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Smarter engagement

Harnessing public voice in policy challenges

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Summary

Four drivers of change

The 2015 parliament presents many challenges for government's national and local leaders. If government can engage citizens more effectively, it can secure more effective and less divisive outcomes from these processes. Four drivers for change make it vital to involve citizens in decisions:

- reductions – the Spending Review, increased pressure on the NHS and cuts to welfare will require citizens to adapt to leaner or reconfigured services
- infrastructure – much of the UK's existing infrastructure must be replaced or replenished, but citizens must be convinced of the need for local disruption
- digital – the process of digitisation requires citizens to adapt to new ways of accessing services
- innovation – the way that services are designed and delivered is changing, moving to greater collaboration with citizens.

Five examples of better engagement

There are examples from the UK and around the world where local and national governments have moved beyond consultation and successfully involved citizens in tough decisions, leading to less adversarial interactions and often better outcomes.

- Redbridge Council provided citizens with 'YouChoose,' an online tool to set budget priorities.
- After public backlash against planned expansion, the Alders Table was founded with public involvement to steward the future of the Netherlands' Schiphol airport.
- In Thurrock, the redesign of adult social care was conducted in collaboration with a group of users who have since taken over delivery of the service.
- The Oregon Kitchen Table is a citizen-founded platform which has been used by government to engage citizens on their own terms.
- Citizens' juries run by PwC and Britain Thinks provided a deliberative space in which citizens established decision-making criteria for the 2010 Spending Review.

Six early insights about what works

From these case studies we can derive six early insights into some of the features of smarter engagement:

- be transparent about the terms of engagement – citizens need to be clear what they can achieve through participation, otherwise they can feel alienated if outcomes do not meet their expectations
- demonstrate impact – citizens want to see that their involvement has been influential
- engage early – early engagement can produce higher-quality outcomes
- involve the right people – representativeness should not come at the expense of targeting specific groups

- use the right channels – engaging citizens means tailoring engagement to their needs and interests
- use tools for creating constructive conversations – there are a number of techniques that can overcome resistance and allow people to approach issues with an open mind.

Three barriers to change

Although good practice exists, there are three barriers that seem to stop decision makers from conducting effective engagement more often:

- regulatory burden – policymakers can view engagement as a regulatory burden and underestimate its benefits
- scarce resources – government may have to prioritise upfront investment in engagement to achieve future savings
- who turns up – engagement exercises are open to derailment by special interest or protest groups.

Four Drivers of Change

The challenges of the 2015 parliament make it more important than ever to engage citizens effectively. Fiscal pressures continue and Institute research highlights that achieving savings will require an even more fundamental redesign of services than has been delivered in the last parliament.¹ Citizens have strong opinions about how these changes should be managed. Although only 7% feel that they have some involvement in decisions made in parliament, over 53% would like to be involved in some form and almost 50% of people would like to be more engaged by policymaking.²

Increasingly, citizens are making their voices heard outside formal processes, from online petitions to community organising. At its best, this energy can be harnessed to support better outcomes for everyone. But when citizens are not engaged effectively, or are even ignored, they can derail reform and oppose change. This has been demonstrated over the last 10 years, when public opposition postponed or disrupted government plans to reconfigure hospital services,³ find a long-term solution to the storage of nuclear waste,⁴ and killed off interest in nationwide road pricing.⁵

There are four pressures in particular that mean that government must engage citizens more effectively or prepare to see change derailed.

1. Spending reductions

Government has committed to making further reductions of £20 billion (bn) from spending,⁶ in addition to £22bn of productivity savings in the NHS⁷ and £12bn of welfare cuts.⁸ Achieving these savings will require even more fundamental redesign of services than has been delivered in the last parliament, including decommissioning. But there is public resistance: for instance, only 35% of the public accept that their council needs to reduce or close services or facilities.^{9,10} Without citizen engagement, already difficult choices on how to make these savings may be further complicated by public opposition.

2. Infrastructure

The UK's infrastructure must be replenished or replaced.¹¹ The value of the current pipeline of projects stands at £466bn, including £275bn of energy projects.¹² Alongside this, discussions about the proposed route for High Speed 3 are beginning in earnest.¹³ The complexities of engaging the public in discussions about infrastructure projects which trade local discomfort now for future national benefit is apparent - most recently demonstrated in the strength of reaction to the Airports Commission Final Report and in ongoing disquiet about High Speed 2.^{14,15}

3. Digital

Services are becoming increasingly digitised with plans to migrate or deliver key services online. Universal Credit, passport applications and personal independence payments are the latest changes in the pipeline.¹⁶ The Government Digital Service is prototyping a platform that allows citizens to pay for anything from a driving license to taxes online.¹⁷ Involving citizens in such changes is necessary to build systems that work, shown by the Rural Payments Agency digital service, which struggled due to poor broadband access in remote rural areas.¹⁸

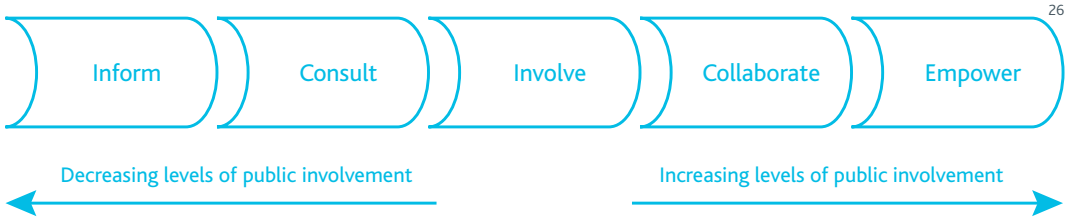
4. Innovation

Citizens are being encouraged to take on greater responsibility for services themselves, from setting up free schools¹⁹ to managing personal budgets in mental health services and social care.²⁰ Many of these innovations rely not merely on citizen engagement, but on citizen collaboration to be effective.

As government accelerates the task of implementing change and reform, the benefits of smarter engagement with citizens could be considerable. Getting engagement right could provide opportunities to generate faster, more effective and less controversial responses to austerity and service reform, and could also hold the key to unlocking debates on healthcare, transport, energy and other sectors. Government has acknowledged this, committing to 'open policymaking' and setting out a vision for "a new relationship with the citizen who becomes a valued partner to identify problems, discover new thinking and to propose solutions" in the Civil Service Reform Plan in 2012.²¹ But, despite notable exceptions, this has not yet translated into widespread practice.²²

What is engagement?

Engagement is a term that captures a multitude of practices involving contact between citizens and their government.²³ A number of attempts have been made at categorising or creating frameworks for the various practices that sit under this broad heading, often grouping methods on the extent to which they transfer power from the state to the citizen.²⁴ This type of categorisation is often described as “levels of engagement” although some reject the normative connotations of the term, disagreeing with the implication that there is a “highest” level of engagement which is always preferable to “lower” or shallower engagement.²⁵



Example methods

- “Present and discuss” community meetings
- Leaflets, posters
- Websites

At one end are the techniques of communicating information, frequently in response to a statutory obligation to consult the public. The NHS Act 2006 places legal obligations on NHS England and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) to consult users in relation to service changes, while the Planning Act 2008 obliges nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs) to hold public consultations.

Often, the definition of consultation in such instances is weak. Practitioners are frequently required only to outline their preferred option for action, with passing reference to rejected alternatives. Such instances can be described as ‘information transfer’, focused on communicating the rationale for a decision to the public rather than seeking their involvement.

Example methods

- Workshops and citizens’ juries for co-design
- Engagement of service users for co-delivery
- Referenda

At the other end of the scale are more participatory techniques. When government is making policy on a contested issue and wants to develop a deeper understanding of public preferences, it may make use of citizens’ juries, deliberative workshops or advisory panels.

In other cases, government may want to involve citizens or users in designing a public service. Such exercises are frequently described as a “co-design” or “partnership” approach and may involve a longer-term relationship than the one-off workshops or panels at the ‘involve’ stage. In some instances, government may choose to go further and actually transfer the responsibility for designing and implementing the policy to the public, with users taking control of services. At this point, “co-design” gives way to “co-delivery”.

Despite this range of engagement practices, government largely makes use of a small collection of techniques based around statutory consultation and “keeping the public informed”, with only experimental use made of more participatory methods.²⁷

Five case studies of smarter engagement

In this section, we look at cases from the UK and around the world where citizens have been engaged in tough decisions on spending cuts, infrastructure development and service reform. Smarter engagement is not homogenous; the cases studies tackle different issues using very different means.²⁸ New institutions, innovative methods and emerging technology have been variously employed to involve citizens in deliberating on whether a project or policy is worthwhile, to reflect on its objectives and main features, and to express their opinions in ways that can genuinely influence the design and implementation of projects or policies for the better.²⁹

A recurrent theme across these stories is the willingness of citizens to think differently about some of the issues they are most passionate about, and get involved in finding solutions to the challenges of spending cuts, service reconfigurations and infrastructure change when given the opportunity to engage more deeply. They worked with decision makers to agree less contentious solutions and even generated opportunities for service reform that could not have been anticipated without their input.

Redbridge YouChoose: A digital platform for involving citizens in budget trade-offs

In 2008, Redbridge Council sought to engage the public in the trade-offs that it faced in its difficult budget deliberations. To do this, they developed the 'YouChoose' platform with YouGov and the Local Government Association, which allows participants to propose their own adjustments to the council budget. As spending is increased or reduced in a given area, participants are notified of the consequences for local services. It is a "forced choice" tool, requiring users to balance the budget before they can submit their proposal.

The tool was expanded in 2010 when the council had to plan £25 million (m) of savings. In total, they received more than 4,000 responses from local residents, 10% of which came from harder-to-reach groups. The savings programme that was implemented largely reflected the decisions made by citizens, who opted to make larger cuts to environmental and housing spend while making smaller cuts to education and community safety.³⁰

Comparable example

Balanced Baltimore is now its second year as a forced-choice budget-balancing participation tool in the US. Residents are asked to find \$30m to close the fiscal gap in 2016 by re-allocating resources between 45 different spending areas.

Insight 1: Be transparent about the terms of engagement

In Redbridge, the terms of engagement were well defined; it was clear what was under discussion and what was not.³¹ There was no room to reject the requirement to make £25m savings; budget deliberations could only occur within that envelope. Research has shown that citizens are more

likely to be engaged when the scope for their involvement is clearly defined,³² overcoming anxiety that an exercise will descend into diffuse “idle talk”.³³

The Alders Table: A permanent institution for deliberation on the expansion of Schiphol airport

In 2006 the Netherlands national government published a white paper setting out plans for the expansion of Schiphol airport. This quickly came under heavy criticism from local and regional voices who were opposed to the growth of the airport.³⁴ In an effort to build support, a permanent consultative body known as the Alders Table was founded to steward the future of the airport. It brought together local residents, unions, government officials and the aviation industry.³⁵

Over the following two years, the forum produced a series of recommendations based on the evidence, values and opinions of members. These have largely been adopted by government, including capping the number of flights per year and limiting night-time activity. In 2008, the Alders Table recommended that Schiphol be allowed to expand, but did not provoke the unhappy response of two years previously. This purpose-built institution for engagement has allowed the government to pursue a policy of airport expansion which had otherwise been thwarted by public opposition.

Comparable example

In France, the Commission Nationale du Débat Public (CNDP) is a state-funded, independent body that ensures citizens participate effectively in decision making on projects that have major effects on the environment or on land planning.³⁶ The CNDP allows citizens to scrutinize a project, but is not responsible for making decisions regarding individual projects. The power to decide stills rests in the hands of the elected authorities. Nevertheless, of the 69 public debates organised by the CNDP since 2002, about one-third of the underlying projects have been abandoned or deeply modified; another third have been significantly modified.³⁷

Insight 2: Demonstrate impact

One of the most commonly cited reasons for citizens losing interest in or faith in public engagement is the failure to see what impact their involvement had.³⁸ These case studies managed that risk. Citizen participants in the Alders Table saw their recommendations adopted as policy. In the case of Redbridge’s YouChoose, the local council has committed to providing a public explanation if it ever deviates from the recommendations of citizens. When government fails to manage expectations about the link between an engagement process and decisions, citizens disengage and may reject government plans more wilfully than if they had not been engaged at all.³⁹

Demonstrating impact will not, however, always be as straightforward as at Schiphol or Redbridge. When citizens are engaged ‘upstream’ and are employed to frame a problem rather than make a decision, it may be particularly difficult to define the impact.⁴⁰ But the positive feedback on the PwC citizens’ juries, discussed below, shows that this is no impediment to successful engagement provided that expectations about the influence on offer are managed upfront.⁴¹

Collaborating with users to reconfigure social care in Thurrock

In 2005, a new Director of Social Care at Thurrock Council decided to close the large, costly multi-purpose day centres that entrenched a culture of dependency. To overcome opposition and ensure the process of reform resulted in a better service, the reconfiguration was run as a co-design process that engaged the public and users from the start.

The outcome of this co-design process was the decision to replace the centralised day centres with a contracting model, run through a new social enterprise called Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions. The nine-person board of TLS is comprised entirely of people who have disabilities or receive social care services.⁴² It provides personalised support, including access to a far wider range of activities than before – from cinema trips to swimming. In 2013, Thurrock Council pushed reform further, transferring the majority of Thurrock Council's disability services to TLS. In the process, the Council saved £0.3m and is set to make further year-on-year savings.

Comparable example

In 2010, Lambeth Council redesigned its mental health commissioning pathways in conjunction with a mixed user/commissioner group called the Lambeth Living Well Collective. By including user voices in the redesign, Lambeth was able to increase the speed of access to care and simplify the discharge process.⁴³

Insight 3: Engage early

In Thurrock, users were engaged from the start of the reform process. By drawing on the expertise and insight of the user group early on, the council were able to develop solutions which would not otherwise have presented themselves. In healthcare,⁴⁴ infrastructure⁴⁵ and local government,⁴⁶ recent reports have highlighted the need to involve the public earlier in the policymaking process. In Redbridge, the decision making space was more limited, but citizens still had the opportunity to experiment with different options rather than respond to an existing proposal. Research has shown that citizens are more likely to accept a decision when they know that the public has been involved throughout.⁴⁷ As demonstrated at Schiphol, evidence of early engagement can lead citizens to accept outcomes that they might otherwise have rejected.

Insight 4: Involve the right people

Some research has argued that a group of citizens that is engaged must be representative if the wider public are to delegate their right to participation.⁴⁸ However, in the cases we looked at, there was also careful targeting of priority groups, even at the expense of representativeness in some cases. In Thurrock, rather than engaging with the whole local population, engagement was focused on users of adult social care services. This group then helped build a wider coalition for change.

Oregon's Kitchen Table: Government participation in citizen-led platforms

In 2010, a group of community leaders and former elected officials at Portland State University decided to create permanent civic infrastructure through which Oregonians could access a suite of different opportunities for engagement – a non-state space to share ideas, opinions, beliefs and resources.⁴⁹

In 2012, the Kitchen Table was approached by the Governor to run a consultation to establish principles for the Governor's 2013-15 budget. In total, 2,790 Kitchen Table members used an online survey to prioritise the allocation of a symbolic \$100 between competing causes in a number of spending areas.⁵⁰ The Kitchen Table demonstrates that engagement platforms do not always have to be commissioned at the instigation of government.

Comparable example

In 2012, Philadelphia sought to involve a group of 'difficult-to-engage' citizens in its Philadelphia 2035 infrastructure proposals. The City used a 'Textizen' platform through which commuters could respond to questions placed on posters around the city from their phone. More than 600 responses were received to the first set of questions. Since this success, the model has since expanded to nearly 40 cities in sectors from public participation to human services.⁵¹

Insight 5: Use the right channels

These case studies recount attempts to reach those who do not usually engage in formal processes, 'unusual suspects', including the group of young professionals, working parents and long-distance commuters who do not have time for traditional methods of participation.⁵² By approaching the Oregon's Kitchen Table, the Governor could engage citizens on their own terms. In Philadelphia, the city authorities used existing communications channels to reach citizens.⁵³ Using existing civic infrastructure rather than expecting citizens to engage via formal structures can increase participation, although there is a risk that in streamlining engagement to reach these groups, practitioners sacrifice depth.⁵⁴

Using citizens' juries to create informed debate about difficult spending decisions

In the wake of the 2010 general election, the UK faced unprecedented spending cuts but there was limited public appetite for change. PwC worked with Britain Thinks to convene a 24-person jury to examine the options available to the Chancellor. Over three and a half days, this representative sample of the public engaged in presentations, panel discussions, small group exercises and plenary debates in order to define their values and make their own recommendations for the criteria that government should apply when making decisions on where and how to make cuts.⁵⁵

At the outset, some participants warned that they “had no idea about the deficit”. But by the end of the process the jury had engaged in rigorous discussions and developed a “citizens’ view”, based on three principles of growth, reform and fairness. Applying these criteria to the Spending Review process led the jury to make difficult decisions, such as proposals to remove the NHS ring-fence or postpone “nice-to-haves” such as HS2.⁵⁶ Since then, this exercise has been repeated and has shown that the public are open to constructive engagement with – and may even change their minds about – a number of other difficult issues including who provides services and the tax system.

Comparable example

In Melbourne in June 2015, 43 randomly-selected citizens met for a period of six weekends to set the long-term direction of city’s fiscal policy through a similar jury process. Many of their recommendations were subsequently adopted by the city government, including allowing debt ratings to fall to AA, selling off non-core assets, and lifting developer contributions.⁵⁷

Insight 6: Use tools for creating constructive conversations

These case studies found ways to break through the adversarialism that can typify relations between governments and citizens. Engagement emerged as a viable means to break deadlocks.⁵⁸ One of the most common routes to fostering constructive conversations is the recourse to a carefully developed body of evidence. Facilitators in citizens’ juries ran workshops and discussion programmes with experts, while the Alders Table was able to commission its own evidence from independent sources.⁵⁹ Even in such instances, the public’s understanding of the issue is likely to be incomplete,⁶⁰ but new information allows citizens to reconsider an issue and change their opinion.^{61,62}

Another technique is to explicitly draw out the trade-offs implied by citizen preferences. In the case of Redbridge and the Oregon Kitchen Table, the use of a forced choice tool pushed participants into a consideration of the necessary compromises of the budget making process. Similar techniques were used to follow on from the deliberative findings of PwC’s citizens’ juries, in particular ‘conjoint’ tools.

Constructive conversations were often the result of combining competing perspectives. The Alders Table brought together the public and the aviation industry, while the representative sample of the citizens’ juries ensured a range of interests were assembled. Research has demonstrated that exposing individuals to interests and perspectives beyond their own, and enabling them to see issues from the point of view of others, is an effective tool for challenging preconceptions and fostering co-operation.⁶³

Each of the case studies employs different tools to encourage a constructive discussion. Whether through the use of evidence, trade-offs or exposure to competing perspectives, these methods minimised the risk of an adversarial dynamic and turned it into one of constructive dialogue.

Barriers to smarter engagement

Citizen participation is not new. The need to consult the public on airport development was established by the Civil Aviation Act of 1949.⁶⁴ But despite decades of practice and experimentation, the fundamental principles of government engagement appear relatively unchanged.⁶⁵ Based on academic and practitioner literature, and successful and less successful examples of public engagement, we have identified three possible barriers to the adoption of smarter engagement techniques.

1. Engagement as a burden

Before it can adopt smarter engagement techniques, government needs to do more to move away from a deficit-based model of public engagement.⁶⁶ In this mindset, citizens are thought to oppose government initiatives simply because they do not sufficiently understand the issue. It is their lack of comprehension that has led citizens to hinder effective decision making, obstructing initiatives on genetically-modified crops,⁶⁷ climate change⁶⁸ and nuclear power.⁶⁹ This approach leads to citizens being engaged late and asked to approve decisions that the government has already made. The deficit model ensures that public engagement is viewed as a regulatory burden, a judicial-review-avoidance tick-box, “a nuisance at worst and an optional extra of nice-to-have at best”.⁷⁰ Engagement is seen as a one-way process, with little value attached to listening, and it does not provide any space for the public to have an impact for the better.⁷¹

This approach fails to make use of the distinctive contribution of the public, for instance their ability to find acceptable compromises between competing demands.⁷² As demonstrated in the case studies we have examined, smarter engagement is not just a means of avoiding conflict, it can genuinely deliver better outcomes.⁷³

2. Scarce resources

Smarter engagement can require significant time and resources. But the costs of smarter engagement should be set against the potential benefits to be achieved from minimising opposition and improving the quality and speed of decision making. The cost of a judicial review can run to the hundreds of thousands of pounds, not counting the cost of having to repeat work should the review rule against the public sector. By contrast, the average management cost of a citizen panel has been estimated at around £12,000 a year.⁷⁴ The financial benefit is not just found in avoiding judicial reviews. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) found that smarter engagement in running NHS services led to reduced demand and significant savings: self-management interventions reduced A&E attendances by 25%, outpatient attendances by 31% and use of primary care by 33%.⁷⁵

Not all of the benefits of smarter engagement are straightforwardly quantifiable, and government may consider that a notionally loss-making programme has value if it can be demonstrated to improve the public’s feeling of empowerment and trust of public institutions.⁷⁶ But realising these potential benefits will require politicians to give officials the opportunity to make upfront investment in public engagement to achieve longer-term savings.

3. Who turns up

Just as government behaviour or attitudes can be a barrier to effective engagement, so the approach taken by the members of the public involved can determine the success of an exercise. Attempts to engage the public constructively may be derailed by protest or abstention.⁷⁷

While digital platforms represent – and indeed are already being used as – an opportunity for better engagement, the growth of online platforms has also made it easier for citizens to quickly mobilise in opposition to proposals, potentially crowding out more moderate, representative views.⁷⁸

Attempts to reach out to these groups may prove difficult. Research has shown that special interest groups may decline opportunities to participate when government establishes a platform on the issue of their concern, preferring instead to discuss the topic in the comfort of a group or website run by like-minded peers.⁷⁹ While there is also scope for special interest groups to disrupt in-person engagement, online platforms can fail to encourage interaction between individuals who hold dissimilar viewpoints, closing down the opportunities for deliberation.⁸⁰

The risk of engagement exercises being damaged by special interest manipulation is increased by the fact that many, more moderate members of the public are sceptical about government engagement exercises, meaning that only the 'axe-grinders' turn up. There is a gulf between "supporting the idea of involvement and the reality of getting involved."⁸¹ In part, overcoming scepticism will be a natural by-product of successful attempts to adopt smarter engagement techniques. Better experiences will dispel pessimism. But the presence of public scepticism also places an additional obligation on decision makers to ensure that new forms of engagement are designed to maximise public interest. The public are more likely to be engaged by subjects that have a clear and demonstrable impact on their lives,⁸² when there is a perceived crisis⁸³ and when the issue is clearly defined.⁸⁴ It also emphasises the importance of engaging with citizens in their own spaces – online as in the case of Oregon's Kitchen Table, or in 'real world' situations such as in the hospital or community – in addition to official channels.⁸⁵

Questions for further discussion

Citizens want to engage with the decisions that matter to them, but are not always satisfied with existing opportunities and instead make their voices heard on hospital closures, airport expansion and schools reform through opposition rather than engagement. As spending reductions bite, the need to replenish and replace infrastructure grows and public service reform continues, government needs to find ways to harness the voices of citizens in a more productive manner or prepare to see change derailed. This short paper tells the stories of when local and national governments have moved beyond consultation and successfully involved citizens in tough decisions, leading to less adversarial interactions and, often, to better outcomes. It sets out some of what felt different about these case studies and the barriers to practising their lessons on a broader basis. However, this paper is only a short stimulus on a topic that requires further examination. The questions opened up here need to be explored in more depth to better understand the opportunities of smarter engagement.

- How are citizens involved in tough decisions at the moment and what are the limitations of current approaches?
- What does smarter engagement look like?
 - Who should be engaged and when? And on which topics?
 - What kind of mechanisms and techniques should be used?
 - What kind of leadership, culture and behaviours are needed?
- What are the benefits of smarter engagement, and what are the risks?
- What are the challenges to practising smarter engagement more widely?
 - How can these challenges be overcome?
 - How can smarter engagement be encouraged and better incentivised?

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