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What's next? How arts-based and creative participatory methods can address the problem of climate assembly follow-up

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ABSTRACT

Climate assemblies (CAs) – a form of deliberative mini-publics – are increasingly used to engage citizens in climate change policymaking, particularly across Europe. There is an abundance of research on the design and implementation of CAs but less attention is paid to what happens afterwards; what to do with the resultant recommendations and if / how newly motivated and knowledgeable participants are engaged. The lack of follow-up action reduces CAs' potential impact, threatens their legitimacy and disillusion participants. Previous studies have identified the gap in CA follow-up, but there is a lack of research on what processes and mechanisms could address it. This article presents findings from a pilot study of arts-based and creative innovations to public engagement via a series of co-productive workshops in the follow-up to South Yorkshire's Citizens' Assembly on Climate (2023). It aimed to demonstrate how creative methods such as participatory scenario-making and interactive documentary can be used to engage citizens in CA follow-up and the translation of CA outputs into actionable policies. Qualitative data collected from recordings of workshops, researchers' field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed through the lens of deliberative democracy. The results reveal notable frustration with the current lack of CA follow-up, overfocus on 'recommendations' as the defining features of CAs and an appetite for CA participants and the wider public to be productively and creatively engaged in translating CA outputs (recommendations and proposals) into policy and action. Scenario making was found to enable this process and improve inclusivity.

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making; creative methods;
interactive documentary

Key policy insights

- The research identifies an appetite for citizens beyond CA participants to be involved in the translation of CA outputs into policy and action.
- To enable citizen engagement in CA follow-up, the outputs (usually recommendations or proposals) could be reframed as dynamic – requiring ongoing processes of reflection and interpretation as circumstances change – and thus, the start of a participatory process (of translation, implementation and action).
- Arts-based and creative participatory methods can contribute to processes of democratic innovation by engaging citizens in iterative co-production of CA outputs.

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

Political systems have failed to cope with the complexity and scale of climate change (Lorenzoni et al., 2025; Smith, 2024). To tackle this impasse, governments increasingly engage citizens in climate change policymaking,

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in attempts to improve the quality and legitimacy of policies with new knowledge, demonstrate inclusion of public views and address long-term issues that representative democracy fails to tackle within relatively short-term election cycles (Fischer, 2017; Smith, 2021). Democratically, the public has the right to be involved in policy-making (Bingham et al., 2005), particularly climate change policies, which have widespread societal impacts (Ainscough & Willis, 2024). Practically, citizens need to support climate policies for action to be successful.

Citizens can be engaged in climate policymaking via democratic innovations, such as deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) that bring together groups of citizens for deliberative and facilitated discussion (Harris, 2019). These include citizens juries (typically 10–26 people) and citizens assemblies (typically 100–160 people) (Harris, 2019, p. 46). In contrast to standard forms of consultation, DMPs aim to bring together people who demographically represent the population of a defined area. Participants typically undertake a process of learning about a subject (such as climate change) before deliberating, where they ‘justify what they want with reasons and listen to each other’s justifications respectfully and with an open mind’ (Elstub et al., 2021, p. 3). They then make decisions on a range of outputs; in practice, this often means voting for a set of recommendations. There has been a surge in the use of citizens assemblies on climate change – climate assemblies (CAs) – by national, regional and local governments, particularly in Europe.

1.2. The problem

There is an abundance of research on the design and implementation of CAs.¹ However, research and practice tend to focus on CA design and execution with less attention paid to what happens afterwards. Organisers and commissioners often neglect to consider what they will do with the recommendations and if / how they will continue to engage with the newly motivated and knowledgeable participants (Kübler et al., 2022; Langkjaer & Smith, 2023). This lack of follow-up planning reduces the potential impact of CAs both within and beyond government (Carrick & Elstub, 2023), as well as with the participants themselves,² who may become disillusioned, undermining CA legitimacy.

There are examples of impact on policy and institutions³ and CAs can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviours of assembly members (Elstub et al., 2023). However, overall, CA impact has been inconsistent and low, with evidence that civil servants ‘cherry pick’ recommendations for implementation (Font et al., 2018).

Smith (2024, p. 92) summarizes the potential consequences of the lack of impact of

The biggest worry about citizens’ assemblies is that they are just ‘talking shops’ with no impact on climate governance. If this is the case, citizens will soon cotton on, losing interest and potentially becoming hostile to this democratic innovation. It will be a wasted opportunity to do something different and productive.

At the root of the problem is a mismatch between traditional representative forms of democracy and existing policy-making structures, and democratic innovations, including CAs (Kübler et al., 2022; Lorenzoni et al., 2025). Deliberative democracy prescribes that decisions are part of ongoing processes of deliberation, reflection and action, where change is expected and facilitated by that process (Carrick et al., 2023; Smith, 2003). In contrast, CAs are treated as tools of the policy process, organized as discrete events to be inserted into existing political and institutional processes. Their value is usually reduced to a list of outcomes (often recommendations), presented as final outputs without mechanisms for continued engagement between the assembly members, the wider public and the institutions and policymakers that they seek to influence. Opportunities for ongoing deliberation, reflection and action are missed, reducing the overall value of CAs for enhancing democratic politics and policy.

This study contributes to a growing body of literature arguing for a move away from one-off DMPs to integrating them into decision-making institutions and the wider public sphere (Bussu & Fleuss, 2023; Niemeyer & Felicetti, 2023). Willis et al. (2022) – among others – call for ‘a more ‘deliberative system’, which creates the

¹Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) provides a comprehensive overview of the sector and the latest research, see www.knoca.eu.

²Thorman and Capstick (2022) have completed a review of the impacts and legacies from climate assemblies..

³The Irish Climate Act (2020) includes most recommendations from the Irish Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change (2017) and the UK’s Climate Change Committee incorporated recommendations from CAUK (2020) into its sixth carbon budget, see: <https://www.knoca.eu/climate-assemblies#The-impacts-of-climate-assemblies..>

political conditions for deliberation, not just within the confines of DMPs but across the political system as a whole'. The empirical work presented in this article builds on the theoretical insights of John Boswell (2016), who has argued for a greater emphasis on 'downstream deliberation'; the processes of deliberation that occur over how, when, and if a DMP recommendation be implemented. Finally, this study is situated within a shift towards the use of *co-production* as a policy innovation to strengthen implementation (see Perry & Atherton, 2017). Co-production (also referred to as co-design or co-delivery) here refers to collaborative practices that enable citizens to engage in direct dialogue with policy makers over questions of implementation. Key elements are creative, non-formalized discursive processes.

This article is not a review of this theoretical literature; instead, the contribution lies in empirically exploring how these ideas operate in practice; examining how particular policy innovations after deliberation – via different forms of creative co-production – may prove effective in advancing the recommendations of CAs.

1.3. Aims and purpose

To address these challenges, this study takes a fresh look at what happens after a CA. This paper presents the results of the first phase of the Climate ReAssemblies project (2024–). This is a pilot study innovating with arts-based and creative participatory methods in CA follow-up. The aim is to reduce the likelihood of CA outputs being 'left on the shelf' by demonstrating that citizens can and should be engaged in their translation into actionable policies via ongoing processes of deliberation, reflection and action, where change is both expected and enabled. To address the shortcomings of CA processes for policymakers and citizens alike, arts-based and creative methods were piloted, including scenario-making, participatory workshops and interactive documentary co-production, to *innovate with innovations in deliberative democracy*.

To address the aim, this study considers the following research questions:

- (1) Is there an appetite for citizens to be engaged post-CA in translating recommendations into action?
- (2) How can arts-based and creative participatory methods be used to enable ongoing processes of deliberation, reflection and action, where change is both expected and enabled?

The article is set out as follows: Section 2 sets out the methodology – describing arts-based participatory methods, a single case study and data collection and analysis; and Sections 3 and 4 present the results and discussion, respectively. Finally, Section 5 provides the conclusions, outlining contributions to the literature in which it is argued that, normatively, citizen participation should not end with the production of CA outputs (recommendations). In accordance with the principles of deliberative democracy, participatory decision-making is an ongoing and iterative process (Carrick et al., 2023). Moreover, the study illustrates that public participation is vital in the processes of translation and implementation of CA outputs (recommendations). This is because an output's meaning changes over time through evolving external circumstances and the development of new knowledge. It is also because people interpret recommendations in different ways depending on their perspectives, experiences and knowledge of the place. In this sense, this study aligns with Boswell and others that co-production may be useful as a policy innovation to improve the implementation of CAs. How co-production fits with CA implementation is a key problem this article addresses.

2. Methods

This article presents an in-depth single case study, piloting a series of innovative arts-based participatory methods to stimulate new forms of co-production in the context of post-CA engagement.

2.1. South Yorkshire Citizens' Assembly on Climate (SYCAC)

A case study approach enabled us to obtain rich contextual data. Case studies are often used in deliberative democracy research (Elstub & Pomatto, 2022) and are useful for building theory through the generation of hypotheses (Yin, 2014), which is helpful given the lack of previous research on CA follow-up.

This study is based on a single case – South Yorkshire Citizens’ Assembly on Climate (SYCAC) – that was similar in design and implementation to previous CAs without significant innovations. SYCAC thus represents a typical CA, justifying its use as a single case study (Elstub & Pomatto, 2022; Yin, 2014).

SYCAC was close in proximity, in terms of time and location, to the research team who are based at the University of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. SYCAC was held between October and December 2023, ending as this research was commissioned.⁴ This proximity made SYCAC a relevant and useful case.

SYCAC was commissioned by South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) to address the question: ‘The way our climate is changing will impact us all. How should we respond to build a thriving and sustainable future for South Yorkshire?’. It is outside the scope of this paper to assess the design of SYCAC; however, for context, a summary is provided here.

One hundred assembly members representative of South Yorkshire’s population were selected via random stratified sampling. Learning, deliberation and decision-making occurred over five sessions held over four weekends. Expert presentations were held over sessions 1–3, with limited deliberation and questions. Sessions 4 and 5 (weekend 4) were dedicated to deliberation and decision-making. Assembly members’ proposals were grouped into themes by organizers and synthesized during weekend 4, resulting in 33 recommendations, which assembly members voted on to identify fourteen priorities (TPX Impact, 2024).

2.2. Arts-based participatory methods

There is a history of using arts-based and creative methods to improve inclusivity and diversity of participatory processes. Cunningham and Hammond (2026) describe how arts-based methods can enable a ‘reflective, playful, imaginative, and collective way of engaging citizens on systemic issues such as climate change’.⁵ They, therefore, have the potential to exceed standard top-down technocratic deliberation and implementation. Previous studies have found that people’s lived experiences and knowledge of where they live hold greater value and relevance than broad, overarching climate change imperatives. Therefore, climate action can be more effective when it incorporates alternative future scenarios tailored to specific communities and localities (Della Bosca & Gillespie, 2018). There is a lack of systematic testing of such arts-based and participatory approaches to support CAs’ implementation.

To address this gap, this study piloted a series of innovative participatory methods, including scenario-making, participatory workshops, and interactive documentary co-production. Established methods – semi-structured interviews and conventional film-making – were also used. These methods were implemented in phases to enable Participatory Action Research (PAR) inspired cycles of deliberation, reflection and action (Kindon et al., 2007).⁶

This article is not concerned with assessing each method in detail (other publications by the research team will seek to achieve this⁷), instead it demonstrates the need for, and potential to engage citizens in the translation and implementation of CA outputs via these methods, to address the gap in CA follow-up, developing broader processes of ‘downstream deliberation’ via co-production. An overview of each method is provided below.

2.2.1. Participatory workshops

Three participatory workshops were conducted where participants created scenarios for South Yorkshire’s climate future, using the SYCAC recommendations as starting points. The workshops were held in Sheffield

⁴This, and other research activities within the Climate ReAssemblies series, were designed and funded separately to SYCAC.

⁵Other studies have explored the use of arts-based participatory methods including Bishop, 2012; Cunningham, 2020; Love & Mattern, 2013; Wiederhold, 2013.

⁶Kindon et al. (2007, p. 14) summarise the key features of PAR as: aiming to (positively) change social (and environmental) injustices; treating participants as competent and reflexive agents in all aspects of the process; addresses ‘real life’ problems; incorporating local beliefs and values; involves a collaborative process of knowledge generation; treating diverse experiences as opportunities to enrich research; constructing new meanings via reflections on action; and measuring the value of knowledge based on whether the action solves the identified problem.

⁷Provisional titles: ‘Climate ReAssemblies: innovating community engagement with climate policy through arts-based participatory methods’; and ‘Do-it with Others’ Futures – Innovating Citizen Engagement in Climate Assemblies through Interactive Documentary-making’.

city centre between April and May 2024, approximately four months after the end of SYCAC. They were designed to be inclusive and accessible, being held between 5.30 pm and 7.30 pm, so working people could attend after work, with food and drinks provided. The venue, an urban room (Akbi & Butterworth, 2025) and community hub, was selected for its relatively central yet off-campus location. Each participant was financially compensated for attending, and travel expenses were paid.⁸

It is recognized that the timing and location of the workshops would not be accessible for everyone. For example, because they were held in the early evening, those with young children may have found it difficult to attend; equally, relatively poor public transport outside the city centre (especially in the evenings) meant those living outside Sheffield may have found travelling to and from the venue problematic.

Fifteen workshop participants were recruited, including SYCAC participants and expert speakers, as well as local stakeholders and those representing community groups, see Table A1, Appendix A. Participants were recruited via the researchers' existing networks. There were 10 male and 5 female participants, most (13) were white, and 2 were from African and Caribbean backgrounds. Most (11) were from Sheffield, but 4 travelled from the Stocksbridge and Barnsley areas – approximately 14 and 19 km north of Sheffield, respectively. As a pilot study with limited resources, the workshops could not be made fully accessible, and numbers were limited, which affected recruitment. Ideally, a more diverse range of people would have participated, as white males were the dominant demographic.

As detailed in Table A1, two SYCAC assembly members and three people who presented at SYCAC participated in the workshops. One-third of participants had therefore been in the room during SYCAC and were able to share their experiences during the workshops. It was important to include members of the wider public as workshop participants to explore and develop our argument about broadening engagement beyond the assembly members. The research team (authors) plus two student research assistants also took part in workshop activities.

The workshops were documented in film, audio and photography.

2.2.2. Scenario-making

Scenario-making is a method of imagining and making sense of alternative (climate-changed) futures through its historical roots within the arts and humanities (Tysczuk, 2019; 2021; Tysczuk & Smith, 2018). Scenarios have been co-opted by scientific organisations and businesses as ways to explore and present potential climate futures. The work of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) (2019) is underpinned by the use of scenarios, where:

[t]he goal of working with scenarios is not to predict the future, but to better understand uncertainties and alternative futures, in order to consider how robust different decisions or options may be under a wide range of possible futures.

During the workshops, participants were asked to create scenarios from the SYCAC recommendations to explore their implementation. The underpinning methodology was participatory and speculative scenario-making, drawing on the origins of scenarios in the theatre. It was conceived as providing a 'framework for *rehearsed improvisation*', comprising 1. a story; 2. props; 3. timeframe and 4. situation (Tysczuk, 2021). This understands scenario-making as a way of collaboratively working out shared futures through processes of conversation and improvisation: an iterative exchange between what if? and what next?.

In four groups participants were presented with a scenario-making game, a framework for *rehearsed improvisation*: resources designed to prompt scenario-making, including a map of South Yorkshire and four types of cards depicting: 1. a story (each of the 33 recommendations); 2. an object, or prop (e.g. a tram ticket, a spade); 3. a timeframe ranging from 1 d to 100 years; 4. a situation or context (e.g. a heatwave, what's in the news today?).

During the first and second workshops, participants worked in groups to build a range of scenarios. During the third workshop, an illustrator helped participants build storyboards from selected scenarios, from which they created animations. Participants were invited to review and suggest amendments in two online feedback sessions, before the final animations were shared and embedded, alongside other documented materials (film, photos, audio of workshops and interviews), into the interactive documentary.

⁸Participants were paid £100 / workshop, plus £5.30 / workshop for travel (equating to a Sheffield bus/tram day ticket at the time).

A representative of a delivery organization – who has organized and managed a range of mini-publics (though not SYCAC) – also spoke to participants in the third workshop about initiatives that their organization has been trialling to improve before, during and after processes.

2.2.3. Interactive documentary

Interactive documentary (i-Doc) is an (inter)active mode of storytelling and story-viewing characterized as non-linear multimodal and activated through a digital technology or an interface. Put simply, an i-Doc is a digital platform hosting a range of media that tell a story, which a viewer must interact with to view.

In this study, the i-Doc platform has an interface of a map of South Yorkshire from which the viewer can navigate through to a range of media co-produced with workshop participants, including animations, photographs, audio and interviews, as summarized in Table A2, Appendix A. The media capture the processes and outputs, before, during and after the workshops, telling the story of the participatory process.

An in-progress version of the i-Doc was shared at a Sharing Event in November 2024. Feedback from participants was invited through a Google Form or email correspondence and was considered in the finalization of the i-Doc.

2.2.4. Other activities

Following the participatory scenario-making workshops and interactive documentary-making, a series of follow-on participatory activities took place: including a Master's student-led creative community engagement project (Live Project), a short documentary film⁹ and a series of knowledge exchange events with policymakers and citizens. These activities aimed to engage policymakers and the wider public with the project and explore the potential for impact.

Data collection took place during and after the scenario-making workshops and i-Doc co-creation, so these additional activities, including assessment of policy impact, do not form part of the analysis presented in this article.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Primary data were collected via interviews, workshop audio recordings and researcher field notes/observations. Qualitative methods can expand existing theories by exploring new hypotheses and are often used in research that seeks to understand the impact of democratic innovations like CAs (Talpin, 2019).

Workshop participants, except for CF15, were interviewed alongside or after workshops. Participant interviews were supplemented with interviews with a former civil servant responsible for commissioning SYCAC, a SYCAC facilitator and a representative of an organization that delivers mini-publics (not SYCAC), see Table A1.

Where possible, interviews were conducted in person by a project researcher and recorded via video camera. If an in-person interview could not be arranged, the interview was conducted online and recorded via Google Meet. The interview recordings were transcribed by software¹⁰, then checked and corrected by a researcher. Qualitative data were stored and coded in NVivo according to the research questions. Through the analysis, new themes and patterns were captured using a staged hybrid approach to thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

3. Results

In response to the research questions, the results illustrate a need and appetite for citizen engagement in CA follow-up (Section 3.1), and that arts-based participatory process can contribute to such engagement (Section 3.2).

⁹Climate ReAssemblies. Available at: <https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/events/climate-reassemblies..>

¹⁰Adobe Premier Pro – video editing software.

3.1. Need and appetite for citizen engagement in CA follow-up

3.1.1. Frustration with the lack of follow-up

In common with other CAs, very little (if any) preparation was undertaken by the commissioners (SYMCA) with regard to the follow-up to SYMCA. In this case, the results report dated January 2024 (TPX Impact, 2024) was published in March 2025, more than a year after the end of the assembly (SYMCA, 2025), and 10 months after the participatory workshops. At the time of the workshops, participants recognized and were frustrated by the delays and lack of follow-up. CF05, who presented as an expert speaker at SYCAC, commented that publishing the recommendations:

is a vital part of the whole process because it's almost a measure of how seriously the process is taken, and people's time and energy and effort to ... take part in the assembly. It feels like it's very disappointing to have not even published the recommendations almost six months after.

CF11, who was a participant of SYCAC, stated the assembly 'shouldn't be buried. We all put an awful lot of work into it'.

A recurring theme among interviewees who had not been part of SYCAC was frustration and disappointment that the assembly outputs were 'stuck in a cupboard' or 'on a shelf', as illustrated by the following quotes:

a lot of energy goes into these ... just to bundle it up and then put it on a shelf is not really a good idea (CF04)

the most disappointing thing is that these are still in somebody's cupboard (CF06)

there's so many recommendations on the shelf (CF02)

The insinuation is two-fold: first, a frustration that nothing is being done with the outputs; second, that (unlike the unidentified civil servants whose shelves they are sitting on) former SYCAC participants and the wider public do not have access to the outputs, excluding them from engaging with them, as illustrated by the following quotes:

the process hasn't continued ... that conversation with the public ... needs to be part of a bigger process (CF06)

each one of those recommendations, strong or weak, should have been discussed ... why has the assembly chosen this? ... what are the trade-offs? ... that should be an open debate ... with the public. (CF11)

3.1.2. Recommendations are not a CA's defining feature

Participants raised concerns about the process being reduced to, or defined by, its recommendations, which ignores the work and effort participants contributed to the process. Considering the process of combining and voting on the recommendations during the assembly sessions, a SYCAC member (CF09) reflected that:

the climate assembly is actually maybe doing a disservice to, you know, a huge breadth of experience and knowledge that was collected from every single person in that room and deliberated on, that somehow then becomes sort of lost to some extent or another.

This shows participants recognize that CA outputs are not a stand-alone defining feature. Therefore, instead of being handed back to be put on the shelves or in the cupboards of policymakers and institutions, they should be transferred into the public realm to facilitate an ongoing process of engagement regarding their implementation.

3.1.3. Broadening engagement beyond CA participants

Providing mechanisms for citizens to engage with CA outputs could deliver two key advantages. First, it demonstrates that something is happening with the outputs – as noted by CF01, who reflected that the scenario-making workshops 'offered at least something that could be seen as some, some form of progression'. Second, it enables the wider public, who were excluded from the CA process, to participate. Participants recognised the need for the wider public to be engaged. As CF11 stated, the recommendations 'weren't for the mayor; they were for the public'.

Participants emphasized that limited opportunities to engage with outputs reinforced perceptions of the CA as exclusionary for those who did not attend. CF03 stated: ‘many of us ... we see the report ... the end product [but] we never really are involved in ... the process itself’. This contributes to low levels of awareness and understanding of the process. As CF06 observed, SYCAC was ‘a bit of a black box in terms of what happened’.

The lack of awareness and transparency about the process threatens CA’s legitimacy; participants voiced concerns about the representativeness of SYCAC; CF08 commented:

I wasn’t at [SYCAC] but, you know, I could probably guess that there wasn’t much cultural diversity.

However, there are tensions around broadening participation beyond the CA participants. CF18 explained that for delivery organizations, protecting assembly members is baked onto the CA design:

practitioners ... think lots and lots about protecting this space during an assembly and making it only assembly members.

This creates a bubble of carefully selected citizens. CF18 went on to plead for preservation of the bubble, even after a CA has finished, highlighting a perceived need to ‘protect’ the participants by excluding all others:

after a process is finished ... I think there has to be space protected for citizens and for citizens’ assembly members only to be able to talk about ... where they are at with it all, and what they’ve learned.

Clearly, there is a need to balance between the protection of CA participants, so they feel they are free and empowered to express their views and the normative and instrumental benefits of broadening engagement beyond an assembly. The workshops provided a ‘safe space’ for participants to reflect on SYCAC, allowing frustrations to be aired and participants to find commonalities between their attitudes and views. Despite the occasional negative tone, the workshops produced within-group cohesion, vital in co-production (Flinders et al., 2016).

3.2. How arts-based and creative participatory methods can enable CA follow-up

3.2.1. Scenario-making

Scenario-making during the workshops enabled participants to envision and generate ideas for the implementation of recommendations into action, as illustrated by the quotes below:

Things are broken down into actual things that people can do. So, our story was based on ... ‘growing your own’ – it’s something that is easy to organise, easy to do, practical, yet will make a difference (CF01)

To actually ... put it in a story form, it sort of blew my mind, in a way, you know, because I’m thinking I’ve never really looked at things [in that way] ... it also brings out a fun element ... we never really have any fun, and therefore it’s not really memorable, you know. But, yeah, the story element was kind of cool (CF03)

Participants recognized the power of storytelling to inspire change. CF06 reflected that ‘stories ... bring it alive for people’. There was also evidence that scenario-making generated new ideas for implementing CA recommendations by encouraging participants to explore new perspectives. When reflecting on a scenario using the ‘50 years’ card, CF04 was encouraged to think about:

how would you see what would happen in 50 years’ time, which was something, again, that I’d not really considered.

As well as encouraging the participants to think differently, across a range of timescales and in varying situations and with different outcomes and consequences, interviewees appreciated that the scenario-making drew out and enabled them to reflect on their own knowledge and experiences, as well as the knowledge and experiences of the other participants. CF05 reflected that:

People had different backgrounds, different areas that they worked in, different areas that they were passionate about. So, that was really valuable, I think. I heard a lot from other areas that I hadn’t thought so much about.

These results indicate that scenario-making did help participants to draw on their lived experiences and knowledge to develop visions for both alternative and collaborative climate futures, by relating the recommendations to places and communities. For example, one of the scenarios developed by participants is called ‘Eco-living

Travel’ and builds on the recommendation for: ‘integrated travel infrastructure for e-bikes, scooters, and pedestrians with mini-hubs throughout urban areas for pick up and drop off of these transport systems’. The scenario describes a couple’s journey from their home in Barnsley (12 miles north of Sheffield in South Yorkshire) to their places of work in Sheffield via a new cycle path and an improved tram service. The scenario drew on participants’ knowledge of the area to envision a new build housing development, near to where one participant lives, selected as they knew the site had been designated for housing by the local authority. Participants described Meadowhall (a shopping centre) tram stop and imagined an integrated travel system where bicycles and scooters were permitted and charged on trams (neither are currently permitted on trams). One participant related the scenario to the evolution of Amsterdam from a car city to a bike city, demonstrating that the scenario enabled the participant to stretch their thinking and draw on wider knowledge of the subject (active travel).

The analysis indicates that the extent participants engaged with scenario-making and i-Doc co-creation to generate new ideas was limited by the complexity of the method. Participants admitted that they were confused, especially during the first two workshops. CF01 admitted they ‘didn’t quite get it first, what we were going to do’. Participants’ understanding of the process improved with time, especially in workshop three, when CF18 spoke to them from a practitioner’s perspective, and the illustrator storyboarded a scenario from each group, as illustrated by the following quotes:

the third workshop ... sort of opened the door as to, as to where it was going (CF04)

the way information was recorded in the last session [by the illustrator] ... was truly amazing (CF02)

Reflecting on the interview data, bringing in the illustrator and speaker (CF18) to workshop 1 or 2 may have helped participants understand the process earlier.

3.2.2. Improving inclusivity using arts-based creative methods

The analysis also shows that to overcome barriers to participation for minoritized groups, efforts need to go beyond the provision of alternative, creative methods. As discussed in section 2, as this was a pilot study, the participatory workshops were held at a time and place that could have precluded some citizens from attending. Moreover, several interviewees considered that engagement should take place within communities. CF02 reflected that such engagement events:

need to happen in communities ... if you come to [community venue] Caribbean food will be served, and people love it.

The study’s phased approach enabled the research team to reflect on this. The next phase of the project, where creative methods were piloted in the student-led Live Project, addressed this gap through engagement with citizens in the town centres of Penistone and Stocksbridge – peri-urban/rural areas north of Sheffield.¹¹

4. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that there is a need and appetite for citizen engagement in CA follow-up, and that arts-based participatory process can contribute to such engagement. This section reflects on how the findings link to the literature and sets out practical and normative implications.

The discussion is structured as follows. First, a discussion of the need for CA follow-up and how that could be implemented. Second, a discussion of broadening post-CA engagement beyond the CA participants, arguing that, normatively and instrumentally, citizens beyond civil servants (and CA participants) can and should be involved in the translation of CA outputs into policy and action. Third, some thoughts on the contribution of arts-based participatory methods.

4.1. The implementation of CA follow-up

The results of this study demonstrate the need for CA follow-up. Drawing on the literature, three suggestions are outlined to enable the implementation of CA follow-up. First, that CA outputs (e.g. recommendations or

¹¹This work will be published by others in the research team. Provisional title ‘Climate Rooms: Infrastructuring Plurality of Climate Politics’.

proposals) should be reframed as the continuation of a participatory process of translation, implementation and action, not the end (of the CA as an 'event'). Second, that CA outputs are viewed as dynamic, not static, requiring ongoing processes of reflection and interpretation as circumstances change. Third, that CA outputs do not represent the entire participatory process and should be viewed in the context of ongoing deliberative processes. These arguments are set out below.

4.1.1. Reframing outputs as the continuation of a participatory process

The results reveal there was widespread appetite for a continuation of citizen engagement post CA, suggesting there could be support for a move away from CAs from being perceived as discrete engagement events for policymakers to 'tick off'. To achieve this, CA outputs should be reframed as the continuation of a process (not the end), where recommendations are the starting point for building on and developing ideas into action. This addresses Smith's concern about CAs becoming 'talking shops' and aligns with Ainscough and Willis' (2024) calls to embed CAs into climate policymaking. It also addresses participants' frustration at the lack of action on the recommendations in the formal sphere.

We therefore argue that instead of viewing the recommendations as a list of instructions or criteria to be judged on, they could be approached as opportunities for further action and public engagement – as evolving and dynamic stories. This resonates with calls for CAs to represent a part of, and contribution to a wider deliberative system (Curato & Böker, 2016).

4.1.2. Dynamic outputs

Treating recommendations as 'fixed' ignores the dynamic nature of knowledge, which changes with new information and experience. The 'shelf-life' of recommendations has been recognized by civil servants involved in CAUK, who noted that the results of a CA would change over time depending on external factors (Carrick & Elstub, 2023).

One danger of not treating recommendations as fixed is that they could be manipulated by those in power so they no longer represent the will of the CA. Some may argue this could give policymakers a 'get out' card. Another danger is that if recommendations are not fixed, their implementation is less trackable. However, given that implementation of recommendations is low (Font et al., 2018), and that, apart from the French Citizens' Convention for Climate (CCC, 2019–2020) (where participants worked with legal experts to develop their ideas into statements that could be transferred into law without modification), recommendations need to be translated before implementation. This translation should not exclude citizens, who can fulfil an instrumental role in envisioning new ideas for implementation.

4.1.3. Moving away from the focus on outputs, toward an ongoing process of deliberation

As observed by participants, CA outputs (recommendations) do not represent the entire process of a CA and framing them as a CA's primary contribution misses the wider contributions of the CA members. In addition, maintaining the recommendations as fixed objects excludes the wider public's knowledge and experiences from their implementation.

Many CAs provide a vision or set of guiding principles which are intended to form the ethos or a lens through which recommendations are implemented. Focusing on recommendations risks bypassing this element, missing value judgements and deliberative work that formed recommendations. In the case of the French CCC, former participants have expressed frustration that civil servants have implemented recommendations without following their ethos (Averchenkova et al., 2025). CA outputs should be, therefore, viewed in the context of ongoing deliberative processes involving the wider public.

4.2. Broadening engagement

The lack of CA follow-up in the formal sphere is a significant challenge to their legitimacy. Our argument is that this translation of recommendations into action should not be the sole purview of elites but should include the public. Crucially, we argue that CA engagement should and can be broadened beyond the CA participants. Selecting assembly members that are representative of the population of their subject area, usually via

randomized stratified sampling, is a cornerstone of DMPs. It is presented as a means of including minoritized voices, and claims that every citizen has an equal chance of being included (Bussu & Fleuss, 2023). A CA's legitimacy largely depends on the idea that the wider public can recognize 'people like them' among the assembly members (Gerwin, 2018, p. 34). However, there are growing concerns that random stratified sampling does not overcome many barriers to participation, especially for those in minoritised groups (Harris, 2021).

The results resonate with concerns raised in the literature about how representative and democratic CAs are, considering the small number of participants and poor public awareness of their existence (Curato & Böker, 2016). The results support claims that the lack of awareness of, and a perceived lack of transparency in, the CA process adversely affects its legitimacy. Better awareness of CAs could improve their influence in the formal and informal public sphere. To facilitate this, access and inclusivity of CAs need to be improved. Post-CA engagement could make CAs more inclusive by opening the process beyond the 'selected' participants of the CA bubble. This could increase awareness and understanding of CAs in the informal public sphere, which conventional media campaigns and publicity around CAs have struggled to achieve (Carrick & Elstub, 2023).

To broaden engagement, participants raised concerns that the workshops were not sufficiently embedded in the community. This resonates with work by Bussu and Fleuss (2023) that argues that to overcome barriers to participation for low-income and marginalized groups, embeddedness within communities is essential to foster inclusive participation'. The phased approach – this study is part of a series of research – meant that the research team could respond to these concerns, as described in Section 3.2 and aligns with theories of deliberative democracy that prescribe just decision-making as part of an ongoing process of deliberation, reflection and action (Carrick et al., 2023; Smith, 2003).

4.3. Arts-based participatory methods

Aligning with previous studies, the analysis shows that arts-based, creative methods could be used to facilitate citizen engagement. Specifically, this study demonstrates that scenario-making can be used in CA follow-up to generate new ideas for implementing CA recommendations by encouraging citizens to explore new perspectives on issues, as well as draw out and reflect on their own and other people's experiences and knowledge of where they live. This resonates with Tysczuk's (2021) exploration of the use of collective storytelling to bridge the gap between institutional politics, communities and inhabitants – including the more-than-human, such as trees, rivers and other voiceless entities that are crucial for a liveable planetary future.

It has long been recognized that diverse and creative communication methods, including storytelling, can improve inclusivity and empower disenfranchised groups to participate (Young, 2000, p. 53). Enabling inclusivity through actively reaching out to engage with alternative views, including traditionally excluded groups, is a central value of deliberative democracy (OECD, 2020). The results align with other studies suggesting arts-based and creative participatory methods of storytelling and scenario-making can support the communicative and expressive aspects of citizen engagement. This is especially relevant given the dynamic nature of ongoing processes of deliberation, reflection and action, characteristic of CA follow-up.

The potential for arts-based and creative participatory methods within a CA is acknowledged, which is a subject of further research within the research series.

5. Conclusions

This study emphasizes not only the need for democratic innovation in the context of climate change but for a critical review of CA processes. To tackle the problem of CA outputs being left 'on the shelf', this study explored the use of arts-based participatory methods to engage citizens in an iterative process of deliberation, reflection and action to translate the outputs of a CA towards implementation. The findings highlight the potential of enabling a culturally-embedded practice of scenario-making to open climate policy-making and research to collaborative, imaginative and inclusive inquiries where citizens were able to see themselves in processes of change. Through 'what if ...?' and 'what next?' questions, the project inspired visions for South Yorkshire's climate future by bringing together people with different lived experiences and knowledge and giving them

the tools and opportunities to use their knowledge to transform the SYCAC recommendations into actions. This could be particularly useful to policymakers tasked with implementing CA outputs.

The results revealed an appetite for citizen participation in the translation of CA outputs into policy among participants, which should include and extend beyond CA participants. This could unblock the bottleneck within the formal sphere that hampers the progression of climate policymaking and thereby action on climate change. Given the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, this is a crucial point.

To achieve this, we argue that CAs should be planned and implemented as part of ongoing participatory processes of reflection, deliberation and action, rather than one-off events (or series of events). This requires understanding that CA outputs evolve with time and circumstances (e.g. technological developments), and that outputs are incomplete in that they do not, and cannot, represent the entire contribution of a CA and its assembly members. Although there are practical limitations (e.g. financial), planning CAs in this way will help CA commissioners to manage their budgets, as well as their own – and the participants' – expectations.

Ethics

The research undertaken in this study was approved by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee.

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Author contributions

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Appendices

Appendix A: Tables

A1: Workshop participants and interviewees

Code	Representing	Place
CF01	Community energy group	Stocksbridge
CF02	Community group representing ethnic minorities	Sheffield
CF03	Community group representing ethnic minorities	Sheffield
CF04	Community energy group	Stocksbridge
CF05	Expert speaker at SYCAC	Sheffield
CF06	Climate activist and trade unionist	Sheffield
CF07	Renewable energy and education charity	Sheffield
CF08	Artist and conservationist	Sheffield
CF09	SYCAC participant	Sheffield
CF10	Community energy group	Stocksbridge
CF11	SYCAC participant	Barnsley
CF12	Education - retired teacher and education charity	Sheffield
CF13	Civil servant - sustainability and conservation and expert speaker at SYCAC	Sheffield
CF14	Sustainable food charity and expert speaker at SYCAC	Sheffield
CF15	Community group - providing funding and support for local projects	Sheffield
CF16	Civil servant	Sheffield
CF17	SYCAC facilitator	Sheffield
CF18	Delivery organisation (not for SYCAC)	Cumbria

Table A2: elements of the i-Doc

Resource	Format	When Produced	Produced by	Who Features
Workshop resources (worksheets, poster, cards)	PDF	Before workshops	Researchers	N/A
Photographs and written notes from SYCAC	Photographs	During SYCAC	Participants	SYCAC participants
List of recommendations from SYCAC	PDF	During SYCAC	SYCAC participants	N/A
Workshop recordings	Audio	During workshops	Researchers and research assistants	Participants and researchers
Animations	Photographs			
	360 videos			
	Story	During workshops	Participants	Characters generated by participants
	Video	During and after workshops	Illustrator	
	Audio	After workshops	Researchers	Participants' voices
Interviews	Video and audio	During and after workshops	Researchers	Participants
Resources	PDF	After workshops	Researchers	N/A
Base map landing page	Illustration	After workshops	Illustrator	N/A