



This is Involve's response to the call for evidence from the Commission on the Future of Local Government. Our response addresses these particular questions: *"What is the future role of local government? In particular, how does the democratic mandate remain relevant and credible as the drive to deliver local solutions for local communities grows? How does local government need to change the way it operates to develop sophisticated partnerships with all sectors to unlock their potential?"*

In response to these questions, Involve will argue that citizen participation is fundamental to the sustainable well-being of local communities, and that the democratic mandate remains central to grounding local governance in the needs of those communities. In particular:

- Citizen perspectives enrich local decision making by providing experience, insight and expertise, and contributing solutions to complex challenges.
- People, communities and local economies thrive on being inter-connected. Public participation in local governance opens up new connections that can support economic resilience.
- The democratic mandate keeps councils responsive and accountable, and facilitates community leadership. It is complemented (not undermined) by public participation, and councillors have an important role to play in connecting with citizens.

## **Citizen participation**

The primary stakeholder in all of this churn and change in local governance is the citizen: as the users of services, as the payers of local taxes, and as the citizens (and voters) of that community.

In our 2009 report [Citizen Power in Recession: the case for public engagement in local government](#), we discuss the value that citizens can bring to local decision making and economic resilience. Engaging local people can open up an issue, make visible previous unknowns and otherwise invisible connections, and broaden the horizons of decision makers. The public have a role to play in finding solutions: an empowering local authority is one in which local government professionals see talking to local people as fundamental to defining complex problems and accessing effective solutions. Public engagement can also be used to gain useful customer insight and find efficiency savings. Tough decisions will be efficient decisions if councils are up-front about the challenges and if they have the support of the public.

We also explored the opportunities for tapping into citizen expertise and insight in our 2010 publication [Talking for a Change – a Distributed Dialogue Approach to Complex Issues](#). This paper (which followed on from a major international public participation event on climate change, World Wide Views) draws on research which has shown that the public can bring in vital experience and expertise, which improves the quality and legitimacy of decision making, and can lead to better targeted interventions and less wastage of public resources. The problems which local (and national) governments face are often complex and interlinked. The solutions to these problems cannot be solved by simple central planning and will require the consent, and often the active participation, of citizens. Core skills for local authority staff are therefore no longer just those appropriate to a service

delivery model, but should include those more centred on collaboration, network management and facilitation.

As Sophia Parker argues in [Participation Nation](#), people want a sense of autonomy, thrive on being connected, and want to feel productive<sup>1</sup>. This interconnectedness was reinforced by recent major research on why people participate<sup>2</sup>. Examples of participative community initiatives - based on these principles of autonomy, connections and productiveness - include Transition Town Brixton and the Brixton Pound<sup>3</sup>.

The current recession throws into relief the interconnections and dependencies between councils, business, voluntary and community groups, and local people. As unemployment increases, the fragility of these connections is exposed and the knock-on implications felt far beyond the site of their immediate impact. Economic resilience is about maintaining these interconnections as well as being able to innovate and forge new ones. This ensures that when one link in the chain breaks it doesn't bring down the entire structure. Public engagement offers the opportunity for new links to be forged between people and the organisations that serve them and can help maintain the stability in local economies. By working closely with the public, councils ensure that the dynamism needed to overcome the difficulties of an economic downturn exists in the local economy and help secure the future well being of local people.

## **Democratic mandate**

The connection between citizen and local services is, in part, mediated through representation. Councillors represent, and advocate for, local residents. Furthermore, the authority that comes with this representation motivates local government to act in ways that are responsive to local needs. Without the democratic mandate, forms of local governance would shift their allegiance to different stakeholders and power-bases, and the public would be reduced to a competing interest. The democratic mandate also provides an important route for public accountability for the provision of services.

The new models of service delivery that might arise under a Civic Enterprise framework need not conflict with this essential democratic mandate – they could, for example, be based on partnership structures where elected representatives play a *primus inter pares* role. The opportunity for local authorities to strengthen their multifaceted leadership role in the light of current challenges (as opposed to a passive withdrawal and letting go), and for councillors to act as community leaders and social entrepreneurs, also emerged from the [Local Society seminar](#) which Involve co-hosted in February 2011.

It is also important to note that participative and representative democracy can be complementary. As John Stewart has said: "*Participative democracy, far from weakening representative democracy, can strengthen it. ....People speak with many voices, expressing differing values and interests. The task of the elected representative is to seek to reconcile, to balance and in the end to judge*"<sup>4</sup>. This balancing role is another important benefit of the democratic mandate. Councillors play a vital role holding the ring between competing interests, providing continuity, retaining focus on the big strategic questions, and speaking for those voices that do not shout loudly. They are community leaders as well as representatives.

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1 Participation: a new operating system for public services? By Sophia Parker, in *Participation Nation: reconnecting citizens to the public realm*, published by Involve 2007.

2 *Pathways Through Participation: what creates and sustains active citizenship?* Can be accessed at [www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk)

3 Please see <http://brixtonpound.org> and <http://www.transitiontownbrixton.org>

4 Stewart J, 2000, *The Nature of British Local Government*, MacMillan

But the way in which councillors represent their communities does not always work well in practice. Notwithstanding particular examples of very good engagement, there remains in general a disconnect between many residents and their councillors<sup>5</sup>. If councillors are to play their full role in leading and representing their communities through a time of significant change, then they need to ensure a strong connection and engagement with all of their constituents.

## **Recommendations**

If the Civic Enterprise model is to address current challenges and meet the needs and aspirations of citizens, then public participation has to be seen as central. As it is currently articulated in the Commission's call for evidence, the model does not mention citizens enough. And so, our recommendations to the Commission are:

- Place citizen participation at the heart of a Civic Enterprise model of local governance, and (on a practical note)
- This participation could be facilitated by cross-cutting networks across public, third and private sector organisations, to build the skills and capacity of staff to engage with the public.

## **About Involve**

[Involve](#) are experts in public participation. We believe passionately in a democracy where citizens are empowered to take and influence the decisions that affect their lives. To that end, by blending thought leadership and practice, we seek to support new relationships and conversations between citizens and decision-makers.

Since its foundation in 2004, Involve has worked closely with public organisations at a local, national and international level, supporting them to transform how they engage with citizens and communities. These include the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, the World Health Organisation, the European Commission, the OECD and numerous Local Authorities and Health Trusts.

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<sup>5</sup> *Frontline Councillor 2017: Empowering a new generation*, published by the Local Government Information Unit, 2007. Can be accessed at: [www.lgiu.org.uk](http://www.lgiu.org.uk)