

Cambridge Centre
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Decision maker interactions with Citizens UK

Report for Trust for London

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1. Understanding decision maker interactions

1.1.Aims

The aim of this part of the evaluation was to better understand the nature of the interactions between decision makers and Citizens UK in their campaigning around housing. A key part of the Citizens UK model is to engage with key stakeholders who are in leadership roles. The research aimed to better understand how Citizens UK are able to influence decision makers and how the work of Citizens UK can lead to change.

The findings presented here are based on the analysis of the interviews. They are an impartial analysis of the views of decision makers and reflect diverse experiences. They are intended to be useful learning as part of the evaluation.

1.2.Methods

In depth interviews were conducted with eight decision makers who have a key role in housing in London and who have interacted with Citizens UK.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a conversation, but broadly speaking they discussed:

- The decision maker's job role and how it relates to housing.
- What changes to housing they would like to see and what their role is in bringing such changes about.
- How they have been involved with Citizens UK.
- What interactions they have had with Citizens UK, including:
 - Where was it?
 - Who was there? (Citizens UK members, decision makers, general public)
 - What were they hoping to achieve?
 - What were Citizens UK hoping to achieve?
 - What did they do?

- Did this change their thoughts/actions in any way?
 - What was the outcome?
 - What happened next?

- Whether they have any ongoing involvement with Citizens UK.

- What they see as the long term aims of the Citizens UK housing campaign.

- Their feedback about the housing campaign, including:
 - What has worked well?
 - What hasn't worked well?
 - Any suggested improvements?
 - Is it focusing on the most important issues?
 - What do they think it will achieve?

- Would they work with Citizens UK again?

- Any other comments?

2. Findings

Generally, all of the interviews identified a number of positive reflections on the interactions between decision makers and Citizens UK, as well as some more critical observations. The roles of the decision makers interviewed within each local authority varied. The housing goals that they were trying to achieve also varied, but they included regeneration, increasing affordable housing, improving the private rented market (including landlord licensing), and housing for refugees.

Quotes from the interviews are included to illustrate the points in the narrative. Decision makers referred to their interactions with Citizens UK groups in the interviews in a way that was specific to each area or decision maker, so they have been referred to as 'Citizens' throughout the text.

2.1. Good conduit to reach local population

A general comment across the interviews was that Citizens provide a useful means for decision makers to reach their local populations. Decision makers have sometimes specifically requested this contact and Citizens have facilitated it, for which decision makers were appreciative:

When we met, I asked if they would connect me with people in the borough with housing needs....and they set this up very enthusiastically.

In some instances, the connection to local people has been part of the general Citizens activity in that area, decision makers have attended and found it useful as a way to hear residents' views:

The organising of big events by Citizens is a good way to communicate and to hear from people.

Some decision makers regard these events as a useful way to be able to pass on information to the residents in their area:

One thing I like about them is that they engage. When they invite me, it gives me the opportunity to interact and pass on information. It is a good way for me to give out information.

But in other instances, decision makers value these interactions with residents because they are an opportunity for a dialogue and not simply a way to pass on information:

It is useful to connect with residents, we have a local assembly programme that we do anyway where we tell people things, but Citizens encourage people to talk and have dialogue.

Citizens are trusted and respected. One decision maker felt that Citizens can communicate with residents in a way that local authorities cannot, and several felt that their support added credibility to a local authority's activity:

What is interesting about Citizens' campaign is that they can speak to residents in a way the council can't, and they have trust, so if they support a campaign, they add credibility.

One decision maker felt that Citizens is able to engage with local people who are not usually engaged in council business or local politics.

They reach people who never come to a council meeting or would never engage with the political process.

2.2. Learn about residents

Decision makers felt that Citizens provided a good way to communicate with residents, and one felt that they had learned more about local issues and residents through these interactions:

I like that it's grassroots and I love that interaction at that level. I pick up a lot at the meetings, I pick up more than people realise. Because a conversation triggers an opportunity to pick up intel and information. This is good and it works both ways. I understand local issues.

2.3. Helpful support to achieve council's aims

Several decision makers felt that having the backing of Citizens provided helpful support for the council to achieve its aims in the area of housing:

On the private rented sector, they have campaigned to bring in licensing schemes and it is useful to have their backing.

This could be because councils can use the support of Citizens as a way to demonstrate that what the local authority wants to achieve has strong local support:

If we have a political priority, then third party support strengthens the case. It shows it has a clear wide breadth of support. They have a high degree of authenticity. It brings a powerful endorsement for campaigns.

The value of the support from Citizens for a particular local authority goal might be from the awareness raising they are able to do in the local community and from the local support they are able to foster:

Landlord licensing helped [a different local authority] with grassroots campaign support and raising awareness in the community, they do a lot of outreach.

In some cases, the support from Citizens might be useful to support particular issues such as planning consents:

If a [body] raises issues about planning consent for housing, the support behind from Citizens helps, they have authenticity.

In other cases, the support from Citizens might be useful to an individual decision maker on a personal level:

They create a space. They give politicians courage. Not really for me but if you are a new council leader or councillor and you go to an assembly with several hundred people cheering for more council housing, then it will spur you on to prioritise it and give you courage.

2.4. Useful campaign pressure

The pressure that Citizens is able to provide as a campaign group was identified in two areas as making a difference. One decision maker felt that the support from Citizens helped to make it difficult for developers to argue about the provision of affordable housing:

They help getting more affordable housing from developers. I don't want to overstate their role as this is a broad coalition. But Citizens made it publicly impossible for developers not to commit. It made it harder for developers to say that the new affordable housing rules are wrong. It makes it harder to disagree.

A decision maker felt that Citizens could claim to have achieved commitment to CLTs:

Getting Transport for London to agree to CLTs. This is definitely a Citizens achievement. They have been so focused on it that they can own that one.

2.5. Well liked

Decision makers spoke with affection about the groups they had met with, and commented on their enthusiasm and positivity.

One decision maker commented that what was particularly positive about interacting with Citizens was the way they said thank you for actions taken by the decision maker:

We support their aims and it is a positive relationship. What sets them aside is that they are very thorough about saying thank you. They lobby, we do it, and they say thanks, then we move on to the next thing together. It is a very positive way of doing it. You don't expect thanks in politics but this is what sets them aside.

In another example, a decision maker described how Citizens are very well respected:

I have a lot of respect for Citizens because they engage with real people and are for real things. They have a pragmatic and nuanced understanding of what is needed and what works. They are good at joining the dots from a people perspective.

2.6. Persistence

Several decision makers commented on the persistence of Citizens in trying to secure meetings with decision makers:

They were very enthusiastic. They were persistent in a hard to ignore fashion. This is positive.... With Citizens there is a very professionalised set of interactions which probably gets some results as it does get the system's attention. It is hard to say no.

More than one decision maker said that their requests for a meeting are hard to ignore:

It is hard to say no. I didn't want to talk to them. But they phoned, emailed, asked for a coffee. But, by the end [other decision maker] just said what they wanted to hear.

This persistence was regarded as positive and a good way to ensure that politicians remained focused:

I found them quite engaging. They are quite a persistent group.... They continue to push. As politicians, we need that push or we become lazy. It is good that we have community groups to push us to different ways of thinking.

2.7. Too much focus on CLTs (Community Land Trusts)

The most common critical reflection on the work of Citizens was that there is too much emphasis on CLTs. Although decision makers talked about Citizens' focus on licensing schemes in the private rented sector (PRS), and in some cases support for refugees, some decision makers said that CLTs were overwhelmingly what they associated with Citizens. Most said that this was not the most useful focus:

When you think of Citizens you think of CLTs. It is their focus, and dominant in my mind when I think about them. CLTs loom large for Citizens.

However, there was a majority view that CLTs were not a very useful campaign and most decision makers were not positive about what could be achieved by trying to deliver CLTs. CLTs were described as taking far too long to deliver only a small number of homes, homes which were then not very affordable:

CLTs take a long time and it would have been quicker if we had some council housing instead.... The issue with CLTs is that to make the money work, the CLT rent is higher than council rent so it is more expensive and the council has to give up land at a time of extreme housing crisis.

Decision makers were critical of the focus on CLTs because they did not feel that CLTs reflected the interests of local residents and members. They felt that the drive for CLTs was top down from Citizens, whereas their members would actually like more council housing:

It is not difficult to attribute CLTs to Citizens, but a lot of people at the Citizens assemblies want more council housing, not CLTs. CLTs play a role but only a small one. They are not an important way of delivering council housing. The members want more council housing, but CLTs are not really about this.

The campaign for CLTs was regarded as being top down and not member driven:

Most contact with Citizens is about the CLT model, they want to persuade us to adopt this. People are sceptical of CLTs in general....The push for CLTs is shaped by the Citizens' agenda. People want their individual needs to be met, and most people haven't heard of CLTs.

There was a view that, as rents and costs have risen, CLTs have become less and less attractive:

Things have moved on a lot since they started CLT work, rents have increased and market costs have gone up so what they offer is so far from a social rent. They should loosen their focus on CLTs.... Why give away land for free when it takes a long time and is expensive? CLTs take years to get going.

They came to me about CLTs but land prices are so high.

A couple of decision makers were of the view that Citizens campaign for CLTs as they will run this housing and need more to make the CLT model viable:

Their focus on CLTs is a challenge for them. From a resident perspective actually campaigning for more social rent would be a better campaign, but Citizens wouldn't be able to run it.

There was a general view that Citizens should reduce their primary focus on CLTs and that their campaign support could be better deployed elsewhere, such as in campaigning for more social and affordable housing:

They are spending a lot of energy for just a few homes. But it could make a real difference if they could help change the debate about council housing.

If Citizens could mobilise around council housing and not just CLTs, it would be good.

2.8. Clarity of goals

Several decision makers commented that they found the mission of Citizens, beyond CLTs, as somewhat unclear, which sometimes made it hard for decision makers to understand what Citizens were trying to achieve:

I'm unclear what they are looking to achieve as a group and what they are as a group.... I am confused whether they know how to target themselves or what to focus on. It is not helpful for me because they are not a specific cause.... it would be easier for me to understand what they are doing if they had a clear mission.

A few decision makers felt that Citizens needed to be more targeted:

They are a newish organisation and I think they need to learn how to hone and target better.

They are not 100% on topic or focused.

2.9.Changing thinking

Two of the decision makers felt that engaging with Citizens had helped to bring about a material change in the local authority:

Their prodding means we will take more unaccompanied children asylum seekers. They squeeze commitments from us in public in front of the members.

Another decision maker spoke very positively about the difference Citizens made to turning the council's focus to the private rented sector and to committing to some form of landlord licensing:

Without them we wouldn't have made this amount of commitment on the last election. They made a rational case and put it on our radar. They changed the extent to which we focus on it.

The other decision makers did not feel that engaging with Citizens had helped to change their thinking, strategy or wider policy:

What would be nice is if it was more obvious where value is added.

In some cases, this was because the decision makers were already committed to the campaign that Citizens was lobbying for. This was mentioned in the case of landlord licensing:

But in terms of the policy commitment, I was already sold on the idea of broadening licensing so they were pushing on an open door.... I am happy to listen. Our views on housing are the same.

Licensing came from within the council. We had decided where we needed to go before we met Citizens.

In other cases, it was felt that the key housing issues would not be tackled by interactions with Citizens, as they were not the stakeholders with influence:

No, nothing they have done has changed anything. The conversations I am having about affordable housing will not be with these guys. [The conversations] are with the GLA, MHCLG and the developers. That is where those conversations take place. Not with Citizens UK.... over housing, they have little influence.

The focus on CLTs has already been mentioned as a critical reflection from decision makers, but it was commented that this focus limits their capacity to influence change:

I have affection for the individuals but I don't agree with their model of community action....They only engage on CLTs, and the conversations are set pieces, choreographed... and that grates with people. It hasn't changed any of the decisions made by the [decision making body].

2.10. Knowing 'the game'

Several decision makers said that they were familiar with the model Citizens uses to engage with decision makers. They were generally sympathetic and understood that campaigning requires certain tactics, and that Citizens has to make 'asks' for actions that would have happened anyway in order to be able to demonstrate successes:

I see their tactics and work with them. Typically they will create an event and make demands at that event, but these are things that will often be done anyway. Part of their appeal to their members is demonstration of their successes.

This was described by one decision maker as a win-win scenario, as both Citizens and the decision maker benefit from public declaration of small but achievable requests, even if they were already in the pipeline:

When we have conversations, they make small asks that are easy to do so it is good for them with their targets. It's 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' and we all look good.

2.11. Mixed view on Citizens' methods

There were mixed views on the methods of interaction used by Citizens. One decision maker was positive about their way of bringing people together and keeping them engaged:

They are one of the few examples of structured engagement which brings lots of people together around an issue. It is formulaic. They say what they have done, what is next,

and use people to keep it interesting, for example, with a song. It is impressive the way they get people engaged. If you just talked about policy, then people would not engage.

A more critical reflection was that their methods can create confrontation with decision makers which was not always seen as productive:

They set up confrontation but what is needed is conversation. This approach closes doors.... It prevents dialogue.

The decision makers interviewed said that they had 'learnt' the Citizens methodology and found ways to work with or around it, but several described colleagues who had not enjoyed the experience of interacting with Citizens. In one case, it was because of a lack of understanding about the nature of the meetings and the lack of opportunity to be prepared:

The previous [decision maker] got very frustrated and got angry as a meeting he thought was going to be one or two people was a room full, and he had no brief and it was embarrassing. As politicians you want to know what you are speaking on and be prepared.

One decision maker had found a particular meeting uncomfortable and would not attend again. They felt that anything that appeared to be a comparison between local authorities when various leaders were present was not a good strategy:

The meeting that made me feel really uncomfortable was in [location] and they brought the leaders of councils on stage and had a chart on how well councils had done on housing.... It would make me apprehensive again about going, I felt embarrassed and very uncomfortable. No one tweeted or took pictures. They are my colleagues, I am there with leaders of other councils.... I would have been fuming if other leaders celebrated who was top and bottom. If I had done so, I would have been a pariah in London.

Decision makers felt that being briefed was important because in some cases they felt that it meant that Citizens did not end up with the best person in a room to answer their questions on occasions when they had not been specific about their questions or the issues they wanted to raise:

They should make sure they have the right person in the room. Like they might get the leader of the council and they want to talk about housing, but they don't say that and

politicians don't know all the details.... they really needed the right officers to be there to get quicker answers to their questions, and this would work in their favour.

I like the group and they are lovely, and they overlap with party members and faith groups. But we could be more relaxed and just have a conversation.

Several decision makers commented on the group approach taken by Citizens at meetings and did not find this effective:

You will not get someone to interact with me at the council by bringing all the children and Citizens people. You can't have a meaningful discussion as all these people are not focused. I don't know if I should be talking to the twelve year old or the fifteen year old, but you cannot talk about strategy, policy, regulation with them. You just get sob stories. I understand this but I can't hone into what they are asking for.

Some commented that Citizens also needs to have one to one conversations with decision makers on a more strategic level:

People like me don't need children in the room. You need the right people to talk to me.

They truly mean well which is why I work with them. I truly want them to succeed and want to interact. Working together we could transform peoples' lives. They make a noble effort. But they are a grassroots campaign and like all they need help and support. The way they do it now they will not achieve much. They need to see that real life does not work this way. They need to sit around the table one to one.

Another decision maker suggested that it would be helpful to have one point of contact at Citizens:

As leader I need one person to pick up the phone to reach everyone, but I wouldn't know who was in charge there.

2.12. Claiming 'wins'

Several decision makers commented that they felt that Citizens tended to claim that their campaign request was successful and a result of their lobbying, when it was something that was happening anyway:

The campaigns are things we were doing anyway. Then they will have a meeting and they say 'we got decision makers to do it' and we were doing it anyway, so I think, no you didn't.

Decision makers were pragmatic about this and felt that it was an understandable campaign tactic:

Landlord licensing was in our manifesto so we would have done it anyway. Citizens then say 'will you meet this demand?' But we already doing this. I get it from a campaign perspective. Some people will just say yes we will do this, even though they already are, but I say, we are already doing this. But they claim it is because of them.

2.13. Lack of knowledge

In discussions about housing, decision makers felt that Citizens were sometimes lacking in sufficient knowledge about issues:

They will have a positive impact but it will take them time to understand the problems. Their problem is that they are jack of all trades and master of none. But it is good that they take an interest and they will find out.

It could sometimes be a source of frustration to decision makers if they were presented with 'asks' that they felt were sometimes lacking in knowledge:

They have raised housing issues at a meeting. But the issues were individual for each child. And they didn't understand their issues themselves.... People need to understand what they are talking about before they make asks.

A few decision makers felt that one to one meetings would be a better way for Citizens to learn about housing issues and then share this knowledge with the rest of their group:

It would be better to have a separate conversation to explain, then it would be easier at the public meetings if one of them understood first. They need this information to work together as a group. They are a bit half cocked. They look a bit naïve.

2.14. Different experiences of representation

The decision makers interviewed had differing views on the representativeness of the Citizens groups they had engaged with. One felt that they were a grassroots organisation and this was seen as positive:

The best thing is that it is grassroots.

One decision maker said that the meetings included people from a range of income and ethnic backgrounds:

...draws on faith groups who have doctors and cleaners all in same room, when I have a Citizens meeting there are all different backgrounds and races, you get a more real view from residents.

However, several decision makers did not feel that the groups they had engaged with were representative of local people. Citizens was described by one as being constituted of middle class, well-intentioned people:

It is community organisation of the middle class where they attempt to do helpful things for local people who are less privileged. This is not a bad thing but it is awkward and not a comfortable starting point.... But it is not people in those situations talking for themselves so you feel unsure how much you want to invest in that dialogue. It is a group of kind people looking for a group on whose behalf they can talk.

One questioned whether they really represent the views of all residents:

They say 'we are [local authority]', but they are not. They are a group of people looking for something charitable to do. This is respectable, but it is not clear if the people they latch on to want this particular help on this issue.

Decision makers were very conscious of issues of representativeness and it was clearly a political priority:

You have to be on guard in politics that groups are truly representative. I've not seen that diversity from them and am not sure they are a diverse group. Groups tend to be white middle class. It is a question mark over them.

2.15. Lack of recognition of wider constraints

The decision makers were positive about Citizens and liked them as individuals and as a group. Several commented that whilst it was good to be optimistic and to campaign, they felt that Citizens did not recognise the wider constraints in which changes to housing had to be made:

But the borough has a deficit of millions of pounds, we have complicated contracts that are hard to change, but which save money. But change is not easily manageable in the world of local government.

Whilst several decision makers thought that licensing schemes in the PRS were positive, they were more sceptical of the benefits that Citizens thought they could bring:

To get approval from the Secretary of State requires us to collect a great deal of data and evidence to show that more regulation of landlords is needed, and I don't think the evidence is there, so it is too much work related to what we want to achieve.

Decision makers highlighted the many challenges involved in implementing and operating them:

The licensing schemes are really helpful but their weakness is a lack of resources for enforcement.

Most decision makers mentioned the financial and resource pressures on local authorities, and several described the significant cuts that had been made to budgets and to staff numbers, whilst demand for services has risen. Some decision makers did not feel that the local level was the only place in which Citizens should focus their energies, as some housing changes are beyond local control:

The relationship has been constructive but I had to explain I only had a very small team working on it. We have had such cuts, and hammering councils who are not the ones in control is not that useful.

2.16. Focus on national government

This leads to the final point, that most decision makers said that Citizens could very usefully turn their energy to campaigning national government. This was felt to be a gap in their lobbying activity:

I don't know how much they engage with national government. They are very focused on [decision making bodies] but I wonder if they could go further with national government. At the moment it is us in a room with them agreeing what government should do. They could do more to turn up the heat on the housing minister.

This was not a criticism, but a suggestion to make the joint effort of improving housing more effective overall. Many decision makers said that their views were aligned with Citizens UK,

and so it might be useful to lobby national government where there may be a different political perspective:

They work on a range of stuff and our agendas are so aligned. We care about the same stuff....Our political philosophies are the same.

It was felt by decision makers that local authorities could only achieve so much on housing, and that Citizens could use their respected campaigning position to effectively lobby national government:

What is the role of pressure on national government and not just local councils who are struggling and have budget issues? Citizens need to put pressure on national government as they have a respected voice.

3. Conclusions

The decision makers spoke freely during the interviews and gave balanced and considered views of their experiences. All were positive about engaging with Citizens and described them as nice groups of people with whom they enjoyed interacting.

Decision makers valued the ability that Citizens gave them to reach their local population and to learn more about the housing needs of their residents. They felt that having the backing of Citizens was helpful support for the council to achieve its aims in the area of housing, and that the support of Citizens could be a strong endorsement.

In some cases, decision makers could point to changes that the council had made as a result of campaigning from Citizens. In other cases, whilst decision makers did not feel that there were any material changes as a result of the engagement with Citizens, they felt that their priorities were generally aligned and that their support was useful and provided legitimacy. Although they were respected and well-liked, and their engagement was welcomed, most decision makers did not feel that engagement from Citizens had changed their thinking or led to different outcomes than those which would have already been achieved. This perhaps reflects the complexity of policy change and the multiple stakeholders involved in both campaigning and implementing change. It therefore becomes difficult to point to one group as being the key catalyst in a complex system.

Citizens were well liked by decision makers and were respected for their tenacity and persistence. There were mixed views on the types of interactions that Citizens had with decision makers, and some decision makers suggested that they would find one clear point of contact useful. The most common critical comment was that Citizens focus too much on CLTs.

Decision makers suggested that it would be useful if Citizens would focus on two areas in their housing campaign, one being helping to foster support for social and council housing, and the other being to turn their attention to lobbying national government on housing issues.