

UKRI-RSA Rethinking Public Dialogue

Enhancing Public Dialogue about Inclusion in School Education: A Citizens' Panel Pilot

Summary Report

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Introduction

Public dialogue, such as Citizens' Assemblies and Citizens' Panels, give members of the public opportunities to learn about, debate and come to conclusions about important issues in a safe and respectful space. The discussions produce practical recommendations to share with the people that make the decisions that affect their lives.

Public dialogues are sometimes designed to be inclusive of people with physical disabilities, but few tend to accommodate the communication, emotional, and processing needs of many people with additional needs and disabilities. This matters because, compared to people without these needs, they may find it harder to relate to fast-moving conversations and make themselves heard. As a result, they are at risk of being excluded from the discussion and decision-making.

This public dialogue pilot project was based on the principle that young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) have a right to express their views on public policy that affects their lives, such as how schools are designed. They should not just be included in public dialogue, but actively *involved* in its design.

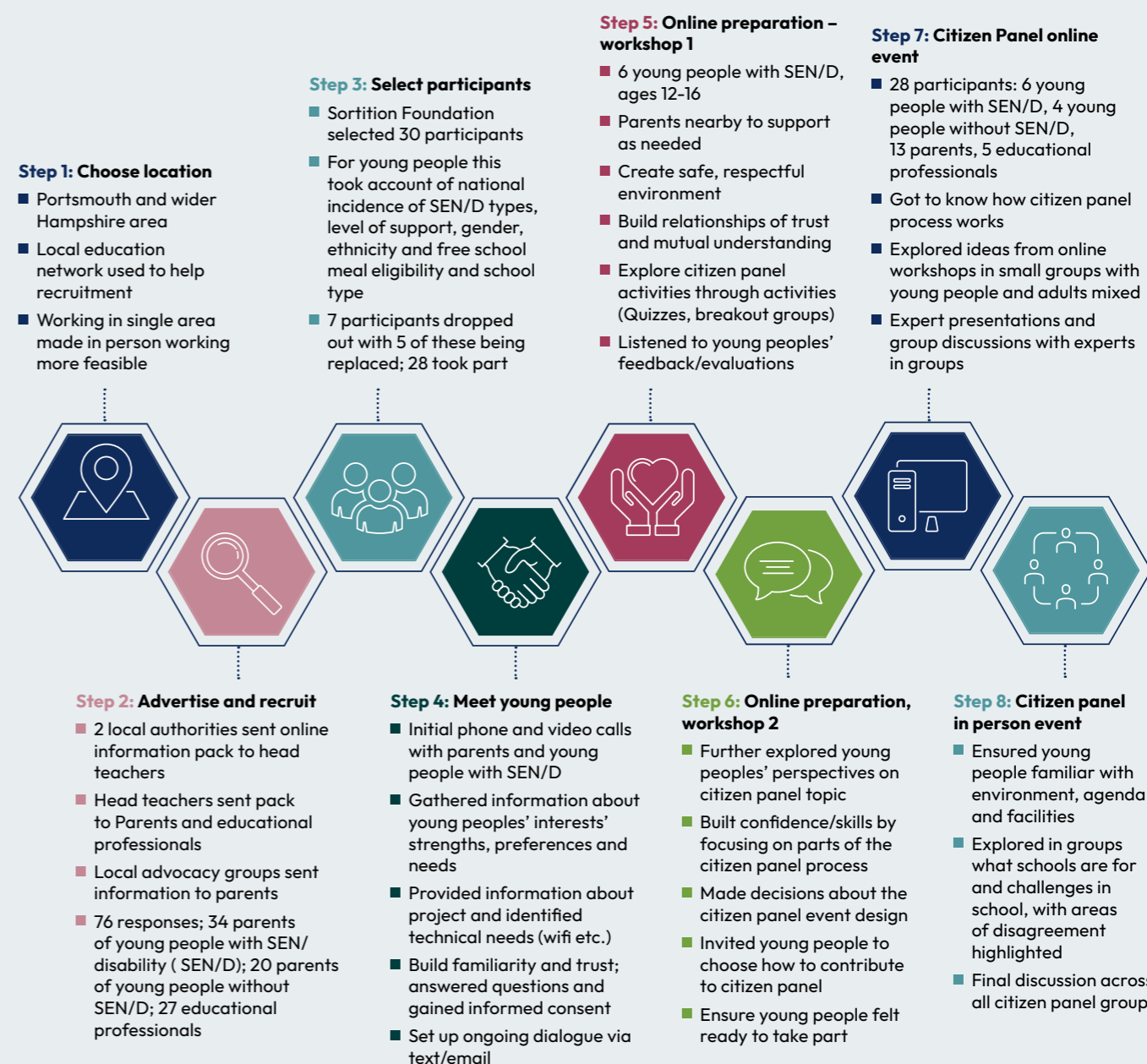
The project involved two key objectives for this pilot:

1. To obtain information about how to modify a Citizens' Panel process to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D
2. To generate, via the modified Citizens' Panel process, more nuanced, grounded and integrated policy ideas about inclusion in school education than current policy.

Designing and delivering the Citizens' Panel

The project involved running a Citizens' Panel with up to 30 young people and adults. Figure 1 summarises the steps taken to design and deliver the Citizens' Panel on school inclusion.

Figure 1. Steps to design and deliver the Citizens' Panel on school inclusion



An invitation to take part in the Citizens' Panel was shared via schools and voluntary organisations in the Portsmouth/Hampshire area (steps 1 and 2). The Sortition Foundation led the process of selecting a diverse set of participants to represent the range of stakeholders in the locality (step 3).

The Citizens' Panel comprised 28 people: six young people with SEN/D; four young people without SEN/D; 13 parents/carers; and five education professionals, including teachers.

Participants were onboarded, with the process for young people with SEN/D being more incremental and informal than is usually the case in a public dialogue event (step 4). It was more personalised, interactive, and highly responsive, involving a greater number of contacts.

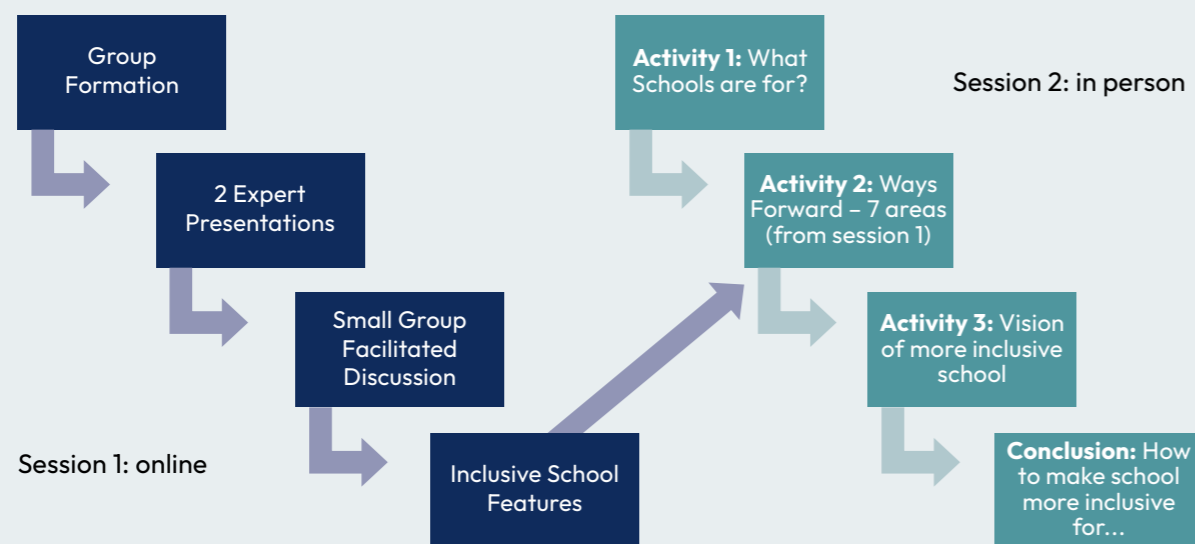
Involve led the planning and delivery of two preparatory meetings for the young people with SEN/D and their parents/carers (steps 5 and 6), prior to the Citizens' Panel itself.

Over two half-days meetings (online), the young people with SEN/D were consulted on how to make the Citizens' Panel as inclusive, engaging, and productive as possible.

The Citizens' Panel took place over two days in March 2023, with the first meeting taking place online, and the second meeting being an in-person in Portsmouth (steps 7 and 8). The question the Panel was asked to address was: 'How do we make schools more inclusive for children and young people with SEN/D?' The Panel heard evidence from experts, debated aspects of school life (from curriculum to uniform), and then made recommendations about what needs to happen to ensure those with SEN/D feel welcome and can thrive in school.

Participants worked in facilitated groups through the sequence of activities shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Citizen' Panel process: phase 2



Recommendations from the Citizens' Panel

The policy ideas generated by the Panel about inclusion in schools were more grounded, integrated and nuanced compared with current policy in England about SEN/D and inclusion.

Groundedness was evident in the principles and practices of the Citizens' Panel involving the lived experienced of a group of local stakeholders, learning, reflecting and deliberating inclusion. *Integrated* was shown in the ideas that connected improvements in the general school system to those in the specialist system.

Nuance was shown via the Panel's suggestions, most of which involved making changes that would benefit *all* young people, not just those with SEN/D, while also offering dignified and

inclusive specialist provision. Many of the ideas related to general changes; for example, promoting wellbeing, changes to the curriculum and teaching, adapting the environment, and management of the school.

Some of the general changes, such as promoting wellbeing and what young people learn, had no SEN/D specific aspects, but had benefits for all, *including* those with SEN/D. While others had a specific SEN/D aspect; for example, training in SEN/D as part of teachers' general professional education and development. This can be organised into a continuum of SEN/D elements in inclusive school provision: from 'improvement for all', to 'improvement for all with some features SEN/D specific', to 'SEN/D specific' (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Continuum of SEN/disability elements in inclusive schools

Promote positive wellbeing	General improvements for all
What learn: curriculum	
Behaviour policy	
Community relations and activities	General improvements for all – some features specific to SEN/D
Teachers – training: all staff trained in SEN/D and neurodiversity	
Provision – resources: resources labelled but available to all	
Manage school – time to build relationships, adapt curriculum, recognise needs	
Teaching – use communication system, eg. PECS, social stories	
Environment – easy accessibility, ramps, lifts	
Specialist provision	

Evaluation of the Citizens' Panel

There was a broad consensus by all involved in the project (panellists and the delivery team) that the Citizens' Panel was successful in achieving its aim of meaningfully including young people with SEN/D in a public dialogue. Participants reported that taking part in the Citizens' Panel had been a positive and worthwhile experience.

Much of the positive reaction to the Citizens' Panel could be attributed to the meticulous planning and preparation that went into each stage of the process and each event. A key feature of delivering the Citizens' Panel was the differentiated and strengths-based approach to its design. The emphasis was on enhancing, and

not unsettling or limiting, the participation and contribution of the young people with SEN/disabilities.

The decision to prioritise the needs and preferences young people with SEN/D in its design involved some trade-offs, the unintended effects of which were reported by other participants. Some of the decisions about grouping the young people with SEN/D with other participants did not enable the some of the challenge that is usual in good public dialogue. The slower pace of the activities might not have been ideal for other participants.

Conclusion

The adaptations and additions to the typical procedures of public dialogue design and delivery trialled in this pilot are relatively straightforward to put in place, and can be transferred and applied to other models of public dialogue. This pilot has contributed to understanding both the potential and the limits of inclusive procedures in this type of Citizens' Panel. Further trialling of modified techniques involving groups of young people with different profiles of need, will broaden knowledge of the strategies of public dialogue and deliberative approaches.

On the basis of this pilot project, modifying a Citizens' Panel to enhance the effective participation of young people with SEN/D requires:

- having adequate time, especially for the early recruitment and preparatory phases,
- designing appropriate recruitment methods,

- involving experts in delivering public dialogue,
- direct work with the young people with SEN/D and their families,
- careful person-centred and strengths-based planning and delivery,
- minimising the effects of trade-offs on the participant experience.

You can access the full report by clicking here

[Norwich, B., Webster, R., Hall, S., McAnuff, J. & Black, P. 2023. *Enhancing Public Dialogue about Inclusion in School Education: A Citizens' Panel Pilot.*](#)

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