

ACTIVE DEMOCRACY

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SUMMARY PAPER

Report of the Local Government Management Network USA Study Visits 2000
Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
(The full report can be downloaded from www.lgmn.org.uk)

THE STUDY VISITS

Eight senior managers from UK local authorities undertook a study programme involving visits to eleven cities in the USA during Spring 2000. This is a summary of the full report, focusing on the degree to which citizen involvement gives credence and validity to the local democratic processes in the USA, where the city council ethos was found to be one of listening, response and expectation of enthusiastic citizen engagement. More detailed information on the cities visited, including the structure of city councils in the USA and electoral issues, can be downloaded from www.lgmn.org.uk.

WHAT IS LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

In modern democracies, power is exercised by those who receive an electoral mandate, the elected bodies exercising power in the interest of the population. The Government's determination to modernise local government challenges councils' roles as autocratic service providers and the way they respond to the communities they serve:

"Modern councils succeed when they put people first, when they work and take decisions in a culture of openness and accountability to local people".¹

New political management structures are intended to make decision making speedier and more transparent. The evidence from the study visits is that in the USA there is greater consultation and engagement in decision making than in UK local government. Councillor Dave Sullivan, Mayor for Lewisham, comments:

"The general calibre of the majority of councillors is not so high that we should trust it before we trust the electorate".²

Active citizen participation is the cornerstone of local government in the USA. The UK Government has established electoral turnout as a key indicator of local authority success in engaging its citizens. Is this sufficient, or should there be additional measures of success in involving citizens and stimulating interest in local government? When citizens can participate actively in local democratic processes, is this better for local democracy than relying on the representative roles of councillors elected on a broad manifesto that may owe more to national politics rather than local issues? Geddes and Davis note:

"The concern expressed by government about the role of local political parties, especially in so-called 'one party local states' where many voters are said to have little effective voice, is intensified by the perceived behaviour of party groups on councils acting as unified blocs".³

Whilst in the USA, we saw that the openness of decision making, the high levels of citizen engagement and the political processes themselves benefited from an ethos of community interest rather than political manifesto.

This report is not intended to recommend USA models and processes for integration into the emerging UK democratic models. Some of the processes observed in the USA would be difficult, if not impossible, to translate into UK local government in its current form. This report, therefore, raises three key questions for local democracy in the UK:

Is electoral turnout a sufficient measure of citizen engagement in local democracy?

Is a large elected body commensurate with good, strategic decision making?

Does the party political process support or detract from local democracy?

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

The decision making process varies depending on the type of council and its size. However, in all councils visited the decision making process is clearly defined, with appropriate checks and balances, in some cases involving officer veto powers. In every city visited, all meetings of the council, boards and commissions were open to the public (unless the business was explicitly confidential). Citizens are able to speak on any item of business, usually subject to a time limit, and many council meetings have a slot for citizens to address the council on any topic. Dialogue with the community forms part of the routine business of the council, enhances public awareness and involvement, and emphasises the leadership role of the council.

In California 'The Brown Act' states that citizens do not "yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them, nor do they give them the right to decide what is good for them to know or not know". The Act further states that citizens "insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created". This, together with an extremely high level of public interest in local affairs, sets the scene for the way decisions are taken in city hall.

Many UK councils have opportunities for petitions to be put before members and some public comment allowed. Public access to decision making in the UK is far less developed, although most official meetings are open to the public unless specific provisions apply. However, the UK falls far short of the USA model of providing comprehensive opportunity for citizens to raise issues and speak on public agenda items. There are, of course, exceptions, and some UK authorities are beginning to enhance the public's role in decision making. Spelthorne District Council enables the public to speak on issues at Council and other local meetings. In another example of innovation in public access, both Lewisham and Newham have experimented recently with broadcasting council meetings on the Internet.

Citizen engagement in the USA does not end with meetings of the council. It extends to all aspects of policy formulation and decision making through involvement in a variety of processes.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY AND OVERVIEW

The shape of US government follows a very non-municipal model of civic society, leading to less dependency on local councils and a greater sense of collective responsibility. Citizens participate in the local democratic process in a variety of ways.

a) Consultation and communication

The relatively small numbers of elected representatives are highly visible in their localities and consult their communities using a wide range of methods. Consultation includes snapshots such as residents' surveys and opinion polls, similar to the UK, as well as newsletters or meetings to give residents information and invite their views. USA city governments also use referenda and ballots that depend on the specific legal framework of US local government. Citizens can initiate votes on an issue if they collect sufficient support by petition, and are able to vote on a wide range of propositions.

b) Boards and Commissions

Most city councils have advisory and policy development bodies, usually referred to as boards or commissions, which consider specific issues and make recommendations to the city council. In this way they contribute to the council's policy formulation and decision making function. In practice the council members will usually accept the views of such bodies and endorse their recommendations.

The constitution and selection of such bodies varies, depending on the local city charter or constitution. Formation of boards and commissions can be through:

- direct appointment by an elected member
- appointment by the city council
- public election
- applications from citizens who have an interest in the issue covered by the body

The use of such advisory bodies reduces the amount of routine matters before the council, while still allowing for public scrutiny.

Board and commissions provide a valuable model to aid overview and scrutiny committees in the UK in developing a pro-active, participative policy making role. This could result in non-executive members, together with non-elected representatives (residents, academics and business people), investigating issues and options in a particular area, reporting findings and recommendations to the Executive for consideration.

c) Public Influence

Interest groups in the USA (for example, ethnic minorities, disabled citizens, environmental groups and the gay community) appear to be well organised and influential. In San Francisco many of the supervisors advocated the interests of particular minority groups. Communities and interest groups have access to professional and voluntary advocates and lobbyists to articulate their views to the city government.

d) Elected representatives listening and consulting

In the USA, elected representatives, including mayors, board or council members, actively engage in a wide range of consultation in addition to the more familiar types of casework undertaken in the UK. This seemed to be both broader and more systematic than UK equivalents and integral to the local government process. Examples were wide-ranging within and across cities. All had high levels of elected representative engagement in dialogues with groups of citizens as well as with individuals.

e) Partnerships with the Private Sector

In the USA there is a great deal of consultation with local businesses, stemming from the fact that the private sector expects to contribute to community life and works within various partnerships to improve the city. In Baltimore, the mayor has engaged businesses to work with city agencies to improve public sector performance. Some 150 executive volunteers are involved in management and efficiency studies of five city government agencies: fire, public works, housing and community development, health, and recreation and parks. The project was developed with the Greater Baltimore Committee - "the region's most prominent organisation of business leaders".

f) Community Associations and Community Planning

Councils in the USA also fund some community organisations. In Monterey, a network of neighbourhood associations has developed and these aid the council in developing neighbourhood funding programmes. Whilst their constitutional arrangements have to be accepted by the council, these bodies are not controlled by it. They participate in a resource allocation scheme that distributes part of the 'hotel' tax to local capital schemes. Each neighbourhood organisation puts in bids for area improvements and representatives from each organisation come together to form an overall body that reviews bids and recommends funding allocation to the council. The recommendations are usually

accepted and council officers provide assistance to the groups to develop and cost proposals. Whilst there are similar neighbourhood arrangements in the UK, it is the community base in the USA models which is of particular interest, plus the fact that it is constituted at both neighbourhood and city-wide levels. In the UK it is more likely that neighbourhood organisations would involve elected members.

There is much that local authorities in the UK can learn from USA local government in respect of consultation and community planning. Communities can develop their own forms of organisation and take responsibility for a wide range of issues, independent from elected councils. The USA methods of encouraging debate and involving citizens in decision making processes will require significant cultural shifts in UK authorities, but has the potential to genuinely enhance public engagement. USA elected representatives use a wide range of imaginative methods to maintain dialogue with their communities. However, it is worth stressing that there appears to be little correlation between citizen engagement and increased voter turnout. Even in USA cities, where voting can determine major issues such as levels of taxation, the voter turnout is similar to that in the UK. It may be that UK authorities need to develop a broader range of measures to evaluate public participation, and that voting should be regarded as only one measure of public engagement.

TOWARDS ACTIVE DEMOCRACY

John Prescott, in his foreword to 'Local Leadership, Local Choice' (DETR, 1999) states that "central to our modernising agenda is giving people a real say about how their council can modernise the way it works". Evidence suggests that people have little interest in the form of local government, but are "naturally more interested in services, in outcomes for local communities"⁴. *In city councils in the USA, people contribute to day to day activities, decision making and policy formulation. These processes may prove to be of value in aiding UK local government move from passive consultation to active participation.*

The drafting of guidance for the Local Government Act Part II (2000) shows a shift in the role of scrutiny towards overview and scrutiny; in addition to providing a check and balance to the executive, the guidance now emphasises the role of policy development and review. This brings overview and scrutiny committees closer to the operation of many boards and commissions in the USA, which develop

policy and legislative proposals for recommendation to the city council.

The elected mayor and city manager forms of political management for UK local authorities are reflected, albeit with some fundamental difference, in existing city council structures operating successfully in the USA. However, attempts to directly overlay the American models on UK local authorities is likely to fail, for several reasons:

- party politics in the UK would inhibit the openness and community engagement which is so evident in USA city councils
- USA city councils generally operate in a culture which is more readily engaged in local democratic issues and which has a stronger ethos of self-help and volunteering
- the diversity of city council structures in the USA reflects the diversity of its cities and culture – a strong message from the US is that the structure should be what is appropriate for, and what works for, the specific city.

The study team remains convinced, however, that the inherent transparency of decision making, the culture of promoting and welcoming citizen participation, and the many mechanisms open to citizens to become involved in local matters, contain valuable lessons which may contribute to the development of responsive and open local government in the UK.

What is required is development of genuinely open and accessible local government, increasing citizen involvement in decision making, and debate on the operation of party politics at a local level. The response to these issues is key to engaging the interest and participation of citizens in new forms of active democracy.

THE STUDY TEAM:

Alan Kirkham

*Head of Support Services,
City of Bradford MDC*

Barrie Parkinson

*Head of Personnel & Performance Management,
Mansfield District Council*

Irene Payne

*Assistant Chief Executive,
London Borough of Lewisham*

Jeff Smethurst

*Assistant Director of Housing,
Bolton MBC*

Bulraj Bassral

*Consultant,
Improvement & Development Agency*

Anne Cooper

*Policy Officer,
East Riding of Yorkshire Council*

Charles Meakings

*Head of Strategic Development,
Wycombe District Council*

Judith Hurcombe

*Corporate Development Officer,
Kirklees Metropolitan Council*

¹ *Local Leadership, Local Choice, DETR, 1999*

² *Municipal Journal, 22-28 October 1999*

³ *'Deepening Democracy or Elite Governance'
Public Money & Management, April/June 2000*

⁴ *Phil Swann, Municipal Journal, 23-29 June 2000*
