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To: ceconsultation@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Sent: Thursday, December 11th 2025, 12:25 PM
Subject: Deedback on community assembly events 3rd December 2025 - Macclesfield

Hello,

Thank you for inviting me to provide feedback on the Community Assembly event held in Macclesfield Town Hall on 3rd December.

I am doing so by email as I find it easier than writing in very small boxes on the form. Firstly I would like to say that I fully support Cheshire East Council's efforts to use community assemblies as a means of stimulating dialogue with its residents. I firmly believe these can be useful in meeting the challenges especially with regard to climate change.

I thought that it was not a bad first attempt and I learned quite a lot from the evening. However I felt quite uncomfortable at times and have been reflecting on why. I think it was that the scope of the discussion was so wide. It was very interesting to have on our table (table 1) Helen Charlesworth-May who provided a lot of insights on the challenges faced by the council in carrying out its statutory duties and 2) Cllr Michael Gorman who told us why he was so keen on setting up community assemblies here in Cheshire East.

Apart from that the table discussion was rather unsatisfying. There was one guy throwing out ideas of cost savings and I think the rest of us just felt we needed more information. Hence we spent a lot of time asking questions but with no real sense of where those questions might take us. This would have been a sensible approach if we had had all day but wasn't going to get us anywhere in half an hour.

I had the sense that we were asking nothing that CEC has not already challenged itself on. It was put to us that CEC wanted our approval for some rather obvious steps (eg for charging what it costs for some services, in planning say, rather than sticking to some central tariff) and our answer was 'why do we need your approval for that? My own view is - I don't know your jobs like you do. I expect you to come up with ways of working that are efficient and effective. You can come up with ways of collecting ideas from service users to help you spot when you are incurring mad and unnecessary costs.

In short I think community assemblies are a good idea but for a different type of question / decision: one which has a distinct focus.

Cllr Michael Gorman said that he had wanted to create such assemblies after the experience in Ireland where Citizens' Assemblies were used to move the debate forward on some very sensitive issues. So I read a case study on the assembly asked to make a recommendation on abortion. I was struck by a number of things:

- The clear focus of the question they were asked to make a recommendation on
- The 99 assembly members had been selected at random to reflect the Irish population in terms of age, gender, social class and geography
- The time they were given to deliberate was substantial - 5 weekends over 5 months
- The amount of information they were given from people on both sides of the debate (medical, legal and ethical specialists, personal testimonies) was substantial
- The process was extremely transparent with contributions of expert witnesses being live streamed
- The assembly's recommendation was debated in the Irish Parliament and was followed by a referendum, the result of which reflected very closely the recommendation of the Assembly (and was very different to what recent previous polling had shown.)

Source: <https://www.involve.org.uk/news-opinion/opinion/citizens-assembly-behind-irish-abortion-referendum>

While Cheshire East Council does not have quite so many resources - I think there are still some lessons that can be learned for how you could make use of assemblies.

- Pick a topic where you can get some focus
- Pick one that is controversial where there is evidence on both sides of the argument that people can consider
- Pick a topic that people can care about

- The decision is clearly discretionary - that is the Council can choose to do or not do it - there is no point in debating whether we meet a statutory requirement (but you could use a community assembly to help with communications around it)
- It may be that the council wants to make a decision eg to improve road safety but is concerned that it may be unpopular. If the community assembly could be used to help the council understand a) if they agree the decision is the right one based on the evidence b) give insight into why it might be unpopular c) how this likely resistance could be overcome for the majority of residents
- Select residents at random in order to reflect make up of residents
- Allow enough time to present all relevant evidence
- Think carefully about what the respective roles are of councillors; officers and residents. Don't expect residents to do your jobs for you.

Getting back to the specifics of the evening - and forgive me for any repetition:

The slide material was presented was clearly by Ashley Hughes - (*although I couldn't read the handouts that were left on the table.*)

The slide that had the biggest impact on me was the one that showed the results of the recent consultation - and showed of 2200 or so respondents large percentages wanted the council to do less of the things including:

- improving walking and cycling infrastructure
- supporting young people in various ways
- adult social care

I found this very disheartening. Someone in the meeting did question whether those figures truly meant people think the council should not do those things or were simply reflecting that they currently don't use those services themselves. I think that was a valid question and I do believe that the current consultation process is flawed. I have responded to several consultations and talked to others who have responded. No one finds it very satisfying and there is a sense that CEC carries out consultations because they have to and do what they have decided regardless of what the results of the consultation are. This is probably unfair and arises out of false expectations inadvertently set by having a consultation process.

For both consultations and for community assemblies you need to be very clear about what you are trying to achieve with them. You need to be honest about how you use the response data and what decisions have already been made. There is no point in asking people if they think the council should do less adult social care when the council has a statutory duty to carry out adult social care. But you could perhaps ask a community assembly help you communicate:

- what adult social care is
- why it is beneficial to the whole community that CEC carries out its legal obligations
- innovative ways of carrying out (Helen mentioned the approach being taken in Disley with the help of the Parish Council)
- relationships between adult social care and other things the council is trying to achieve

Another community assembly could be used to help overturn the attitudes expressed in the recent budget consultation with regard to spending on walking and cycling infrastructure. I personally support the direction of Locat Transport Plan (consultation closed on 7th Dec) and strongly support the council in trying to promote active travel (actually I think they could be much more ambitious.) The results of that budget consultation show there are some attitudes that need to be overcome but this is surely no more contentious than the Irish examples.

I hope that is helpful and yes, I would be interested in attending others or helping you shape the process. If you were to pursue the idea of having a community assembly on active travel and road safety, I could help put you in touch with some experts to provide evidence to an assembly.

Best wishes