By E-Mail only
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7th May 2021

Dear BEIS Select Committee

Sustainability First Response to BEIS Select Committee Call for Evidence on the Findings of the Report of the Climate Assembly UK

Sustainability First is a charity and think-tank working on sustainability issues in essential services – in particular energy and water. We have a long-standing interest in engagement given the crucial role that it can play in helping shape and provide legitimacy for policy making and for businesses, leading to better decisions that reflect the values and priorities and meet the practical needs of consumers, communities and citizens.

We have been strong advocates of the use of citizens assemblies as set out in a Citizens Advice paper on engagement that we played a part in developing and in a note[1] we prepared on best practice in this space. Building on this we have carried out analysis comparing the French equivalent of the Climate Assembly with the UK one. The conclusions are available on the Sustainability First website in three blogs[2] which compare the process, the initial reports and the recommendations. We hope these will be of interest to the Committee.

We would note that even in the last week new legislation has been introduced in France to implement a number of the recommendations of the French Assembly which reinforces a theme of our research that there was a clearer commitment there to implement the findings of the Assembly, which we consider an important element of a citizen assembly process. We therefore welcome the BEIS Committee's enquiry to ensure that maximum benefit is being obtained from the work of Climate Assembly UK and hopefully to draw lessons to inform future such initiatives.

[1] https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/blog/259-what-should-a-uk-citizens-assembly-on-climate-change-and-net-zero-look-like

[2] Please see: https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/blog/173-the-voice-of-the-people, https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/blog/170-the-voice-of-the-people-part-2, and https://www.sustainabilityfirst.org.uk/blog/164-what-is-fair-ask-the-people

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We have set out below responses to the specific questions raised by the Committee.

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?

   Climate Assembly UK has been valuable as an example of how such processes can work and Sustainability First has been able to cite it as an example when advocating wider use of such deliberative processes to explore particular issues around the Just Transition. The existence of Climate Assembly UK provides legitimacy to our calls for such approaches to be adopted more widely. For example, in our 2020 book 'Building from the corona crisis toward a sustainable future' we made recommendations for public engagement and participation in post pandemic recovery plans which noted:

   "New ways of communicating online make technology-facilitated mass participation possible. We can take this opportunity to give people a stronger voice and sense of agency in decisions affecting their futures. This is essential to build trust and confidence in decision-making in a dynamic and disrupted world. This can be done through community-based listening circles across the UK, feeding into larger-scale, representational Citizens Assemblies. ***These can build on the work of existing Climate Assemblies and focus on the impacts of Covid-19 in terms of equality and the need for tax and welfare reform****."*

   We have also been able to draw on what we know to be informed and thoughtful views from the Assembly on particular issues to support our arguments as part of wider policy debates.

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

   To date it is not clear that there has been any direct particular impact in terms of policy developments as a result of Climate Assembly UK. Our note comparing the French and UK approaches argues that this is a result of the initial framing of the questions the Assembly was asked to address. In the French example the Assembly were asked to come up with clear recommendations for actions to reduce emissions by 40% by 2030, which President Macron undertook to then implement – which in large part he has done.

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?

   It is not clear how the Climate Assembly UK has affected the work of government and it is important to the process that there is a visible feedback loop. I am sure that individual officials and indeed Ministers will have read the relevant parts of the report and that it will have informed their thinking alongside other evidence. Government's actions since the report have not been out of step with the recommendations but there are still gaps in policy areas that the Assembly would have wanted to see filled in particular around public education on climate change and local decision making. Moreover, there has been no "you said we did" reporting back that I am aware of and this is an important step in the process.

   In contrast in France there are regular reports in the media (eg Le Monde) of actions that have been taken in response to the work of the French Assembly which continues to give prominence to the role the Assembly played in policy evolution there. This reflects the initial commitment from President Macron that the proposals from the Assembly would either be put to a referendum, voted on in Parliament or enacted straight into law.

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

   Because of the nature of the question asked of the Climate Assembly UK (and the fact that the practical implementation steps were not explored in any detail) it would be unrealistic to expect Government / Parliament to simply implement the recommendations of the Climate Assembly UK.

   That said the select committees that commissioned the Assembly do "owe" the group some sort of response setting out what they see as next steps and how they propose to make use of the Assembly's recommendations.

   One practical step would be for any policy proposals / consultations from Government to include prominently what the views of the Climate Assembly were on that particular topic. That would provide a valuable framing for any subsequent policy debate and would put the citizen views centre stage.

Another practical option could be some sort of "one year on" report where Government sets out what action has been taken in the areas identified by the Assembly.

In addition, it would be helpful to understand what impact the Assembly has had on local government, mayors etc in terms of framing and shaping their own climate related work. In some cases local assemblies have been set up building on the Climate Assembly UK example. Linking together local and national engagement initiatives can share good practice, maximise impact and build coherence into subsequent policy change.

Last, it would be useful for Government to explain how the Assembly's work sits alongside its wider engagement activity on climate to help the public and civil society groups to assess how best to focus their interactions in this area going forward.

Best regards

Maxine Frerk

Sustainability First