

Public participation in decision-making – ‘Deliberative democracy’

The second meeting of the Borough and Area Governance Review received a presentation from Involve (www.involve.org.uk), ‘the UK’s leading public participation charity, ‘on a mission to put people at the heart of decision-making’. Involve argue that decision-making in the UK needs to be more:

- **Open** - so that people can understand, influence and hold decision-makers to account for the actions and inactions of their governments;
- **Participatory** - so that people have the freedom, support and opportunity to shape their communities and influence the decisions that affect their lives;
- **Deliberative** - so that people can exchange and acknowledge different perspectives, understand conflict and find common ground, and build a shared vision for society.

This paper sets out some examples of innovations identified by Involve that enable the public to debate and consider issues in order to inform decision-making. The Panel may wish to recommend that the Council experiments with different formats for ‘deliberative democracy’, if appropriate topics for consideration can be found.

1. A **Citizens’ Assembly**: a fairly large body (50-250 citizens) that comes together to deliberate on an issue, or set of issues of local, regional or national importance. Participants are usually selected to create a ‘mini-public’ that is broadly representative of the demographics of the population.

Participants learn about a topic through presentations from experts and facilitated workshops (they often get materials that introduce them to the topic being discussed before the Assembly starts). This is followed by dialogue which encourages participants to explore their own opinions on what they have heard and develop a wider understanding of the opinions of others.

Participants then, through deliberation, come to conclusions on what they have learnt through the assembly process. Most large Assemblies will do this through voting systems, but smaller Assemblies might use consensus decision making processes.

Citizens’ Assemblies usually tend to be quite high-profile events. Relevant decision makers will often be present at the Assembly allowing citizens to present their findings directly. This method can be used most effectively when the goal is:

- Examining broad policy objectives/ horizon scanning to create new ideas and propose solutions;
- Assessing policy options to develop recommendations;
- Gaining insight from the public about the effectiveness of existing practice.

Strengths:

- The process can be quite high profile and helps draw attention to an issue;
- Can bring out diverse perspectives on complex and contested problems;
- Decision-makers and policy makers are brought face-to-face with citizens or those with lived experience of an issue;

- Citizens who aren't part of the assembly may feel that people like them have listened to all of the evidence and have come to an informed view on behalf of everyone else;
- Learning phase and deliberation with peers can help participants to understand, change and develop their opinions.

Weaknesses:

- Gaining a broad representative group of people can be challenging and expensive;
- Very intensive and (human and time) resource demanding processes;
- Running a Citizens' Assembly is a highly complex process requiring significant expertise;
- There is a danger of being seen as a publicity exercise if not followed by real outcomes.

2. **Citizen advisory groups/ juries** can allow issues and concerns to be explored in depth, and ideally addressed, while the participants are still involved. They are normally formed of 10-30 members of the public who sit as a committee to inform and advise decision making. Participants can either be a representative sample of the local population, representatives of particular groups (for example, older people) or specific individuals, such as community leaders. The group may meet either over a couple of days as a one-off event, or regularly over a longer period. Citizens reach a decision following deliberation on the issue, either by consensus or voting.

For advisory groups to be effective:

1. The selection of participants is crucial. Those who are most affected should be considered first and there should be an attempt to benefit from a spread of expertise amongst the participants.
2. Participants should be provided with all necessary information to reach informed decisions on issues.
3. The participants' decisions and/or recommendations should be respected.

A Citizens' Jury is particularly effective on value-laden and controversial questions, where knowledge is contested and there might be important ethical and social repercussions. Juries have been used for different issues such as: cuts in public service spending; care provision; the wellbeing of young people etc.

Normally the deliberation phase is not open to the wider public to ensure jurors feel comfortable in expressing their opinions without outside pressure. All phases are facilitated by a trained facilitator(s) who ensures a level playing field. On the final day a public forum is held where the jurors present their findings and recommendations and explain how they reached their decision. About two to three weeks later a final report is issued and made available to the public.

Strengths:

- Can provide an early warning of potential problems and be a useful sounding board to test plans and ideas;
- Regular meetings over extended periods of time give participants a chance to get to know each other, which can help discussions;
- Interrogation of issues and experts/evidence;

- Citizens can introduce a fresh perspective to discussions, encouraging innovation;
- Citizen involvement increases accountability in governance due to the more transparent process.

Weaknesses:

- Requires a long term commitment from participants; hence recruiting and retaining participants can be difficult;
- Can appear exclusive to those who are not included;
- Involves only a small number of people and therefore does not provide statistically significant data;
- Participants can become less representative over time; advisory groups may need to be renewed regularly.

3. **Participatory budgeting:** an umbrella term covering a variety of mechanisms that delegate power or influence over local budgets, investment priorities and economic spending to citizens. It involves citizens directly in making decisions about budget issues. This can be done at service or neighbourhood level, or at authority-wide level.

Discussions are often limited to new investment rather than discussing spending as a whole. It can be run as a one-off process but long-term benefits such as social capital and ownership, require a recurring, cyclical process. Participatory budgeting can deliver increased transparency and re-establish the legitimacy of budget decisions. It has also been shown to build the skills and awareness of participants through the process of deliberation.

Peer grant giving is a variant of participatory budgeting: a group of citizens assign grants for community grants and other spending.

Strengths:

- Involves decisions about spending and devolving real power;
- Can be a very public, conveying legitimacy beyond the immediate participants;
- By being exposed to the tradeoffs surrounding financial decisions, participants can acquire a deeper understanding of the work of government.

Weaknesses:

- Can create unrealistic expectations among participants if managed badly;
- Works best where there are high levels of community activism to begin with;
- Doesn't work well where central targets and restricted budgets limit the amount of power that can be given to citizens;
- In most processes, meetings are open to all, creating the risk of certain groups dominating proceedings.

Participatory budgeting, and other methods of deliberative democracy may be supported by a growing number of software tools, such as Consul (www.consulproject.org/en) The software can, for example, enable people to vote on different proposals for spending ward budgets.

4. **'Conversation Cafe':** an informal dialogue method which invites people to take part in discussions about topical issues in an informal setting such as cafes,

bookshops and other public places. There is a standard technique which enables the topic to be explored, while ensuring that all participants have the chance to contribute.

Strengths

- Informal;
- Open;
- Flexible;
- Encourages learning, listening and sharing views;
- May inspire people to take action;
- Stimulates debate;
- Meet new people.

Weaknesses:

- Does not lead to any particular goal;
- Cannot be used to reach a decision;
- Likely to only encourage certain participants.

5. **Online discussion groups:** can take place either via an online bulletin board/ forum or a live chat system. Groups can be used to consult with the public on proposed service or policy changes. They can take place as one-off special events where particular experts/ groups can arrange to meet and chat online at a particular time, or as constantly available chat spaces. Anyone with access to the internet can contribute, however some groups can be reserved just for members of websites or groups.

Strengths:

- Ability for forum participants to get a response;
- Can include expert advice as well as experience from individuals;
- Can provide comfort and community to isolated people as well as practical information and support;
- Not necessarily time-dependent, forums can be posted to at any hour;
- Enables people separated by distance or time constraints to communicate with each other.

Weaknesses

- Information on boards or typed in chatrooms is not always monitored by experts – some information may be misleading or even harmful;
- Forums discussing particular issues may need to be monitored carefully to discourage too many off topic conversations;
- Cannot be used to reach a decision.

Heather Wills
Director of Governance and Co-ordination
25 March 2019