



Citizen engagement and accountability: prospects for the future?

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The last decade has seen a cascade of reform from Whitehall, channelled through local government and other public services, to increase engagement and accountability – white papers, citizens’ juries, neighbourhood management, community charters and calls for action, area working, the councillors’ commission, the choice agenda, web feedback on public services – with the words empowerment, engagement and accountability becoming part of standard public sector language. There is now a fairly broad political consensus in support of this agenda amongst the three main parties, albeit with a difference in emphasis: whether the priority is to help those with least power and resources get a fairer deal; or to help everyone regardless of background to have more control over local services.

But has it worked? On the one hand there is little hard quantitative evidence of impact. On the other, activists and enthusiasts advocate the transformational powers of engagement and empowerment and cite strong local examples and case studies.

Evidence suggests that what local people are asking for is to know how to get involved and engaged when they want to, and that the task of the public sector is to make sure that avenues are open for dialogue when they are wanted.

The lessons are that how services behave and respond – and how this is reinforced by their organisational culture – is critical. This needs to be reinforced by clever use of tools and tactics to make sure that people know about their options to make their views known. And finally there is a need, where possible, to work with the enthusiasts in communities and institutions to take forward the cutting edge radical local initiatives that can inspire more profound long-term change.

Public services will need to boost engagement and accountability if they are going to adapt to the challenges of the next few years. They are likely to face more demands to justify their actions, in the face of public protest as spending falls at a time of rising social need. At the same time, to build the response that will enable them to reconfigure and support local recovery, they are going to be dependant on local residents' contributions in new ways. The scaling back of the local state will place more reliance on residents. The aim will be to increase their co-production role, as managers or providers of the some of the very local public services that the public sector may not be able to provide itself. Local people will also be important stakeholders in the local activities that will be key to economic recovery: building local assets through credit unions, social enterprises, local power companies, and new models of social care and housing.

What has been the impact of involvement and engagement?

The biggest dataset globally on the impact of involvement is probably the UK's national evaluation of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme.ⁱ However, in spite of the policy intentions of those who designed the programmes, the data shows that community involvement in NDC areas had negligible impact on how people felt about the area they lived in, their quality of life, their feeling of being part of the community, and their trust in the local authority.

Over the last four years the Young Foundation has worked with over 25 local authorities, residents and communities on two neighbourhood programmes.ⁱⁱ From this we learnt that people are deterred and discouraged by the experience of past failures of local empowerment initiatives, and that they remember the mistakes much more clearly than the successes. In our local work we found examples of consultations with no follow up, referendums that backfired, community forums set up on false pretences, assets transferred to communities that failed to manage them, failure to feedback, poor communication and over promising.

The wider evidence about involvement is complex. People do not vote in the same numbers as in the past, but the UK population is involved and engaged in activism in other ways. Three quarters of the public engage in one or more type of political activity in a year; a third take part in five or more.ⁱⁱⁱ There have been over eight million signatures on the number 10 petition site from over five million unique email addresses.^{iv} There are 350,000 school governors and many more parents are involved in PTAs and helping out in schools. Six per cent took part in demonstrations in 1974, rising

to 13 per cent in 2000. Membership organisations are growing: between 1971 and 2002 Friends of the Earth grew from 1,000 to 119,000; the National Trust from 278,000 in 1971 to 3.5 million last year.^v

The NDC data showed that what did matter – particularly in improving satisfaction with councils – was the amount of information people had about local services, whether they felt they had opportunities for participation, and whether they felt they had influence or not. This reflects the experience of our local work. The majority of people live busy lives, and are unlikely to find time to engage with local services unless on a specific issue that they feel strongly about. A smaller number of people, including many community activists who are the mainstay of local organisations and campaigns, do get involved and engaged on a regular basis, but this number is unlikely to grow significantly even against the backdrop of the next few years.

What are the benefits of engagement, involvement and empowerment?

So the question is: what is engagement, empowerment and accountability for? Is it just a zero sum game: any devolution of power or influence means that institutions and politicians have to give up power to community activists and unaccountable nebulous organisations, with little return? Or is it that empowerment and engagement have the potential to improve public trust, service delivery, and quality of life for the most disengaged and disadvantaged?

The service that has probably done most to transform delivery at the local level and increase engagement and accountability is the police, through neighbourhood policing. Their command and control culture and structure gives an advantage over most other services in rolling out a localised strategy of engagement nationally. And the evidence is that it has been effective. The impact of the first neighbourhood policing pilots was positive on a wide range of outcome measures, including crime, perceptions of anti-social behaviour, and public confidence in the police.^{vi}

Some of the most important factors that make people feel satisfied with the neighbourhood they live in are quality of life issues in the immediate area.^{vii} Anti-social behaviour and the cleaner and greener agenda are key to how people feel about where they live. The topics that succeed in getting residents to meetings in community halls on dark winter evenings reflect this: crime, local disorder, planning applications, the threat of new housing developments, and, in big cities, parking proposals. These issues resonate across the country – in cities, rural areas and suburbia.

What works?

The Young Foundation's neighbourhoods programmes included intensive work in local areas. From this we analysed the critical factors for success in neighbourhood working, These emerged as the need to develop the right structures, processes and organisational culture to underpin ways of working appropriate for different local areas and communities.^{viii} Our broad framework can be applied across the broader range of engagement and empowerment activities, not all of which are geographically based.

Structures, process and organisational culture: examples in practice

Structures	Processes	Culture
Neighbourhood partnerships	Community kitties	Staff development
Community forums	Local pledgebanks	Senior managers buy in to localities remit
Community hubs	Time Banking	Customer care
Asset transfer	Calls for action	Making sure leadership reflects values of communities and residents
Community charters	Citizens' juries	Promoting and embedding collaboration across services/agencies
Neighbourhood management	Planning for real/design fests	Supporting staff to be involved in civic empowerment
Ward forums	Integrated service delivery	Leaders at ease with multiple conversations
Redress	Neighbourhood tasking	Nurturing empowerment skills
Directly elected police, health	Local web 2.0	Shared ownership by LSP

Why does it matter?

The standard answers to why engagement and accountability matter in the public sector focus around service quality (to help services respond to needs so that customers and service users get a better deal), legitimacy and democracy (to give agencies legitimacy to act, strengthen local democracy, and maintain reputation amongst funders – for public sector this is tax payers, at national and local level), and a set of motivations around

'community' and disadvantage (that is important to empower the most excluded and those most dependant on needs-based public services).

Current economic circumstances put this into sharp relief: financial pressures on local government from falling revenues mean that services will be under greater pressure. Less resources (from central government and local taxation) means the imperative will be to do more (to deal with increased demands) with less. A critical aspiration will be to increase the citizen role – to shift as much responsibility (and ideally effort) from paid officials to volunteers: at the extreme encouraging residents to take over local government functions like parks management at the very local level. If the role of the local state as service provider declines, is it feasible for some gaps to be filled by 'improved' public behaviour? If local authorities are going to restrict cleaning rubbish away from public areas, the question will be how to stop the public fly tipping?

The imperative to refocus local authority activity on behaviour change will be complicated by the likely public response to the changing local authority role. Recession and fiscal cutbacks will ignite protest, as services are reduced at the same time as social needs intensify. At the same time local agencies will need the same people who are protesting to become more involved in finding solutions to local problems. The engagement of local people will be necessary to underpin the new initiatives required in moving from recession to recovery: worklessness schemes such as ILMs, building resilience in individuals and communities to economic stress, developing new models of credit union and micro finance, social enterprises to help support an ageing population, and new models of local energy and sustainability projects, necessary to make the cuts in CO₂ emissions needed in the future.^{ix}

What will help? What makes a difference?

Reviewing the evidence and our practical experience of working with local authorities and other agencies on the ground, as well as listening to residents and communities, four critical factors underpinning successful engagement emerge in the future:

1. **political support at local level** – no empowerment or engagement initiatives work if politicians are not on board with the agenda
2. **responsive organisational culture** – treating people as if they have power
3. **clever use of tools and tactics** – particularly in making sure people know the avenues for voicing opinions
4. **working with the enthusiasts** to set up the next generation of radical initiatives.

The traditional battery of consultation and involvement mechanisms – citizens’ juries, participatory budgeting, good consultation – all have a role and can be effective when implemented sensitively and appropriately. The key is to respond to local issues and focus on the priority issues that get people activated.

New media, web 2.0 sites that enable users to generate and share information with each other, rather than simply consuming the information on a webpage, is an evolving area. The 2008 Obama campaign in the US used these tools extensively in a new context – with great success. In this country local authorities and the government are exploiting the potential of MySpace, twitter, YouTube and Facebook to enter into different kinds of dialogue with residents. There are already strong examples of this in places as far apart as Redbridge and Wakefield. These tools give the potential to communicate directly with large proportions of the local electorate, including many who do not participate in traditional consultation and engagement structures, and provide a powerful way to seek out a range of nuanced views.

The challenge for the public sector is that this is a very different starting point to standard approaches. Instead of proposing an option and getting a response, web 2.0 requires that agencies enter into a dialogue with their residents, with many different conversations. Interactions need to be moderated and facilitated rather than planned and controlled. To take this on requires confidence in the benefits of increased transparency, and an organisational culture which not only assumes people have power but that they have the right to an ongoing dialogue and to demand information and answers on their own terms.

And the next generation of radical ideas?

Our structures and processes of engagement and accountability have developed in response to public pressure, often from committed activists, backed by commitment from politicians and individuals within local agencies to do things better to meet community needs.

Generating the future stream of ideas and inspiration for new ways of engaging citizens will need to build on grassroots pressures. However commitment, inspiration, energy and enthusiasm are not evenly distributed. They occur in local pockets and are often driven by people whose way of operating can be oppositional and challenging. But it is only by supporting the enthusiasts that the next generation of radical ideas will emerge.

However much goodwill from government and agencies is channelled towards galvanising activity, it will only deliver if it goes with the grain of what people want, and takes the starting point that citizens already have power.

The future – in 10 to 15 years – could go two ways. Against the backdrop of recovery from recession, sharpening carbon targets, lower public spending, local government could take the lead through engaging citizens and increasing accountability, decentralising power, building up new forms of dialogue and trust, enabling new local activism and the development of new models of local provision. Alternatively, local government could fail to go with the grain of changes in the economy and society and become increasingly residualised and disempowered, as budgets and roles shrink. Engagement and accountability will be key to underpinning innovation and efficiency and finding new ways of doing local authority core business.

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This paper was commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government to feed into their May 2009 conference – The Local Revolution.

The Young Foundation's business is social innovation: finding and developing new and better ways of meeting pressing unmet needs.

We undertake research to identify and understand unmet social needs and then develop practical initiatives and institutions to address them – in fields as diverse as health and education, housing and cities. Our work combines applied work and practical action (undertaken under our Launchpad brand), and developing our buildings as a hub and home for other organisations.

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- ⁱⁱ see www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/local-innovation/strands/neighbourhoods
- ⁱⁱⁱ ESRC Audit of Political Engagement, 2003
- ^{iv} www.mysociety.org/projects/no-10-petitions-website
- ^v Power Inquiry, "Power to the People", 2006
- ^{vi} Paul Quinton and Julia Morris, "Neighbourhood policing: the impact of piloting and early national implementation", Home Office Online Report 01/08
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