

# citizens' assemblies as a democratic innovation in transport planning

**Dan Durrant, Philipp Verpoort and Isobel Wade** look at lessons – not least for planning decision-making processes – from an Innovation in Democracy Programme citizens' assembly pilot that was set up to explore the possibility of consensus on bold solutions to transport issues in the Greater Cambridge area

Planning has a long history of using consultation and deliberation to resolve some of the 'wicked problems' development brings with it – for example, decisions to construct or restrict the use of infrastructure such as roads that may benefit one group to the detriment of another.<sup>1</sup> A relatively recent addition to the toolbox of participatory methods has been an approach called a citizens' assembly. This method of bringing together a representative, randomly selected sample of citizens, in what is known as a 'mini-public', to consider issues in an informed, respectful environment has attracted the interest of central government.

This article looks at the Greater Cambridge Citizens Assembly, a successful pilot project from the Innovation in Democracy Programme set up last year by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It begins with a discussion of the issues in Cambridgeshire that led the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP), the local City Deal delivery body, to explore this option. It then describes how the process was used to address the questions of improving public transport, improving air quality and reducing congestion, and how it led weight to arguments for bold solutions.

Interestingly, in the guidance given to local authorities applying for the funding provided by the programme 'planning issues'<sup>2</sup> are expressly ruled out owing to the quasi-judicial nature of the process.

Notwithstanding this, all the three pilot projects for the Innovation in Democracy Programme dealt with issues that are either upstream of or inherently connected to planning. With this in mind, the final section of this article reflects on how democratic innovations of this type may interact with the planning system.

## **Why try a citizens' assembly in the Greater Cambridge area?**

Both the city of Cambridge and the surrounding district of South Cambridgeshire (together known as Greater Cambridge) are experiencing rapid growth, with an additional 44,000 new jobs and 33,500 new homes expected in the next decade. Combined with a booming economy, this sees growing pressure put on the transport network.

High housing costs and a shortage of housing in the city results in high levels of commuting from South Cambridgeshire and a wider travel-to-work area, with people making longer journeys. Despite investment in new transport infrastructure such as the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway, very many of these journeys are still made by car. Congestion has been worsening, with around a quarter of people's journeys to work spent stuck in traffic. This has a knock-on impact on public transport, slowing down buses and affecting reliability. For many, commuting by public transport remains uncompetitive, even with slow and stressful car journeys.

This reliance on the car contributes to poor air quality in some areas, and to high levels of carbon dioxide emissions – transport emissions per capita in Cambridge are 50% higher than the national average. The whole of the city centre has been declared an Air Quality Management Area, with concerns over nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter breaching legal limits. These concerns are particularly acute around public transport hubs, around new developments at the main station, and at new employment areas such as the Cambridge Biomedical Campus developing around Addenbrooke's Hospital to the south east.

The City Deal funding has offered an opportunity to invest in infrastructure to address some of these issues (with plans for four high-quality public transport routes on key corridors) in addition to the current Guided Busway. Linked to areas of housing and employment growth, these will enable speedier and more reliable journeys. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is working on plans to then link these routes together with tunnels to form a Cambridgeshire Autonomous Metro. New cycling and walking infrastructure, and upgrades to radial routes into the city, are also being developed.

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All this will help more people to make journeys using sustainable transport. Nevertheless, tackling traffic and air quality issues also requires investment in public transport services to make them more attractive, and calls for lower traffic levels to create space for buses to run faster and more reliably, and for walking and cycling.

There has been a steady alignment of Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council, with the two authorities beginning consultation on a new joint Local Plan.<sup>3</sup> Yet the governance of this key centre for UK economic

growth and the delivery of housing remain complex. The City Deal has brought together the two district authorities, Cambridgeshire County Council, the University of Cambridge and the business community, and brought with it up to £500 million of central government investment in infrastructure and skills development, alongside local contributions.

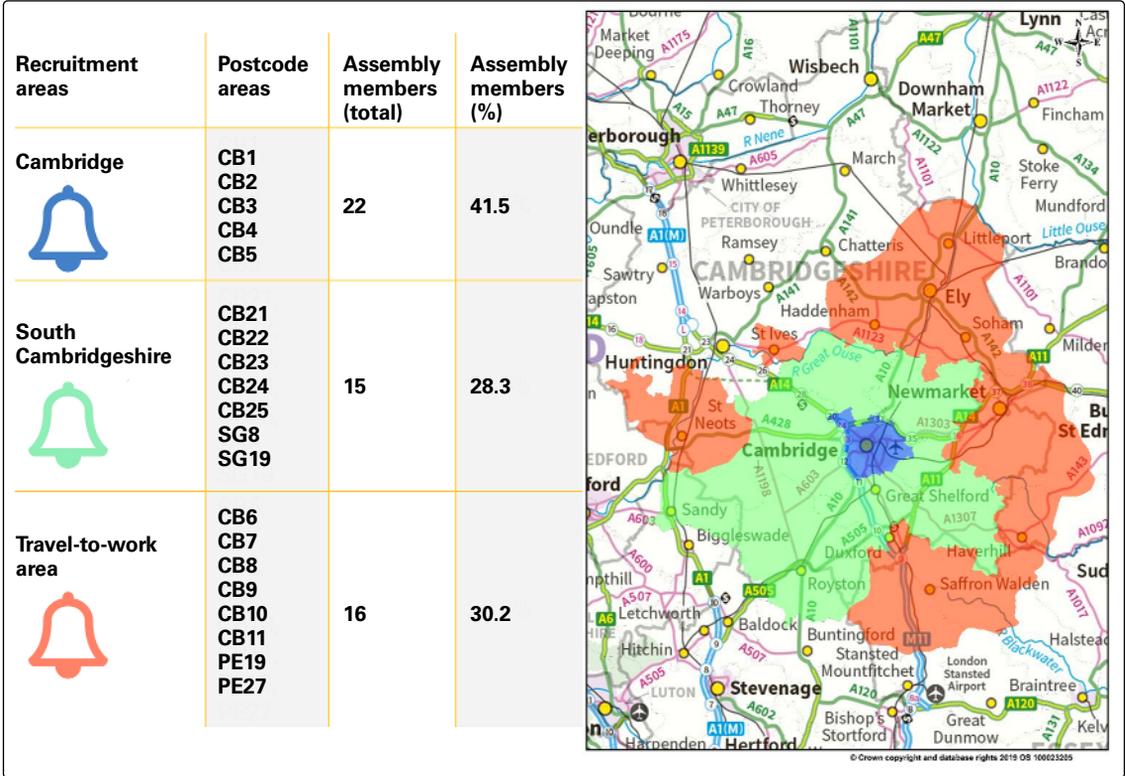
On top of this is the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, which brings together the three Greater Cambridge partners along with the surrounding authorities of Fenland District, East Cambridgeshire District and Huntingdonshire District and Peterborough City Councils under an elected mayor as part of a separate devolution deal with central government. The Combined Authority, intended to increase the efficiency of limited local government resources, also has responsibility for strategic transport, development of a non-statutory spatial plan, and economic development.

The travel-to-work area includes the area of the Combined Authority as well as parts of Hertfordshire and Suffolk, taking in nearby commuter towns and more rural areas. This illustrates the way in which transport issues reflect (and why any solutions need to take account of) the differing needs of rural and urban populations.

In the city itself, despite being the UK's cycling capital with around 29% of working residents getting to work by bike, more needs to be done.<sup>4</sup> The historic core provides no opportunities for expansion of the road network, and congestion for cars – and crucially public transport – is increasing journey times. Furthermore, elevating the level of bike use to the norm for European cities like Amsterdam or Copenhagen is impossible without further intervention and concerted action.

More generally, for Cambridge residents more active travel is an easier choice, with amenities closer at hand. Were steps taken to reduce congestion, public transport would become more attractive and easier to provide for those for whom cycling is not an option, given the higher population densities. In contrast, the shift to active, low-emissions transport is harder for rural populations, for whom the car is often the best or even the only option. Public debate in this area can often pit the interests of different groups against each other – most notably drivers and cyclists, but also the different rural and urban constituencies. This can result in, at worst, a degree of inertia and, at best, a desire or political need to try to please all groups. Yet overcoming this and meeting the challenges of growth in the Greater Cambridge area in a sustainable way requires investment, political will and most likely bold measures to address current dependence on the private car.

As a supplement to what was already an extensive programme of consultation over transport options in support of the City Deal, the GCP decided to



**Fig. 1 Citizens' assembly members within the Cambridge, South Cambridgeshire and wider travel-to-work area**

convene a so-called 'citizens' assembly'. In this case it offered a chance to explore what bold solutions might be acceptable and to build consensus over how the transport and infrastructure component of the investment from central government should be spent.

The process of a citizens' assembly is based on the concept of allotted citizens' juries, an idea that dates back to the early democracies of ancient Athens. Through what is known as sortition, a stratified, randomly selected group of citizens is invited to be part of an assembly. This stratification process ensures that the group is broadly representative in terms of gender, age, location, and socio-economic status. Assembly members listen to evidence on a particular issue, discuss and review the received information, and make recommendations to public authorities based on what they have learnt. While assemblies are usually not legally binding, the convening authority should normally announce in advance how it is going to respond to and implement those recommendations.

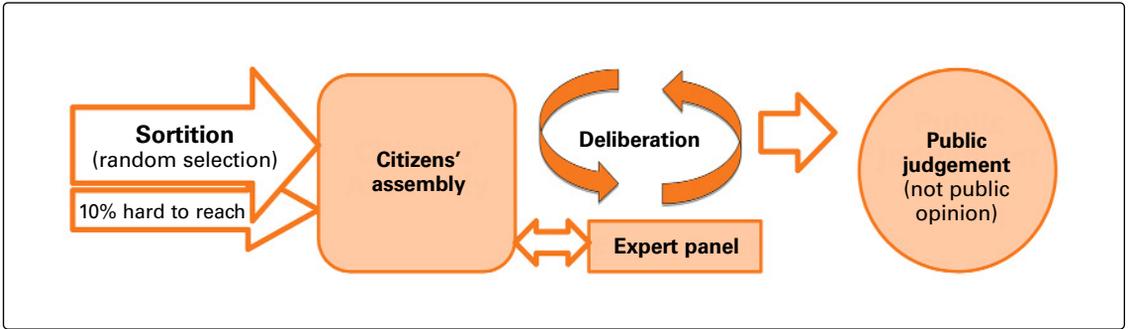
**The Greater Cambridge citizens' assembly process**

Reflecting the growing use and understanding of the potential of citizen's assemblies around the world, the Greater Cambridge citizens' assembly was one of the successful bids for funding under

the Innovation in Democracy Programme, along with pilots in Test Valley and Dudley. The assembly was convened by GCP and was jointly delivered by the Involve Foundation and the Sortition Foundation, who bring considerable experience and have delivered many similar processes across the UK over the past few years.

The Sortition Foundation recruited the assembly participants by sending 10,000 invitations to randomly selected households within the travel-to-work area (see Fig. 1). From those who replied, a selection was made based on the respondents' fit with the general sampling criteria and, in this case, their broad geographical location and their most often used mode of transport (cycle, car, bus and train, or walking). In other words, participants were selected randomly, while ensuring a certain degree of representativeness. This meant that there was no means of self-selection by groups or individuals who may feel they might like to get involved. The receipt of an invitation letter was necessary to participate, and even passing the letter on to a friend or neighbour was forbidden. Equally, participants were not selected by the GCP.

As a result of this process a group of 60 participants were selected to take part in a process spanning two full weekends in September and October 2019. Of this group, the vast majority (53) completed both weekends. The established structure of a citizens' assembly (see Fig. 2 on the next page) sees



**Fig. 2 Citizens' assembly structure**

participants provided with information on the issues on which they are to deliberate by a panel of experts. This is in turn overseen by an advisory group with a role to ensure both the accuracy and balance of expert knowledge and perspectives. This group was led and represented in the assembly by Honorary Professor David Metz from University College London.

During the first weekend expertise was provided on the first day predominantly by local authorities, with the participants given time to discuss and question presenters, working together on tables in groups with facilitation provided by trained staff from Involve. This was intended to give the assembly members the necessary background information to be able to take part in an informed debate – namely, information on the current situation as well as the policy options available.

On day two the expertise came from a wider group, made up of a range of civil society organisations promoting the interests of, for example, cyclists and rail users, as well as representatives of the business perspective on Cambridge's transport issues. The academic perspective on what is possible and what has been achieved elsewhere came from Dr Rachel Aldred, Reader in Transport at the University of Westminster.

In the second weekend the deliberations began in earnest, with groups and their facilitators asked to first consider policy options, with commentary from a panel made up of academics and practitioners from bodies such as Transport for London. They were then asked to produce and analyse a range of options and to suggest a series of recommendations and key messages for GCP to consider. The support for those recommendations was then tested through a series of ballots on the fourth and final day. The presentations and much of the results were livestreamed, although individual group deliberations remained private.

**The results**

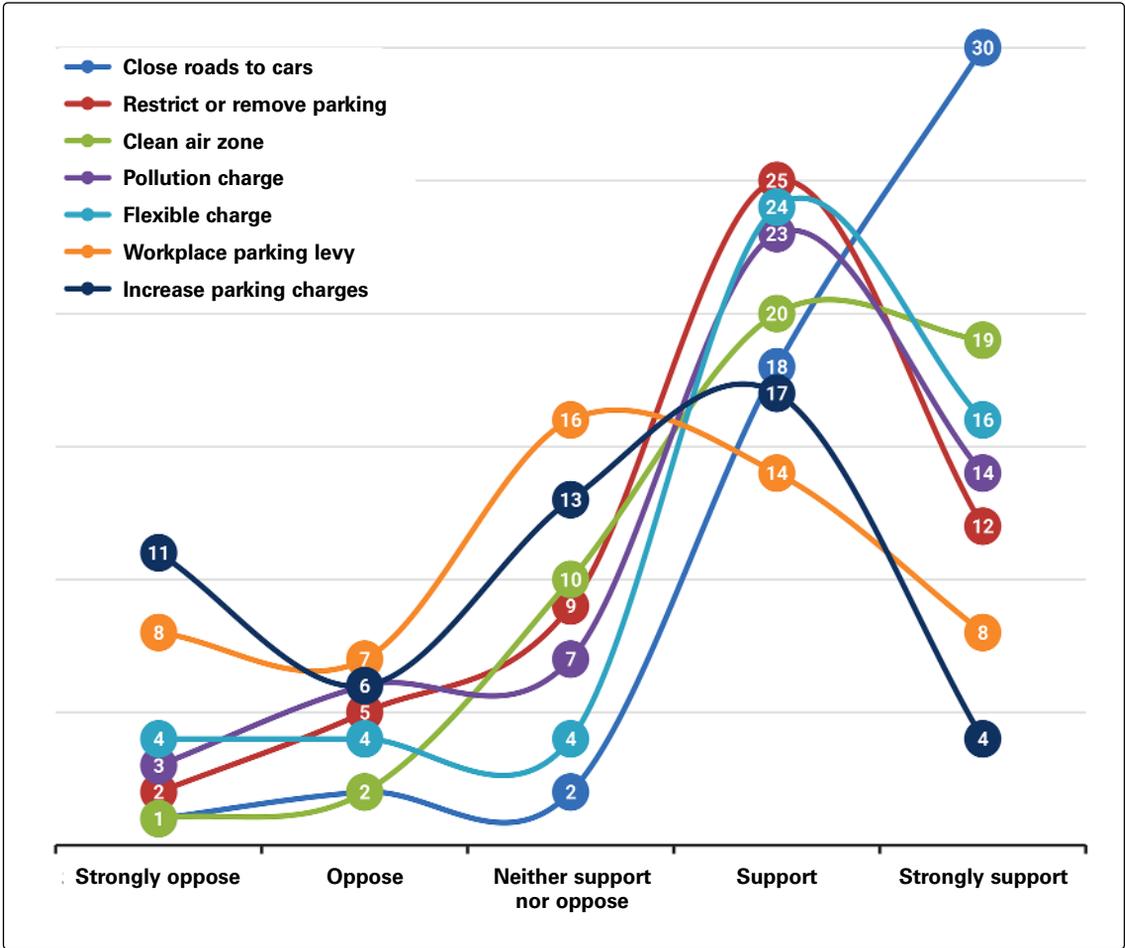
A much more detailed description of the process and recommendations is available in a full report published by Involve.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, the recommendations and two questions that come

from the report that ought to be of particular interest to the readers of this journal. The first question is whether citizens' assemblies provide high-quality, well reasoned recommendations that can inform the way in which knotty issues such as those of Cambridgeshire and its transport infrastructure are addressed.

Based on the evidence from Cambridgeshire, the answer to this question has to be a cautious yes. From observations of the assembly meetings and the final report it produced, it becomes clear that the recommendations were made through a process of thoughtful, wide-ranging discussions reflective of a range of perspectives. Likewise, it was clear by the end of what was a demanding four days the assembly members had informed themselves and developed a high level of understanding of the issues involved and the policy options available.

The strongest recommendation was for the closure of roads in the city centre supported by a form of flexible charging based on levels of congestion (see Fig. 3). While the use of flexible or pollution charging is broadly in line with measures favoured by previous consultations, the option of road closures came out of the assembly process. This is a solution that had been explored in the past and rejected in the face of public opposition, and particularly opposition from specific groups such as local traders. Interestingly, for assembly members this option commanded both a high level of support and a low level of opposition, hence suggesting this is an area where a consensus ought to be achievable. It appears to suggest that this form of deliberation may be a way of avoiding the sort of polarised debates that pit groups against each other and can lead to political inertia.

The GCP hoped the assembly would come to a view on a package of measures to tackle the issues, but did not have a fixed view on what these should be – they were interested in what the participants felt would work, and what they would independently come up with, rather than looking for endorsement of a particular approach. Furthermore, international experience of assemblies shows that the solutions of the organisers can be rejected. For example, an



**Fig. 3 Recommendations from the Cambridgeshire citizens' assembly pilot**

assembly in Australia defeated an attempt by the government to develop a radioactive waste storage facility, and another in South Korea reversed the President's plan to discontinue the construction of a nuclear power plant. This suggests that it cannot be assumed that assemblies will return results broadly in line with current policy or the preferences of the organisation convening the assembly.

Beyond this, the Cambridge Citizens' Assembly experience suggests that participants do not necessarily approach issues in the same way as conventional processes bound by existing institutional structures would. The participants were asked to propose a series of supporting measures arising from their deliberations. At the top of the list was the recommendation that the Mayor should establish a bus franchise. This went beyond the remit of GCP, being directed towards the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority. Second on the list was a recommendation for increased tree-planting – again, something that stretches the economic development and infrastructure investment remit of the authority convening the assembly.

**The value of citizens' assemblies in planning**

The second question of particular interest here is how assemblies might fit into the established forms of planning decision-making and the processes of consultation that support them. In answering this question, we may need to return to the caution surrounding the answer to the first. While it seems to be a process that has something to offer, integrating citizens' assemblies in a way that leads to better planning decisions requires more work if we are to get beyond the one-off experiments that programmes like the Innovation in Democracy offer.

In the case of Cambridgeshire, the value of the assembly will rest upon both the capacity of GCP to build further consensus around more specific concrete proposals for traffic, and also on commitments to the process and its recommendations from other levels of government. In particular, the role of the citizens' assembly depends on how politicians will view it. Is it just to inform politicians, or can it be seen as some form of political mandate? Furthermore, the assembly recommendations still remain at a relatively abstract level, and deciding, for example,

which roads ought to be closed poses fresh challenges.

Specific proposals that may have an impact on particular groups is an area in which further democratic innovation may be beneficial. In this case the design of the assembly – with its focus on a broad, strategic question – did not include some of the more local interest groups that may, for example, be objecting to specific transport infrastructure developments, or local traders who have been vocal opponents of road closures. It is a distinct feature of citizens' assemblies that members are just that, citizens. Beyond being broadly representative of the population as a whole, they are not intended to represent a particular view or group.

In a sample of this size it is also unlikely that representatives of what are often small local groups would be included. There are good reasons for this when decisions are taken at the level of suggestions of broad directions for action and policy. The principle of sortition means that assembly participants would not resemble what are often referred to as 'the usual suspects' who would regularly participate in public meetings or activists who spend a lot of their free time debating these topics. Instead, assemblies include people who would often not take part in this type of debate. However, as the evidence from Cambridge and around the world shows, people who would not normally involve themselves often welcome the chance to do so and can reach informed conclusions sometimes beyond those that existing processes might be expected to produce.

## **'In a world where complex, wicked problems require delicate solutions, it is crucial to think more widely about the way that experts of all types, including planners, engage with the public'**

We should not, however, simply dismiss the 'usual suspects', who can also contribute greatly and form the sort of vibrant and informed civil society that is able to respond to, scrutinise and challenge planning decisions. Citizens' assemblies provide another potential tool in the box which could explore further and generate ideas, arguments, solutions, and recommendations.

If the method were to become more widely used and understood it could also improve public trust by demonstrating popular support. Local interest groups often have very specific concerns about a particular issue, as do private sector consultants



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and public sector officials, whose careers, incomes and opportunities are often tied up in the delivery of specific policies and programmes. Academics too all come with their own perspective. The citizens' assembly process potentially captures the inputs from all of these different entities and allows a broadly representative group of citizens to arrive at an informed decision based on these inputs.

It can be hard for anyone who has developed considerable knowledge of an area or professional expertise to have this challenged by an assembly that, by definition, is made up of people with little initial knowledge of that subject. Yet, in a world where the public has apparently had 'enough of experts', where complex, wicked problems require delicate solutions, it is crucial to think more widely about the way that experts of all types, including planners, engage with the public. The purpose of the citizens' assembly process is to regain democratic legitimacy for expert knowledge and reinstate a balance between different perspectives by allowing everyday people to understand what is behind expertise and how it is used to produce potential solutions.

A further, final, consideration if assemblies are to be used more widely is the matter of costs. These are not insignificant, in terms of the logistics of sortition, facilitation and the development of an expert panel. There are also payments to assembly members and the meeting of travel costs – something that is important if a wider range of people are to be encouraged to participate. In Cambridge there was a gift of £300 given to everyone that completed the four days. While for some this may be little more than a token, for others it can replace lost earnings and make the difference between being able to take part or not.

To conclude, there is a lot that can be taken from this particular pilot in terms of the potential to include a really wide range of respondents in

decisions that may be directly related to planning. Assemblies could certainly form part of the earlier stages of plan or even site development, and it is possible to see the principle of sortition being used to supplement and support existing tools for deliberative planning such as charrettes. In particular situations, as with Cambridge, the method allows flexibility in selecting the area or perspectives that the mini-public is representative of.

Situations where this should be of particular use include where there are hard-to-reach communities or polarised positions that need to be brought into the process. Here, it ought to be possible, with further innovation, to adapt either the method of sortition or the use of expert panels, or both. This could then include some of the civil society perspectives and local knowledge that it may have been useful to leave out of high-level deliberations such as those setting a general direction. These perspectives may well then become more important as more concrete proposals (that may be detrimental to some groups but beneficial to others) are developed.

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## Notes

- 1 HWJ Rittel and MM Webber: 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning'. *Policy Sciences*, 1973, Vol. 4 (2), 155–69. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2FBF01405730.pdf>
- 2 *Innovation in Democracy Programme Expression of Interest Guidance*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Nov. 2018. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/innovation-in-democracy-programme-expression-of-interest-eoi](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/innovation-in-democracy-programme-expression-of-interest-eoi)
- 3 *The First Conversation*. Greater Cambridge Local Plan: Issues and Options. South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council, Jan. 2020. <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/media/1203/greater-cambridge-local-plan-the-first-conversation-issues-and-options-2020.pdf>
- 4 *Running out of Road: Investing in Cycling in Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford*. Report for the National Infrastructure Commission, Jul. 2018. [www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Running-out-of-Road-June-2018.pdf](http://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Running-out-of-Road-June-2018.pdf)
- 5 *Greater Cambridge Citizens' Assembly on Congestion, Air Quality and Public Transport. Report and Recommendations on How Do We Reduce Congestion, Improve Air Quality and Provide Better Public Transport in Greater Cambridge*. Greater Cambridge Partnership and Involve Foundation, Nov. 2019. [www.greatercambridge.org.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/GCCA%20on%20Congestion%20Air%20Quality%20and%20Public%20Transport%20-%20PEP%20final%20version.pdf](http://www.greatercambridge.org.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/GCCA%20on%20Congestion%20Air%20Quality%20and%20Public%20Transport%20-%20PEP%20final%20version.pdf)