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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Citizen participation in food systems policy making: A case study of a citizens' assembly [version 1; peer review: 2 approved]

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Abstract

In this article, we offer a contribution to the emerging debate on the role of citizen participation in food system policy making. A key driver is a recognition that solutions to complex challenges in the food system need the active participation of citizens to drive positive change. To achieve this, it is crucial to give citizens the agency in processes of designing policy interventions. This requires authentic and reflective engagement with citizens who are affected by collective decisions. One such participatory approach is citizen assemblies, which have been used to deliberate a number of key issues, including climate change by the UK Parliament's House of Commons (House of Commons., 2019). Here, we have undertaken analysis of a citizen food assembly organized in the City of York (United Kingdom). This assembly was a way of hearing about a range of local food initiatives in Yorkshire, whose aim is to both relocalise food supply and production, and tackle food waste. These innovative community-based business models, known as 'food hubs', are increasing the diversity of food supply, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Among other things, the assembly found that the process of design and sortation of the assembly is aided by the involvement of local stakeholders in the planning of the assembly. It also identified the potential for public procurement at the city level, to drive a more sustainable sourcing of food provision in the region. Furthermore, this citizen assembly has resulted in a galvanizing of individual agency with participants proactively seeking opportunities to create prosocial and environmental change in the food system.


Keywords

citizen assembly, food system, food policy

Open Peer Review

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- Christian J. Reynolds** , City, University of London, London, UK
- Bethan Mead** , University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
- Charlotte A. Hardman** , University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.



This article is included in the [Sustainable Food Systems gateway](#).



This article is included in the [N8 AgriFood collection](#).

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Introduction

In recent decades there has been an increased emphasis on citizen engagement in co-designing policy. There is a growing recognition that solutions to complex challenges need the active participation of citizens (Chwalisz, 2019). To achieve this, it is crucial to give citizens the agency in the processes underpinning design and implementation of solutions and related policies. This requires authentic and reflective engagement with citizens who are affected by policy decisions. The structures which facilitate such deliberative engagement are collectively known as deliberative mini-publics or citizens' councils, assemblies and juries (Ercan *et al.*, 2019) (henceforth referred to as citizens' assemblies).

A citizens' assembly consists of a randomly selected and representative group of citizens, tasked to deliberate and make decisions on specific topics or questions (Ercan *et al.*, 2019). These balanced and representative groups comprise of citizens from all walks of life and with diverse characteristics (e.g. gender, race, age; and religion and belief). While, in some cases, established democratic institutions mandate citizens' assemblies, in other cases these are brought together by NGOs or civil society groups (Table 1).

Recent interest in the idea of citizens assemblies can be attributed to modern applications of deliberation and sortation (Chwalisz, 2019). Information available to citizens through communication technologies, combined with the increasing number of stakeholder platforms created by governments, communities and private organisations has facilitated this face to face interaction with constituents (Nabatchi *et al.*, 2013). Citizens'

assemblies are often referred to as a democratic innovation in the literature. The twin concepts of representativeness and deliberation in decision making are, however, as old as democracy itself. To support this, Chwalisz (2019) notes that in 431 BCE, the Greek statesman Pericles is recorded as saying that "ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters". And he stated that instead of being a "stumbling block in the way of action . . . [discussion] is an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all".

Due to their resurgence, national and international institutions are increasingly recognising citizens' assemblies as an effective mode of citizen engagement (Farrell *et al.*, 2019). In 2017, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Council on Open Government recommended that its members should provide citizens and other stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted, and actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle" and "promote innovative ways to effectively engage with stakeholders to source ideas and co-create solutions (Chwalisz, 2019; OECD, 2017). To support the Council recommendation, the *Innovative Citizen Participation* programme is being led by the OECD's Open Government Unit, where they have commissioned a review of around 700 such deliberative processes (OECD, 2019). Its forthcoming report, entitled 'Catching the Deliberative Wave: Innovative Citizen Participation & New Democratic Institutions (June 2020), is expected to be the first comprehensive body of evidence on the use and effectiveness of citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberation processes. The report will include recommendations on best

Table 1. Selected examples of citizens' assemblies and their structures (Bellantoni & Chwalisz, n.d; Citizens' Assemblies, 2018; Electoral Reform Society, n.d; G1000 Linked with Foundation for Future Generations, 2019; Involve, n.d; Involve, 2018; Madrid City Council Web Portal, n.d; MASS LBP (n.d.); UCL, The Constitution Unit, 2017; UK Parliament, 2019; Vorarlberg Unser Land, n.d).

Country (Year)	Purpose and Remit	Mandate and Structure
Ireland (2012)	Constitutional amendment on same sex marriage	Irish Parliament A constitutional convention composed of 100 participants including Independent Chair, 33 parliamentarians and 66 citizens
Ireland (2016)	8th amendment of Irish constitution on abortion.	Mandated by Irish parliament; 100 members of the public
Spain (2018)	Monitor Municipal actions and make proposals for improvement	Observatory of the City; Mandated by municipal government of Madrid; composed of 49 citizens and can trigger citizen consultations on municipal matters
Poland (2016)	To deliberate on local matters e.g. local government's response to torrential rainfall and flooding	Mandated by municipal government of Gdansk; Signatures from 5000 citizens can trigger citizens assemblies on local matters
United Kingdom (2020)	To deliberate on ideas and inform future national food strategy	Organised by the National Food Strategy Team (tasked by the UK government); Citizens will be selected randomly from different parts of the country
Belgium (2019)	Policy recommendations to parliament	Mandated by Ostbelgien parliament; A permanent Citizens' council comprising 24 citizens will mandate citizens assemblies to deliberate and make recommendations
Austria (2017)	Handling of land within the remit of local council	Mandated by local government; 1000 citizens' signatures can trigger assembly on any local policy topic
Canada (2015)	Deliberate and develop recommendations on local planning or transportation issues	Citizen led movement to inform local government decision making

practices to design, build trust, increase legitimacy and develop strong outputs from citizens assemblies.

In the UK, citizens' assemblies have been used to deliberate on the future relationship with Europe following UK's exit from the European Union ([Electoral Reform Society, 2019](#)). More recently, both the House of Commons and the National Food Strategy have launched plans to use citizen assemblies to test ideas on climate change and food policy, respectively, with citizens across the country ([House of Commons, 2019](#); [National Food Strategy, 2019](#)).

In this paper, we present a case study on the York Citizen Food Assembly held in November 2019. Here we include a summary of the procedure for hosting a citizens' assembly, a summary of the findings, and future recommendations.

York Citizens' Assembly

The York Citizen Food Assembly was designed to raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing the local food system and collect citizens' views on the future food provisioning in York, Yorkshire and UK food system. The assembly was organised by the IKnowFood programme (funded by the Global Food Security programme), in collaboration with the York Environmental Sustainability Institute (YESI) and supported by Good Food York, DEFRA and the National Food Strategy team. The organizing committee for the assembly involved key academics and local food groups such as Good Food York. Using various food system databases, the assembly participants were randomly selected from key stakeholder groups (business, third sector, civil society groups, local government, farmers etc.) and added to a citizen assembly invitee list. Throughout the whole process, the organizing committee ensured the stratified list provided a representative sample according to age, gender and stakeholder group from across the food system. The committee paid particular attention to inclusivity, ensuring potentially excluded groups such as those people experiencing food insecurity were encouraged to attend the assembly. In essence, we followed the guidance provided by University of Canberra on Deliberative Mini-Publics ([Farrell et al., 2019](#)). The citizens invite list was reviewed and developed at monthly committee meetings. These meetings also focused on developing a facilitation brief and the selection of an appropriate pool of facilitators for the assembly. A facilitators briefing was also provided prior to the assembly.

The York Citizen Food Assembly involved a series of short presentations from citizens, researchers from the University of York, policy makers, food hubs (e.g. Food Circle in York), cafes, the Local Economic Partnership for York, North Yorkshire and East Riding (LEP), charities and participants on their food system experiences. These presentations were followed by detailed discussions on challenges and potential future 'solutions' for the food system.

The one-day assembly took place at a community centre in the heart of York. The event was attended by 102 people, who were grouped into roundtables of 8–10 people. The participants

were organised on a pre-selected table plan to ensure diverse representation across the food system. Each table had a facilitator briefed before the event to ensure all participants were able to express their different perspectives. In the first half of the assembly, citizens were provided with a series of short presentations to stimulate thinking, including an explanation of what a food system is (see [Figure 1](#)). A copy of the food system diagram was also provided for each table. During the first one-hour breakout discussion, participants were asked to discuss, from their perspective what is working and what is not working in the York food system. All tables were provided with a worksheet with icons to represent different food systems activities and the roundtables were asked to discuss and complete their worksheets. These were then pasted onto the white boards surrounding the room and people asked to move round to discuss.

Key outcomes

What works well in York's food system?

Relocalisation of food production and supply. A strong theme was the popularity of various local food initiatives designed to supply fresh fruit and vegetables into disadvantaged communities and to redistribute food waste (surplus food). A range of organisations were highlighted by participants e.g. Edible York (creating community and school gardens) and its sister project, [Abundance York](#), an urban harvesting programme, whose volunteers harvest fresh fruit and vegetables from peoples gardens that would otherwise go to waste. One of their initiatives are apple press days from harvested apples.

Abundance York used social media to mobilise volunteers and the public. One of the assembly presenters was Joe Fennerty of Food Circle (food hub) based in Tang Hall Community, which has developed supply chains of fresh fruit and vegetables from local farmers and growers by food aggregation and distribution to supply healthy food into the Tang Hall community in York. This does include vegetables from local growers from cancelled retail orders.

The co-ordination and distribution of surplus/waste food by local York groups was another theme raised by more than one discussion table. One of our speakers, Emily Deckers, from the York Nurturing Community (YNC) talked about how they coordinate with restaurants etc. to redistribute their surplus food to organisations such as Food Without Bombs, which is a homeless charity. In addition, YNC also run a community pay-as-you-feel café. Another York social innovation is the [share waste app](#) for the redistribution of food waste across the city.

A number of tables mentioned the need for more bring-your-own container stores (pay and weigh) to reduce the need for plastic packaging. The roundtables also discussed what was not working.

What is not working well in York's food system?

Food poverty is a real problem in York with 26 food aid providers in the city. There were also reports of teachers bringing food into schools for their pupils. The assembly

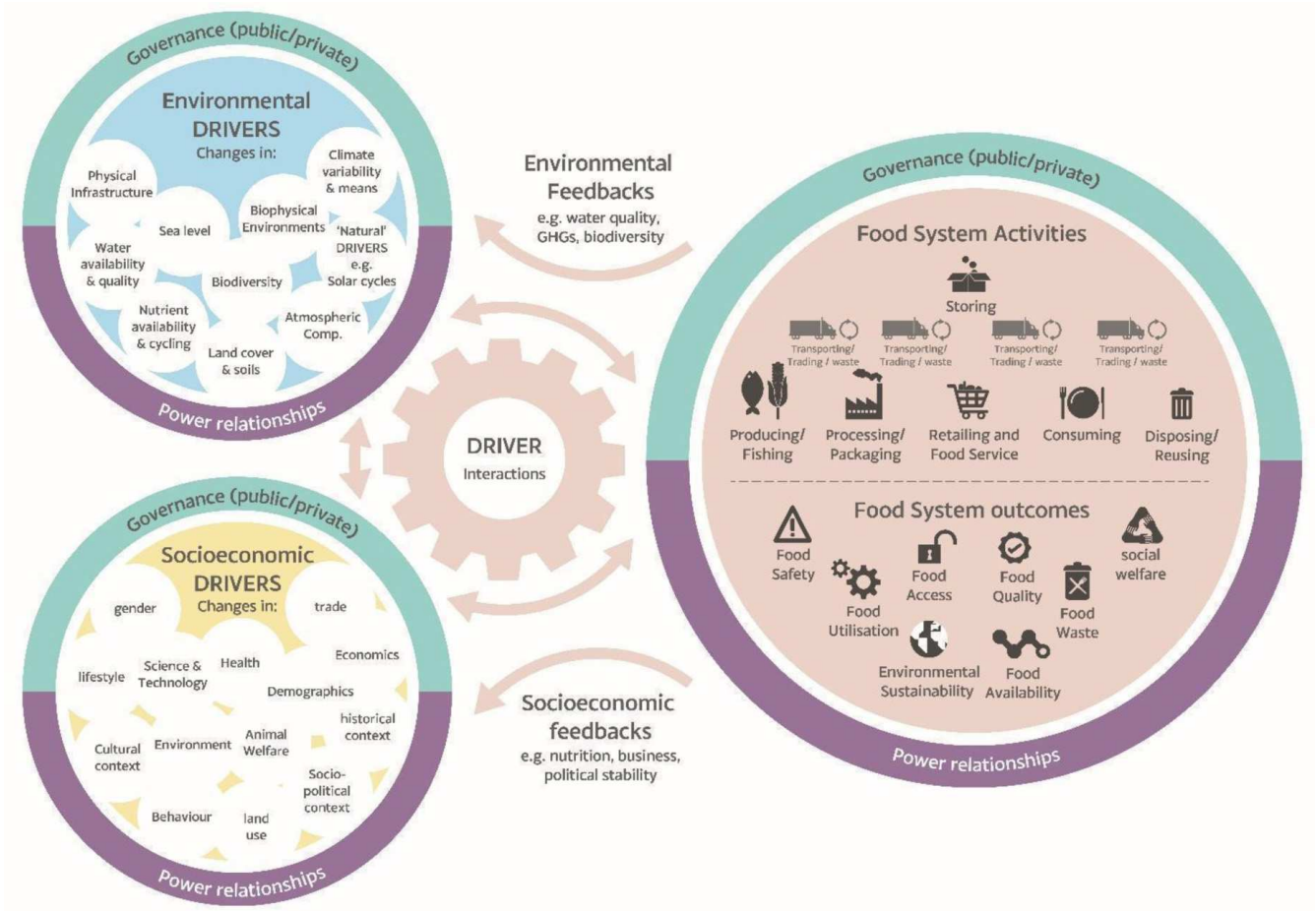


Figure 1. The conceptual map of the food system. The IKnowFood team and members of Good Food York then analysed the table contributions to draw out core emergent themes for further discussion.

also felt the availability of healthy food into disadvantaged communities was a problem. One of our speakers from the York Food Justice Alliance, which carried out a family survey in the summer of 2019 in partnership with the University of York, found that 26% of people who reported experiencing food insecurity had not yet visited a foodbank due to the stigma associated with this. This appears to suggest that food bank parcel provision is not an accurate indicator of food poverty. This also highlights the importance of innovations mentioned above such as Food Circle York and YNC.

A second key theme identified at the assembly was the significant amount of food waste created in the city. This appears to be exasperated by the waste emanating from restaurants and cafés. This is not helped by York City Council not having a food waste collection and composting service. Too much plastic and packaging associated with food was also raised by a number of tables. In addition, frustration with the lack of retail outlet diversity was raised by a number of tables along with low pay in the hospitality sector in York. The afternoon breakout session asked the roundtables to discuss what could be changed and how people could action change themselves.

What changes are needed in the local food system?

Common suggested actions across the tables included the need for some type of award/verification scheme to indicate sustainable/healthy shops, restaurants, hotels and bread and breakfast outlets. This would be awarded against a set of criteria, including number of healthy, vegan and vegetarian food choice options, dealing with waste, the percentage of profits used to tackle food poverty. The outlets receiving the award will be featured on tourist maps, websites and show their award in their windows.

A second theme was the need to scale-up the infrastructure for community food hubs by attracting investment into these food innovations. There is interest from the LEP to support this development. Food hubs involve food aggregation and distribution – in other words, they gather food from growers and other suppliers, and distribute to customers. There are currently 29 food hubs in the UK, the majority set up since 2013 (Guzman & Reynolds, 2019).

A third theme was for York City council and other councils to develop new policies for sustainable food systems via

public procurement, which prioritizes healthy sustainable diets for schools, hospitals and other public venues. This would be supported by education in early years and young people, focusing on health, nutrition and seasonality. Greater support for local/sustainable stores (perhaps through reduced rent), to increase their number and make them more accessible. In addition, the idea of reduced council tax for those families accessing food aid providers was also advanced.

The outcomes generated from the Citizen Assemblies are available for download as *Underlying data* (Doherty, 2020).

Way forward for democratizing decision making

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the York food citizen assembly regarding the food system and how to approach organising citizen assemblies, particularly those focused on food. The assembly was an effective way of hearing about a range of innovative local food initiatives (some for the first time) in Yorkshire, whose aim is to both relocate food supply and production and tackle food waste. These innovative community business models, increasingly known as food hubs, are increasing the diversity of food supply, particularly in disadvantaged communities. A number of these organizations had incubated in their early start-up phase in the community interest company (legal form) called Spark York. It is clear these spaces for innovation and the lessons learnt are important in catalysing food hubs. This is important for those policy makers at both regional and national level, looking to stimulate economic growth that delivers positive social and environmental change at the community level in the food system.

The relocating of food supply was also seen as a way of providing healthy produce at affordable prices into disadvantaged communities where in some communities there is a deficiency in supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. The assembly also felt the York City Council (schools, hospitals etc.) coupled with other large institutions; e.g., the two universities could use public procurement to stimulate more sustainable sourcing of food provision in the region.

Feedback on the event itself was largely positive, participants liked the fact the tables were diverse. Opportunities to repeat engagement (e.g. in non-working hours) and targeting specific stakeholder groups e.g. farmers, more actively is likely to broaden the stakeholder base and thus the breadth of opinion represented, which would be an important consideration for those wishing to act upon any of the recommendations made. The organizing team also stressed the importance of involving local food stakeholders in the design and sortation of the event. Facilitators appreciated their guide coupled with the briefing.

Those involved in the event were genuinely enthusiastic and appreciative of having the opportunity to express their views, and were encouraged both the presence of individuals in positions of 'institutional authority' (e.g. the University of York Vice Chancellor, members of local council) which they felt lent

credibility. There was also enthusiasm for individual agency, with participants wanting to participate in the change, and a strong call that outcomes from the meeting should include the establishment of a solid platform for information exchange and 'practical action' on the issues highlighted. This agency has been demonstrated in a number of ways, including increasing membership of Good Food York, lobbying local institutions such as universities to procure more sustainably and increased attendance at public events focused on food.

Future recommendations

There are some key themes which have emerged from this York food citizen assembly. First, is the need to investigate further the potential of food hubs to provide healthy food into local communities. Despite the growth of the number of food hubs in the UK there is limited research on this phenomenon. Further investigation on their critical success factors, coupled with how they can be scaled-up, would be useful for both policy makers and practitioners. The findings of this subsequent report on food hubs should be presented to policy makers at national and regional levels. Another key area identified was the potential for changing public procurement to drive a more sustainable food system. This will initially require an investigation into legal options for changes in the weighting of criteria (economic, social and environmental) of public tendering documents. There was also a demand from citizens at the workshop for national legislation to collect food waste separately. This should be reported to policy makers.

The workshop also identified the problems with hidden hunger and our recommendation is that York City Council should start measuring food insecurity annually. The methodology and indicators should ensure this is an accurate robust approach. In addition, there was also enthusiasm at the assembly for an award/verification scheme for business if they met a set of sustainable food criteria. Working with York City Council and Good Food York this requires a further look at feasibility. Finally, reflecting on the citizen assembly method for encouraging participation in food system policy making there are a number of recommendations. First, a number of participants recommended running similar events also on weekends to increase the diversity of participation even further. In addition, to increase the number of farmers attending will probably require staging citizen assemblies in market towns. It is clear this citizen assembly has stimulated participation and interest in the Yorkshire food system. Organisers should give consideration to how this should be handled post the assembly event to ensure this agency is galvanised for greater good. In addition, including local food stakeholders in the design, and sortation of the event is key to ensure local participation.

Data availability

Underlying data

York Research Database: Citizen Participation in Food Systems Policy Making: A case study of a citizens' assembly. <https://doi.org/10.15124/ece986b1-24eb-472d-b9cf-acbf5345f1f7> (Doherty, 2020).

This project contains the following underlying data:

- Citizen Assembly Reflections (DOCX). (Reflections from Citizen Assembly participants.)
- Feedback (XLSX). (Feedback from participants on the Citizen Assembly.)
- IMG_0578 to IMG_0581 (JPG). (Images of participants' views from Session 1.)
- Session 1 write up (DOCX). (Output from Session 1: Which parts of the food system are working well and which are not?)

- Tables 1–9 (DOCX). (Outputs from Session 2.)

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank both the York Environmental Sustainability Institute (YESI) and the IKnowFood research programme for organising and facilitating the York Citizen Assembly. The IKnowFood research programme (funded by the Global Security Fund) was born out of the N8 AgriFood programme.

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This paper provides a case study account of a citizens' assembly that took place in York, UK in November 2019. The aim of the event was to engage key stakeholders and members of the public in discussion about issues affecting the local food system and to identify opportunities for change. The article provides strong background and rationale for the use of a citizens' assembly and the method and findings are well-detailed and will be of use to a wide range of policy makers, academics and stakeholders.

The introduction first defines the citizens' assembly approach and then provides a comprehensive overview of the use of this method in different contexts. A number of examples are provided in the text and Table 1, including the proposed use to inform the UK National Food Strategy. However, it would be helpful to know more about the effectiveness of the citizen assemblies in these previous contexts; for example, are there specific outputs which have resulted from the approach?

The participant selection process for the York Citizen's Assembly was well thought out and is clearly described in the paper. Using random sampling to select assembly participants is a key strength and the authors also followed published guidelines to ensure that the sample was representative. The assembly was attended by more than 100 individuals which indicates the level of public engagement with and enthusiasm for this approach. Findings provide clear answers to the key questions of what works well in York's food system, what is not working well, and what changes are needed. A number of evidence-based recommendations are proposed. However it would be helpful to know more about how these will be put into practice. For example, a sustainability award/verification scheme for businesses was proposed as a change needed in the local food system. How will the team use these data to instigate change and facilitate action and outcomes in this area?

With regard to methodology, the article may be further strengthened by addressing the following points: The authors note that the timing of the event (daytime, weekday) may have impacted on the range of participants who attended. Do the authors consider that there may be an issue with self-selection in participants due to this, and that their findings may be biased by the demographic of participants able to

attend the event? Also, while description of sampling process is welcome and useful for future work, more detail on the 102 participants who attended the assembly is needed. What proportions of participants were from each stakeholder groups or members of the public?

Page 4 states “There were also reports of teachers bringing food into schools for their pupils.” – was this a direct quote from a participant or an anecdotal observation?

More detail on how key themes were identified is needed. Were these drawn from participant worksheets, facilitator notes, or a combination? This information would be useful for designing future assemblies.

In conclusion, this is an interesting and well-written presentation of a citizens’ assembly and its findings. Some elaboration of the points above would further strengthen the paper and its utility for others wishing to conduct similar citizens’ assemblies.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: Charlotte Hardman has received research funding from the American Beverage Association and speaker fees from the International Sweeteners Association for work which is unrelated to the content of the present manuscript.

Reviewer Expertise: Psychologists working in the area of eating behaviour, food choices and obesity. Investigators on the Global Food Security-funded research project, Rurban Revolution.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 11 May 2020

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Christian J. Reynolds 

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This work introduces the concept of a citizen food assembly, as way to actively address food system issues at a local level. It then gives example of one organized in the City of York. Providing procedure for hosting a citizens' assembly, a summary of the findings from the York assembly, and future recommendations. Overall a good strong article that advances the field. I would however like a bit more theoretical advancement (as shown in comments below):

Figure 1 provides a strong conceptual map, however editing this to show how CS (and/or food hubs) fit into this would be a helpful advancement of theory.

What are the ethical dimensions of a citizens assembly? In the context of the York CS, was there consent obtained from the 102 participants? Further discussion of the data collected in "Citizen Participation in Food Systems Policy Making: A case study of a citizens' assembly" might be worth exploring further.

Would the Sections under "key outcomes" benefit from a summary of figure representing this, and the various actors and policy opportunities suggested? This would allow you to show how the different food system and policy actors all relate within York.

Finally some of the references need full citations.

In summary:

The work clearly and accurately presented and cites the current literature

The study design is appropriate and the work technically sound - though more theoretical development would be welcome. This feels like an intermediary paper (which is still a welcome advancement for UK local food systems and food policy).

There is sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication. Though there is little deep analysis of the data. E.g. no statistical analysis. But data is available for reproducibility.

The conclusions drawn are supported by the results

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: Over the last 4 years I have worked for the same wider multi university organisation research project as Bob Doherty (N8AgriFood). However, I was never managed by him, nor have I worked directly on a funded piece of research with him or his wider research team. I have attended funding workshops and research sandpits with Bob Doherty and his wider research team.

Reviewer Expertise: I research sustainable food and local food systems. I have some familiarity with local food hubs, and local food policy responses

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
