

OKRA: Rethinking democracy in urban planning: community-led plan-making in Old Kent Road

This project explores how local communities can play a meaningful role in shaping planning decisions from the very beginning of the process. Too often, participation in planning happens after key decisions have already been made, leaving communities with little real influence. While statutory plans such as Local Plans or Area Action Plans go through consultation, they are rarely co-produced with local people and organisations.

This project aims to test a different approach: one where residents and community organisations help lead the process, contributing with their knowledge and lived experience, and developing a shared vision for the future of an area. The project focuses on Old Kent Road in Southwark, an area under significant development and regeneration pressure. Its main outcome will be a community-led vision for Old Kent Road that reflects local knowledge, lived experience, and collective aspirations.

How the project works:

The project combines four connected methods, designed to reinforce each other.

1. **Citizens' assembly:** A citizens' assembly brings together a diverse group of local people to take part in structured discussions about the future of Old Kent Road. 24 participants, aged 16+, who live or work in the area, are randomly selected through an independent sortition, reflecting the area's demographics. This independent sortition is carried out by the Sortition Foundation, which are the UK leading experts in citizen assemblies. The assembly meets on three occasions. Participants are supported with accessible information, local evidence, and facilitation methods that encourage collective discussion and learning.
2. **Community Steering group:** The project has established a community steering group composed of local community organisations, resident groups, and other locally rooted actors. The steering group plays an active role in co-designing the process, shaping the agenda of the citizen assembly, reflecting on interim findings, and helping translate the

outcomes into a community vision for Old Kent Road. The steering group meets six times during the project. We recognise that different organisations have different capacities, so participation is flexible. Where attendance at group meetings is difficult, we arrange one-to-one or smaller conversations to ensure contributions can still be made.

3. **Questionnaire:** To include a wider sample of participants, the project includes a questionnaire that collects further evidence on the type of development that local people would like to see in Old Kent Road. This will include open-ended questions where participants can type their responses. The anonymised results are presented as evidence to the citizens' assembly. This ensures that the assembly's discussions are informed by broader community input, not only those directly involved in meetings.
4. **Public meetings:** Two public meetings provide opportunities for wider engagement. A mid-project meeting to share emerging ideas and invite feedback, and a final meeting to present the outcomes. These events create space for dialogue and collective reflection across the wider community.

How the different elements connect

The four methods are designed to work together as part of a collaborative process. The steering group helps shape the overall direction of the project. Insights from the questionnaire and public meetings feed into the citizen assembly's discussions. In turn, the assembly's ideas are reviewed, discussed, and strengthened through ongoing dialogue with the steering group and the wider community. Together, these methods aim to demonstrate how more democratic, inclusive, and community-led approaches to planning can work in practice.

For more information about the project, email pablo.sendra@ucl.ac.uk or visit <https://linktr.ee/OKRCitizenAssembly>