

Slowing Down to Move Together: Democratic Listening Circles for a Just Transition

Emilia Melville, Jack Nicholls, Kirsty Tait, Rachel Moffat, Emma Geen, Olivia Sweeney

We piloted a powerful new approach to public dialogue: a Democratic Listening Circle, rooted in the [Way of Council](#). This method enables participants to be deeply heard and speak freely, allowing underlying truths and hard tensions around Just Transition to surface - without pre-set agendas or forced consensus.

Our findings show that deep-rooted conflict, mistrust, and polarisation can begin to shift when people are truly listened to. Not just heard but held, with dignity, care, and attention.

About the research

As we accelerate toward a net-zero future, the road must be just. But how do we hold meaningful space for disagreement, fatigue, grief, and divergent needs in a deeply divided social and political landscape?

This pilot explored whether intentional, structured listening - especially among those on the frontlines of climate injustice - could create the trust and insight needed to make Bristol's Just Transition Declaration not just a document, but a living practice.

The work brings together longstanding research by Nicholls and Melville on the tension between the urgency of climate action and the slow, relational nature of democratic participation, with the community leadership of Tait, Moffat, Geen, and Sweeney - co-creators of the Declaration.

What is a Democratic Listening Circle?

Inspired by the Way of Council, a Listening Circle invites people to sit in a circle, speak one at a time, and listen - really listen - to each other. It's governed by four principles:

- Speak from the heart
- Listen from the heart
- Say just enough
- Be spontaneous

We also made one essential agreement: **confidentiality**. Nothing leaves the circle unless explicitly agreed upon. This created a space where vulnerability, truth-telling, and mutual respect can transpire.



Shutterstock

The pilot

We ran two Listening Circles on March 25, 2024:

- **Morning:** Hartcliffe residents - community members facing intersecting challenges of poverty, exclusion, and climate vulnerability - gathered in the familiar roundhouse at Heart of BS13.
- **Afternoon:** Representatives from "early adopter" organisations who've signed the Just Transition Declaration met at the Redland Friends Meeting House, honouring the Quaker roots of this practice.

Each circle began by reading the **Ten Just Transition Principles** (see below). Then we listened. No recordings, no transcripts - just simple presence and careful notes taken afterwards by the research team.

Key Insights

From Hartcliffe Residents:

- "There's so much going on here - poverty, isolation, violence. It's hard to even think about the future."
- Hope is fragile - but essential. It needs to be nurtured through community, visibility, and follow-through.
- Transport isn't just a convenience. It's a lifeline, deeply tied to justice, autonomy, and safety.
- Trust is everything. People want more than to be 'consulted' - they want to be heard and see action.
- "Stop rushing consultations. Start having cups of tea!"

From Early Adopter Organisations:

- There's a deep weariness among those trying to lead the transition. Burnout is real and systemic.
- The Just Transition demands working within systems while also challenging them; a delicate and often painful balance.

- Competitive funding undermines collective action. We need to prioritise collaboration over individual organisational gain.
- A common tension emerged: speaking on behalf of institutions vs speaking as individuals with lived experience and emotion.



Shutterstock

Reflections on the Process

The circles didn't follow a linear agenda - and that's the point. Instead, participants named what mattered most to them. This is itself a form of justice, especially when aligned with the first principle of the Just Transition:

"Centring the expertise of disadvantaged communities at every step."

Several things became clear:

- **Trust is built on relationships.** In Hartcliffe, this relied on Tait's deep local ties. Among organisations, the sense of peer support was key.
- **Speaking from the heart requires safety.** The circle structure made this possible, even for those used to policy-speak and formal roles.
- **Listening is tiring and transformative.** Holding two circles in one day was intense, but revealed how rare and needed this kind of space is.

Importantly, this wasn't therapy, but it was therapeutic. The process surfaced difficult emotions, including despair. Facilitators need to be prepared to hold this, and help participants navigate it without sinking.

"The success of the council is largely determined by the quality of listening in the circle. When it is "devout" (as the Quakers would say), the speaker feels empowered and is more likely to rise to the occasion."

(The Way of Council - Zimmerman and Coyle 2009 - emphasis in original)

For Listening Circles to reach their radical potential, it matters who is in the room and how power is held and shared once they are. There is a profound opportunity for those in decision-making roles to not just observe, but fully participate in the circle process. When leaders sit alongside community members in a space governed by mutual respect and confidentiality, the usual hierarchies soften. This opens the door to genuine dialogue and shared transformation. A truly mixed circle - where positional power is set aside - can spark the kind of deep cultural change that policy alone cannot achieve.



Image credit: Simon Holliday

Policy Implications

In a time of deep division, Listening Circles offer something rare: a space where disagreement doesn't escalate into opposition, and where shared humanity can emerge even in the face of profound difference.

This method slows things down, not to delay action, but to deepen it. As Bayo Akomolafe says: "The times are urgent; let us slow down."

Key takeaways for policymakers:

- **Social innovation is essential.** Policy often funds tech and novelty, but we also need spaces that build trust and emotional infrastructure.
- **Let go of control.** It's uncomfortable but necessary. Real participation means surrendering tight agendas and allowing emergent intelligence to lead.
- **Invest early in relationships.** It's cheaper, and fairer, than patching up broken policies later.
- **Respect difference.** Don't flatten or polarise it. Let it sit in the room and be held.
- **Ultimately, if we want a Just Transition, we need just processes.** The Democratic Listening Circle isn't a silver bullet, but it's a start. It creates the conditions where people feel safe enough to tell the truth and be changed by hearing each other.

The Ten Just Transition Principles

1. Centre the expertise of disadvantaged communities
2. Provide good, future-proof jobs for all
3. Empower community-led climate and ecological action
4. Support individual change through systemic change
5. Ensure fair distribution of costs and benefits
6. Prioritise accessible communication
7. Stand in solidarity with global communities facing worst impacts
8. Build inclusive resilience
9. Invest in infrastructure for all
10. Embed just transition thinking from the start

(Source: Bristol Climate Hub)

Further information

Find the full Just Transition Declaration and introductory video on Bristol City Council website: <https://www.bristolclimatehub.org/just-transition>

This project was funded by the [Cabot Institute for the Environment](#)

Contact the researchers

[Dr Jack Nicholls](#)

Lecturer, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol

jack.nicholls@bristol.ac.uk

[Dr Emilia Melville](#)

Research Associate, School of Computer Science, University of Bristol

emilia.melville@bristol.ac.uk