot be said about two other questions placed before the Convention on the Constitution, namely: reducing the voting age to sixteen and the President’s term of office to five years. On three other issues, randomising the order of candidates on the ballot paper; extending voting hours during elections; and extending access to postal voting, the Convention sensibly declined to make any decision.²⁷

It is useful to compare the functioning of citizens’ juries and assemblies with court juries with which people are largely familiar. In both processes competing arguments are presented, the facts determined, the jurors adjourn, and after due consideration, a verdict is reached. Just as such a process is invaluable in dealing with major crimes but is not called for in minor offences, deliberative democratic processes should only be used to address issues of major controversy or political import. Furthermore, just as court juries tend to be focused on a single issue, with deliberative processes the fewer the recommendations that are called for, the more likely they will be to receive the kind of attention which would make them authoritative. A long list, by comparison, is less likely to command public interest. One test for deciding when to establish a Citizens’ Assembly or jury is to ask whether or not the issue to be dealt with, if left unaddressed, is not just controversial but is likely to add to division of society.

The issues raised by the NPF relate to everyone’s daily lives - where people live, their access to employment and services, and their relationship to the environment. The implementation of the plan will involve a significant change of public attitude toward the planning process. That, in itself, is sure to command public interest. It is also, as the Expert Group report points out, sure to give rise to controversy. Furthermore, because it relates to the use of land, decisions made will be highly visible and enduring, and the resulting divisions will be likely to fester. One way of resolving such fraught issues would be by citizen juries. The fact that they are randomly selected would free them from any taint of vested interest and would command public respect.

National and Regional Participation

Citizens’ juries could facilitate the successful implementation of the NPF in Ireland at both national and regional levels. First, at national level a jury could be used as part of the launch and promotion of the new framework. The revised NPF will be the outcome of research and reflection on the part of groups of experts, including planners, demographers, social scientists, environmentalists, public servants, and representative bodies. It will be based on highly specialised knowledge, but its successful implementation will depend on public understanding and acceptance.

A citizens’ jury could be empanelled and presented with the following four principles of ‘place-centred’ planning.

1. Quality of place is bound up with quality of life.
2. A sense of place values the local environment, cultural heritage, connectedness to services, and access to other places.
3. Place-centred development which respects quality of place requires a coherent overview of needs, resources, and amenities; it cannot be left to isolated initiatives.
4. This overview is needed at local, regional, and national level and, to be effective, requires the participation and trust of citizens.

The jurors could be invited to make recommendations on how to ensure the participation and trust of citizens in developing an overview of place-centred development. This jury would serve two purposes. First, it would act as a kind of laboratory for communicating the concept of place-centred planning to the general public. Secondly, its recommendations would serve as a vehicle for furthering that communication.

26. NPF, p.85. (See note 1)

27. [Constitutional Convention](#) Appendix D.

At the regional level, significant development is envisaged in particular cities and towns across Ireland. Each of these urban centres constitute or is part of a local authority area, but the regional development being called for will affect a number of neighbouring local authorities. An integrated development of these urban centres will have to be overseen at the level of regional councils²⁸, and these exchanges will have to be conducted in a way that commands understanding and public trust. If a citizens' jury were empanelled for each of the regions and presented with the resources available and the infrastructural supports that would be needed, they would be capable of resolving the issues in a manner which would be seen as reasonable and fair.

The Expert Group report speaks of the need for advocacy in relation to the NPF. If advocacy sets out to persuade a passive 'general public' it will achieve little, and that public will remain passive. If it invites a small group of citizens to play a part in communicating the plan with a view to encouraging their fellow citizens to participate in the process, the outcome of such a deliberation would be much more persuasive than any utterance from any politician, public administrator, or academic would be. An ongoing role for citizens' juries would strengthen the NPF, while enriching the democratic culture of this country. On an international level, the role of citizens' juries could contribute towards a movement which enjoys the enthusiastic endorsement of both the European Commission and the OECD.

28 NPF, p.12, 30. (See note 1)

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is Ireland's leading international affairs think tank. Founded in 1991, its mission is to foster and shape political, policy and public discourse in order to broaden awareness of international and European issues in Ireland and contribute to more informed strategic decisions by political, business and civil society leaders.

The IIEA is independent of government and all political parties and is a not-for profit organisation with charitable status. In January 2021, the Global Go To Think Tank Index ranked the IIEA as Ireland's top think tank.

© Institute of International and European Affairs, July 2024

Creative Commons License

This is a human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike> 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You are free to:

- Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt - remix, transform, and build upon the material
- The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The views expressed here are solely those of the author.



The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme of the European Union



The Institute of International and European Affairs,

8 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

T: +353-1-8746756 F: +353-1-8786880

E: reception@iiea.com W: www.iiea.com