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Citizens' Industrial Strategy

An interim report: from a Fellows' conversation to a round table

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ABSTRACT

An interim report on the first two workshops in a series of three workshops that are exploring the use of sector assemblies to engage citizens for shaping local economies under the Modern Industrial Strategy.

A strategy is written in one place and lived in thousands

In June 2025 the Government published the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy, a ten-year plan to raise investment and productivity by concentrating national effort on eight sectors with the greatest potential for growth: advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, defence, digital and technologies, financial services, life sciences, and professional and business services. Behind the strategy sits a sector plan for each, written alongside the industries themselves, and behind those a set of tools — planning reform, public investment bodies, skills reform, regional growth plans — intended to make the country an easier place to build in.

Industry received it well, and rightly. It is a serious document. But a strategy is a map, and a map is not a journey. The path laid out by Whitehall is one that will be walked in Teesside and Torbay, in a college in Wrexham and a lab in Cambridge, by firms, universities, councils and combined authorities whose incentives do not line up of their own accord, and by millions of people who have not read it, and were not asked. If the strategy is to be delivered rather than merely announced, those people will need to understand it, see themselves in it, and be ready to take up the work it creates. That readiness cannot be legislated. It has to be built, place by place, and building it is a democratic task as much as an economic one.

The question we asked

Deliberation Gateway has spent nearly ten years asking how deliberative methods — citizens' assemblies and their relatives — can be used across the whole of society, not only in the making of law. Over that time we have arrived at an idea we call the *sector assembly*: a citizens' assembly convened around one part of the economy, or one place, in which ordinary people deliberate alongside the professionals who work there, with a real question in front of them and a real commitment to hear the answer. We have been pursuing a sector assembly for the finance industry on a separate project. When we read the Modern Industrial Strategy, with its eight sectors and its insistence on local delivery, we saw the fit at once. Here was a national plan already divided into exactly the kind of pieces a sector assembly is built to take.

So a group of Fellows asked a simple question. What mechanism would let the citizens of any given place engage seriously with a national strategy that is going to shape their lives? Not to rewrite it — the strategy is the Government's to write — but to deliver it: to build local understanding, surface local priorities, and generate the legitimacy and the workforce that a plan written in Whitehall cannot manufacture on its own.

What we did

A public panel. In February 2026 we convened an online session, *Making a Success of the Modern Industrial Strategy*, co-chaired by Chris Forman, Roger Casale and Eva Pascoe, with Professor Tim Minshall of the Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing, Irenie Ekkeshis of New Citizen

Project and Jo Lucas of CoCrea8. The recording is published on the Deliberation Gateway. Its purpose was to test the idea in front of people who would know if it was foolish, and to find out who needed to be in the room. It went well, and it produced enough interest to run a working programme.

Workshop one: people and principles. In March an application-only working group, chaired by Stephen Oram, met to set out the objective and the principles behind it. What came out was a discipline: we could not do everything at once, and we needed a single pilot. So we took the strategy's own eight sectors and wrote a case study for each — a worked example of how a sector assembly would engage with a real goal in that sector, from raising women's share of advanced-manufacturing jobs to the trade-offs a town faces when a carbon-capture pipeline is routed through it. Writing them, we found the same four patterns underneath every one:

- **Consent** unlocks build.
- **Co-design** unlocks people.
- **Trust** unlocks data.
- **Alignment** unlocks patience.

Those four are now the spine of the work.

Workshop two: choosing, and not choosing. The second session, chaired by Roger Casale, was meant to select one case study to pilot. It did not, and what it produced instead was more useful. Every sector and every place turned out to be distinct — its own industrial geography, its own politics, its own gatekeepers — and a single template for a citizens' assembly would not serve any of them well. The sharpest questions in the room were about power and delivery. Is there a credible route from an assembly to a decision? How would its output plug into the strategy's actual machinery — the sector plans, the local growth plans, the levers a combined authority holds — rather than sit beside it as a well-meaning report? Can it happen in time to matter? And, beneath all of these: what convening authority would pay heed? Those questions did not weaken the case. They defined what a serious version of it must answer, and they told us plainly that a real pilot would need real money and a real sponsor.

What we learned

Three things, in the order we learned them.

First, that there is no one-size template, and we should stop looking for one. The sector assembly is a repeatable mechanism — take any national plan, break it into the sector and place questions that actually touch people's lives, put those questions to citizens deliberating with the relevant professionals — but each instance must be designed for its place, with those in that place.

Second, that the gap we are filling is a specific one. The links between research and industry are already well served; universities and firms have decades of practice at talking to each other. What is largely missing is any route by which ordinary citizens engage strategically with either. That is the space this work stands in, and nobody else is standing there.

Third, that the hardest problem in this field is sequencing. Funders and governments are reluctant to commit to acting on the output of an assembly before anyone has seen what an assembly produces, and

asking people to fund an abstraction is slow. Over the summer we explored one way round this — a visioning competition for students and young Fellows, imagining a place or a sector as it would look after an assembly had done its work — and we may return to it. But the more direct route, and the one we are now taking, is to bring the people who could sponsor a first assembly into one room and ask them.

Where we are

We have a recorded public panel, a completed design programme, a published set of eight sector case studies, a transferable framework in the sector assembly, and a committed core team. We have tentative and varying levels of buy-in from a range of organisations, including the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, the Nuffield Foundation, New Citizen Project and the National Strategy Project, and we would want to bring in UKRI and a group of universities such as UCL, Cambridge and Sheffield as the work scales.

The transfer of power to Andy Burnham makes the moment a good one. The argument of the day, across parties, is that *place* should come before party and that power should move out of Westminster into the communities that will live with its consequences. Devolution moves the power. Something still has to bring citizens into using it, and to do so at a cost — in time, in money, in attention — that ordinary people can afford. That is what a sector assembly is for.

The round table

Our next move is to convene a round table of the people who could make a first sector assembly happen: sponsors in industry and philanthropy, the universities and combined authorities who would host it, the practitioners who would design it, and the parts of government whose strategy it would serve. We will bring the case studies, the four patterns and the lessons above. We will ask those present to help us choose the first sector and the first place, to say what a credible route to a decision looks like from where they sit, and to fund a professionally scoped pilot.

The Modern Industrial Strategy asks the country to build. This is a proposal for how the country might answer.