



RTPI

Royal Town
Planning Institute

Citizens' assemblies: An evidence review and guidance for local authority planners in the UK

Invitation to tender

June 2026

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Executive summary

Local authority planners working in the UK today face an incredibly challenging environment. Whilst contending with deep budget cuts and chronic understaffing, they face external pressures from political polarisation and the erosion of legitimacy and public trust in experts and policymakers. To meet their goal of planning for development that supports healthy living standards, economic growth and adaptation to climate change, and in the face of poly-crises in housing, an aging society, climate and biodiversity, local authority planners must make the most of limited resources.

Accumulated evidence from international and UK practice shows that deliberative public engagement methods (or ‘mini publics’ – often discussed in relation to ‘citizens’ assemblies’) can be used successfully by public bodies to help make complex decisions that affect the public. Citizens’ assemblies and other forms of ‘mini publics’ - used at the right time in the right way - can be a cost-effective way to help rebuild public trust and help planners make difficult decisions which the wider public will support.

We see potential for more use of this approach to public engagement in town planning across the UK, yet uptake by planners has been limited.

This project will deliver the evidence review and tailored guidance that are needed to institutionalise mini publics as a tool to support statutory planning processes.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project summary

1.1.1 The project brief

The RTPI is commissioning a two-stage practice and research project on deliberative public engagement methods¹, also known as ‘mini publics’, and how these could be deployed by planners across the UK.

The project will deliver two outputs:

- An evidence review of the use and impacts of deliberative public engagement (e.g. citizens’ assemblies) in policy making, with a focus on the UK; and,
- Building on the evidence review, a practical guide for UK local planning authority planners on how to use citizens’ assemblies and other types of mini publics within the formal planning process.

The key audience for this guidance will be planners working in local planning authorities (LPAs) on local plan policy.

We are particularly interested in proposals that focus specifically on local plan policy as it relates to new large-scale housing developments or low-carbon energy infrastructure sites.

1.1.2 The tender process

1. The deadline for proposals is **17 July 2026**.
2. Bidders should submit a costed proposal that answers this brief.
3. Proposals will be scored and shortlisted based on:
 - a. How well proposals answer this brief;

¹ Deliberative public engagement conducted via mini publics includes methods such as citizens’ assemblies, juries and panels, as described in an Institute for Government [explainer](#).

- b. How effectively they are likely to answer the research questions;
 - c. How effectively suppliers combine experience/knowledge of:
 - i. Planning practice; and
 - ii. Citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberative public engagement.
 - d. How well the proposed timeline can be accommodated; and
 - e. Added value (e.g. possible additional outputs, social media, presentations, etc).
4. Proposals will be reviewed by Dr Daniel Slade MRTPI, Head of Practice and Research, Merav Shub, Research Officer, and Claire Stafford MRTPI, Planning Practice Advisor.
 5. Shortlisted bidders will be invited to an interview at the RTPI offices in London - at least one of your team members will be expected to attend in person. Additional colleagues may join online, via Microsoft Teams. If you would like to bid for this project, but this would be a problem, please let us know.
 6. Bidders' commitments to climate change and EDI will be considered – we will review information on your website and may ask for more details as needed.

1.2 The RTPI

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) champions the power of planning to create sustainable, prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 27,000 members in the private, public, academic, and voluntary sectors. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social environmental and cultural challenges.

The RTPI is:

- A membership organisation and a Chartered Institute responsible for maintaining professional standards and accrediting world class planning courses nationally and internationally;
- A charity whose constitutional purpose is **to advance the science and art of planning (including town and country and spatial planning) for the benefit of the public**; and
- A learned society.

The RTPI promotes research into planning practice, theory, policy development and education, within a strategic research agenda in the UK that aims to:

- Promote the funding and dissemination of research and project activity that informs and evaluates planning policy and practice;
- Promote awareness and engagement of planning practitioners in planning research at local, national and international scales;
- Encourage interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral research and dialogue; and support research in planning education and lifelong learning.

1.3 Project background

The RTPI is commissioning a research project on ‘mini publics’ such as citizens’ assemblies, juries and panels. The project will produce guidance for local planning authority (LPA) planners in the UK on how to use these methods within the formal planning process to gain more public input, particularly on the policy trade-offs that they need to make.

The project aims to help LPA planners know when and how to apply citizens’ assemblies to build legitimacy at an early stage in decision-making for developments, to deliver better outcomes for the public and the profession.

We are particularly interested in proposals that focus specifically on local plan policy as it relates to new housing or low-carbon energy infrastructure sites.

Accumulated evidence from international and UK practice in recent decades shows that they can be used successfully by public bodies to help decide on complex issues that affect the public. With growing polarisation and declining public trust in decision-making and experts, citizens' assemblies - used at the right time in the right way - can help rebuild public trust and help planners make difficult decisions which the wider public supports.

We see potential for more use of these methods in town planning in the UK, yet uptake by planners here has been limited. **We aim to institutionalise citizens' assemblies as a tool for planners working in and with statutory planning process.**

1.4 Research focus and key goals

1.4.1 Key research questions – work package one: Evidence review

- What evidence is there on the use of citizens' assemblies and other 'mini publics' by local planning authority planners and other public bodies in the UK? What have been the outcomes of these citizens' assemblies?
- What have members of the public who took part said about the process and outcomes of these citizens' assemblies and other 'mini publics'? Did they feel they benefitted or gained trust? What have LPA planners said about the process and outcomes?
- What are the resourcing challenges associated with councils and LPAs' use of citizens' assemblies and other 'mini publics'?
- What lessons are there for LPA planners on how, when, and when not, to use citizens' assemblies and other 'mini publics' for planning decisions at local plan level?

1.4.2 Key research questions – work package two: Guidance for LPA planners

- What do LPA planners need to know to conduct citizens' assemblies well?

- How can insights from the evidence review guide LPA planners effectively on how, when and when not to use citizens' assemblies for planning decisions at local plan level relating to housing or low-carbon energy infrastructure?
- What format of guidance will be most easily accessible and useable for LPA planners?
- How can the impact of the guidance be monitored after the project ends?

1.4.3 Target audience and section of the planning system

- Planners working for local planning authorities (LPAs)².
- Policy/plan making and public engagement as it relates to the Town and Country Planning Act regime (not the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime).

1.4.4 Types of contested planning projects

Though mini publics can be deployed for a very wide range of planning-relevant policy issues, we are particularly interested in their use within two key areas of decision making and policy that are particularly contentious national priorities, and exemplify the type of large-scale, high stakes, trade off-heavy, policy issues to which deliberative engagement may be particularly well suited. These are:

- **Large-scale housing developments**, including (but not limited to) urban extensions, new towns, local plan site allocations.
- **Planning for renewable energy, net-zero and low-carbon energy infrastructure**, including (but not limited to) solar farms, wind turbines, battery storage, wider grid infrastructure.

² Planners working at the strategic level, for example, in England, Combined Authorities, are a secondary interest. However, they may become more relevant if there is limited potential for the wider use of citizens' assemblies by planners working in LPAs (e.g. due to a lack of resourcing).

1.5 Key RTPI agendas, issues and priorities

Empower 2030: This project supports the RTPI's Empower 2030 goal to equip planners with the skills they need to deliver better outcomes, particularly in relation to our equality, diversity and inclusion agenda.

Equality, diversity and inclusion: Citizens' assemblies are designed to be inclusive and representative of a place-based population. EDI is an intrinsic feature, achieved through a robust sortition process as well as payments to participants to ensure a representative sample of people - not just the "usual voices" - take part in making policy decisions that will affect their lives.

Rebuilding public trust: The UK and other liberal democracies are challenged by polarisation, misinformation and declining public trust in policy makers. Citizens' assemblies, used at the right time in the right way, enable a representative sample of the public to gain in-depth understanding of an issue and help make decisions that involve difficult trade-offs. There is untapped potential for their use in contested planning issues in the UK, and for adoption into the standard suite of planners' tools.

2. Tender information

2.1 Budget

This project will be funded up to a maximum of **£15,000 (to include all disbursements and including VAT)**, with the intention that this be paid in three instalments according to agreed project milestones (i.e. on signing of the contract, delivery of the evidence review and delivery of the briefing for LPA planners to an acceptable quality standard).

The tendering and research management process is being managed by London-based RTPI officers, and the funding of the research has been approved by the

Institute’s Policy, Practice and Research Committee as part of its [2026 to 2028 Research Strategy](#).

2.2 Eligibility

Tenders are invited from RTPI-accredited planning schools, other university-based research teams/departments, consultancies and other appropriate organisations, individuals, and collaborations between any of the above.

We are particularly interested in hearing from individuals or teams that can demonstrate expertise in both long-form deliberative processes including citizens’ assemblies, and UK local authority planning practice.

2.3 Expected outputs

This project seeks to bridge the knowledge gap between the deliberative democracy sector and LPA planners in the UK.

To this end we are commissioning this as a two-part project:

- **Work package one (August to October):** A desk-based, high-level evidence review of existing research and evidence on best practice and ‘what works’. This could be international in scope, but must a) focus on the UK and b) provide a solid foundation for work package two’s output (see below).
- **Work package two (November to March):** Develop and publish guidance for planning practitioners working for UK local planning authorities on when and how to use citizens’ assemblies during plan making and policy development. We are particularly interested in proposals that focus specifically on new large-scale housing developments or low-carbon energy infrastructure sites.

Output	Description	Proposed publication date
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<p>2. Evidence review report</p>	<p>An accessible research report summarising current evidence focussing on real-world case studies of mini publics applied in practice by public sector bodies and their outcomes, primarily in the UK, for an England / UK audience including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction/background • Literature/policy/evidence review • Cross-cutting findings regarding ‘what works’ <p>It would be good to include at least four strong images illustrating successful citizens’ assemblies (photographs, drawings or other), with copyright permissions.</p> <p>The report should be roughly 30-50 pages in length including any relevant appendices.</p> <p>It should comply fully with our tone of voice and brand guidelines which will be provided at project initiation.</p> <p>The output will be published in HTML, .docx and in .pdf form.</p>	<p>October 2026</p>
<p>2. Practice guidance for LPA planners</p>	<p>Accessible guidance for UK-based local planning authority planners helping them to decide how, when (and when not) to use different forms of mini publics within the statutory planning process.</p> <p>We welcome engaging, creative approaches such as a “build your own adventure” decision tree format.</p>	<p>March 2027</p>

	We are happy for inclusion of signposting to best practice available elsewhere on the different forms of deliberative engagement.	
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2.4 Methodology / overall approach

2.4.1 Work package one - Evidence review report

We expect the evidence review to be undertaken as a desk-based study using existing sources that does not require field work. It should be broad and does not need in-depth detailed case studies, though examples could be useful.

The evidence review report should, where available, include data on the number of mini publics which have been conducted by public sector bodies in the UK. These can be citizens' assemblies and other types held outside the town planning sector, though examples from local planning authorities would be of high relevance.

2.4.2 Work package two - Guidance for LPA planners

We encourage bidders to consider alternative, engaging ways of presenting the guidance, such as a 'choose your own adventure' format.

It is important that the project draws on and combines the knowledge of both the deliberative democracy sector and of planning practice to produce effective and applicable guidance for planners.

Potential suppliers may want to bring in planners to help develop and test the applicability of their developing guidance. The RTPi's Practice and Research team can help support this aspect of the work.

For the practice guidance, potential suppliers should explain in their bid document how they will achieve the above, and the merits and suitability of their proposed methodology.

We will establish an advisory panel with subject specialists from within academia and consultancies to provide input to support project delivery.

2.5 Indicative project timeframe

The following milestones are proposed in 2026 to 2027:

1. **29 June** – opening of competitive tender;
2. **17 July** – close of competitive tender;
3. **20 to 21 July** – scoring of bids;
4. **21 July** – notification of shortlisted bidders;
5. **22 to 28 July** – interviews with shortlisted bidders;
6. **28 July** – notification of successful bidder;
7. **30 July** – inception meeting;
8. **Aug to Oct** – **project working period one**: monthly check-in meetings
9. **30 Oct** – delivery of evidence review;
10. **Nov** – the RTPi will write and publish a short summary of evidence review;
11. **Nov to March** – **project working period two**: monthly check-in meetings;
12. **31 March** – delivery of practice guidance;
13. **April** – publication of guidance. **End of work programme for suppliers.**
14. **April / May** – possible launch event / webinar;
15. **Post May** – monitoring of project impact.

The exact timescale for the project work will be determined in collaboration with the selected research team at the inception meeting.

2.6 Project governance

The project will be managed by Merav Shub, Research Officer, with input from Claire Stafford MRTPI, Planning Practice Advisor.

Oversight plus feedback and input will be provided by Dr Daniel Slade MRTPI, Head of Practice and Research.

3. Bidding process

3.1 Bidding

Bidders should submit a tender document that includes:

- A short project bid summary;
- Proposed methodology;
- Proposed outputs, demonstrating conformity (or otherwise, with rationale) with the project purpose and brief described;
- Project team bios and experience;
- Statement of experience and projects that demonstrate relevant experience;
- Proposed approach to project management;
- Total cost of the project; and
- Budget breakdown for work package one and two, daily rates and personnel inputs.

Bid documents must not exceed 20 pages including all the above information.

3.2 Evaluation criteria

Proposals will be evaluated against four criteria:

- The extent to which the proposal aligns with the key requirements described in this document;
- Quality, rigour and likely impact of the proposed methodology and outputs;
- Experience/knowledge of the subject matter and of research project delivery methods relevant to the project;
- Value for money and added value.

3.3 Deadline for bids

Tender applications should be submitted electronically in .docx or .pdf format to research@rtpi.org.uk.

The deadline for applications is **23:59 (UK time) Friday 17 July 2026**.

We plan to interview a shortlist of bidders during **w/c 20 July 2026** and to appoint the successful research team soon after. Interviews will be held at the RTPI London office and online (shortlisted suppliers will be expected to send at least one team member to attend interview in person).

4. Intellectual property

The RTPI will retain ownership of the work but will grant the researchers the right to publish and re-use the material submitted to the RTPI and will be fully credited for their work. Consultancies and institutions should not apply if they will not be able to agree to this provision. They should acknowledge the support from the RTPI in any subsequent publications and activity based on the supported projects.

Any outcome from the project shall remain strictly **CONFIDENTIAL** until such time as the RTPI determines that it be released for publication.

5. Further information and enquiries

If you have any comments or queries please contact Merav Shub, RTPI Research Officer at research@rtpi.org.uk.