

National framework for greater citizen engagement

Comments from undergraduates at the University of Gloucestershire

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Background

Thank you for this opportunity to take part in a live consultation. The following feedback is made by undergraduates taking ‘modules’ (courses) in ‘participation & consultation’ and community development at the University of Gloucestershire. The contributors are listed on page 1.

Student inputs were gathered through the online teaching medium of WebCT. Comments relate to **pages from the framework document**.

Page 3 We endorse the Minister’s emphasis on “the importance of re-invigorating democracy”. In particular we commend the idea of universities being funded to award ‘Public Engagement Bursaries’ to gap year students to encourage them to undertake work of benefit to (their local) communities. This would be equivalent to one year’s tuition fees/head, currently circa £3,000.

Furthermore, the introduction of ‘National Sustainability/community Service’ by Central Government - as a mechanism to plug the ‘democratic deficit’ of disengaged teenagers/citizens, would contribute to the UK Government’s recognition that “young people are often willing to volunteer. So we must do more to engage them.”¹ This idea would also tally with the Framework’s commitment (page 4) to “providing innovative means for the public to participate...to re-invigorate and strengthen our democracy.”

We also agree that “representative democracy” remains central to a healthy society, **but** that it must properly and effectively link with the thirst for “participatory democracy”: As stated on page 10 effective “public engagement should complement representative democracy.”

“younger people” are particularly disenchanting with conventional forms of participation e.g. voting; that is why we welcome this opportunity to have our say on the development of the national framework.

We believe that the ‘acid test’ for ‘citizen engagement, participation in decision making & consultation is neatly expressed in the *Communities & Local Government* (2008) Communities in Control: Real People Real Power Summary page 2 section 9:

“while people want to have a greater say, they need also to be convinced that their involvement will make a difference....passing more and more political power to more and more people through every practical means.”

We commend discussion/details on incentives to make people *want* to participate, in order to combat the increasing public disinterest in formal political processes. However, in a 24/7 society people are increasingly looking for an immediate effect or result, otherwise they may lapse in to thinking, “what is the point?”

¹ Communities & Local Government (2008) Communities in Control: Real People Real Power, (Summary) HMSO, London page 8 section 36.

Introduction: chapter 1

Page 5 we support the emphasis on “councillors and councils as the hubs of local democracy.” In particular we would urge and remind Government to give practical form to this in terms of delegating, *as appropriate*, powers to Town and Parish Councils – many of whom now serve urban as well as rural areas; and who – in many cases work for significant numbers of people (Dover Town Council for example represents the needs of some 28,000, whilst Weston-Super-Mare serves 71,000). See also the University of Gloucestershire’s evidence to the Commission for Rural Communities ‘Strengthening the Role of Rural Councillors’ Inquiry <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/panel%20inquiry%20meeting%20uni%20glos.pdf> Whilst the importance of councils as 'hubs of local democracy', is highlighted, the framework does not follow this through by mention their role/activities in delivering this.

“Engagement at the local level tends to focus on everyday issues which often have a direct impact on people’s lives”. We would agree – on the basis of research findings²; in particular how engagement through *community appraisals* [now termed *Parish Plans*] “had been of real practical benefit” to parishes (*Moseley et al* 1996, page 325). Critically and not surprisingly “those most readily carried into effect tended to be those whose implementation lay largely in local hands (page 326). **This reinforces the point above** (Communities in Control: Real People Real Power Summary page 2 section 9) that power and capability to deliver should, where possible, be devolved to the most appropriate local level.

Representative democracy and engagement: chapter 2

Page 7 Again, our research on community appraisals [Parish Plans] confirmed these as genuine democratic vehicles for local engagement in decision-making, “averaging around 74 per cent” of households returning questionnaires – “a testament to the level of interest that most people show in their local community when invited to give an opinion.” (*Moseley et al* 1996, page 326). This point is reiterated in the draft framework **page 10**: “people are keen to engage at the local level, on local issues.” And you will note how this local opportunity to express opinions (74% *across all age groups*) substantially outstrips the “voter turnout in UK general elections” (60%).

Re-invigorating representative democracy: chapter 3

Page 10 We support the Government’s recognition that the “political system needs to become more responsive to the public”; but again would reiterate the *Communities & Local Government* (2008) Communities in Control: Real People Real Power summary page 2 section 9: “while people want to have a greater say, they need also to be convinced that their involvement will make a difference...passing more and more political power to more and more people through every practical means.”

² Moseley MJ, Derounian JG & Allies P (1996) *Parish Appraisals - a Spur to Local Action?* *Town Planning Review*, Volume 67 Number 3 page 326

Page 10 also emphasises that "people are keen to engage at local level, on local issues" but it doesn't mention *which* people. Will it, for example, be key figures speaking on behalf of others? Not all people are keen, confident and able. And such attributes are needed debate and speak in front of a group.

We would encourage Government to accelerate the ability of Parish & Town Councils to exercise the **power of wellbeing** vested in those that meet the criteria of Quality Parish and Town Councils (granted via the 'Local Government and Public Involvement in Health' Act 2007). In particular this acceleration of local council engagement with their communities, can be delivered by councillors and parish councils fulfilling their potential and responsibilities to electors through **precepting**. Councillors need to realise the **virtue of precepting** in order to improve local circumstances – locally generated funds can lever money from principal authorities and actually get things done (building a community hall, establishing a play park etc.

We support the contention **Page 11** that by “involving a wide range of people from across the UK directly in the policy process, people can both inform collective decisions and become more familiar with the constraints on politicians and how they take decisions, helping to develop greater understanding and hence greater trust” in politicians/parliament/democratic engagement. The statistics cited, however, show that certain groups are more likely to get involved than others, a trend which might well translate into involvement in the proposed consultative initiatives. It is therefore essential for government to monitor involvement to avoid dominance by the ‘usual suspects’ (better-educated, wealthier etc.) whilst the harder to reach groups have no more input than before.

How should we engage? Page 12

Bullet point 1 – we would reinforce what comes in bullet 3 - “feedback to those consulted is critical, as is an indication of how the public’s views have been incorporated in to policy, or why they have not been”; either way ‘the great silence’ must be avoided whereby people are encouraged to contribute.....but then never hear another word about the effect or otherwise of what they have said. Otherwise, as the draft indicates, citizen consultations will be dismissed as “gimmicks”, leading to a downward spiral of disenchantment and non-involvement.

We also **strongly endorse** bullet 5, that opportunities for community input “are systemic and embedded in the policy making process...” There must therefore be a link from expressions of community preference to policies, programmes, projects and funding [from local authorities & others] to make these local aspirations a reality.

Engagement mechanisms: chapter 4

Page 13 Past referendums – again, it would be useful/transparent to state [as a reminder] how the ‘voting’ went on these & whether the eventual decision was in line with majority wishes. Did these referenda “influence significantly” final decisions
4.1 page 14?

4.3 page 18 The beauty of Citizens' Juries (CJs) is that these are a relatively longstanding and 'tried & tested' mechanism (see e.g. *Participation Works!* Undated page 23) http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=16. It is a familiar method that is easily explained, given the legal jury system within the UK. We would, however, caution in terms of 'process': the selection of jury members will need to be on the basis that they are genuinely representative, and that there is no 'whiff' of rigging the jury.

Page 19 mentions funding but it doesn't explain whether selection for Citizen's juries will be compulsory or voluntary, if 'jurors' are paid, given paid time off work, expenses, child care provision etc. Procedures will need to counter the inevitable leaning towards those with the time and money for travel and babysitters, selection of the able confident, and able-bodied members of the public. What will be the selection process? Accessibility of venues will be a further consideration.

The New Economics Foundation, in particular, have piloted various participatory techniques including CJs and should be involved in detailed planning for the use and deployment of such means <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/>. Again, with Petitions **page 20** it would be valuable to see how these, overall, have/not influenced outcomes. Otherwise it's "full of sound & fury, signifying nothing" (Macbeth Act V, scene V). This point is made in the Government's own Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (BERR) 'Effective Consultation'³ 2007 document regarding 'responsiveness' section 3.17: "feedback following consultation exercises should...set out how the consultation exercise has affected Government plans." We completely agree.

Page 22 Email petitions – There will need to be a mix of opportunities & mechanisms to ensure that those without computer access are able to contribute; to ensure *inclusion* rather than reinforcing *exclusion*.

Page 23 Three participatory techniques are proposed (Citizens' Summits, Juries & petitions); given the framework's emphasis on appropriateness of techniques ('horses for courses') it is recommended that recognition is given to the much wider range of available and long-used mechanisms e.g. Planning for Real® <http://www.nif.co.uk/planningforreal/>, Visioning etc. We note for example the Government's own [National Strategy on Participatory Budgeting](#) and the Commission for Rural Communities pilot project to promote and test [Participatory Budgeting](#). We are not persuaded that the participatory methods mentioned will engage 'hard-to-reach' groups (the young, disadvantaged, poorly educated etc) because they are often large-scale operations. We commend the use of some smaller-scale techniques, where appropriate.

³ Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (2007) [Effective Consultation: Government Response](#), HMSO, London <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file44374.pdf>

Organisations such as the *Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation* and *Involve* <http://www.involve.org.uk/home> can provide detailed experience and expertise in the use of such tools. In the words of the draft framework “it is appropriate to adopt different measures of engagement” according to circumstances [page 11](#).

We are concerned at the comment that deliberative activities - such as citizen’s juries will be funded “from within departmental budgets”. We would not want this reallocation to reduce or damage frontline services such as police or health provision. And a final caution: the statistics in chapter two chart the decline in interest in formal politics. If less people are getting involved in politics, then there must at least be a question mark over engaging people in consultations such as citizen’s juries.....

Appendix 1

University of Gloucestershire:

WebCT invitation to students to contribute to consultation, 19.9.2008

'Participation & Consultation' is a very 'live' activity (potentially/actually) influencing the lives of many worldwide.

In the spirit of consultation & participation **I want you to contribute to the following, by briefly commenting & posting in to this WebCT, by September 29th LATEST!**

The Ministry of Justice consultation document on engaging citizens **is itself out for consultation! THAT'S WHERE YOU COME IN.** Details at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/citizen-engagement.htm>

Pre page-15 is a good summary of where we are with citizen involvement in policy, politics and democracy - some great stats for assignments! More public engagement in order to make better policy is what the MoJ says it wants to see.

Participatory Practitioner Alison Crowther comments:

"The use of good and transparent and appropriate public deliberation processes should help ease both policy maker and public cynicism when they see how policy does begin to reflect public feeling, not what many think is just Ministerial guess-work based on what is in the media and what strong and powerful stakeholders are saying."

A nice way into this may be to imagine what would make Ministers feel really positive towards dialogue designed using principles. As examples:

- Participants in deliberative processes don't expect to (and often don't want to) be responsible for the decision. They love to advise though! Ministers do not need to worry about abdicating their power.

- The right dialogue at the right time, of the right size with the right people can save an awful lot of money and avoid conflict. The ones suggested look rather large and costly - tiny ones earlier might do as well and in some cases be better."

I would like as many of you as possible to respond - it only need be 5 lines!