

Learnings from the ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub

12 November 2018

This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences of the ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub Project (2018).

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Learnings from the ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub

What is the question?

In 2018, newDemocracy had oversight of a territory-level public deliberation in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) on the issue of housing choices. This topic implicitly brings with it associations of zoning change, density and unwelcome change. The project arose from a growing disquiet within the community and government: that, currently, planning rules potentially don't allow people and communities to create the dwellings and neighbourhoods they would prefer.

Planning decisions made by governments are rarely trusted by the general public. High levels of cynicism surround developer involvement in making long-term decisions about construction, zoning and housing with the public perception being that power and influence triumph over public decision making. This makes it difficult for governments to make long-term decisions. For this reason, the ACT Government commissioned the newDemocracy Foundation to design and deliver a deliberative citizens' jury-type process.

This note addresses the learnings for newDemocracy about this particular public deliberation.

Why did we do it?

The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate of the ACT Government sought innovative and participatory forms of planning that included members of the community in the contentious, trade-off decisions concerning the place in which they live. The usual approach to community consultation skews to hearing from active interest groups, focuses on public opinion rather than public judgment, and does nothing to decrease the widespread distrust in planning and zoning decisions made in the ACT. The Directorate wanted an approach that could overcome these limitations.

newDemocracy has an acute interest in small scale local planning decisions that can be assigned to randomly-selected citizens in deliberative environments. This particular project was an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of making planning decisions in this way. Further, planning decisions may require more information than other policy areas and newDemocracy wanted to test design elements of that.

What was the process?

To accomplish this, the Directorate conducted a review of Housing Choices in the ACT. This involved a deliberative Collaboration Hub for which newDemocracy provided design and oversight (See, [Mini-publics](#)). This review also involved a broader public consultation roadshow and the Demonstration Housing project that sought design proposals for innovative solutions ([Read more here](#)).

The goal with the Collaboration Hub was to shift public engagement away from 2-minute survey replies to considered public judgment after 40 hours of thinking and learning about the topic. Thirty-six randomly-selected members of the community met five times between May and July 2018 to make recommendations to the Minister. Their remit was this:

Canberra is changing – and there are many different ways our housing needs can be met.

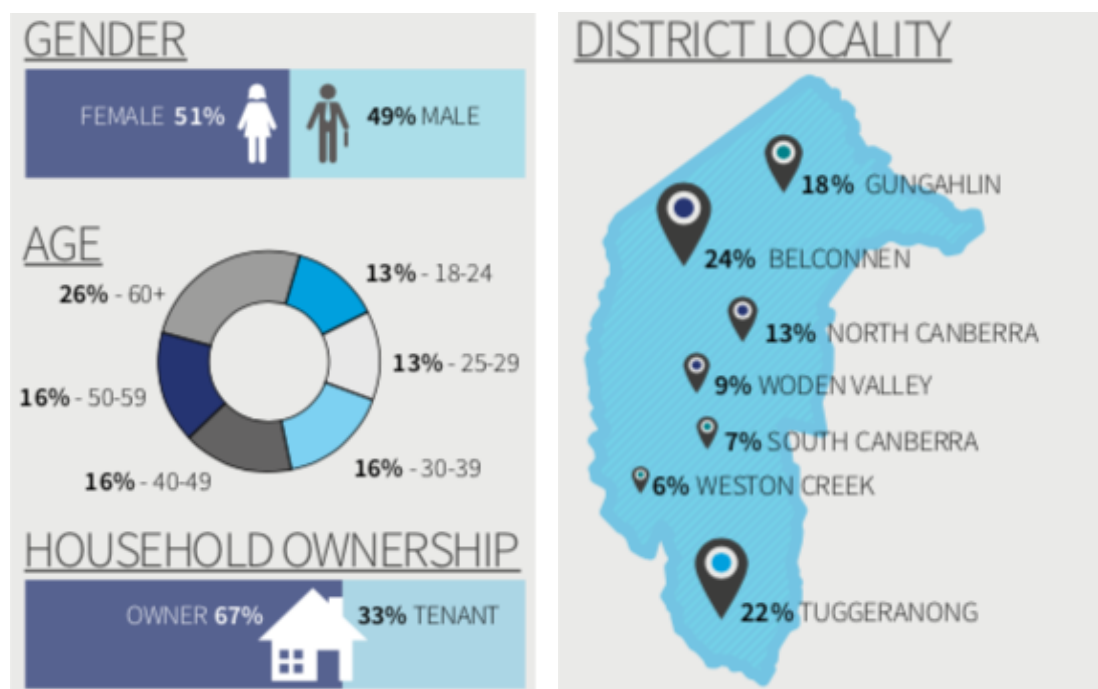
What should we do?

Ultimately, the group made key recommendations about design and construction quality, zoning, housing affordability and the environment. Their [final report can be accessed here](#), and the [Government's response here](#).

What worked well?

Recruitment

The recruitment for the Collaboration Hub was effective. Participants were randomly recruited to match a demographic and geographic profile of the ACT. This meant that participants descriptively represented the diversity of people in the ACT. newDemocracy received good numbers for RSVPs which meant that all ages and demographics were met.



Unique to the ACT, the locale of the national capital, was the skew of participants (roughly two-thirds) who worked for Government at some level (national or territory). This meant that participants were more acutely aware of how the Directorate makes decisions and what might influence the implementation of its recommendations. This was not an error in recruitment but a unique attribute of the ACT community.

There was one notable situation with recruitment. A participant was selected who worked for an architect who was putting a submission in for the Demonstration Housing element of the Housing Choices Review. Typically, we would resolve a conflict like this by asking the participant to consider if he/she perceived there to be a real conflict and how both his/her employer and the wider community would view involvement in the process. newDemocracy takes this approach because there are often perceived and real conflicts in community decision-making and there cannot be a rigid line of in or out. By asking a participant to consider if his/her involvement would be taking the spot of someone who might be better suited to being involved in the process, we create a more nuanced approach to complexity of perceived and real conflicts of interest.

This specific conflict meant that the participant was required to sit out the final session of the final day when participants of the Collaboration Hub used their recommendations to give comments and prioritise criteria for the Demonstration Housing Project – but was able to participate in the remainder of the process. This was negotiated with the entire group of participants, by asking them if they were comfortable with the conflict of interest and what, if any, measures should be taken. Ultimately, this participant was able to provide unique insight into housing choice in the ACT, something that may have been missing had the participant not been included at all.

Directorate staff on hand to answer questions

Directorate staff are best placed to answer off-the-cuff questions arising from participants. Typically, they are hesitant to play this role – often concerned about providing their perspectives on a problem because of the way it can be construed as the “government’s” position.

With careful positioning in the room, an environment can be created that enables government staff to provide real-time fact checks or grounding statements that help the participants find their way to their own decisions.

This role is invaluable. Staff can orient the participants, for example, about areas where the government needs advice, and enables the participants to enter into a consensus-seeking conversation where government advice is on-tap but not on-top (See, [Hearing from Experts](#)).

This approach was put into practice with the Housing Choices Collaboration Hub. Directorate staff were on hand for each of the sessions, able to answer questions on the fly so that participants did not experience a lack of information that could have stalled their progress. Importantly, staff members were only involved in conversations where the Hub requested their input or answers to specific questions.

Specifically, between the penultimate and final meetings, EPSDD staff were given draft recommendations for comment. Their comments helped shape the participants understanding of the clarity and use of their recommendations. They were asked, “What would you do with these recommendations?”. The answers gave a clear picture of the implications of recommendations and whether they were achieving their intended impact.

Going beyond immediately actionable recommendations

Throughout the Collaboration Hub, there was friction between two competing camps for the purpose and direction of the Hub’s final report and its recommendations. This centred on the perceived need to have focused recommendations that were practical and implementable in contrast to more open statements of principles and generalised intent.

This challenge regularly arises in deliberative mini-publics (See, [Deliberation](#)). It is a tension between how different types of people think and how they see the best use of their time.

Ultimately, the Housing Choices Collaboration Hub opted to make many recommendations that went beyond the ‘practical’ scope of immediately implementable and measurable in favour of recommendations that provided insight into the reasoning and principled aims of the recommendations themselves – i.e. clarity of intent. This was important because it did not specify the exact tools that government were required to use to reach a given outcome – not

turning people into planning experts, but instead giving a clear sense of community common ground to those who *are* experts.

Recommendations in this form are often more useful to government because they communicate a more accurate image of what a community wants from decision makers, without getting lost in the minutiae of specific plot-ratios or site coverage (where some participants may not have a technical understanding of the terms).

Decisive logistical decisions

Decisions around venues and catering are made long before Day 1. Sometimes, though not often, these venues or catering decisions do not pan out the way they had been imagined. In these situations, it takes courage to drop already-made plans and move venues.

This happened with the Housing Choices Collaboration Hub. The original room was difficult to locate within the building and catering was far from optimal. This left organisers with two options: to persist with the original venue and make changes that might help; or, to change venues.

The decision was made by the directorate to move venues. This dramatically improved everyone's experience with the deliberative process in terms of catering, accessibility and availability of natural light – dramatically aiding in retention of jurors.

What do we wish had worked better?

There is always room for improvement. This process ran differently to others in a small number of ways that are worth exploring.

Use of background reading materials

The defining difference between the ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub and many of the other projects newDemocracy has had oversight for, was the use of the background reading materials. These are important documents that provide the *initial* platform of information for the participants but are equally useful reference materials *throughout* the process.

For this reason, newDemocracy always advises government staff of the importance of these documents. They provide an opportunity to answer as many initial questions as possible to create time in the room for deeper deliberation ([EPSDD's information kit is available here](#)).

By all standard measures (and newDemocracy's regular comment and review), EPSDD's information kit was in-depth, thorough and in plain-English. These usual measures of usefulness and success of the reading materials would typically have indicated their continued use as reference material throughout the process.

However, the Collaboration Hub participants did not refer to, or seem to regularly use, their information kits beyond the first meeting (rarely bringing them to meetings). This meant that questions would regularly be asked that could have been answered by quick reference to the reading materials.

When asked, in the post-Hub survey, about why it might have been the case that the participants did not refer to their reading materials as often as expected the responses included:

“Appearances may be deceiving. I think it would have been useful to have sent out a hard copy of the kit before the first meeting.”

“People seemed to take in more info from the speakers and their own experiences”

“It was all very high-level info provided by government about what they wanted - mistrusted in the government steering the project and overly defining the process.”

“Part of the Information Kit materials were covered in greater depth by speakers”

“I suspect many participants did not read the material in detail.”

“There was a lot of jargon and it seemed to focus on zoning more than the group was interested in.”

“I think a number of people had particular views they wanted to air which wasn't reflected that well in the information kit”

“There was a lot of information to absorb and I think many people did not invest enough time outside the actual of the forum”

“Many of the participants clearly hadn't read it. This is why we needed a presentation on zoning on the third Saturday.”

This final comment highlights two aspects of the process, one that was done well and another that fell short. The availability for government staff to provide a presentation on zoning in the middle of the process was able to overcome the perceived lack of pre-reading.

Other survey responses draw on the key themes above. Namely, that some participants believed that others relied on their early opinions more than careful reading of the information; that some participants considered that the information provided by the government was leading; and that some participants felt that the time necessary for reading the information was excessive.

These are all issues that newDemocracy must address. Background reading materials are a crucial aspect of the success of citizens' jury-type deliberative processes. There are a number of issues here and each should be considered.

1. That the information provided was leading:

newDemocracy worked with the Directorate in producing the information kit. We were able to advise them to include open-ended questions that framed the kit around the key areas the Government needed answers to (in its view), in order to resolve the proposed remit question. This meant that, although the information kit *did* direct participants toward answering specific *questions*, –it did not direct them towards any pre-determined *answers*.

It appears that the low trust in the subject area made for a lower base-level of trust overall. This then extended to the reading materials themselves. There is a nuance here between healthy scepticism through critical thinking and a general distrust of information.

This confusion between directing the conversation toward questions and directing towards answers is a nuance that ought to be explored at the outset. Highlighting the areas where comment from the participants is most useful for the Directorate makes better use of everyone's time.

This was not done with the Collaboration Hub, contributing to a distrust of the background reading materials from some of the participants.

2. That participants did not invest the time

The suggestion that participants did not read the background reading material is not new for newDemocracy. We place a strong emphasis on the shared aspect of the shared learning exercise. This means that participants can take in and approach information at their own pace. However, this shared learning exercise becomes less suitable when those who do read the information kits opt to limit the way in which they reflect on or continue to reference the documents throughout the process. This information then becomes lost because of the way it is contained and not shared by those who do most of the information sourcing.

There is a suggestion in the survey responses: to mail hardcopy versions of the information kit prior to the first meeting. This is an approach newDemocracy has taken in the past – but one that adds a considerable additional expense. There is a trade-off between the time given for participants to read the materials, the accessibility of the materials and the cost. In newDemocracy's experience, hard-copy material received a month out is much more likely to be read than digital versions with 2-weeks' notice. This is primarily due to the ease of access of a physical booklet, something that is also referenced in some survey responses. The difficulty here is finding the financial resources and lead time to cover the additional expense. This is important because, of the places in which an organisation should prioritise their time and money, it is in the invitation and the background reading materials. Both contribute hugely to the integrity and depth of the process and contribute only a fraction of the overall investment in a process.

3. That participants did not want to have their views challenged

The suggestion that participants came into the process with views that conflicted with those presented in the information kit is again not a new issue for newDemocracy. Core to citizens' juries and public deliberation is the critical engagement with a diversity of views and sources. Participants are encouraged throughout to approach all information with a skill set of critical thinking (See, [Critical Thinking](#)). This group exercise covered the shared learning aspect of the process as well as drawing on the intellectual strength of diversity over ability (See, [Diversity Trumps Ability](#)). These skills are taught on Day 1 and are helpful for interrogating expert speakers, but this happens after background information reading has happened.

On Day 2 of the Collaboration Hub, the participants took part in a 'biases exercise' that had them sharing their own perceived biases or what they personally hoped would change with Housing Choices. This resulted in an exchange where one participant suggested they wanted a specific result because it would suit them, which prompted another participant to suggest that they wanted the exact opposite. This exchange forced the whole group to think through both their own positions and the ways in which they would find a compromise between competing interests. Instead of positioning participants against one another, it revealed the diversity of views and had everyone relaxed and laughing.

This reveals an opportunity for focusing the group on a re-reading of the information kit *as a group*, interrogating information in a new way and looking for gaps in breadth, depth and source diversity. Spending time on pre-conceived viewpoints narrows the focus of the whole process when participants seek to convince and not interrogate all information (See, Hartz-Karp & Carson, 2013).

What do the results mean for the practice of deliberative democracy?

Working with government staff

The broad success of this process comes from the relationship between Directorate staff in the room and the participants in the process. Regular in-the-room interactions communicated a clear sense of the intent behind the recommendations in the report while also allowing fast flowing information to enter the room when asked for. By having facilitators 'own' the interaction, it was done without increasing mistrust.

Often, government staff are hesitant to play this role but its success in this process is something newDemocracy can draw on for future processes. **This includes repeating the initial 'draft recommendations' review where government staff took the draft recommendations and provided comment on what their action would be when receiving the recommendation.** This helped participants track if their recommendations would have the desired impact. Overall, this method seems increase the likelihood of implementation of the recommendations or their overarching principles (See, Riedy & Kent 2017).

Information kit learnings

That there was mixed success with the information kit means newDemocracy must pay specific attention to this aspect of the process. newDemocracy already heavily emphasises the time needed to complete a good information kit. Additional elements such as posting hard-copies and in-the-room facilitation exercises that draw on and continue to return to the information kit are important in getting the most out of the time put into the information kit – notable in very low-trust topics.

Impact beyond recommendations report

This process highlighted the benefit of a continual dialogue between government staff and the participants of a deliberative process. newDemocracy places a strong emphasis on clarity of intent in final report writing. Nothing communicates this intent more than the conversations that are had in the room when developing and finalising group decision-making. Staff presence when those conversations are happening can often more clearly communicate intent than the difficult task of distilling the thoughts of 30 onto the page.

What remains unresolved?

Accusations of bias on the part of organisers

Participants in this process projected some accusations of bias on the part of the Government organisers. These ranged from scepticism around the implementation of recommendations to the leading of questions and answers. newDemocracy's role in alleviating this tension by ensuring the independence of the process is important there. The heat of the topic (housing/zoning/development) draws on strong community feelings of place and identity that

often bring out more strongly-held views. How to perfectly allay all misgivings about government involvement in these processes remains challenging.

How to enable good deliberation online

Online environments continue to be difficult to predict. The ACT Housing Choices Collaboration Hub used its online platform as an information source, having sporadic and un-facilitated conversations, often over the week following an in-person meeting. This meant that the online platform was more of a library source for individuals' own research but did not facilitate wide conversations between participants. Ultimately, this is because the online aspect of this process was not highlighted or impressed upon the participants but instead presented as a complementary communication tool.

Overcoming technological asymmetries between participants is the first hurdle before placing online tools at the centre of a deliberative process. Youth processes have dramatically more success with this.

References

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