LOCALITY MATTERS

MAKING PARTICIPATION COUNT IN LOCAL POLITICS

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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 Milband's phrase: devolution from the centre to the town hall and from the town hall to smaller towns, villages, parishes and neighourhoods. 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.

Ben Rogers, Associate Director, and Nick Pearce, Director, ippr

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 pubic 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.

2. Explaining variations in participation: socio-economic status, social capital and institutional design

What causes people to participate or, alternatively, to stay at home? Why are some communities so much more politically active than others? Most explanations suggest that variations in political participation can be traced either to variations in social and economic status or variations in social capital – in community bonds and associational life. As we acknowledge below, both socio-economic and social capital factors are indeed important. But explanations that refer only to these miss out on a third vital factor affecting levels of civic engagement, namely the degree to which those with power encourage and support engagement.

> **Political participation**
> This is a study of political participation, but what do we mean by the term? We understand political participation as 'taking part in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies' (Parry *et al* 1992: 16). Our concern is with *local political participation*, which refers to action taken by citizens in seeking to influence decisions ultimately taken by public officials and elected representatives at the local level. Participation in this sense includes: 'not only voting and other forms of electoral activity (for example, working in campaigns, making financial contributions) but also contacting public officials, attending protests, and getting involved either formally or informally on local issues' (Brady *et al* 1995: 272-3). Political participation, then, covers a range of activities, from involvement in organised politics through to radical protest.

Socio-economic circumstances as a driver of participation

We know variations in socio-economic circumstances make a difference to participation levels. One important factor in determining intensity of participation is, undoubtedly, the *resources* that citizens have access to – money, education and civic skills. The socio-economic status, and therefore the resources of a locality, is a strong predictor of its level of participation. The conventional 'resources' approach to explaining differences in political participation can be summarised thus: 'those with higher education, higher income and higher status jobs – are more active in politics' (Verba *et al* 1995: 281).

The Citizen Audit, based on a representative sample of over 12,000, confirms the link between socio-economic status (referred to here as SES) and political participation in contemporary Britain. The researchers conclude that 'political engagement is very much dominated by the already well-resourced; in other words, the most highly educated, the rich, and those from the top educational echelons' (Pattie *et al* 2004: 109). This pattern looks set to become further entrenched given the trend established by the Audit towards more individualistic modes of participation (and away from collective forms). The increasing popularity of activities undertaken alone – like giving money, signing a petition, or purchasing particular types of goods – acts to 'reinforce the trend towards a middle class profile' in political participation (Pattie *et al* 2004: 79).

Social capital as a driver of participation

In recent years, social capital – essentially networks of trust and reciprocity – has matched the popularity of the resources model in explaining participation. Exponents of the importance of social capital argue that patterns of formal and informal sociability build up relations of trust and reciprocity, which enhance individuals' capacity to join together in collective action to resolve common problems.

The most prominent advocate of this factor in explaining participation is Robert Putnam. In his study of Italy, Putnam (1993) argues that the relatively higher performance and capacity for engagement of local and regional government in Northern Italy can be directly correlated to the nature, vitality and density of associational life in the localities. These associations helped to create the social conditions to develop and maintain democracy by generating social capital, which can be defined as: 'features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives… Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust' (Putnam 1995: 664-5).

In the north of Italy, there is a virtuous circle of social capital: 'Stocks of social capital, such as trust, norms, and networks, tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative' (Putnam 1993: 177). In the south there is a self-reinforcing destructive circle: 'Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating miasma of vicious circles' (ibid). Putnam argues that the differences between the north and the south are best explained by deep and long-standing differences in civic and political culture – differences that go back to the medieval period.

The resources model and the social capital explanation both help explain differences in levels of political participation. But we argue that this

is not the end of the participation story. We think the way local leaders behave – their openness and responsiveness to citizen participation – makes a difference to levels of participation. Below we distinguish between three sorts of local leaders or players – political players (broadly, local politicians), managerial players (broadly, council and public service officers and professionals) and civic players (broadly, the people who run civic/voluntary organisations) – and explore the different sorts of contributions that each can make.

Political players

The attitudes and behaviour of politicians have a profound effect on the way in which citizens view the prospect of taking up involvement in the political world. A relatively open political system will encourage political involvement, while a relatively closed one may encourage oppositional confrontation or resigned apathy. As Brady *et al* (1995) recognise, whether and how people are asked to participate will have an effect on the likelihood of them participating.

In the case of local government in England, the political context of the last 40 years has been conditioned by two major trends. The first is the increasing role of political parties in the organisation of local elections and the running of councils. As in other industrial democracies (see the analysis presented in Scarrow 2000: 95-7), local government consolidation has been accompanied by the increasing dominance of candidates representing political parties. The range of parties contesting elections has remained relatively restricted, and elections are dominated by three major parties: Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat. After the 2003 local elections, almost 98 per cent of English councils were controlled by political parties, compared with 77 per cent in 1974 (Pratchett 2004).

As a result, parties play a key role in not only getting candidates elected but in the organisation of local government business (Gyford *et al* 1989). Increasingly, parties came to dominate the formal decision-making procedures of local government. Party group meetings decided policy positions in private that were then played out in formal committees. Party discipline operated so that candidates elected on a party label voted all together for an agreed line.

The dominant party or parties chose the leading figures for council positions and also had a substantial impact on the recruitment and treatment of permanent officials. 'If there is one generalization which can safely be made about the enormously variegated world of local government, it is that over the past century and a half – and particularly since the structural reorganisation of the early 1970s – there has been an increase in party politicization' (Gyford *et al* 1989: 6). Even under the new political management arrangements brought in by the Local Government Act 2000, parties play a

crucial role in the decision-making structures and processes of councils (Stoker *et al* 2002).

The second and opposite trend is the substantial decline in the membership of political parties in the UK, from over three million in the 1960s to around 800,000 in the 1990s (Scarrow 2000). Matching a trend observable in most western democracies (Council of Europe 2004), Scarrow (2000: 100) comments that 'few of today's membership parties are striving to be "mass" parties … i.e., parties which attempt to solidify their political support by enlisting supporters from a particular class into a party-linked social and cultural network'.

Indeed, the figures for membership recorded in the mid-1990s in the UK may, in any case, have been overgenerous (the quality of the records kept by political parties is relatively poor), and the evidence is of further decline as the decade progressed. The number of activists has not, perhaps, declined as rapidly as the number of members, but local studies suggest that in many local authority areas, the number of activists committed enough to stand and campaign in local elections may not be more than 50 people (Hall and Leach 2000).

As Scarrow (2000: 95) notes, while the decline in membership has not entirely undermined the capacity of parties to achieve key goals in terms of running election campaigns, organising legislative activity or directing the selection of political leaders, the absolute and relative decline in party membership 'almost certainly represents a decline in parties' capacity to promote social integration'. Game and Leach (1996: 148-9) comment in more stark terms based on a series of local studies in England:

> Parties used to be in a class of their own as the main agencies of participation as locally grounded, mass-membership organisations. Today's parties reflect the dramatically changed nature of our political system: severely depleted memberships, increasing dependence on limited numbers of activists, and their relevance challenged by ever-proliferating numbers of single-issue groups … Yet they dominate the operation of our local councils as never before.

In the UK, particularly in England, parties run local government, but they do so with thin, or non-existent, roots in the community. It is the response of local political parties to these two trends that interests us here. At the national level, parties have responded to their decline in membership by developing more sophisticated and targeted campaigns (Farrell and Webb 2000). We argue that, at the local level, a key response has been the attempt to modernise the way that the party in power relates to and reaches out to its local community.

As Gyford *et al* (1989) note, some councils began to experiment, especially from the late 1960s onwards, with consultative and participatory

schemes and neighbourhood management. Generally, to radical groups on both left and right, it was clear that new forms of accountable and responsive government were needed, whether of a market orientation or of a more participatory variety.

This commitment to modernise the way councils relate to their public was taken up and actively promoted by the national New Labour government once it was elected in 1997 (see Lowndes *et al* 2001a and 2001b). However, it is far from being the property of one single party, and has been actively pursued by the modernising elements of all three main political parties. Many local political actors have seen a participation strategy as part of an attempt to reconnect elected representatives with the communities they serve.

Managerial players

Participation is shaped not only by local politics but also by the managerial regimes with which the public come into contact. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the quality of the interactions between citizens and front-line council officers (whether in call centres or old-fashioned estate offices) affect people's more general perception of the accessibility and responsiveness of their local authority. The prospects for mobilising social capital also depend on mundane matters that often lie in the hands of managers rather than politicians – for instance, access to basic information about how the council works or the opportunity to use local authority premises for meetings.

It is also true that, in some areas at least, the purpose of non-electoral participation is as much a matter of fine-tuning management and service delivery as it is a channel for informing representatives and holding them to account. The growth of partnership working also often places managers, rather than elected politicians, in the role of participation brokers.

No single council falls into one management style, but understanding the nature of the mix in different councils may help us to understand their attitude and openness to public participation. Our earlier research shows that councils vary in the extent to which they employ traditional (for example, public meetings), consumerist (for example, satisfaction surveys) and newer deliberative methods (like citizens' juries). In addition, some councils focus on the participation of specific groups of service users, others on geographical neighbourhoods or 'identity' groups. Councils may stick to consulting service users on specified options, or go as far as involving citizens in decision-making and management of services (Lowndes *et al* 2001a).

Managerial approaches to participation may vary across both authorities and policy areas within a local authority. While political leadership may be important in shaping the political will to engage with citizens in an area, the managerial style (at both a corporate and service level) is likely to

shape not only the ways in which participation is encouraged but, also, who is asked to participate and on what issues.

Our research on citizens' reasons for *non-participation* highlights the importance of management style and practice. Citizens tend to explain their non-participation in relation to a lack of information on participation opportunities, a belief that the council will not respond to their efforts, and a perception that council initiatives are not open to 'people like us' (Lowndes *et al* 2001b). The rules and norms of local authority management may act either to reinforce or to undermine political commitments and initiatives. Pro-participation management often operates in tandem with open forms of politics. It is equally possible, however, for one to exist without the other.

Civic players

So far, we have concentrated upon institutional factors that are specific to the internal politics and management of local authorities. However, we recognise that institutional arrangements within civil society may also have important effects on local political participation. We have already recognised the significance of voluntary and community activity as both an expression and a measure of social capital. Furthermore, as our survey data in the next chapter will demonstrate, there are significant differences between areas in terms of organisational membership.

Our argument here is that, while social capital may be created within voluntary and community sector organisations, its *mobilisation* depends heavily upon the presence of an enabling civic sector. Co-ordinating bodies within civil society (like councils for voluntary service, volunteer bureaux, racial equality councils, chambers of commerce, and faith networks) can act as important institutional *conduits* for public participation. The key aspects of such a role include: facilitating access to local politicians and managers, developing the skills and capacity of citizens and groups to make use of that access, 'pooling' and/or arbitrating between the diverse voices of citizens, and monitoring the response of decision-makers to participation.

The structures and processes established by the local authority itself are important in determining the degree of influence that the voluntary and community sectors have, and the way in which the civic infrastructure develops over time. The voluntary and community sectors may be held at arm's length by local authorities, or they may be consulted on a formal and regular basis.

In some areas, the co-ordinating bodies for the voluntary sector may become effectively incorporated into local government decision-making structures, which can then compromise the independence and campaigning role of local organisations. In areas where formal consultative structures are weak (or even absent), there is a tendency for traditional patronage-based arrangements to dominate (that is, between individual councillors and spe-

cific local groups). In rural areas, parish and town councils are an important part of the civic infrastructure; in urban areas, new partnership bodies (at authority-wide or neighbourhood level) are taking on important roles, exploiting their hybrid status between the state and civil society.

The nature of the civic infrastructure does not simply reflect current patterns of social engagement but also reflects more deep-rooted values and identities within localities, related to the broader economic and cultural history of an area (see Duncan and Goodwin 1988, Gyford 1991). Historical patterns relating to the organisation of civil society, and its relationship with the state, will shape contemporary expectations about which issues are open for participation, whose voice is likely to be most significant, and the ways in which political differences can be resolved.

For example, industrial (or post-industrial) areas with a strong tradition of trade union organising may exhibit a relatively more collectivist and formal style of community sector activity. Metropolitan areas with diverse populations may be characterised by a preponderance of single-issue and identity-type groups, which may favour more informal and 'direct' forms of action. Many rural localities are dominated by village-level bodies that focus on 'quality of life' issues that are not overtly political, and make greater use of individual letter-writing and petitioning.

While the concept of civic infrastructure is linked to that of social capital, it is not the same. We distinguish it as a separate concept in so far as it is about the institutional forms that shape the way in which latent stocks of social capital are used in localities. Our argument here is that locally-specific civic infrastructures shape the extent to which social capital is mobilised as a resource for political participation. Social capital is created in different types of networks and organisations in different areas. It is also invested for different purposes.

We hypothesise that, in areas where the voluntary and community sectors are internally fragmented or poorly connected to the local state, social capital is more likely to be invested in informal social and neighbourhood activity than in political participation directed at the policies and decisions of local government. Hence, it may be possible for an area to have strong reserves of local social capital that are not translated into effective demands upon local policymakers.

It is clear, then, that political and managerial initiatives to increase participation may go down very differently in different places, depending upon the institutional structures and sensibilities of civil society. Institutional rules within the political, managerial and 'civic' domains thus interact to 'switch on' (or off) the potential of social capital as a resource for political participation.

3. Participation in action: six areas compared

In order to explore local variations in political participation, we undertook primary research in six contrasting local authority areas. We deliberately tried to choose localities where we thought levels of participation would be different. We wanted scope to allow for the structural factors of resources and social capital and also to give ourselves the capacity to consider the impact of institutions and their local operation. This section presents the results from this study, and shows how not only resources and social capital but also institutional and political commitment make a difference to levels of participation.

Participation and socio-economic status

If economic and social conditions alone accounted for levels of political participation, you would expect to see a simple correlation between the rel-

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Box 3.1 Six contrasting areas

Low socio-economic status	**Middlesbrough**	**Hull**
	A large town in the north-east of England, which grew out of the now largely defunct steel and chemical industries	North-eastern English city with a long heritage of dock work and fishing as its main industries
	Population: 141,600	*Population: 245,300*
	Deprivation index: 9	*Deprivation index: 13*
Middle socio-economic status	**Sutton**	**Merton**
	A wealthy outer-London suburb with good schools, low crime rates and large middle-class population	Outer-London suburb (adjoining Sutton) with a wealthy middle-class population in Wimbledon, but pockets of deprivation elsewhere
	Population: 170,341	*Population: 175,794*
	Deprivation index: 250	*Deprivation index: 198*
High socio-economic status	**East Hampshire**	**Vale of White Horse**
	A wealthy rural district in the south of England, within commuting distance of London	An affluent rural area near Oxford with a vibrant hi-tech economy
	Population:102,700	*Population: 116,500*
	Deprivation index: 310	*Deprivation index: 334*

ative wealth of our six areas and measures of political engagement. As we will see, the correlation does not appear.

Box 3.1 provides some brief portraits of the six areas selected, with the poorest areas at the top and the richest at the bottom.

The most obvious measure of local political participation is turnout at local government elections: it is also the most accurately measured form of participation, as it does not depend upon sampling or self-reporting but is an actual measure of real practice. Our research in the six areas, therefore, began by comparing local election turnout. For each of the areas, turnout was averaged over a four-year cycle. The results are summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Average turnout in local elections in the six areas

Low SES[1]		Middle SES		High SES	
M'brough %	Hull %	Merton %	Sutton %	E. Hants %	V of WH %
36	20	38	36	39	40

1 Socio-economic status

The analysis of electoral turnout immediately reveals some anomalies in terms of political participation. While the areas with the highest socio-economic status (SES) also have the highest electoral turnout, areas with low SES show a much more mixed picture. Middlesbrough, the area with the lowest SES, has the same turnout rate as relatively well-off Sutton. More significantly, it is 16 percentage points higher than Hull, the authority with most similar SES.

It is evident from these cases that not all local variation can be explained in terms of socio-economic characteristics. While high SES might be a good predictor of those areas that will also have high electoral turnout, the converse is not true. Low SES does not necessarily lead to low electoral participation: there are other local factors at work.

Electoral turnout is, of course, only one aspect of political participation. Our next step, therefore, was to obtain survey evidence regarding different forms of political participation (see Appendix 1), beyond voting in periodic elections. In each of the six areas, survey participants were asked whether they had attempted, over the previous 12 months, to influence rules, laws or policies through a number of different named actions, which ranged from contacting a politician or public official through to taking part in a public demonstration or strike. The results are summarised in Table 3.2.

The picture of the actions that people have undertaken is surprisingly mixed, and certainly does not support the conventional belief that SES will predict

Table 3.2 Political activity in the six areas

	Low SES		Middle SES		High SES	
	M'brough %	Hull %	Merton %	Sutton %	E. Hants %	V of WH %
Contacted a politician	21	15	14	30	19	25
Contacted a public official	35	38	17	27	26	30
Worn a campaign badge	21	17	27	30	38	27
Signed a petition	55	54	56	59	49	62
Donated money	78	71	75	82	86	80
Formed a group	5	0	6	7	8	2
Attended a demonstration	5	8	7	5	5	4
Taken part in a strike	3	7	5	2	4	2

Question: During the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence rules, laws or policies?

participation behaviour. While it is not entirely consistent, a picture emerges in which the citizens of Middlesbrough, more often than not, have higher levels of participation than those of Hull. Middlesbrough's citizens are more active than Hull's in five out of the first six actions in the table: it is only in relation to contacting public officials that Hull's citizens are more active. Furthermore, in many of the categories, Middlesbrough's citizens demonstrate levels of political engagement that equate to those found in the more prosperous case studies.

The pairing of Merton and Sutton – our middle-ranking areas in socio-economic terms – shows a pattern in which Sutton has higher levels of participation across all of the first six actions in the table. The wealthy areas of East Hampshire and the Vale of White Horse do not demonstrate a consistent pattern of political activity that would be in keeping with their high socio-economic status. For our case study areas, at least, there was no direct relationship between socio-economic characteristics and political participation. Even more so than with voting, it appears that there are local factors that affect political participation.

When the survey participants were asked whether they would consider using any of the same actions in the future to influence rules, laws or policies, the results show some variations in the sense of political efficacy that parallel the data on political activity. Table 3.3 summarises the responses. Of course, there is an important difference between taking an action and being willing to do so at some time in the future. Consequently, the positive responses in Table 3.3 are much higher than those in the previous table. Nevertheless, the responses provide an important insight into the different sense of political efficacy that exists across areas.

The picture that emerges in terms of the sense of political efficacy is remarkably consistent. In the low SES areas, the citizens of Middlesbrough

are overwhelmingly more prepared to use the various actions to influence rules, laws or policies than their counterparts in Hull. A similar, if less overwhelming, pattern, is evident in the middle SES area, where Sutton demonstrates more sense of political efficacy than Merton in many of the actions listed. In the high SES areas of East Hampshire and the Vale of White Horse, the picture is, once again, more mixed, although, as expected, the figures for these two areas are consistently high.

The data from Table 3.3 shows that some areas have a higher sense of political efficacy than others. Furthermore, this sense of political efficacy is not wholly predicated upon SES.

Table 3.3 Sense of political efficacy in the six areas

	Low SES		Middle SES		High SES	
	M'brough %	Hull %	Merton %	Sutton %	E. Hants %	V of WH %
Contact a politician	63	51	79	60	68	72
Contact a public official	73	65	71	75	77	71
Wear a campaign badge	50	38	53	54	55	54
Sign a petition	86	76	92	87	89	87
Donate money	87	76	85	89	90	93
Form a group	31	28	24	45	37	29
Attend a demonstration	37	44	37	33	30	33
Take part in a strike	40	42	34	32	22	25

Question: Would you do any of the following to influence rules, laws or policies?

The pattern emerging from the above data is one in which, within the pairings, Middlesbrough has notably higher levels of political engagement than Hull and, similarly, Sutton has notably higher levels than Merton. Only in the highest SES areas is it difficult to identify a consistent pattern of one area having higher levels of engagement than the other.

An exception to these patterns, however, exists in the last two actions in Tables 3.2 and 3.3: 'attend a demonstration' or 'take part in a strike'. In each of these last two categories, the citizens of Hull have been more active and are more willing to do so in the future than those of Middlesbrough. The same is true of Merton in relation to Sutton. In effect, while the citizens of Middlesbrough and Sutton appear to be more engaged through what might be considered consensual forms of political participation, the citizens of Hull and Merton have a greater propensity towards confrontational politics. In particular, the latter areas appear more likely to eschew formal channels of political engagement.

Overall, therefore, while SES explains and predicts high participation in

the wealthy areas, it is less useful in the areas of lower SES. Indeed, as the evidence presented here shows, there is considerable variation across areas with apparently very similar socio-economic characteristics and, even, between those that are in close geographic proximity to one another. Not only does level of participation vary but also the channels of engagement which citizens are likely to adopt.

The impact of social capital

We look next at the role of social capital in explaining local variations in political participation. From our point of view, it is a weakness of Putnam's (2000) work that he includes, within his various indices of social capital, explicitly political activities, like voting and lobbying, alongside community involvement and informal sociability.

Such an approach may work when exploring links between social capital and phenomena such as economic growth, public health, or community safety. However, it seems deeply problematic when seeking to establish links between 'social capital' and democratic performance (which Putnam does in *Making Democracy Work*, 1993). It makes little sense to argue that the presence of political participation (as part of the social capital variable) explains or predicts a healthy democracy. High levels of political participation could just as easily be regarded as *evidence* of a healthy democracy (that is, an aspect of the phenomenon under investigation), or the causation could run in entirely the opposite direction – the existence of a healthy democracy predicting the level of participation.

We have taken care to remove evidence of political participation from our measures of local social capital. We offer two measures to reflect the concern within the social capital debate, with values and attitudes on the one hand, and associational involvement on the other. We look first at local social capital in terms of people's sense of attachment and connection to their neighbours. The key findings are presented in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Social capital as trust and attachment in the six areas

	M'brough %	Hull %	Merton %	Sutton %	E. Hants %	V of WH %
Attachment to neighbourhood[1]	49	51	41	39	49	42
Trust in other people[1]	44	51	41	37	54	45
How helpful are people[2]	78	68	67	59	75	77
How fair are people[2]	67	61	62	55	73	78

Notes:

1 Answers are those responding 'high', chosen from high, medium or low

2 Answers are the percentage of those rating six to 10 (where 10 is strongest)

The first point to note here is that, measured in this way, social capital does not appear to relate strongly to socio-economic variables, with a mixture of both relatively wealthy and deprived areas gaining high scores. But we are less interested in relations between economic and social conditions and social capital, than between social capital and political participation.

It appears that, of the 'top' four communities in terms of levels of political participation, three out of four also do well in comparative terms on our first measure of local social capital. The exception is Sutton, which, in contrast with our other communities, appears to lack a strong attachment to neighbourhood or a strong sense of connectedness to explain the relatively high levels of political participation in the area.

Hull and Middlesbrough are remarkably close in terms of their average measure of social capital, despite significant differences in their overall levels of political participation, It would appear that there may be other factors at work if we are to explain why Sutton has an inverse relationship between (low) social capital and (high) participation; and why Middlesbrough and Hull are so similar in relation to both SES and social capital, yet so different in terms of their levels of political engagement.

Another way to analyse local social capital is to examine the density and nature of associational involvement in an area. Our survey asked people about their membership of a wide range of organisations. None were overtly party political, but the list stretched from campaigning groups, through social and identity groups, to recreational organisations. Table 3.5 summarises the key features of this membership.

Table 3.5 Social capital as organisational membership in the six areas

Type of organisation	M'brough %	Hull %	Merton %	Sutton %	V of WH %	E. Hants %
Hobby	16	11	11	14	19	19
Cultural/social	22	19	22	21	31	25
Sports club	34	28	46	41	35	41
Common identity	31	25	24	39	64	63
Campaigning/cause	47	36	33	44	32	42
Residents' association	26	28	32	35	35	26
Parent-teacher associations	16	8	16	18	21	20

Again, the findings about organisational involvement add to our picture of the six localities. Variation in associational involvement appears to lend support to the idea that the difference between Middlesbrough and Hull (both areas of high social deprivation) might be connected to the degree of community organisational capacity. Sutton's relatively poor score on local

social capital, as measured in Table 3.4, appears to be counterbalanced by the organisational involvement of its citizens. East Hampshire appears to match its high relative position in Table 3.4 with a high relative position in terms of organisational involvement.

Our findings suggest that both measures of social capital have a role to play in explaining local variations in political participation. But puzzles remain. Hull and Middlesbrough are both deprived communities in the north of England. Although different in terms of the degree of organisational involvement, and, to a lesser extent, the sense of attachment and connectedness, Middlesbrough has higher participation than Hull, and we are not yet able to offer a full explanation as to why that is.

Similarly, Sutton, like its London neighbour, does relatively poorly in terms of a local sense of neighbourliness and connectedness, but, unlike Merton, picks up when it comes to relative position in respect of organisational membership. Does that factor alone explain why two London boroughs of similar socio-economic status have different levels of political participation?

The role of political, managerial and civic players

Neither economic nor social capital factors alone seem to be able to account for patterns of variation in political participation. We draw on qualitative research we undertook in the six areas to explore the way in which politicians, managers and civic organisations work to shape these patterns. We take each of our three pairings in turn.

The low SES pairing: Middlesbrough and Hull
The areas compared
The similarities between the areas are striking. Both are economically depressed urban areas on the north-east coast of England, with proud industrial pasts. Hull's economy was primarily based around its location as a North Sea port and, particularly, the fishing industry. Middlesbrough was largely dependent upon the wider Teesside steel and chemical industries, although it had some port and shipbuilding activities as well.

Both areas have suffered major de-industrialisation in recent decades, leading to similar socio-economic problems of high unemployment and crime rates, coupled with low income and a high level of dependency on the welfare state. At the same time, they have both been substantial beneficiaries of central government and European funding mechanisms aimed at addressing economic decline and supporting economic and community regeneration.

Territorially, Hull and Middlesbrough are also similar, having large areas of both traditional terraced homes and post-war social housing (often

located on very large peripheral estates). Similarities endure in relation to politics too: both have a long history of Labour party dominance (although the 2002 local elections did break this pattern, albeit briefly, in the case of Hull).

The socio-economic context also appears to encourage a high level of social cohesion in both areas, linked to a strong sense of identity with their respective locations. Given such similarities, the differences in participation seem even more difficult to explain by reference to crude measures of SES. However, by examining the different institutional rules it becomes possible to develop plausible explanations for why the two areas have such different experiences when it comes to political participation.

The political players

Hull	Politics in Hull has been stable and 'very old Labour', with most councillors and party members over 60. One leader served from 1979 until 2001 (being challenged only once in that time), succeeding a previous leader who was in office for a similar period.
	Prior to May 2002, the council elite remained supremely complacent and confident that the Hull way of doing things would continue into the future. A leading cabinet member summed up this viewpoint from a politician's perspective: 'Local democracy hasn't changed much in the last 50 years and it's not likely to change much in the next 50 years.'
Middlesbrough	Although there is a long history of Labour control, politics in Middlesbrough has been characterised by episodic shifts of control within the ruling party.
	While at times the leadership has been 'traditional Labour' with strong similarities to Hull's, this has been interspersed with episodes of reforming leadership, which has had incentives to actively seek support within the wider community. This element has championed initiatives like the 'community councils': a network of ward-based councils that provide a clear focus for highly localised politics and the articulation of local concerns.
	While this is only one of many examples of such initiatives in the town, community councils provide a good illustration of how party competition has changed political institutions in Middlesbrough.

The managerial players

Hull
At the time of our research, Hull certainly talked of the importance of participation, and has many of the initiatives that conform to current thinking on participation. However, beneath the surface, managerial practices appear to cling to traditional, bureaucratic beliefs about how services should be delivered, and the formal relationships that should exist between supplier and 'client'.

Where wider 'public value management' ideas have been adopted, these have been altered to serve the bureaucratic ends of the management. For example, many managers saw the local strategic partnership as a venue for exerting the council's influence, rather than as a mechanism for co-ordination, or the sharing of power across the community.

Middlesbrough
Middlesbrough has had a long history of managerially led innovation, which appears to be imbued within the culture of the organisation. Public consultation and participation are very much a part of this set of values.

Commitment to participation extended beyond rhetoric, and local government officers showed an impressive understanding of the subtleties and complexities of community engagement. Managers expected to receive conflicting opinions from consultation exercises, and often saw their role as exploring these tensions as well as resolving them. Furthermore, many officers were pioneering radical forms of engagement.

The civic players

Hull
The overwhelming impression of the voluntary and community sectors in Hull was one of an unco-ordinated and disorganised set of groups that are largely in conflict with the council. Few arrangements exist to enable the voluntary sector to come together successfully, although new structures are now emerging.

More significantly, the council's funding of voluntary and community organisations has been piecemeal, unco-ordinated and incremental, reflecting, once again, the patronage style of Hull politics, while

also producing entrenched patterns of advantage.

Relations between the local authority and the voluntary sector are often strained and confrontational, operating in an environment of mutual distrust. As a medium for public engagement with the formal levers of power in Hull, therefore, the voluntary and community sectors provide only a limited framework.

Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough has an active and engaged voluntary sector that, while preserving its autonomy, is well served by a strong umbrella organisation (One Voice Tees Valley). Many of its groups are highly politicised, and, while relations are not always cosy, there is a sense of common purpose across voluntary and community organisations and the local authority.

This common purpose is supported by a well structured, local authority-led funding programme for voluntary groups that seeks to take a holistic view of the funding available from various sources before allocating monies to particular groups. Consequently, Middlesbrough has been able to support diverse and active voluntary and community sectors.

Analysing the differences

The institutional differences noted between these two areas are significant. In Hull, unresponsive institutions within the political, managerial and civic domains are linked in a vicious circle that militates against any new form of political participation. The operating rules of each domain mean that participation outside of long-established mechanisms of traditional politics is actively discouraged.

In Middlesbrough, a different approach has emerged in which the different rule sets have interacted to enhance participatory opportunities. There are strong incentives for community activists to participate, and equally good reasons why politicians and officers should encourage them to do so and listen to their arguments. Higher levels of political participation in Middlesbrough have not been precipitated by a single innovation or institutional development, but by the interaction of different rule sets developed over time.

Socio-economically, Hull and Middlesbrough are similar areas. It is the way in which their political, managerial and civic players operate – and interact – that makes the difference.

These two south London suburbs have much in common. Although Merton is more ethnically diverse than its neighbour, they have approximately the same population and rates of employment. Wealthy areas rub shoulders with pockets of relative poverty. Neither borough has a strong identity, each being composed of several former suburban towns that remain the focus of people's day-to-day lives. But their existence as local authorities for nearly four decades does give them a history and a potential identity.

The political players

Merton

One of the defining characteristics of Merton's political domain is the general absence of any effective politics. Labour took over from the Conservatives in 1990, after 12 years of rule, but it has failed to find a notable leader or establish a particularly strong policy agenda.

Consultation measures including area forums were established, but they do not appear to have been followed through. If member support is present, initiatives tend to find favour, but without sustained support they tend to fade from the agenda. The council appears to have a culture in which it reacts to central government plans rather than take forward a positive set of measures under its own steam.

Sutton

The Liberal Democrats have run Sutton council since 1986. They started with a small majority, taking over after years of Conservative rule, and have beaten all-comers since then fairly handsomely. They have gone out of their way to install systems of consultation in the workings of the council.

When the Liberal Democrats won control over the borough from long-standing Conservative control a standard joke made by them and about them was that they only had one policy, and that was to consult the public on everything. It is a policy that has served them well, keeping them in power ever since.

The managerial players

Merton

Merton does not appear to have embraced any management trend with a strong level of conviction. While interviews revealed an awareness of different

managerial innovations, there was lukewarm support for substantive change, and a general attitude of contentment. Managers were generally entrenched in a world of traditional public management, and appeared to be only capable of dabbling in management changes and techniques.

The weak managerial position of the council is reflected in the 'weak' score it achieved in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Sutton   Sutton has a reputation for the progressive nature of its management, with a tight core of corporate officials, under conditions of overarching political stability, able to take the council on from traditional public management techniques towards New Public Management. Indeed, in terms of its consumerist attitude towards its service users, Sutton has been a pioneer for a number of years, developing user satisfaction polling techniques with the survey company MORI, and developing a range of measures to check the policy and performance of the council against consumers' expressed preferences.

The civic players

Merton   Merton has an impressive array of voluntary and community organisations, some of which cross the border into neighbouring boroughs, including Sutton. However, the impression is one of a largely fragmented civic environment, with only limited engagement with the council, and a general lack of co-ordination between groups. As a consequence, while individual groups may have contact with the council, the opportunities for collective voice are limited.

Sutton   Sutton has a similarly impressive array of voluntary and community groups, active within and across its borders. Although it, too, suffers from some fragmentation, it does have a successful umbrella body that has strong links to the council. The openness of the council, in both its political and managerial regimes, provides a strong incentive for voluntary and community groups to work with the council to address shared issues.

The key difference between these two areas lies in the openness of Sutton's political and managerial institutions and the incentives that this offers for engagement, and Merton's indifference to the challenge of engagement. It is not that Merton actively discourages participation, but that relatively old-fashioned, inward-looking politicians and officers do little to encourage it. In Sutton, a very different political and administrative culture encourages participation, and has done so as a matter of strategic priority for a number of years.

The high SES pairing: East Hampshire and the Vale of White Horse

The areas compared

East Hampshire and the Vale of White Horse do not, perhaps, contribute as much to our inquiry as the other two pairs we have examined. Levels of wealth, social capital and participation are high in both. Such variation as there is might partly be explained by the rather different profiles of the localities.

East Hampshire, which is based on small towns and villages around Alton and Petersfield, provides a combination of homes for wealthy commuters who work in London, and a location for south coast retirement. The Vale of White Horse is near to Oxford, and the wealth of its inhabitants is based particularly on the residence of highly educated professionals from the nuclear research establishments and the city's universities. Even here, however, we can see differences in municipal culture making a difference to patterns of participation.

The political players

East Hampshire   Politics in East Hampshire shows a substantial and strong political commitment to participation initiatives. These initiatives were started by the Liberal Democrats, but were continued by the Conservatives when they were elected. In particular, the council focuses participation upon the different town identities of the district, providing each area with a devolved budget to develop its own initiatives.

Vale of White Horse   The Vale of White Horse has shown only limited innovation in consultative techniques, and no great desire to build on them. Politics is generally complacent, and interested more in maintaining balance than in either enhancing participation or driving up electoral participation. In this respect, it is a very traditional form of rural politics that exists.

The managerial players

East Hampshire   East Hampshire's managerial domain reflects the political priorities of the council. There is evidence of managerial commitment to formal consultation via surveys and other such innovations. There is a general sense that managers in the council want to learn more about how to engage with the public.

Vale of White Horse   Management in the Vale of White Horse reflects the political situation of the council. There is little sign of a desire to effect significant changes and a general air of complacency. The sense of a rural authority that does not want to raise its head above the parapet pervades the managerial climate.

The civic players

East Hampshire   The civic domain in East Hampshire is characterised by the rural and semi-rural identities of its different towns. Each seeks to have its own distinctive identity, and organises a range of activities around it. However, it is a civic culture based around these activities that prevails, rather than a cohesive or challenging group of voluntary bodies that can act with, or in opposition to, the council.

Vale of White Horse   The civic domain in the Vale of White Horse is in direct contrast to that of its political and managerial environment. It consists of a range of groups that are challenging and highly critical. These groups are organised by well educated (or retired) professionals who have the skills and other resources to engage politically. However, much of this engagement is focused on single issues and specific campaigns. Despite high levels of resources, the civic domain lacks co-ordination and synergy.

Analysing the differences

While both districts have active levels of participation, reflecting their high SES, the way in which participation occurs in each of them is notably different. East Hampshire has worked hard to create political and managerial institutions that support participation. However, its efforts remain frustrated by the fragmented nature of the area's competing rural identities, which limits the focus of district-level political activity.

In contrast, the Vale of White Horse provides little evidence of political commitment to consultation, or any official commitment to new public management ideas. Instead, the high level of local political participation appears to be related to the vibrant civic infrastructure, which supports volunteering and campaigning on particular issues. Despite their high placings in terms of participation measures, therefore, there is a sense that in both of these cases more effective institutional practices in the other domains could unlock far higher levels of political participation among citizens.

The six paired case studies show that the attitudes and conduct of municipal players do make a difference. The low SES pairing provides an illustration of how positive institutional design can address inadequacies in the latent resources of the population. Thus, Middlesbrough has been able to overcome many of the limitations of its socio-economic circumstances to provide a range of incentives for participation. Hull, on the other hand, has tended to maintain institutional forms that militate against enhanced engagement.

The examples from the middle SES pairing tell a similar story. Sutton has created an open set of political and managerial structures that contrast with the relative lack of innovation by its neighbour Merton, with clear results.

As the last chapter highlighted, however, it is not only the existence of positive institutional rules within each of these domains that matters, but also the synergy between them. The evidence from the high SES case studies acts as a reverse example in this respect. In East Hampshire, positive institutional structures in the political and managerial domains are not matched by a strong civic infrastructure. In contrast, the vibrant campaigning activities of the voluntary and community sectors in the Vale of White Horse are not supported by open and engaged political or managerial structures.

Consequently, in both of these cases, when the high SES of these areas is taken into account, it is fair to suggest that their full potential for political engagement is not being realised.

Of course, the experience of each of these areas continues to develop. There have been significant political and managerial changes in most of the case studies since our fieldwork was undertaken. Such changes present opportunities to reshape the institutional rules so as to make things happen differently. Indeed, this type of change lay at the heart of the Government's intervention in Hull in 2002. There are several positive signs of change, occurring not only in the internal management of that authority but also in its wider relationships with its community and the institutional rules that frame political engagement. In this respect, our case studies are illustrative of the way in which institutional rules frame opportunities for participation; they are not definitive analyses of the particular cases.

4. A CLEAR model for understanding participation

In this section we develop a diagnostic tool that enables policymakers to look at citizens and ask questions about their capacities, their sense of community and their civic organisations. It also asks them to examine their own organisational and decision-making structures, and assess whether they have the qualities that allow them to listen to, and take account of, messages from citizen participation.

The tool takes a diagnostic stance rather than a judgmental approach. The investigative approach that we advocate is about understanding the

Table 4. 1 Factors promoting participation: it's CLEAR

Key factor	How it works	Policy targets
Can do	The individual resources that people have to mobilise and organise (speaking, writing and technical skills, and the confidence to use them) make a difference	Capacity building, training and support of volunteers, mentoring, leadership development
Like to	To commit to participation requires an identification with the public entity that is the focus of engagement	Civil renewal, citizenship, community development, neighbourhood governance, social capital
Enabled to	The civic infrastructure of groups and umbrella organisations makes a difference, because it creates or blocks an opportunity structure for participation	Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication via compacts
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked, people say they will participate if they are listened to (not necessarily agreed with) and able to see a response	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond – through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback

range of ways in which the overall goal of greater citizen engagement might be promoted. It gives public authorities the opportunity to analyse their own particular, context-specific approach to engaging citizens – and the ways in which it might be improved.

The tool focuses upon officially sponsored participation initiatives. At the same time, however, the tool places an emphasis on understanding participation from the citizen's perspective: what needs to be in place for citizens to participate? In this respect, it is a bottom-up tool. It is important for policymakers to understand what citizens think about their participation initiatives, and how they might be developed or improved. The diagnostic tool gives public bodies a way of looking at their initiatives from the perspective and position of citizens.

The diagnostic tool is based upon the CLEAR model (see Table 4.1). It offers public authorities an investigative method for understanding where the strengths and weaknesses of their existing participation infrastructure are, and helps to identify policy responses that might be pursued.

The CLEAR model develops from the theoretical and empirical insights of a large body of research into participation. It argues that participation is most effective where citizens:

- **Can do** – have the resources and knowledge to participate
- **Like to** – have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation
- are **Enabled to** – are provided with the opportunity for participation
- are **Asked to** – are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups
- are **Responded to** – see evidence that their views have been considered.

'Can do' refers to the socio-economic arguments that have traditionally dominated explanations for variations in local participation rates (Verba *et al* 1995, Pattie *et al* 2004). The argument is that people are more likely to participate when they have the appropriate skills and resources. These skills range from the ability and confidence to speak in public or write letters, to the capacity to organise events and encourage others of similar mind to support initiatives.

It also includes access to resources that facilitate such activities (from photocopying facilities through to internet access and so on). These skills and resources are much more commonly found among the better-educated and employed sections of the population: those of higher socio-economic status. This is why the lowest levels of participation (electoral and non-electoral) tend to be in the most deprived areas (Rallings and Thrasher 2003).

Skills and resources for participation are not related only to income or social class. Some skills rest on an individual's resources: her or his education, or, more broadly, capacity for engagement. The facilities and capacities available in different communities are also important. It is possible for public, voluntary or community bodies to intervene to make up for socio-eco-

nomic limitations in equipping citizens with the skills and resources for participation. Faith communities, for instance, have been found to provide opportunities for the development of civic skills among those who would otherwise be 'resource poor' (Verba *et al* 1995, Lowndes and Chapman 2005).

The 'can do' factor can be enhanced by capacity-building efforts aimed at ensuring that citizens are given the support to develop the skills and resources needed to engage. In Britain, urban regeneration schemes (like New Deal for Communities) have invested heavily in capacity building, but faced challenges of geographical coverage and long-term sustainability – alongside the challenge of reaching the most excluded sections of the community.

The Home Office's new national programme 'ChangeUp' aims to co-ordinate such work across the voluntary and community sectors, covering areas such as volunteering, leadership, mentoring, governance and financial management. There is no guarantee, however, that skills developed in this way will catalyse participation in public decision-making (such resources may be directed towards self-help efforts within communities). Other factors that drive participation need to be taken into account.

'Like to' refers to the importance of people's felt sense of community as a basis for engagement. The argument is that, if you feel a part of something, you are more willing to engage. Evidence from many studies confirms that, where people feel a sense of togetherness or shared commitment, they are more willing to participate (for example, Tam 1998).

This concern for a sense of attachment to the political entity where participation is at stake has been given new impetus in recent years in relation to debates about social capital. Networks of formal and informal sociability are seen as creating norms of trust, mutuality and reciprocity, which enable people to work together and co-operate more effectively. High levels of social capital are, in turn, associated with more responsive democratic institutions: citizens expect, and representatives provide, better government (Putnam 1993 and 2000).

Sense of community can be a strong motivator for participation. Conversely, an absence of identity or commitment to a locality can militate against participation. Again, we argue that this factor can be addressed by policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote participation.

The most important initial step in diagnosis is to gain an understanding of the sense of loyalties and identities held in various communities. It is not easy to manipulate or change these feelings held about the communities in which people live, but it is possible to give people the opportunity to believe that they are part of a wider civic identity built around the municipality. Recognising and promoting a sense of civic citizenship and

solidarity can help develop a positive environment for community engagement.

Such is the intention of policies directed at 'civil renewal', which focus on citizenship education, community development, and the engagement of activists and leaders in partnerships for governance and service delivery. Less ambitiously, public policymakers can at least sign up to the 'precautionary principle', by establishing that interventions will not actually *damage* stocks of social capital – as has so often been the case in the past (in urban development, school and hospital reorganisation, land-use planning, and so on).

It is possible that, even if people feel engaged with that wider community, they may still choose not to participate. As we argued earlier, people may let others do the participation work for them or feel that their elected representatives are doing a good job. As with other elements of the diagnostic tool, the choice about whether to participate remains with the individual citizen. The point of the diagnosis is to understand what needs to be done to ensure that citizens have that choice.

'Enabled to' as a factor driving participation is premised on the research observation that most participation is facilitated through groups or organisations (Parry *et al* 1992, Pattie *et al* 2004). Political participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks. Collective participation provides continuous reassurance and feedback that the cause of engagement is relevant and that participation is having some value. Indeed, for some, engagement in this manner is more important than the outcome of such participation. The existence of networks and groups that can support participation and provide a communication route to decision-makers is vital to the vibrancy of participation.

Our research shows the relevance of civic infrastructures to facilitating or inhibiting participation. Where the right range and variety of groups exist to organise participation, there tends to be more of it. Policy development is particularly important in this area, given the demise of many traditional bases for mobilisation, especially on a cross-issue basis (for example, mass political parties, trade unions and traditional women's organisations). There is an important role for local authorities in developing partnerships with the voluntary and community sectors to ensure they have routes into decision-making, and are not seen purely as potential service contractors.

Investing in the governance and capacity of 'umbrella' organisations is also important – councils of voluntary service, race equality councils, tenants' federations and civic societies. Such bodies can enable groups that have a quite different primary purpose (for example, sporting or cultural) to act as participation platforms on issues of concern to their members, and to provide points of access for decision-makers seeking community

opinion. A willingness on the part of decision-makers to open multiple umbrellas is vital: no one body can be representative of civil society as a whole. Support to specialist community networks that engage marginalised groups is of particular importance.

'Asked to' reflects the finding of much research that mobilisation matters. People tend to become engaged more often and more regularly when they are asked to engage. Research shows that people's readiness to participate often depends upon whether or not they are approached and how they are approached (Verba *et al* 1995).

Mobilisation can come from a range of sources but the most powerful form is when those responsible for a decision ask others to engage with them in making it. Our case studies have demonstrated how open political and managerial systems in local municipalities can also have a significant effect by extending a variety of invitations to participate to their citizens.

The variety of participation options for engagement is important because some people are more comfortable with some forms of engagement, such as a public meeting, while others would prefer, for example, to engage through online discussions. Some people want to talk about the experiences of their community or neighbourhood, while others want to engage based on their knowledge of a particular service as a user. Rather than seeking 'balance' or 'representativeness' within every participation exercise, public bodies need a broad repertoire of approaches to reach different citizen groups (Lowndes *et al* 2001a: 453).

The nature of 'the ask' is also important. Participation can be mobilised by the use of incentives (for example, honoraria), through establishing a sense of obligation (as in the case of jury duty), or by offering bargains/exchanges (as in enhanced tenancy agreements). And the focus of the 'ask' is important too. It could be directed at a particular neighbourhood or a larger cross-authority population.

The sustainability of participation is relevant: can the 'ask' be sustained and will citizens keep responding? Who is being asked is another issue. There is a dilemma between developing 'expert citizens' and rotating/sampling involvement to get at 'ordinary citizens'. The 'asked to' factor proposes that municipalities critically review the range and the repertoire of their initiatives, and seek to build a capacity for reflexivity and learning into their participation strategy.

'Responded to' captures the idea that, for people to participate on a sustainable basis, they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference. Research shows that one of the biggest deterrents for participation is citizens' perception – or previous experience – of a lack of response (Lowndes *et al* 2001a: 452-3). For people to participate, they have to believe that they are going to be listened to and, if not always agreed with, at least

convinced that their view has been taken into account.

The 'responded to' factor is simultaneously the most obvious but also the most difficult factor in enhancing public participation. But it is also the factor most open to influence by public policymakers. Leadership and decision-making arrangements – in political and managerial domains – play an important role in determining whether groups of citizens are able to gain access to those with power, whether decision-makers have a capacity to respond, and whether certain groups are privileged over others in terms of the influence they exert (Maloney *et al* 2000, Lowndes and Wilson 2001).

Meeting the challenge of the 'responded to' factor means asking public authorities how they weigh messages from various consultation or participation events against other inputs to the decision-making process. How are the different or conflicting views of various participants and stakeholders prioritised? Responsiveness is about ensuring feedback, which may not be positive – in the sense of accepting the dominant view from participants. Feedback involves explaining how the decision was made, and the role of participation within that.

Citizens need to learn to live with disappointment; participation will not always 'deliver' on immediate concerns, but remains important. Citizens' confidence in the participation process cannot be premised upon 'getting their own way'. Ideas of natural justice are important here: participation is necessary to ensure that citizens get their case heard, and that it receives impartial judgment. If something affects you, you should be able to make your case and have it listened to, but you cannot be guaranteed a positive outcome.

5. Conclusions

Our research not only illuminates the reasons why participation varies between localities, but also lays down a challenge to all those involved in local politics. In opening the local participation 'black box', we have been able to both better understand the way in which participation works and to provide what we hope will be a useful diagnostic tool for policymakers.

We end, however, with a note of caution. Our research, and the CLEAR model we have developed, does not suggest that a participation 'nirvana' can ever be achieved. There is no end goal in which a perfect form of participatory community can be reached. The institutional frameworks that shape participation opportunities will need to be constantly renewed within changing environments.

The CLEAR model is not a one-off examination of the strengths and weaknesses of participation in a locality. Rather, it provides a tool with which to continuously revisit and refresh the mechanisms that facilitate, or inhibit, participation. At the heart of our argument is a challenge to all policymakers to apply and reapply the CLEAR model. We must ensure that participation opportunities continue to evolve as local contexts change and communities themselves develop over time.

Appendix 1: Research method

To investigate local participation we identified six areas with contrasting experiences of participation. In each area a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence was collected.

Quantitative evidence was collected using data from the Citizens' Audit (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). In those areas that the Citizens' Audit had not studied, its survey instrument was replicated.

Qualitative evidence was collected through a process of interviews with a range of local government members and officers, as well as with representatives from various other local agencies and community groups. This evidence was backed-up by focus group work with citizens in each locality.

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