

Recommendations Report

COLCHESTER CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON HOUSING



EU-CIEMBLY
Democracy for All



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INTRODUCTION

In February and March 2026, as part of the EU-CIEMBLY project, the Colchester Citizens' Assembly on Housing brought together **50 Colchester residents** to discuss **housing issues** in Colchester and at the University of Essex, and to propose recommendations for dealing with housing problems in both parts of the community. **The student and 'local' community** in Colchester are often viewed as distinct, despite the common experiences of both. The project team's effort in this local citizens' assembly was aimed at bridging that perceived gap in experiences as they related to the issue of housing.

The Assembly took place in **three sessions**: two online and one in-person. People from across Colchester, students and local residents, from different backgrounds, nationalities, and with different experiences, came together to **learn** from each other, to **discuss** housing issues in the community, and to propose **solutions** to decision-makers in Colchester.

Prior to the Assembly, the organisers engaged in a **'co-design' process** with relevant stakeholders in the community, namely Citizens Essex and the University of Essex Students' Union. This allowed us to gauge the **concerns of the community** in relation to the housing issue and to begin to understand what particular issues the Assembly participants might be interested in discussing, without prejudicing the emergence of new discussion points during the Assembly itself.

SESSION 1

Getting to know each other and Sharing our Experiences

The first session, which took place on 24 February 2026, began with a welcome by the organisers, who explained the purpose of the Assembly, including the relevance of 'intersectionality' in our approach to delivering the Assembly.

The **goals and objectives** of the Assembly were set out, including the **role of participants** and the need to take account of the wider community interests in deliberation. To do this, we shared the 'listening' that we had conducted as part of the co-design process in advance of the first session. Participants were invited to **prioritise, categorise, but also to suggest new issues** that may not have been captured in our existing community outreach. Participants were **keen to share their own personal experiences** of housing issues, which provoked further reflective and considered responses from other participants.

SESSION 1

There were two additional substantive functions of the first session beyond getting to know each other, namely: to **co-design the ground rules** for the three sessions of the Assembly; and to allow participants to reflect on their **own positionality** through an ice-breaking activity.

Following the first session, the project team was able to organise the participants' thoughts and reflections into **five broad categories** for further deliberation at the second session, namely:

Lack of affordable and social housing

High cost/value for money/lack of options for student accommodation

Income insecurity and the cost of living

Social and economic barriers to accessing housing

Lack of housing support for disabled people and those on Universal Credit

Accessibility challenges related to housing

SESSION 2

Listening and Deliberating

In the second session, which took place in person at the University of Essex Colchester campus on 28 February 2026, we started by displaying the results of the ice-breaking activities from the first session, to remind participants of the **importance of positionality** and reflecting on the diverse make up of the group. Participants were then divided into small groups to **discuss the above broad issues**, after we had explained the rationale for our categorisation of the issues in this way. Participants were also **reminded of the ground rules** that had been co-created during the first session.

SESSION 2

In the small groups, participants were encouraged to foreground their **personal and lived experiences** in order to build recommendations in the final session. Further ice-breaking activities were conducted in the small groups to allow participants to get to know each other further and to encourage the flow of discussion. The focus throughout remained on personal reflection on the housing issue, allowing us to **dig into the concerns of the community**. Participants also engaged in an 'empathy mapping' exercise, allowing for consideration of wider community or social (as opposed only to individual) considerations.

The first small group session was followed by a **series of presentations** from invited speakers with experience of the housing issue, including personal experiences, and experiences in campaigning for housing reform and supporting those facing difficulty in accessing affordable or decent housing. Katie Hood presented on her experience working on **housing campaigns** and provided the group with a personal reflection of her own experiences. Rue Garande discussed her work in the **social care sector** and working with housing associations in the local area. Sebastien Chapleau from Citizens Essex reflected on his experience as a **community organiser** and explained how to go about transforming recommendations into 'asks' from decision makers. Jack Head from the Health Determinants Research Collaboration project gave an insightful presentation on **housing as a determinant of health**. Participants were invited to ask questions of the presenters, which led to a further round of enriching discussion.

The participants returned to their small groups to begin **putting together recommendations** or solutions in relation to their topics of discussion. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the challenges and potentialities of their recommendations in addressing the chosen issue.

In between the second and third session, the organisers conducted a **categorisation exercise** on the participants' recommendations in order to identify commonalities and overlaps between recommendations.

SESSION 3

Refining and Finalising Recommendations

In the third session of the Assembly, which took place online on 10 March 2026, the participants reviewed the already **refined recommendations** that derived from the participants' discussion in the second session.

The aim of this final session was to determine whether and where there was **agreement between the various small groups** that worked together during the second session. To ensure a degree of oversight and to allow for further contributions, participants joined new small groups for discussion on the refined recommendations. It was made clear to participants that the **objective was to achieve shared understanding** rather than necessarily consensus. The idea was to **preserve pluralism** and to reflect **intersectional realities** and experiences.

Participants were invited to confirm their **agreement with the final set of recommendations** (presented below), including that the recommendations reflected their own experience and perspective even where they did not necessarily 'agree' with the recommendation as finally constituted.

COLCHESTER CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON HOUSING

RECOMMENDATIONS

The members of the Colchester Citizens' Assembly on Housing, which deliberated between February and March 2026, recommend the following **list of measures** for dealing with **housing issues in Colchester** (in no particular order). Given the two principal decision-makers identified in the co-design process (**Colchester City Council** and the **University of Essex**), we have divided the recommendations accordingly for the sake of clarity, though there may be some overlap when it comes to addressing the recommendations raised. Suggestions for potential **collaboration** are also identified in the below recommendations. Other recommendations have been identified as being most effectively directed to the **national (UK) Government**.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COLCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Introduce a **cap on renting costs** for local renting set by local council.

1

More **housing should be built** that is both accessible and genuinely affordable to low- and middle-income residents. Council and housing associations get incentives to build housing estates by public funding, and 10% can be reserved for accessibility housing. Funding could also be provided to encourage developers to include accessibility clauses. Define minimum standards for low and middle-income families.

2

Introduce a **cap on deposits for local renting** set by the local Council.

3

The Council should provide a mechanism/forum through which to **improve transparency and accountability among local estate agents**, to reduce predatory practices, improve complaints mechanisms, and to allow healthier market practices to emerge.

4

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

Introduce **reduced accommodation rates** if students commit to staying in accommodation for the full duration of their studies.

5

More **information** should be shared with students **before moving into student accommodation** (including location of room, size of room, up to date photos of room, accessibility and suitability information).

6

The University should provide more **information** about the **contract process and about renting in the UK** and what to expect from housing as university students renting accommodation.

7

Bring back properly **trained resident advisors** to help create a stronger community feeling among the students.

8

Detailed plans and updates on student **accommodation repairs** when students report a repair is needed, with a booking system so students can book in repairs.

9

The University should provide better **information** and clarity about (i) **choices and costs** for students about renting and better value for money from campus accommodation; and (ii) the **type of support** that is available to students, e.g. in terms of harassment reporting for incidents taking place in campus accommodation.

10

Provide support with contracts to University students who need it e.g. through 'clinic-like' services provided by law students pro-bono.

11

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

Create **community hubs** (+ associated website) where people can walk in and find advice and legal information on housing and issues related to housing (emotional support).

12

Statement to the University that they need to really consider the **broader financial impact on international students** and reflecting that in the decisions that they make about how much rent and other services costs on campus.

13

Create an easy, friendly, **one-stop-shop** forum for everything that is happening on campus, to help create a **sense of community** for all students either renting on campus or outside.

14

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Capital should be reserved and directed toward the **renovation** of derelict and vacant properties, returning them to active use. Council could buy derelict properties.

15

Clear **regulations should determine who can become a landlord** and the standards they must meet. Rent guidelines should also be established rather than leaving prices entirely to the market.

16

Policy should shift its focus from the current framework toward **actively supporting renters** in finding affordable, stable homes.

17

A solution could also be **capping profit above mortgage reimbursement**, but without disincentivising renting out existing properties. Student loans could make accessing this solution harder for students (if the scheme is considered an investment, it is not allowed), we would need the same protection than in national insurance schemes.

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ABOUT EU-CIEMBLY

EU-CIEMBLY is an international research project funded by the European Union's Horizon Research and Innovation Programme, addresses the need for the introduction of new forms of citizens' participation and deliberation in EU political life.

Our project aims to create a prototype for a Citizens' Assembly that addresses issues of intersectionality, inclusiveness, and equality.

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