

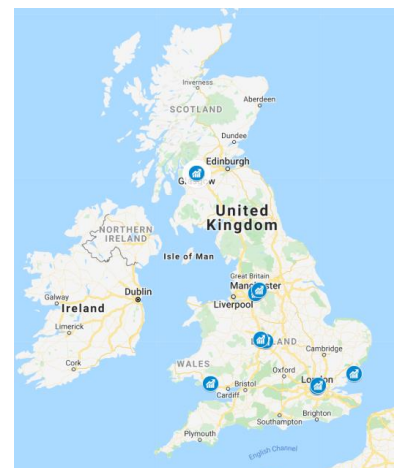


The RSA Citizens’ Economic Council: Citizen Contributions to Policy- Making

Highlights The RSA’s Citizen Economic Council was a two-year programme (2016–2018) in which 59 citizens conducted their own enquiry into economic policy in the United Kingdom and worked and deliberated with policymakers to co-create economic policy recommendations. The four goals of the Citizen Economic Council were to improve economic literacy and accessibility, increase transparency, improve democratic accountability, and create space for innovative economic alternatives. Through a series of workshops, seminars, the development of a toolkit, public crowdsourcing, and stakeholder engagement, the programme reached over a thousand UK citizens to co-generate creative economic policy recommendations for the UK context.

Introduction

Recent economic crises, like that of 2008, have undermined trust in economic and political institutions (Tonkiss 2009) and debates around accountability have spread (Greiling 2014). Studies have shown the need for citizens to improve economic literacy and gain an understanding of their role in the policy arena, as well as the need for transparency and accountability on the part of economic policymakers (Harrison and Sayogo 2014). In the UK, the results of the European Union referendum vote, in which over half of voters supported leaving the union, led to enquiries as to what caused this result. Studies demonstrated that many who voted leave did so because they ‘felt left behind by a pursuit of economic growth at the expense of a more



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inclusive understanding of growth and who it benefits.’ (Patel, Gibbon and Warden 2017: 4). In this context, RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) began the Citizens’ Economic Council Programme in 2016 to explore four main questions:

- What are the goals of an economy?
- Who should the economy serve?
- What are the trade-offs involved in economic decisions that need to be made transparent and explored?
- What new, innovative economic policies can we create that represent the perspectives, wishes and values of the public?

The programme was designed to use experimental, iterative and participatory techniques to ‘better understand and capture the potential such processes have to strengthen citizens’ agency on, influence over and contributions to economics’ (Patel and Gibbon 2017: 12). Before being used in the programme, the processes used by RSA were developed and trialled by innovative organisations such as Involve Foundation, the Democratic Society, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Democracy Matters. RSA’s programme involved three main components: a Citizens’ Economic Council; an Economic Inclusion Roadshow; and the use of civic technology and crowdsourcing.

Timeline

June 2016	Oct – Dec 2016	Feb – June 2017	Feb 2017 – ongoing	Oct 2017 – Jan 2018	March 2018
Brexit Referendum	Economic Inclusion Roadshow	Citizens’ Economic Council	DIY Economics Toolkit	Online public crowdsourcing	Bank of England declares it will implement citizen councils

How It Works

The three components of the programme were divided into five main stages:

- Economic Inclusion Roadshow (Oct-Dec 2016);
- Citizens Economic Council (Feb-June 2017);
- DIY Economics Toolkit (Feb 2017 – ongoing);
- Online public crowdsourcing (Oct 2017 – Jan 2018); and
- Stakeholder engagement (Feb 2017 – ongoing) (Greenham 2018).

The Economic Inclusion Roadshow held 11 half-day workshops in 11 locations throughout the UK where marginalised citizens’ views and experiences of the economy were explored alongside an inquiry into the means through which their views could be more effectively included in economic policy. In total, 190 voices of socially and economically excluded citizens were engaged from October 2016 to January 2017 (Patel, Gibbon and Warden 2017). Participants included people from various ethnic minority backgrounds, people who identify as LGBT, care workers, students, and people who identify as disabled. Discussion topics ranged from transparency and accountability and the value of citizen engagement to immigration and social infrastructure.

Following these roadshows, the Citizens’ Economic Council was created with 59 citizens selected with regard to diversity in ethnicity, age, gender, and social grade (Patel and Gibbon 2017; Patel, Gibbon and Greenham 2018). Once selected the council came together nine times to deliberate national economic policy during full-day workshops – four in London; four in Manchester and one synthesis workshop in Birmingham (Patel and Gibbon 2017). During each

of these Council meetings, a different economic theme was discussed through a variety of activities, such as expert panels, structured debates, as well as videos, e-voting, games and collage (Patel, Gibbon and Warden 2017). The fourth workshop on designing new economic policies drew directly on findings from the Economic Inclusion Roadshow.

Discussions held by the Citizens' Economic Council identified three key challenges that were then posed to RSA's online network to crowdsource creative and innovative policy ideas. These challenges were:

- Getting a fairer deal on what we buy;
- Engaging the public in decisions about the economy; and
- Making today's economy work for tomorrow (Patel and Gibbon 2017).

These policy ideas were reviewed by a panel of judges and several were presented in RSA's final report on the programme (Patel, Gibbon and Greenham 2018).

In addition to crowd sourcing policy ideas, the Council, alongside economic experts and policy makers, co-created a Citizens' Economic Charter (Patel and Gibbon 2017). The resulting Charter is not prescriptive but provides guidance on how a citizens' economy could ensure: fairness; a socially just society; innovation for social good; sustainability; citizen engagement and empowerment; devolved power and decision-making; and accountability and transparency (Patel, Gibbon and Greenham 2018).

Enabling Participation

Throughout the programme, deliberation processes, educational tools, and technical support built people's understanding and strengthened their voice. The Citizens' Economic Council discussed their ideas about the purpose of the economy and considered, as a group, the values that should be at the heart of the future UK economy. They were introduced to key economic concepts and different schools of thought, with jargon-busting to ensure discussions were accessible to all, regardless of prior knowledge of economics. Panels were also held with representatives of key economic institutions, who were questioned by the Council members. To prevent bias in information that was presented during the Council meetings, materials were first reviewed by an Economic Review Panel of economists from different schools of economic thought, in order to ensure balance and impartiality (RSA 2018).

For the Economic Inclusion Roadshows, communities typically excluded from economic decision-making were provided with additional support to ensure their participation, such as through disability access and translation services. To acknowledge participants' time, the RSA provided 'thank you' vouchers for purchase of goods from local retailers, as well as paying for the time of partner Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations involved in recruiting and engaging participants (Patel, Gibbon and Warden 2017: 7).

The Roadshows used various deliberative design techniques such as Augusto Boal's *theatre of the oppressed* and Lego® Serious Play, alongside more conventional focus-group style discussion in order to foster effective engagement. The aim was to draw out rich insights from a diversity of groups regarding their perception of the economy, the barriers to economic inclusion and the actions they felt were necessary to remove barriers (Patel, Gibbon and Warden 2017: 7).

Outcomes

While this was a demonstration project, the RSA proposes that economic institutions such as the government and the Bank of England use this type of randomly selected Citizens' Council to better understand the public's views on a variety of issues, such as interest rates. The aim is

to have better and more informed policy decisions, to help explore citizen values, to promote transparency, awareness and education about economics, and to strengthen democracy and debate.

As a result of the work RSA did in engaging stakeholders, one of the RSA's recommendations for the Bank of England, to set up a Citizens' Reference Panel along with other deliberative processes, has been acknowledged by the Bank. According to a statement made by Andy Haldane, the Chief Economist at The Bank of England, in March 2018:

I am delighted to announce that the Bank intends implementing in full the RSA's recommendation. During the course of this year, we will begin the process of setting-up regional citizen councils using our Agency network. This is a natural next step, and will become a central plank, of the Bank's engagement strategy in the years ahead.
(RSA 2018: np)

Furthermore, citizens involved in the programme stated that they felt that they had more influence over the economy after participating than before their involvement. Furthermore, participants also stated that their wellbeing had improved as a result of their involvement. Survey results showed that the majority felt that: their sense of autonomy and agency had increased, they were more optimistic about the future, they were more connected to their society and their self-esteem had improved (Patel and Gibbon 2017).

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