

Foreword

We urge anyone interested in local civic life to read this booklet. Although the research on which it is based was undertaken several years ago, its findings and arguments could not be more relevant today. They concern the relationship between local government and civic well-being: an issue that is at the heart of a number of contemporary political debates.

There is good reason to believe that the long post-war decline in the power and influence of local government has reached its nadir and that we are about to witness a rebirth in its fortunes.

First, there is also near universal agreement, in government and beyond, that the next phase of public service reform will have to involve a large dose of devolution – the limits of central intervention have been clearly demonstrated. Likewise, fiscal centralism has nearly run out of road and there is a growing recognition of the case for using local fiscal instruments to secure public goods. At the same time, the failure of the referendum on regional government in the northeast of England means that there is nowhere to devolve power to but local government.

Finally, there is an emerging consensus that elected local government should at the very least assume the role of first among equals in holding other local services, such as the police and primary healthcare, to account. Too many of our services remain unaccountable at a local level – a state of affairs that not only offends democratic principles, but, arguably, detracts from their performance.

Clearly, then, the move is towards devolution – or ‘double devolution’, to use David Miliband’s phrase: devolution from the centre to the town hall and from the town hall to smaller towns, villages, parishes and neighbourhoods. But local government officers and councillors will be fooling themselves if they believe we are returning to the days of Joseph Chamberlain’s Birmingham or Herbert Morrison’s London County Council.

Yes, local government will continue to provide some services directly. And it will commission and oversee many more. But if it is to meet the challenges it faces, it will also have to take more of a lead in forging partnerships, building community capacity, fostering norms of respect, and encouraging common identity and community cohesion. Local government has, at its best, always acted as a civic leader and community empowerer. But these roles will become ever more central in the future.

Nevertheless some wonder if local government can really do much to encourage civic life or increase engagement. The research of Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker suggests clearly that it can. As they describe, it is by no

means the rule that the poorer a place, the poorer its levels of active citizenship; the richer a place, the richer its civic life. Where local leaders – what they call government, political and civic players – set out to invite people to get engaged, support their involvement and engage them in proper conversations, levels of citizen activity increase. But where the attitude of 'we know best' prevails, the public remains unengaged.

As already indicated, the research on which this paper is based was undertaken several years ago – it offers a view through the rear view mirror. The authors and ippr wish to make it clear that anything said in this pamphlet about the six local authorities, positive or negative, refers to the past. The local authorities will have necessarily moved on in key ways.

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1. Introduction

Across the world, governments, public services and commentators insist on the need to increase public engagement in political life – nowhere more so than in Britain. To take just one example, the recent Power Inquiry called for ‘a culture of political engagement in which it becomes the norm for policy and decision-making to occur with direct inputs from citizens’, going on to recommend that ‘all public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes’ (Power Inquiry 2006: 24).

A number of developments provide the context for this new, or perhaps renewed, appreciation of the value of political and civic participation. It is now generally acknowledged, for instance, that public services work best where the public gets involved in them – a lesson taught, it is argued, by some of the failures of the top-down, paternalistic welfare states of the post-war years. Furthermore, many social scientists argue that, as deference declines and governments become less powerful, so governments have to do more than ever before to engage the public and win their buy-in. At the same time, there is evidence that some forms of engagement are falling – voting and party membership are down, and there appears to be a growing gap between the rates at which the better-off and worse-off participate (Dixon and Paxton 2005).

But not everyone is convinced that government should be investing its valuable resources in pursuit of greater citizen participation. This position comes in different guises. Sometimes it takes the form of a radicalism that says you cannot do anything unless you transform society and do away with inequality. Sometimes it takes a more cynical form – people do not want to get involved and all these attempts at consultation and engagement are just a waste of time.

There are also more academic versions of the same point, which see either the social and economic status of individuals or strength of community ties (social capital) as limiting engagement. In practice, participation is for the well-off and well-networked, and it gives them an advantage in accessing services and influencing decisions.

This report challenges these positions. It suggests that, while poverty and inequality, and community strength, shape levels of participation, they do not determine them. Contrary to those who doubt the value of drives to open up government and change the terms of exchange between citizens and those in authority, we offer arguments here, drawn from close examination of make-up and performance of different English localities, that the

way institutions work and those in charge behave does make a difference to whether people choose to participate.

We develop our argument in three parts. First, we review the research on participation and lay out our broad understanding of what is important to driving citizen engagement. In this section we make our general argument that what institutional structures are established, and how political, managerial and civic players behave in the context of these structures, makes a difference to the likelihood that citizens will engage.

A second section then applies this broad way of looking at participation to six localities whose participation activities we have studied intensively. Through these cases studies, we show how, when local elites want participation to work, they can make it work.

Finally, we offer a diagnostic framework that local municipalities can apply to their own circumstances to judge whether they are getting their participation strategy right. The best way to predict the future is to invent it. We aim to show how local politicians and officials can get people to engage, if they are prepared to change the way they behave.