

Public Participation in the UK

Lessons from the UK experience

Background paper for a SIGMA workshop on
consultation.

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Written by Dominic Potter, Researcher at Involve



Acknowledgements

This background paper is a personal reflection on the state of empowerment and participation in the UK. It is based on the work of Involve and other organisations, and I am indebted to the work of many. In particular I would like to acknowledge the work of Edward Andersson and Richard Wilson without whom I could not have written this document.

The coverage of the Devolved Administrations is patchy at best. It would be presumptuous of me to assume that the paper reflects the experiences of others.

About Involve

The Involve Foundation is a not for profit and non-partisan organisation, based in London, UK. Involve are public participation specialists, bringing institutions, communities and citizens together to accelerate innovation, understanding, discussion and change.

We breathe new life into institutions and communities in the UK and across the world, by working with senior people in government and business as well as community activists. We were set up by a number of UK based practitioners and our chair is Geoff Mulgan. Involve has over the past few years worked with organisations in the UK and across the world

More information can be found on the Involve website www.involve.org.uk or People and participation, our practitioner site www.peopleandparticipation.net

About the Author

Dominic Potter is a researcher at Involve. He has recently been working on diverse range of projects regarding youth engagement, user evaluation of services, and the links between participation, empowerment and community cohesion. Alongside this Dominic is responsible for the management of People and Participation.net, an online portal for public participation practitioners, and the Involve Seminar Series

Dominic has previously worked for Demos, SIGMA and several UK Members of Parliament on a diverse range of social and public policy issues.

Summary

This paper takes a critical look at the current situation for public participation and empowerment in the UK. It seeks to counter the fact that we often find that people are overly impressed with the UK's progress on citizen engagement and sometimes we tend to overlook some key difficulties and challenges. This paper explores some of the key challenges for public participation in the UK.

In my view the two main problems are that we have so far seen far more quantity than quality when it comes to government run public participation processes and that there has been a lot of confusion regarding what citizen empowerment actually means. The paper will explore these problems in two chapters. The paper ends with an overview of some of the work that Involve is doing to deal with these issues.

I would welcome feedback on this report. Please get in touch through:

dominic@involve.org.uk

+44 (0) 20 76320102
Involve 212 High Holborn
London, WC1V 7BF

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom has in the past decade seen a tremendous amount of government sponsored activity to increase the involvement of people in decisions, policies and services in public life. For a number of reasons UK government, at all levels, have committed publicly to increasing the involvement and empowerment of ordinary citizens.

The number of government initiatives has lately been astounding. In 2007 and 2008 alone we have seen the government produce or announce the following:

- **Governance of Britain Green Paper** –Reviewing how Britain is governed, including the division of powers between parliament and the executive
- **Participatory Budgeting Strategy** –Setting out the Government’s intention to bring citizens into the budgeting process
- **Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act** –Increasing opportunities for citizen action, including ‘Community calls for action’
- **Sustainable Communities Act** –led to the creation of local sustainability strategies which communities play a key role in drawing up
- **Empowerment White Paper** –marks a landmark step in embedding public participation and empowerment in central Government policy
- **Duty to Involve** –Upcoming requirement to ‘inform, consult and involve the people they serve’
- **National Empowerment Partnership** –a new national partnership set up to ‘improve the quality, coordination and evidence of empowerment across England’
- **Best value framework** – All local authorities are now obliged to consult residents much more than previously through mechanisms such as Best Value Performance Indicator surveys.
- **Quirk review** –Recommended wider transfer of assets to community groups
- **Lyons Review** –Recommended more power to communities alongside devolution to local councils
- **MoJ national framework for greater citizen engagement** – discussion paper exploring cross-Government methods and approaches to public participation and citizen engagement

This is not limited to just words. We have also seen an increase in the scale of public involvement. For example the 2003 “GM Nation” process involved 40,000 people across the UK in over 200 community events, and more recently debates on health and pensions both directly involved several thousand members of the public. There is a lot of activity and many state institutions have massively improved the way they engage and communicate with the public. Today the principle that the public has a right to be consulted on issues that will affect them is established to a degree that was not the case ten years ago. A new generation of civil servants tend to be more open to the idea of citizen empowerment which means that we are likely to see further developments in this direction.

This is not limited to England. In many ways other parts of the United Kingdom are further ahead than England is in terms of supporting participation. Also it is worth noting that this enthusiasm for public engagement is not limited to the governing Labour party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have also committed themselves to the idea of a ‘new politics’ where citizens play a more active role.

Compared to many other countries public participation in the UK is more likely to be funded by government funds, rather than NGOs. It is also often clearly linked to the decision makers and is often delivered by market or social research companies.

From this list of initiatives you can see the scale of activity taking place around citizen empowerment and engagement in the UK. However, there are worrying signs that all is not well when it comes to citizens’ empowerment in the UK. For example many initiatives, such as the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health and the Scottish Civic Forum have been short lived due to a lack of long term government commitment. The next sections explore some of the grey clouds on the horizon for public participation in the UK. The final section will examine some of the solutions that Involve is working on.

PARTICIPATION IN THE UK

One of the biggest problems in UK participation today is that the focus has been on quantity rather than quality. Two common assumptions that many people hold are that 'participation is always a good thing' and that 'if we build it they will come'. We often assume that there is a vast untapped reserve of active people who want to get involved. There has been an explosion in opportunities for the public to get involved in decisions over the last years. Today if you lived in a local area of England you might, in any one month, be invited to take part in decisions through the following structures:

Foundation Trust membership
Local Involvement Network
Citizens' Panel
Local Area Forum
Residents/Tenants Association
Police Consultative Committee
Participatory Budgeting meetings

School Governing Body
Housing Association Management Board
Service user panels
Surestart Board
Focus groups
Citizens' juries
Local Strategic Partnerships

Despite all these opportunities the truth is that only a small proportion of the population take part in the UK today. The 'Audit of Political Engagement' survey for 2007 shows that only 12% of the British population could be said to be activists and almost half had not taken part in any form of political activity (in the broadest sense) whatsoever.¹

It wouldn't be so bad if the 12% who take part were an accurate reflection of society at large. However those who take part are disproportionately well off, elderly and white. Only one percent of members of minority ethnic groups were activists, compared to white respondents to the survey. Education was also important. Those without qualifications had an activist rate of three percent compared to twenty-six percent for those with postgraduate degrees. Obviously this will skew the results that participation delivers.

It has been common to criticise 'the usual suspects' or 'NIMBYs'; the same people who turn up to all events, and who, according to some, are a small group of unelected people who have captured local decisions. Clearly it is not a lack of opportunities that puts the majority off participating. So why is it that only a small proportion of the population take part?

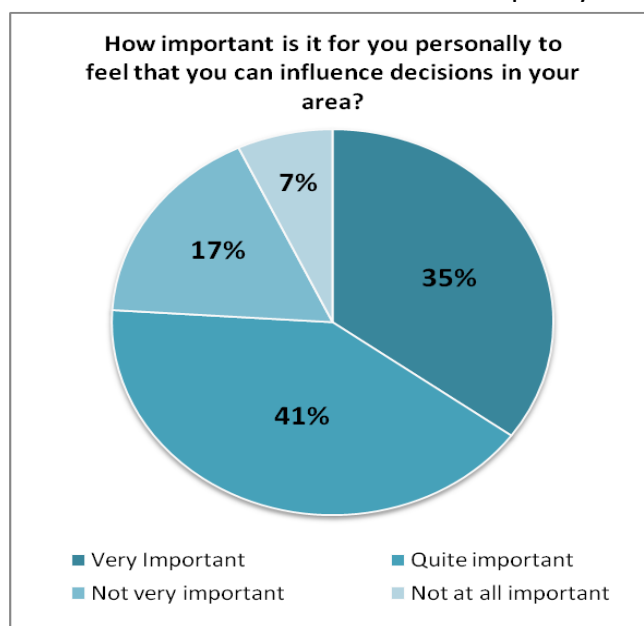
Our experiences at Involve point to a combination of bad practice, time pressures and the overwhelming number of opportunities to get involved that explains this.

'Tick-box' tokenism and bad practice

It is unfortunately the case that a lot of public engagement in the UK today leads nowhere. A significant number of processes are flawed, either because the people in charge of them lack the skills or resources to run them properly or because the motives behind the process are not genuine.

Speaking to community activists, the prevailing view is that consultations and other forms of engagement rarely influence decision-making; that a lot takes place because of requirements and not out of a conviction and commitment to involving people in decision-making; and that decisions have often already been made. The term 'tick box' consultation is becoming frequently used to express this.

Source: Citizenship Survey 2007



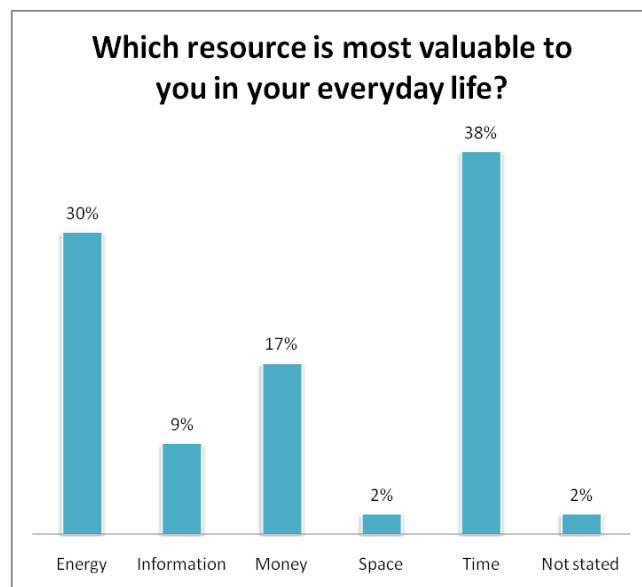
¹ Hansard Society (2008) Audit of Political Engagement 5 (London: Hansard Society)

Time pressures

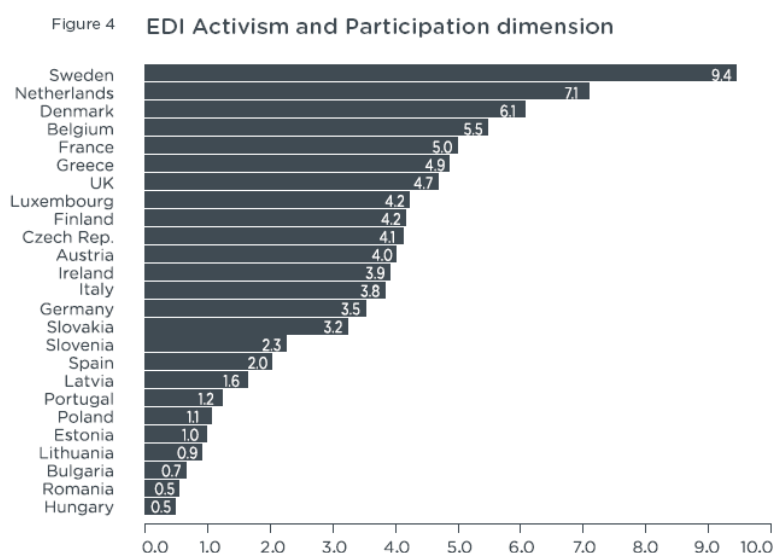
It is easy to assume that people will somehow find the time to take part. People in the UK have never felt busier than today. They work the longest hours in Europe and recent survey results show that for many people time has become more precious than money.² (see figure). In many experts' view a substantial amount of our processes are designed for people with lots of time on their hands. It is therefore strange that we are then surprised when we don't get a representative group.

To be effective, engagement processes need to look at multiple ways of engaging, so that those with little time on their hands can choose a quick and easy way to take part.

It is also necessary to accept that most issues will not motivate a large part of the population to take part. However, it isn't impossible to encourage a far larger part of the population to be actively involved – it boils down to being more innovative and inventive around how we design processes and invite people to them.



Source: The Everyday Democracy Index, Demos (London)



Flood of opportunities

So if a majority claim they want more of a say, so why do they not get involved? Time pressures and tokenistic, poorly designed processes are important reasons - but these are not the only reasons. A large part of the answer lies in how participation is organised in the UK today.

It is often based around institutional boundaries that make no sense to the average citizen. We often see cases where the police service, health service and local authority consult the same people about the same issues in parallel. According to researchers in the average Welsh authority there are 92 partnerships where citizens could get involved.³ With all likelihood the same is true in other parts of the UK as well.

In this context, how do we expect citizens with precious little time to understand how they can best be involved? In the face of relatively high levels of activism and participation in our society (see figure above) we have in many cases created a labyrinth of opportunities and partnerships. Because of the high number of opportunities and the lack of central co-ordination the system becomes un-transparent and hard to access, in spite of the genuine levels of responsiveness to such processes that exist within the UK.

Portsmouth City Council – pointing the way towards quality rather than quantity

The solution has to start with better rather than just more participation. If anything we need a substantial decrease in the number of forums, partnerships and other participative events. This can be done by joining up the many events that cover the same or related topics.

² Planning for Consumer Change research programme, Henley Centre 2007

³ Bound, K. Et al. (2005) Mapping governance at the local level (York: JRF)

We also need to focus on what's in it for the participants. Why should people give up their valuable time to take part? Hopefully a citizen centred process is more likely to deliver real change than one which is primarily focussed on the needs and wants to government.

We also need to pay more attention to how we communicate these opportunities to people. Portsmouth City Council provided their citizens with clear information about what the options available to citizens were around local issues. This had a dramatic impact on how citizen perceived their local council. The Community Involvement Directory provides residents with a menu of options on how they can get involved in their communities and local area as active citizens. This includes low intensive ways of getting involved, as through surveys and text messaging. The directory has contributed to significant increases in public satisfaction with opportunities for participation, which has risen from 48% (2001) to 56% (2005).

PARTICIPATION, OR EMPOWERMENT?

What is empowerment?

Words like participation and empowerment are often very vague and they take on many different meanings depending on who uses them. This is why so many different (and fundamentally opposed) organisations such as parties across the political spectrum, can sign up to the concept of participation. What they mean in practice is obviously very different.

So how is empowerment different from participation? Empowerment, unlike participation, is an outcome and not an activity. While it is relatively straightforward to measure levels of participation by counting those who take part it is much harder to assess empowerment in any meaningful way. It is important not to presume that public participation always leads to empowerment. This is a critical concern when working with those who have less power within society.

The state cannot empower people. It can put in place structures and carry out activities that increase the likelihood of empowerment, or remove barriers, but ultimately it is down to the citizens to empower themselves. This makes empowerment different from participation. After all in countries with compulsory turnout at elections, government enforces mandatory participation. By its nature the same cannot be done with empowerment.

So exactly what is empowerment? Is it legal rights, a sense of being able to influence things or actually affecting change? In Involve's view it can be all three:

- **De jure empowerment** (the opportunity to influence) – formal legal or judicial rights, such as the right to. These opportunities and rights are primarily provided through law, contract or other official record. De jure empowerment does not actually need to be exercised to exist.
- **De facto empowerment** (actual influence) – control or influence (power) over an outcome or a decision. For example, some referendums and participate partnerships have de facto power because they actually make binding decisions. Importantly, the presence or absence of de facto power is independent of perceptions – those who took part in a referendum will have exercised de facto power even though they may not be aware of this causal relationship.
- **Subjective empowerment** (the sense of influence) – the feeling, or perception, of being able to influence, control or affect a situation. Importantly, subjective empowerment is a psychological state and does not need to be linked to actual power. A person or a group can have subjective power without de facto power if they feel that they have power over things that they cannot in fact influence. Similarly, subjective disempowerment can be defined as when individuals or groups believe themselves to be without power, whether or not this is actually the case. . Subjective empowerment is especially important, as there is a strong correlation with community cohesion. A recent study found a strong positive link between “feeling able to influence local decisions” and community cohesion.⁴

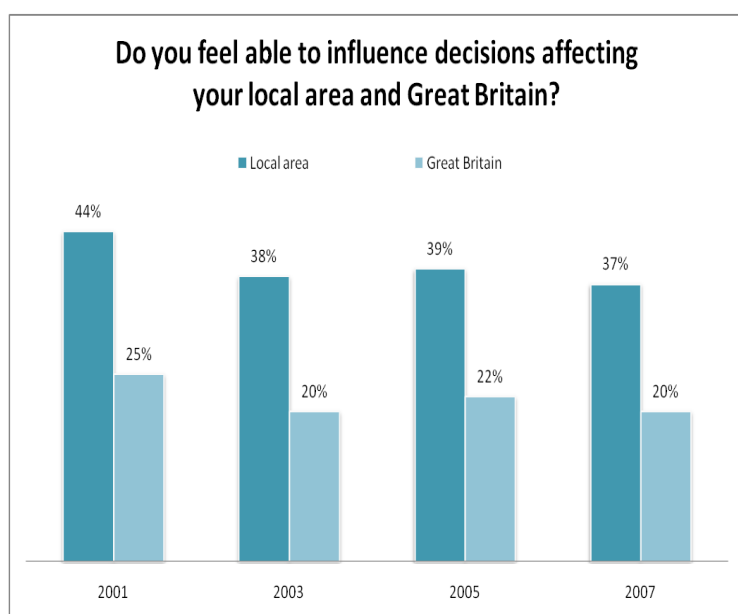
⁴ CLG (2008) Predictors of community cohesion (London: CLG)

The Empowerment Gap

With this in mind, how are different participation opportunities offered by public authorities affecting power relationships at a local level? After all, as we have seen record investments in empowerment initiatives over the past years we should expect to see all facets of empowerment rise.

De jure empowerment (the legal opportunities) has been substantially increased over the past ten years. This becomes evident when you look at the list of policy initiatives mentioned earlier. Legal instruments such as the Freedom of Information Act has also played a part in increasing the legal rights of citizens.

De facto empowerment is harder to measure. How much influence over decisions do citizens in the UK actually have today? While it is clear that much 'participation' is tokenistic in nature, it is unlikely that the increased opportunities would have led to a decrease in actual influence. With this in mind de facto empowerment has probably risen or stayed the same over the last years.



Subjective empowerment has actually decreased in the past decade, despite all the investment in participation and engagement. The latest citizenship survey shows that 37 per cent of people in England agreed that they could influence decisions in their local area and one-fifth (20%) of people felt they could influence decisions affecting Great Britain in 2007. In 2001 the figures were 44 per cent and 25 per cent respectively (See figure below).⁵ This is a worrying result and one that calls out for explanation. Why is it when government has created multiple new structures for citizens to take part there has been no increase in the sense of power? Might the government's approach to participation in fact be to some degree contributing to this situation?

This 'empowerment gap' - the growing mismatch between the increased de-facto opportunities to affect change - and the differing capacity and willingness to use these opportunities amongst individuals is a real issue. If nothing is done to counter balance this it is likely that the increase in opportunities for influence are simply increasing opportunities for certain sections of society to exercise ever greater power. Put starkly, people who do not feel able to influence things tend not to sign petitions, and tend not to participate in participative events, no matter how innovative they may be.

Whilst de-facto opportunities are vital, on their own they cannot guarantee that larger segments of the public will take part. The growth of structural and institutional mechanisms to empower communities and to increase opportunities for de-facto empowerment locally must be matched by action to develop a subjective sense of empowerment across British society.

The UK therefore needs a twin track approach to empowerment; one that supports both the de facto opportunities, combined with programmes to build a culture which values participation and empowers all citizens to contribute. Without this twin track approach there is a real risk that the empowerment agenda will increase inequalities in power between groups.

⁵ Communities and Local Government (2008) Citizenship Survey 2007 (London: CLG)

Devaluing empowerment

Empowerment is a word that is frequently used in the UK, most often without any clarification. In the UK policy arena, despite attempt to clarify the terms, terms such as empowerment, engagement, consultation and participation are often used as synonyms.

Using the word empowerment tends to raise expectations amongst the participants, as they will expect more from a process labelled empowering than one where they are merely being consulted. In the short term it can be in the interest of an institution to use vague terms and allow multiple interpretations.

Much of what passes for empowerment in the UK today are activities that could actually be characterised as consultation or communication exercises. As a result one of the key risks that we face in the UK today is that the term empowerment will be devalued in the public's eyes.

Institutional culture

It is quite clear that a lot of the issues outlined above are related to the behaviours of civil servants. For this reason it is surprising that to date there has been very limited research into how civil servants relate to public engagement. Involve recently carried out primary interviews with civil servants as part of a research project for the Sustainable Development Commission.⁶

Involve uses a framework for understanding how to secure institutional cultural change, which highlights both "hard" elements such as structural systems and "soft" elements such as the culture, skills and attitudes.⁷

The "hard" dimensions are often easier to identify, most commonly presented through strategy statements, corporate plans, organisational charts and other documentations. These are the elements most likely to be determined through legislative change. In contrast, the "soft" dimensions of good working practice are more difficult to quantify because they are a facet of the relationships and cultures within and between groups of people. In processes of attempted wide-scale change it is these softer dimensions that can lag behind in implementation and most threaten success.

Engage for change

The research used a social representations approach, which looked at the relationship between perceptions and the personal and social identities of those who hold them. The case of civil servants we found a direct link between their sense of professional identity civil servants and their view of public engagement.

Most of the interviewees perceived policy as something that is done for and to the public, rather than created in collaboration with them. They also emphasised benefits from public engagement that accrued to public bodies (such as educating the public or creating buy in from public) rather than benefits that accrued to the participants.

We also found that the use of external consultants to deliver engagement activities meant that many participants viewed public engagement as a specialist enterprise, rather than a way of working within government. This also reinforced internal divisions between those who produce policy research and analysis, and those who work within communications and engagement teams.

Those who had directly taken part in an activity or even contributed to designing it, were much more likely to champion engaging with the public in policy making. Because of a lack of direct experience of public engagement many participants could not see how it could be useful in their work. As a consequence, they did not seek to participate themselves in any engagement activities, resulting in a lack of experience as to what it can and cannot deliver.

Based upon our experience in this, there is too much focus on methods and not enough on either the purpose behind engagement or the wider context it is situated in. Government capacity building has tended to focus too much on which methods, despite a lot of research which shows that it is not so much delivering the right approach (e.g. citizens jury or development trust) that matters, but rather how culturally disposed any given organisation is to empowering others.⁸

⁶ Involve (2007) Engage for Change (London: Involve)

⁷ This work builds on concepts of collaboration and whole-system attitudinal change; see for example, Waddell S (2005). Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems. Greenleaf Publishing, Sheffield

⁸ Lowndes, V. et al (2006) Locality matters (London: Ippr)

4. WHAT INVOLVE IS DOING

This section outlines some of Involve's recent projects relating to the issues raised in this background paper. You can find more information on all these projects on the Involve website www.involve.org.uk

Working with citizens: Say and Play

Involve is working with Lambeth Council and five local schools to run children's fun days as a form of public consultation with parents, carers and young people. Funded by Lambeth Council and the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust the project aims to demonstrate a flexible approach to engagement which fits in with the busy lives that people lead today.

Working with practitioners: Peopleandparticipation.net

Involve has developed a successful practitioner portal which contains information about over 35 methods of engagement and provides the facility for site users to upload their own case studies and events. The site features an interactive planning tool. The site is aimed to be a definitive place to go for up to date information about participation methods and practice.

Working with civil servants: Participation Partners

Involve is supporting central government teams who are new to engagement through an innovative mentoring and support programme, funded by the Ministry of Justice. So far Involve has supported teams in DEFRA, MoJ, DCMS and the Northern Ireland Office. The programme aims to build the capacity of government to run meaningful engagement processes.

Quality assurance: Principles for deliberation

Involve and the National Consumer Council are developing a set of best practice principles to improve the quality and impact of deliberative public engagement processes. The principles have been developed with leading practitioners. The final document will be launched in the summer of 2008.

Scaling up participation: Teleparticipation

The Ministry of Justice is funding Involve to produce a guidance document looking at how public engagement activities can seek to engage large numbers of people - on the scale of millions. The project focuses on the implementation of new technology in a mass engagement context and how this will interlink with mass media and face to face approaches in order to produce a 360degree engagement process.

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