



# Local engagement in democracy: Launch event report

18 October 2011

Committee Room 12, Houses of Parliament

## 01 Introduction

On 18 October 2011, in a committee room in the Houses of Parliament, the **Pathways through Participation** project team launched '**Local engagement in democracy**', a briefing paper summarising the findings and implications of the project for public participation. The event was hosted by Stella Creasy MP, chaired by Simon Burall (director of Involve) and attended by over 40 individuals from public and civil society organisations. Further information and resources can be found in the **e-report** of the event.

## 02 The project

The Pathways through Participation project was a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explored how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives and within the communities they belong to. Through improved understanding of the reasons for, and the contexts of participation, the project also aimed to influence policy and practice, and encourage the development of opportunities for participation that are better suited to people's needs and

aspirations. It focused on the following questions:

- How and why does participation begin and continue?
- Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?
- What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

The research methodology placed individuals' own experiences throughout their lives at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three different geographical locations and contexts (suburban Enfield, rural Suffolk and inner city Leeds). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, enabling people to tell their story in their own words.

## 03 The research presentation

After a welcome from Simon Burall (director of Involve), Ellie Brodie (NCVO) and Tim Hughes (Involve) summarised the findings from the research. Ellie started with an introduction to the project, including the research questions and approach, and then summarised some key

overall findings (see the [summary report](#)); covering:

- why participation starts, continues or stops,
- how people's participation changes over time, and
- some key conclusions.

Tim then presented the [Local engagement in democracy briefing paper](#), covering three issues:

- the language and image of local engagement in democracy
- the practice of local engagement in democracy, and
- the accessibility of local engagement in democracy.

Audio and slides from the presentation can be found on the [e-report](#). This was followed by a short Q&A and discussion session.

## 04 Speakers reflections

The three speakers, Stella Creasy MP, Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell, and Tessy Britton, then gave their reflections on the findings and implications. You can find transcripts and audio of their full reflections on the [e-report](#).

Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell spoke about the negative perceptions of politics and overcoming the reasons that people do not want to be politically engaged, or take the step to become a councillor. He described two projects that sought to overcome this to bring people into the political process, stating that:

*'I think we wouldn't overclaim the results but by opening our town halls up, by talking to people, by bringing them in, by explaining what their role*

*would be, how whatever their background, whatever their finances, whatever their circumstances they could be local councillors, they could be candidates, that I think is the way that we need to – at least at the active participation level – we need to change things.'*

Tessy Britton spoke about the need for system change in order to overcome the status quo described in the research. Tessy highlighted the importance of good engagement for good decision-making – *'The citizens don't know everything and the local authorities don't know everything, but I think that good decisions come out of blending those two together'* – and she pointed to the potential of a creative-collaborative participation paradigm that is imaginative about the way people work together and pulls *'on the imagination of citizens and local authorities alike'*.

Stella Creasy spoke about how the research *'nails some of the myths that have developed some of the structures we're now struggling with'*. This included: the "field of dreams" approach, that *'if we build it, they will come'*; *'that politics is about tribes'*; and that people will become increasingly more involved:

*'Participation isn't an escalator, it's more of a dance; at some points people will be more active – they'll be more steps involved – than at others.'*

Stella went on to say that the research:

*'challenges all of us to deal with [...] the "unconscious incompetence" within our conditions and the way in which we work now within politics,*

particularly the need to challenge the very real threat [...] that we could end up with a consumer complaints approach to politics.'

Each group chose key points to feedback which they wrote on coloured pieces of card (see figure 1).

## 04 Group discussions

Following another short Q&A session, participants split into groups to discuss three questions:

- What has particularly struck you?
- What are the implications?
- What else do we need to know?

**Figure 1: Cards produced by groups**



### **What has particularly struck you? (Blue cards)**

- The importance of individual/personal motivations – and not what ‘we’ think.
- How can we dance on an escalator? How can we work with the messy reality of participation?
- Co-producing communities. Capacity building. Obvious.
- Respect people’s choices for how to engage.
- What is needed: fundamental change in (power) relations – co-operative model.
- Party politics sucks local citizens’ participation.
- Insight: People can be put off by participatory processes if their very design is top-down. Implication: Start participation early (in even the design of the process).

### **What are the implications?** (Yellow cards)

- Participation is meaningless without purpose.
- Incentives. Nudging.
- Tension between local decision making and wider accountability.
- Rational government vs. Right answer = Right process
- Insight: Participation can be motivated by fear and anger. Implication: Resource for 'anti-X' groups. Processes which are inclusive.
- Insight: People can be put off by participatory processes if their design feels top-down and not participatory. Implication: Include people early and make design of process participatory.
- Insight: Scepticism towards formal politics drives people to informal politics but even that builds people's 'felt resources'. Implication: Encourage informal participation to drive formal participation.
- Moving from consumer to participant to collaborator and attach to decision making.

### **What else do we need to know?** (Purple cards)

- How do power and networks influence people's ability to take up opportunities to participate?
- Need to understand the interplay between engagement activity, motivation and deprivation.
- Best practice and next steps.
- Structures don't work at the moment – radical mindset change in Whitehall and town halls needed.
- Data on what engagement each politician is doing.
- Is power zero sum or can participation add to total power?

These cards were then grouped by Simon and participants commented on the themes that emerged. The points raised in this discussion included:

*What institutions do we need to support engagement? Current structures and institutions seem to be getting in the way of politicians engaging.*

*Issues of power are not being addressed when we come to look at questions of consultation or political participation. Power is held by all parties, not just those in power. We need to address power as it really is - in the community, in the council office or in Parliament - and allow those communities to interact. The moment there's assumed to be a powerless population, they are asked their opinion and then ignored in many cases. But there are powers within the community -*

*networks that are really locked in and working with the political powers, and these are ignored in the report. We need to move to a place where we recognise that power is not located within individuals, or within "the community", but actually in networks that move shift and change over time. That's where the zero-sum game question comes in - that we're looking to mobilise power in a whole range of new places where power has previously been ignored or excluded or underplayed.*

*There is a distinction between decision-making process and getting to that decision-making process. Participation is crucial to getting to the decision making process, because we don't have the best information for decisions to be taken. We confuse participation at the decision-making level with getting as much quality*



*information into the process up to the point when you make decision.*

*The ultimate goal of localism and participation is people themselves making the decisions, and that means devolving resources, devolving decision-making, devolving assets. But then there's need for wider accountability because of the point that there are "insiders" and "outsiders", and certain groups have more power than others. So in devolving decision-making and assets there's going to be a concern that some voices are louder than others and the decision might not be in the interest of the whole community. There's a role of representative groups like councils to mediate.*

*Timescales of how public bodies want you to participate are completely out of sync with how people want to get involved. Rather than expecting people to jump through hoops to get involved its about simplifying processes and starting early, from the beginning, in involving people - not right at the end.*

*It's a cultural thing of not expecting people to participate where you want them to, but where they're willing to.*

*The findings from the research are obvious but really important to have them because we were ignoring it all. It makes total sense that people will participate in different ways over their lifetimes and a lot of the other points that were made, but we're not actually taking that into account in consultation processes.*

*We talk about the value of co-production and the savings that come from that, and we slightly change the buzz-word every six-months, but then we don't do anything*

*else - because as soon as you start to actually co-produce, then some vested interest has to give up some of their powers, some of their influence, even some of their budget, some of their commissioning power, and it stops because they are powerful. Citizens, you can bring them together in a room, but they're still a collective of individual citizens. Unless that collective can become empowered to stand up to the very empowered groupings in government, nothing happens. They're patted on the head and they go home. Then it becomes harder and harder to enthuse people to want to try again.*

*It's a fairly recent development, but now party politics has got a stranglehold on politics at a local level. It didn't use to have. It's been around at the national level for a long time, but at the local level it did not use to have the strangle hold it's got now. As a community activist, it really does suck, it's terrible, because the way in which it works is that the politicians are always directing everything into the next election. It gets in the way of a huge amount of things. Until we get some way of helping the local politicians to not be obsessed by that, we're going to have to find some other ways to empower citizens.*

## **05 Further information**

**For more information on the Local engagement in democracy event visit <http://localengagementindemocracy.posterous.com/>**

**For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the [website](http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/)**