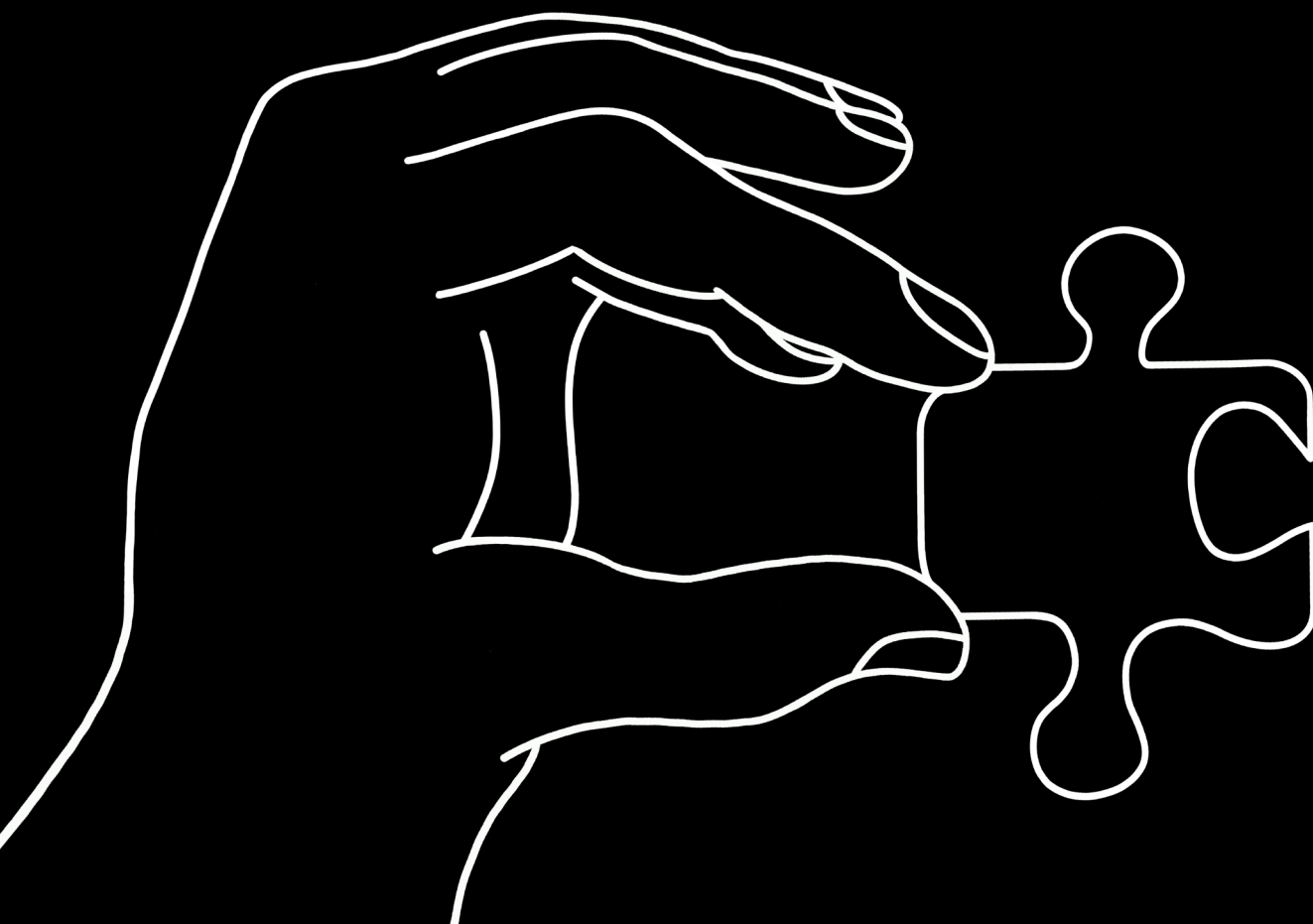


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# **Transitions to participatory democracy:**

## How to grow public participation in local governance

Riley Thorold

JUNE 2021

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to our partners the Centre for Progressive Policy for their support, without which this work would not be possible. Thanks also to all Inclusive Growth Network members for their input and to Garance Choko for her inspiration and ideas. Particular thanks go to Alexa Clay for her support, guidance and encouragement throughout this project and to Amanda Ibbett, James Morrison and Eden Lew for all their efforts during the report production process. I would also like to thank those listed below, all of whom inspired different aspects of this report through conversations and email exchanges. Any errors are my own.

- Coryn Barclay, Fife Council
- Clare Mansfield, Kingston London Borough Council
- Cllr Saima Ashraf, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Avril McIntyre, Community Resources
- Pam Crosthwaite, North Ayrshire Council
- Cllr Joe Cullinane, North Ayrshire Council
- Evelyn O'Donnell, Glasgow City Council
- Graham Smith, University of Westminster
- Panthea Lee, Reboot
- Jez Hall, Shared Future CIC
- Tim Hughes, Involve
- Atte Ojanen, Demos Helsinki
- Claudia Chwalisz, OECD
- Matt Leighninger, Public Agenda
- Frances Foley, Compass
- Louise Crow, mySociety
- Richard James, Intensive Engagement Limited
- Perry Walker, Talkshop
- Anthony Zacharzewski, The Democratic Society

Contents

	Page no.
<b>i.</b> About us	2
<b>1.</b> Scope of work and research approach	4
<b>2.</b> Defining and designing public engagement	6
<b>3.</b> Transitioning into the future: building participative systems	13
Micro transitions	15
Meso transitions	20
Macro transitions	26
<b>4.</b> Conclusions	32

# REALISING



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**L**aunched in September 2020, the Inclusive Growth Network (IGN) is an ambitious initiative hosted by the Centre for Progressive Policy, supported by delivery partners Metro Dynamics and The royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce (RSA), and funders The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The IGN's membership comprises 12 places – combined authorities and local councils – who are leading the drive for inclusive local economies across the UK.

# SCOPE OF WORK

# RESEARCH APPROACH

## 1 Introduction to the project

### Scope of work and research approach

**W**orking alongside the UK Inclusive Growth Network the RSA has spent the last six months exploring how local places can advance and embed the use of participatory democracy. The work has been shaped by five primary research questions:

- How can we make the political and business case for participatory democracy?
- How can we manage a community process effectively, authentically and ethically, including reaching the most marginalised groups?
- How can we demystify the different methods of citizen involvement? What helps us decide what is the best approach in each situation?
- How can we help create an inclusive democratic recovery from the impact of Covid-19?
- How can we create the right governance structures and institutional context for these processes?

Our research has involved (i) interviews with UK and international practitioners, academics, VCSE representatives, public sector leaders, local and combined authority officers and local politicians; (ii) a participatory workshop with IGN members; (iii) a steering group session with a subset of the network; and (iv) desk research exploring international best practice and guidance for community engagement.

Our research has shown local democracy to be a complex and dynamic system, rather than a set of discrete institutions and processes. Participatory democracy is not a product to be 'pulled off a shelf' or a set of

methods to be straightforwardly deployed, but is part of a cultural shift for distributing power and agency that is highly contextual and messy.

While recognising there is no single approach to growing resident engagement, our research has highlighted several broad transitions in local policy and practice that can help local authorities to enhance resident participation. We describe these transitions, alongside practical guidance and priority recommendations, in the second section of this report. In the first section, we set out an approach to designing particular engagement exercises that properly accounts for the contextual nature of local democracy.

The recommendations and guidance contained in this report are targeted primarily at local and combined authority officers and councillors who are interested in creating more vibrant and participatory local democracies, but we hope the insights will also be of interest to other audiences, including process designers, facilitators, advocates, local communities and researchers. While some of the guidance is specific to local and regional democracy, lots of the suggestions apply to national and even transnational participation.

# Defining and designing public engagement



## 2 Introduction to participatory democracy

### Defining and designing public engagement

Figure 1: Key of terms



#### Public participation

Public participation is “an umbrella term that describes the activities by which people’s concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues”.<sup>1</sup> Participation can be initiated and led by residents – examples being public petitions or community discussion forums.



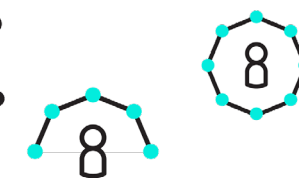
#### Public engagement

Public engagement is a subcategory of public participation, involving “active, intentional dialogue between citizens and public decision-makers”.<sup>2</sup> Public engagement, as we define it, must be initiated by public authorities.



#### Thick engagement

Thick engagement is “intensive, informed, and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussion. Organisers... give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels”.<sup>3</sup>



#### Thin engagement

Thin engagement is “faster, easier, and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause”.<sup>4</sup> It is less likely to cultivate deep connections among participants than thick engagement.



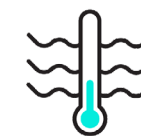
#### High-stakes issues

If an issue is challenging, thorny and potentially very impactful for residents, it is a high-stakes issue.



#### Low-stakes issues<sup>5</sup>

If an issue is uncontroversial and has limited impact on most local residents, it can be considered low-stakes.



#### Deliberation<sup>6</sup>

The term deliberation refers to a specific subset of participation at the thickest end of the engagement spectrum: “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants”.<sup>7</sup>

Deliberation differs from other forms of participation in supporting participants not only to share their personal opinions and experiences, but also to address key trade-offs, negotiate the pros and cons of different options and collectively arrive at a series of recommendations. In a deliberative exercise, decisions are made during the process, rather than being ‘induced’ by the commissioning authority afterwards.



#### Citizens’ assemblies

Citizens’ assemblies, the most popular type of deliberative democracy, are composed of randomly selected citizens, facilitated by trained professionals and tend to take place over a series of days. When people use the term deliberative to refer to a process, these additional characteristics are often implied.

Footnotes on following page.

Planning a public engagement exercise

There are many variables that combine to determine what the best approach to public engagement may be in any situation. Is the issue high or low-stakes? Does it require thick or thin engagement? How many people need to be involved? Does the issue lend itself to a deliberative process?

Involve have proposed four key sets of questions that can help organisers to consider and address the key variables that influence the design of public engagement: why? where? who? how?<sup>8</sup>

Question	Key considerations
<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Organisers should start by asking themselves why they are engaging with residents: what can participants help the authority with? What can the authority help participants with? What are the desired outcomes of the process?</p> <p>The purpose for engaging with the public and desired outcomes, once established, should shape how organisers answer the subsequent three questions.</p>	<p>Leighninger and Nabatchi list some general goals for engagement.<sup>9</sup> The list is high-level and inevitably inexhaustive, but provides a solid starting point for addressing the ‘why?’ question:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Participation leaders want to gather public input, feedback, and preferences.</li><li>2. Participation leaders want citizens to generate new ideas or new data.</li><li>3. Participation leaders want to support volunteerism and citizen-driven problem-solving.</li><li>4. Participation leaders want to make a policy decision.</li><li>5. Participation leaders want to develop a plan or a budget.</li></ol> <p>Each of these general goals can then be translated into more specific outcomes; what kind of feedback is required? What data in specific is needed? What kind of policy decision needs to be made? etc.</p>

1 Nabatchi, T and Leighninger, M (2015) Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy, Wiley, Hoboken: New Jersey.

2 CitizenLab (2020) What is the Difference Bbetween Citizen Engagement and Participation? [www.citizenlab.co/blog/civic-engagement/what-is-the-difference-between-citizen-engagement-and-participation/](http://www.citizenlab.co/blog/civic-engagement/what-is-the-difference-between-citizen-engagement-and-participation/)

3 Ibid.

4 Organizing Engagement, Types of Engagement: Thick, Thin, and Conventional [online] [organizingengagement.org/models/types-of-engagement-thick-thin-and-conventional/](http://organizingengagement.org/models/types-of-engagement-thick-thin-and-conventional/)

5 It is not always easy to discern which issues cause most contention and concern among the public, so it can help to work with residents to draw this distinction.

6 Deliberation is useful for high-stakes, complex issues where a wide range of different perspectives need to be considered.

7 Chambers, S. (2003) Deliberative Democratic Theory. Annual Review of Political Science, 6(6): pp307–326.

8 Read more about how to approach each of these questions in the Involve Knowledge Base [online] [www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/building-back-how-do-we-involve-communities-covid-19-response-and-3](http://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/building-back-how-do-we-involve-communities-covid-19-response-and-3)

9 Nabatchi. T and Leighninger. M (2015) Op cit.

Question	Key considerations
<p><b>Where?</b></p> <p>What is the context in which engagement is taking place? What internal and external factors might influence the ability of the organiser to realise their desired outcomes and purpose for engagement? How might the organiser address or mitigate any problematic or challenging contextual factors?</p>	<p>Internal factors to consider include: the buy-in of key decision-makers, the availability of support, resources and skills in the authority, where agency and levers for change exist in the council and/or its partners, how quickly a decision needs to be made and by what mechanism the public input can influence the decision-making process.</p> <p>External factors to consider include: current and past engagement efforts, potentially controversial topics in the community, barriers to resident participation, existing relationships and networks in the community and major political/economic trends and events.</p>
<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>Who needs to be involved in the process, internally and externally, for the organiser to (i) be able to realise their purpose and outcomes; (ii) feel confident that the process can have influence; (iii) feel satisfied that those most impacted by the process have a voice in it?</p>	<p>Once the question of who has been answered, it is important to consider how that target group can be engaged. What are the barriers that need to be scaled and assets that can be utilised to enable their participation? What does this imply about the optimum approach to recruitment and/or marketing and comms?</p> <p>We consider how to tackle barriers to resident participation and the challenge of bringing key decision-makers on board in section 2 of this report.</p>
<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>How can a process be designed so that it engages the right people, accounts for the local context and delivers outcomes that contribute towards the overall purpose of engagement? What methods and tools can support these aspirations?</p>	<p>Process design generally works best as a collaborative enterprise. External partners and internal stakeholders (ie councillors) can bring valuable perspectives to the design process (councillors, for example, are often best placed to advise on how processes can be designed to have political influence) and engaging them early can help secure their buy-in.</p> <p>Organisers might also find it helpful to consider different engagement methods and tools that have worked elsewhere. However, these methods will always need to be adapted and tailored to particular contexts, rather than applied mechanistically.</p>

Towards an inventory of methods

To support process designers, we have compiled a list of tried and tested public engagement methods.<sup>10</sup> This should not be used as a shortcut to bypass the four planning stages we set out in the previous section – the purpose and context of engagement remain paramount – but may offer inspiration and ideas to participation leaders, helping them discover, adapt and combine different engagement methods and tools to fit their purpose and context.

<sup>10</sup> For other helpful engagement methods directories, see Involve's Methods database. Available at: [www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods](http://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods). Also see the Engage2020 Action Catalogue. Available at: [actioncatalogue.eu/search](http://actioncatalogue.eu/search)



Figure 2: Inventory of methods

Methods	Policy stage	Purpose (1-5)	Cost (£-£££)	High/low-stakes issues	Thin/thick engagement	Size of group	Length	Participant selection	Example(s)/resources
Surveys/polls	Policy development	1	Varies	Both	Thin	Varies	Short	Representative sample	<a href="#">UK Polling Report</a>
Focus groups	Policy development	1	£-££	Both	Thin	6-12	2 hours	Representative sample	<a href="#">How to run focus groups</a>
Citizens' panel	Throughout policy process	1-2	£-££	Both	Thin	Usually thousands	Ongoing	Representative sample	<a href="#">Barnet Citizens' Panel</a>
Citizen report cards	Audit	1	££	Both	Thin	Varies	Short	Targeted sample (service beneficiaries)	<a href="#">More info</a>
Problem reporting forums	Audit	2	Varies	Both	Thin	Unlimited	Short	Self-selecting	<a href="#">FixMyStreet</a>
Crowdsourcing	Agenda-setting	2-3	£	Agenda-setting	Usually thin	Varies, often large	Varies	Self-selecting	<a href="#">yrpri</a>
Crowdfunding	Implementation	2-3	£	Both	Usually thin	Varies, often large	Varies	Self-selecting	<a href="#">lobby</a>
Online networks	Policy development	1,3	£	Both	Usually thin	Large	Ongoing	Self-selecting	<a href="#">Labour Policy Forum</a>
Participatory appraisal	Agenda-setting	1,2,3	££	Both	Thick	Varies	Ideally ongoing	Self-selecting	<a href="#">Walsall Participatory Appraisal Network</a>
Democs	Policy development	2-3	£-££	Both	Medium	6-8	Up to 1 day	Self-selecting	<a href="#">Talk Shop</a>
Appreciative inquiry	Agenda-setting	2-4	£-££	Agenda-setting	Thick for core group, thin for rest	5-15 core group engaging with larger network	3 months +	Self-selecting	<a href="#">More info</a>
Participatory audit	Audit	2-4	££	High	Thick	Varies, usually 15-30	Multi-year	Targeted sample (service beneficiaries)	<a href="#">World Bank Case studies</a>
Charrettes	Policy development	2-3,5	££-£££	High	Thick	25-500	3-5 sessions	Usually self-selecting	<a href="#">Glasgow Thriving Places</a>
Future search conference	Agenda-setting	1-3	££-£££	Agenda-setting	Thick	25-100	2+ days	Multi-stakeholder	<a href="#">Future Search Network</a>
Participatory budgeting	Decision-making	2-3,5	££-£££	Both	Thick	Unlimited	1+ days	Self-selecting	<a href="#">PB Chicago</a> <a href="#">Other examples</a>
Consensus conferences	Policy development	1-5	£££	High	Thick	10-20, open to observers	3+ days	Representative sample	<a href="#">Participedia</a>
Poverty Truth commissions	Policy development	1-5	£££	High	Thick	20-50	1+ year	Multi-stakeholder, including people with experience of poverty	<a href="#">West Cheshire PTC2</a>
Citizens' juries	Decision-making	1-5	££-£££	High	Thick	12-24	2+ days	Random sample	<a href="#">More info</a>
Citizens' assemblies	Decision-making	1-5	£££	High	Thick	50-250	3+ days	Random sample	<a href="#">Citizens' assembly tracker</a>

**Box 1: Notes on Figure 2**

Methods: an inexhaustive, but varied, range of tried and tested methods that produce different outcomes and apply at different stages in the policy cycle.

Policy stage: (i) agenda-setting; (ii) policy development; (iii) decision-making; (iv) audit.

Purpose: here we use the following classifications, as listed above:

- 1 = Participation leaders want to gather public input, feedback, and preferences.
- 2 = Participation leaders want citizens to generate new ideas or new data.
- 3 = Participation leaders want to support volunteerism and citizen-driven problem-solving.
- 4 = Participation leaders want to make a policy decision.
- 5 = Participation leaders want to develop a plan or a budget.

Cost: due to the number of variables involved, it is impossible to provide an accurate summary of costs beyond what we provide here. Readers are advised to follow-up with their own research.

High/low-stakes issues: definitions provided above. Agenda-setting is treated as a separate category (agenda-setting processes are often designed to ascertain which issues are high/low-stakes). When running engagement on a low-stakes issue, organisers may choose thin, self-selecting, low-commitment forms of engagement. On high-stakes issues, however, organisers should choose a more targeted recruitment approach, seek more informed, thick participation, and consider sharing more decision power with participants.

Thin/thick engagement: definitions provided above. There is a spectrum between thin and thick engagement – the categorisations below are necessarily simplified. When it comes to choosing between thin and thick forms of engagement, there tends to be a three-way trade-off between breadth (how many people can participate), depth (how informed and intensive the engagement is) and cost (thick engagement usually costs more than thin engagement) - hence why most engagement practitioners recommend using both thin and thick forms of engagement and, when money allows, combining them to capture the dual benefits of breadth and depth.

Size of group: this is an important design question for organisers to consider. The data below reflects the average size chosen in past applications of each method.

Length: this is an important design question for organisers to consider. The data below reflects the average length of time chosen in past applications of each method.

Participant selection: this is an important design question for organisers to consider. The data below reflects the standard approach taken in past applications of each method.

# BUILDING PARTICIPATIVE SYSTEMS



# Transitioning into the future: building participative systems

The project of growing local participation will require more than just well-designed methods. Just as specific engagement exercises should be designed to account for local context, civic leaders should proactively work to change the local context, to create the conditions under which participation can thrive.

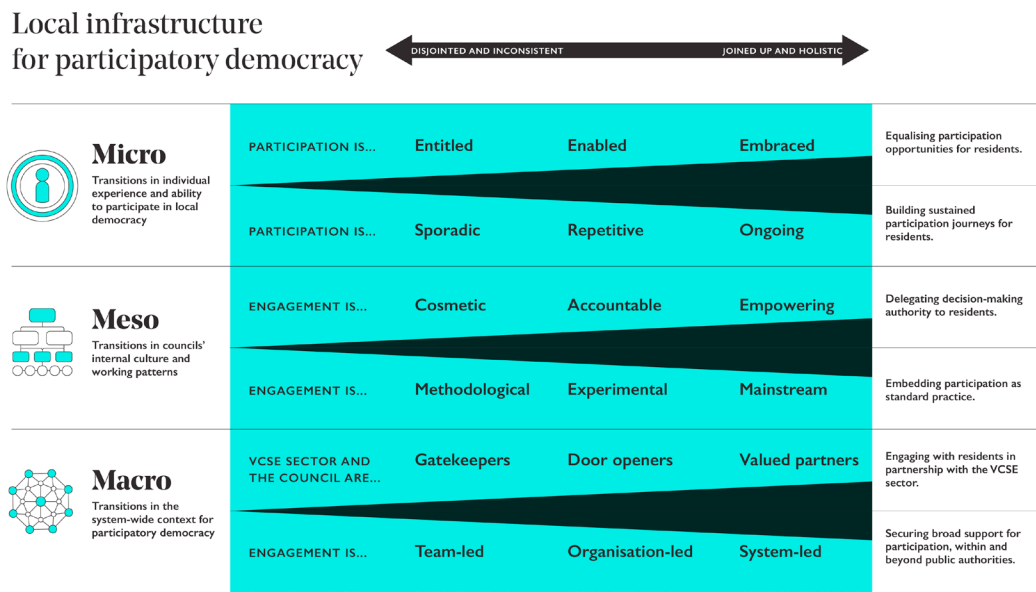
While recognising there is no single approach to growing resident engagement, our research has highlighted six broad transitions in local policy and practice that

can help local authorities to develop a local participatory infrastructure to support innovative, empowering, inclusive and impactful forms of participation on a more ongoing basis.

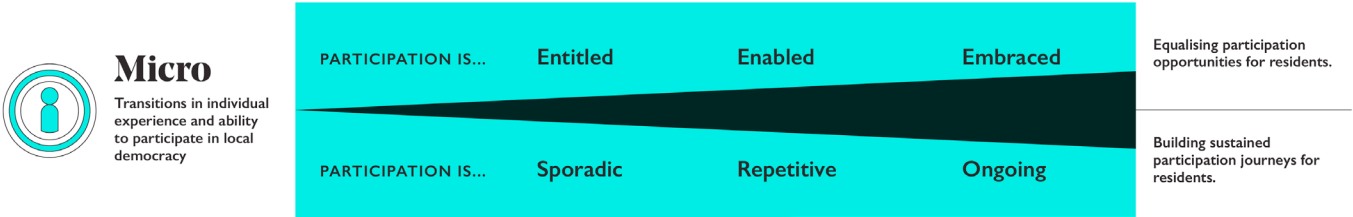
These six transitions overlap significantly and cut across different layers of the system, but can broadly be classified as such:

Under each of these transitions we specify a series of practical recommendations that agencies can pursue in the short-term. The project of building more participative local systems will always be a work in progress and will vary depending on pre-existing civic infrastructure and past experiences of civic engagement, but we hope these broad transitions and the practical recommendations that accompany them can offer inspiration and practical ideas to local authorities seeking change.

Figure 3: Local infrastructure for participatory democracy



## Micro transitions



### Equalising participation opportunities for residents

In the majority of cases, all residents are entitled to participate in local consultation exercises, however in reality those who do participate – often nicknamed the ‘usual suspects’ – tend to be more wealthy, more white and more educated than the wider population. Local participation can be a mechanism for confronting and redressing power imbalances, but without a genuine commitment to equal access and influence, participatory programmes risk reinforcing existing inequities. When people are simply entitled to participate, participation will predictably become the vocation of an entitled few.

Avoiding this outcome will require local authorities to invest considerable time, energy and resource into breaking down access barriers and equalising participation opportunities.

There is no silver bullet solution for levelling-up local participation. Different participation approaches will attract different people, suggesting a mixed-methods approach to local engagement, combining different facilitation methods and recruitment models, will be most fruitful. However, there are some practical measures that organisers should always consider, especially when running engagement on high-stakes issues, that will consistently enhance access:

- **Compensating participants for their time.** For many people, the financial barrier to participation is the most fundamental. Without proper compensation many young people, carers, single parents and people with low income will struggle to get involved. If an issue is important and consequential and people are expected to contribute substantial amounts of time to the process, compensating participants (at least on a per request basis) should be a priority. If participants come for the money and stay for the experience this should be celebrated: these are precisely the people who wouldn't turn up to a regular local authority meeting.
- **Supporting people with disabilities and specific access requirements.** This includes physical/virtual access to participation spaces, access provisions relating to sensory impairments, interpreting and translation services and trained support for individuals with learning difficulties.
- **Utilising the access opportunities provided by technology without creating new barriers to participation.** Covid-19 social distancing measures have pushed many engagement processes online and demonstrated not only that virtual participation is possible, but that it may be more convenient and accessible for many people. However, any moves online should be combined with focused support and training for participants who require it and measures to improve local access to computers and the internet.

- **Avoiding self-selection by using targeted recruitment.** Deliberative processes, user panels, focus groups and other methods of engagement often limit participation to a pre-selected group. For instance, citizens' assemblies involve a random-stratified sample of the local population, built to match pre-determined demographic criteria, whereas focus groups often involve participants drawn from a single resident group. Running a citizens' assembly alongside a more targeted process and comparing the results can allow agencies to 'take the temperature' of the wider public, without muffling the voice of those communities most impacted by the topic of engagement.
- **Using straightforward, non-technical language.** At all stages of any engagement process – recruitment/marketing, delivery, and feedback – organisers should use simple language to avoid alienating non-specialists and those who don't speak the language fluently.
- **Using trained facilitators to moderate discussions.** For all forms of participation that involve dialogue, trained facilitation can help to mitigate power differences within the group, enabling all participants to work effectively and cooperatively together. Maintaining a network of trained facilitators, either within the local authority or in the wider community, has the potential to transform the quality of participation in a place.
- **Working with partners from the community.** Building partnerships and trust across the local VCSE sector will not only give local authorities a better awareness of more informal, bottom-up forms of participation taking place in their area, but also provide them with additional publicity and recruitment opportunities. For instance, authorities might improve levels of engagement, particularly among traditionally

**Box 7: Example: Camden Conversations: a family-led enquiry into child protection services**

In 2017, the Camden Family Advisory Board (FAB) – a group of parents and grandparents with direct experience of Camden's child protection system – led an enquiry into options for making Camden's child support services more effective and inclusive. As well as co-designing the research approach, six FAB members were supported to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with local social workers and managers and residents who had been involved in child protection services. This research culminated in a series of recommendations for Camden Safeguarding Children Partnership. Camden Conversations is a strong example of peer-research methods being deployed by a council to (i) empower and upskill local residents and (ii) build upon existing community relationships to hear from different parts of a community.<sup>11</sup>

marginalised communities, by channelling their communication and marketing via trusted community representatives and spokespeople. Organisers can also ask people who have previously participated to encourage their friends and family to get involved – a process of recruitment known as 'snowball sampling'. For this to work, local authorities will need to win the trust of prospective recruiters and should ideally compensate them for their time and effort.

11 Camden Conversations: our family-led child protection enquiry. Available at: [www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/1006758/Camden+Conversations+-+full+report.pdf/675d7d6c-827b-a4ba-08a9-1fbaa9378d10](http://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/1006758/Camden+Conversations+-+full+report.pdf/675d7d6c-827b-a4ba-08a9-1fbaa9378d10)

- **Engaging with people on their terms and where they feel comfortable.** The typical settings for formal top-down engagement (council chambers, local authority meeting rooms, school assembly halls etc) can feel overly formal and marked by symbols of power and status, which will inevitably put some people off. Agencies should engage with people where they feel comfortable – in local community-led spaces, on street corners, in booths at street fairs or in community WhatsApp groups.
- In addition to the practical measures listed above, local and combined authorities should also consider how equitable participation can be embraced strategically as part of a long-term approach to placemaking and community development.
- This could start with a thorough audit of local engagement, helping authorities to better understand who is currently participating, who is not participating, how people are participating and which engagement approaches have worked well in the past. While requiring some up-front investment and ongoing light-touch evaluation work, such an audit would show where the organisation's resources could be most strategically targeted and where future recruitment, sampling and engagement should be prioritised.<sup>12</sup>
- As part of this audit, local authorities should ask communities why they do or do not participate in local democracy and what would encourage and enable them to participate more.
- The audit would help authorities to understand where the most marginalised and disempowered local communities live. These communities in particular would

- benefit from longer-term community development work, perhaps including:
- **The establishment of community support services** to help build and grow social networks within and between communities, facilitate engagement in traditionally marginalised groups and provide vital information about local participation opportunities.<sup>13</sup>
  - **Supporting communities to create their own social and civic spaces.** Spaces that are created by communities can be invaluable hubs for community-led discussion, deliberation, learning, skills development and relationship building, especially in more fragmented or marginalised communities.
  - **Promoting civic education and participation in local schools and colleges** and/or through specialist citizens' academies targeted at marginalised segments of the community.<sup>14</sup> This would allow young people to meet local leaders and learn about different local participation opportunities. A simple digital engagement platform would enable young people to regularly have a say in local issues as part of their civic education and these classes could become recruiting grounds for wider local engagement activities.

12 Lightbody, R (2017) 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement. What Works Scotland.

13 Ibid.

14 See Kirklees Council's Democracy Friendly Schools programme for a promising attempt to grow "confident active citizens of the future" through democratic education in schools. Read more here: [www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/nesta-democracy-pioneers-democracy-friendly-schools/](http://www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/nesta-democracy-pioneers-democracy-friendly-schools/)

Key recommendation

**Local authorities should conduct an audit of local engagement,** to get a better grasp of who is currently participating, who is not participating, how people are participating and which engagement approaches have worked well in the past. While requiring some up-front investment and ongoing light-touch evaluation work, such an audit would show where the authority’s resources could be most strategically targeted and where future recruitment, sampling and engagement should be prioritised. As part of this audit, authorities should ask communities why they do or do not participate in local democracy and what would encourage and enable them to participate more.

Building sustained participation journeys for residents

Participatory democracy is commonly associated with formal processes deployed during particular ‘decision moments’, but it is important not to lose sight of the more informal, relational modes of participation that more accurately reflect most people’s day-to-day experience of community participation.

At its best, community participation can be experienced as an ongoing journey built on enduring relationships and, although local authorities can and should never seek to assert ‘ownership’ over all forms of local participation, there is good reason for them to try to establish the conditions and incentives for more ongoing resident participation.

It is true that, for many residents, ongoing engagement with local agencies is neither possible nor desirable (it may feel repetitive or gratuitous, leading to ‘consultation fatigue’), but it might help to change things if local authorities invest over time in local relationships, seek to

build civic skills and confidence and offer a varied range of participation options to residents. Each individual participation event, no matter how small, should be designed in such a way as to reaffirm local relationships, relay helpful civic skills and habits and redirect participants to future engagement opportunities.

Box 8: Example: Barking and Dagenham’s Every One Every Day initiative

Barking and Dagenham’s Every One Every Day initiative was founded in 2017 with the aim of building practical participation (joint cooking, repairing, playing, learning, gardening, or producing goods for example) into the everyday life of people living in Barking and Dagenham. Every One Every Day is an attempt to turn Barking and Dagenham into a “large scale, fully inclusive, practical participatory ecosystem ... the first one of its kind in the world”, as a means to building a participatory culture in the borough. The first three years of Every One Every Day saw over 6,000 people participate in over 140 new projects, comprising 34,000 hours of community participation and enterprise. The perceived impact of the initiative among participants is impressive, with 80 percent of respondents reporting higher trust in neighbours, increased ‘vibrancy’ of Barking and Dagenham and increased capacity to make collective decisions, and 70 percent of respondents perceiving increased community capacity to respond collectively to social, economic and environmental problems.<sup>15</sup>

15 See Barking and Dagenham’s Every One Every Day. Impact. Available at: [www.weareeveryone.org/impact](http://www.weareeveryone.org/impact)

Taking this developmental approach to engagement will help agencies to build more sustained participation journeys out of discrete initiatives. It will work best when local participation has a low floor and a high ceiling – if it’s easy for people get involved in a light-touch way, and subsequently possible for them to build and develop knowledge and experience and become more deeply involved in local politics if they are able and inclined to do so. Convenient, low floor gateways to local participation might include:

- **SMS or app-enabled engagement.** This could involve (i) ongoing text/ WhatsApp messaging between local decision-makers and resident groups;<sup>16</sup> (ii) more structured back-and-forth messaging based on pre-prepared text sequences which provide people with information about a local issue and gather their input via text;<sup>17</sup> or (iii) through problem-reporting apps like FixMyStreet.
- **Highly social or ‘gamified’ approaches to local participation.**<sup>18</sup> Some people’s primary incentive for participating might have little to do with shaping local policy. They may be there for the free lunch or want to meet their neighbours in a supportive – and potentially fun - environment. Local agencies should consider appealing to these motivations in their design and marketing of at least some local engagement events.
- **Meeting local residents where they are at** - on doorsteps, in community-led spaces, at street fairs or in other informal settings.

When it comes to more formal engagement activities, organisers should make a clear plan for how they intend to stay engaged with participants after the event. In the past, citizens’ assembly participants have formed alumni groups to stay engaged after the process has concluded. These can either be task-oriented working groups (for instance,

following up on the implementation of recommendations or continuing to act on the issue at hand) or looser platforms into which participants are able to direct their newfound political energy. Local agencies could subsequently re-engage this group and involve them in designing, facilitating and publicising future processes.

Whether a people’s gateway into local participation is through thin informal exchanges or thick deliberative forums, local agencies should seek to build residents’ confidence, their ability to participate and their understanding of local politics and additional participation opportunities. Providing varied opportunities for local engagement at different levels is the best way for local authorities to avoid consultation fatigue while still encouraging regular, ongoing participation.

Key recommendation

Based on the data that emerges from the local engagement audit, **local authorities should develop a series of ‘participation personas’** (general profiles that show how different residents engage with local agencies and public life more generally). Different participation journeys can then be designed to appeal to each of these persona types and local agencies can curate a range of engagement approaches that will match the interests and priorities of different people in the community.

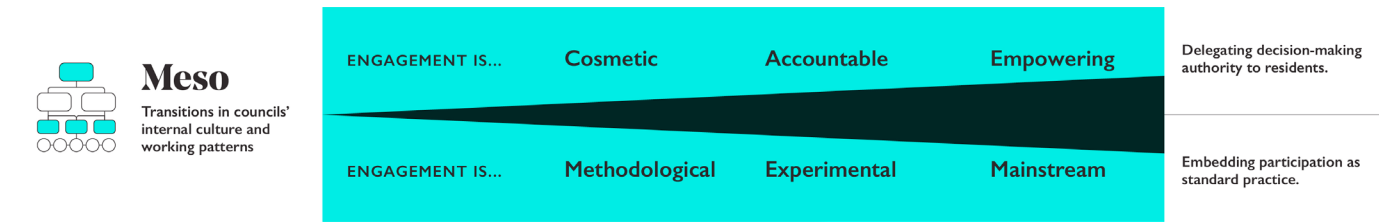
When designing engagement exercises, organisers should consider, from an early stage, how the exercise can enhance residents’ skills, build their confidence and improve relationships and trust between the local authority and community.

16 Anecdotal evidence from our research interviews suggests SMS-enabled engagement has, at least in some areas, grown substantially during the pandemic.

17 Leighninger, M. (2018) How Public Engagement Needs to Evolve, Part 2. Available at: [medium.com/on-the-agenda/how-public-engagement-needs-to-evolve-part-2-1934f065d09c](https://medium.com/on-the-agenda/how-public-engagement-needs-to-evolve-part-2-1934f065d09c)

18 For a detailed account of ‘gamified’ approaches to engagement see Lerner, JA (2014). Making democracy fun: How game design can empower citizens and transform politics. The MIT Press, London.





Delegating decision-making authority to residents

Participatory initiatives are only as good as their real-world legacy. Effective processes will tend to have multiple positive impacts, including on the internal culture and practice of public authorities and the attitudes and behaviours of participants and the wider community. But here we focus on the impact of participation on administrations' policy- and decision-making. Without sincere buy-in by local powerholders, even skilfully designed, well-intentioned engagement activities will be little more than 'participatory theatre'.

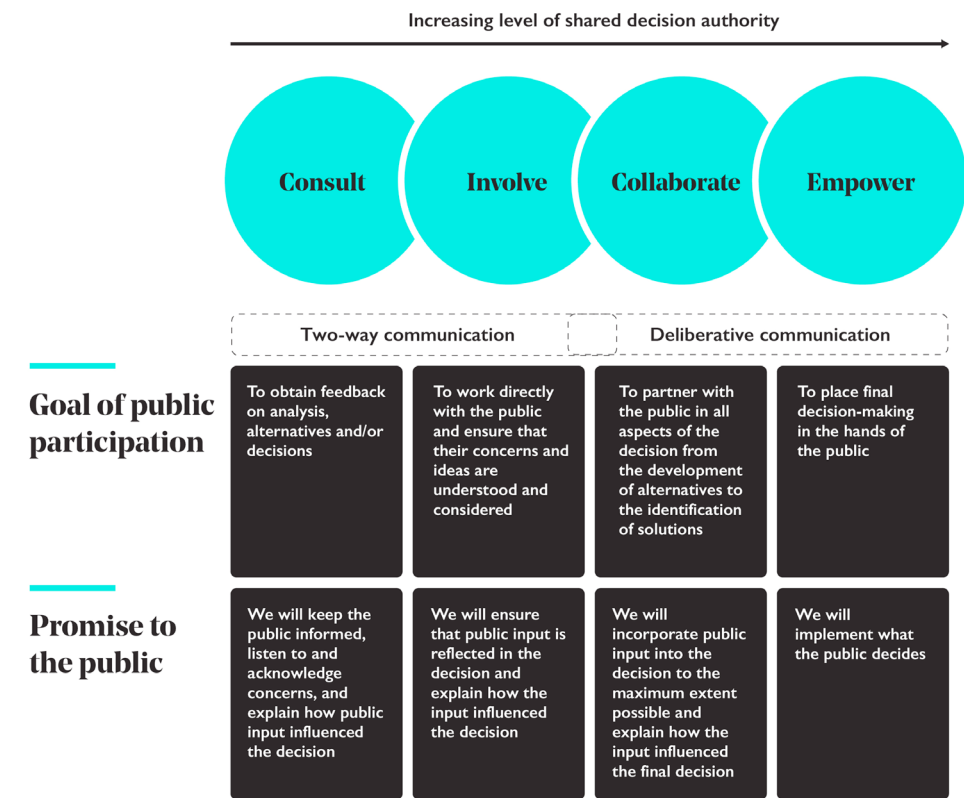
Even cosmetic forms of engagement can enable authorities to familiarise themselves with different methods and design features of participatory democracy. Once authorities have 'learned the script', they may feel more comfortable investing greater influence in participatory processes or experimenting with more ambitious participatory models.

However, we would never recommend running an engagement process on a topic where there is no room for public influence. If a final decision has already been made and residents feel that their voice has been ignored, they will likely become disheartened and less willing to participate in the future. Likewise, in instances where public engagement has led to little change in the past, this needs to be acknowledged, and accountability taken if communities are to trust any future process.

The nature and degree of influence that the public can realistically exert over public policymaking and decision-making will depend ultimately on why the authority is inviting public participation. If the authority wants to consult the public for feedback on existing proposals, the degree of influence will inevitably be much lower than an agency intending to collaborate with residents in the development of policy. This variability makes it very important for organisers to be categorical, explicit and transparent about the aims and remit of any participation process they run. If participants understand the terms on which they are participating and the influence they can expect to have – even if this is relatively limited in scope – they are far less likely to be dispirited by the process and better able to hold the commissioning authority to account if they break the terms of engagement. It helps to involve politicians in negotiation around the appropriate scope and remit of a participation exercise – they will have a strong sense of the political constraints and leverage points that determine where action is feasible.

Figure 4 shows how different aims of participation correspond with different forms of public messaging, helping organisers to manage expectations and create a degree of accountability in their public communications leading up to an engagement process.

Figure 4: Adapted spectrum of participation<sup>19</sup>



Accountability and transparency cannot simply be achieved through communications in the run-up to an engagement process. As the table above implies, it is equally important for public authorities to follow-up with residents during the process to explain what is happening and afterwards to explain how the public input will influence the final decision.

Residents will likely be put off from participating again if the commissioning authority is not communicative or transparent, regardless of whether they had any influence over the final decision(s). It is important for public authorities, especially on high-stakes issues, to:

- Clearly communicate the timeline of decision-making, the programme of implementation and key milestones along the way. One option would be for public authorities to release publicly accessible calendars showing decision-making timetables, key milestones and any additional participation opportunities. It is important to provide regular

updates about policy change and implementation and to clearly publicise and (if necessary) justify the final decision.

- Be transparent about where responsibility for the decision lies and how the local political system works, including the role of local politicians and other local powerholders. A 'family tree of local democracy', as proposed by the Kirklees Democracy Commission, could demonstrate key powerholders and significant relationships in local politics.

In some cases, it might also be valuable to support resident-led working groups or scrutiny committees to monitor the uptake of resident input over time and help communicate progress with the wider public.

Although organisers will need to prioritise certain issues on which higher levels of shared decision authority is appropriate and feasible (public authorities need to allocate their limited resources strategically and there are many low-stakes decisions

<sup>19</sup> This diagram is adapted from Nabatchi, T and Leighninger, M (2015) Op Cit.

that do not necessarily require such deep and influential engagement), we would encourage local authorities to routinely consider more empowering forms of engagement, as a means to authentically demonstrating and building trust with residents.

From our conversations we have identified three structural/legal shifts that could complement the principles of transparency and accountability set out above and help to guarantee more impactful public engagement exercises:

- 1 Local agencies commit to giving residents greater influence over local decisions.** This is the most straightforward path towards greater power sharing and might involve:
- a. Putting options to the community at an early stage when there is a greater scope to influence the process. For instance, giving residents the power to set the agenda, terms and remit for an agency's policymaking process.
  - b. Setting conditions under which the public authority is bound to implement residents' proposals, or reducing its power to reject community proposals outright.

In Gdansk, Poland, the mayor is required to run a citizens' assembly on any proposals with at least 5,000 signatures. As well as giving residents agenda-setting power, the local municipality is also bound to implementing any proposal that receives over 80 percent support among the citizens' assembly participants.

- 2 Local agencies involve community representatives in existing decision-making forums.** We have heard stories of UK councils changing the makeup of ward level decision-making forums to include residents and community figures, thereby creating a space where the power dynamic is more genuinely equal and shared.

North Ayrshire's locality planning partnerships have evolved over time to equalise the power and responsibility held by elected members and community representatives. The council's local grants budget is dispensed through participatory budgeting (PB) processes which are overseen by these planning partnerships.

- 3 Local agencies create new institutions for public participation.** Some local and regional authorities, primarily outside the UK, have gone an extra step and created entirely new bodies that can help to 'institutionalise' public influence over political decision-making. We consider different approaches to 'institutionalisation' in the next section.

Key recommendation

Local and regional agencies should start experimenting more routinely with upstream and empowering engagement approaches that fall towards the higher end of the participation spectrum. This might include:

- **Establishing spaces where the power dynamic between residents and elected representatives is genuinely equal and shared.** The Locality Planning Partnerships established in some Scottish local authorities and the mixed deliberative committees operating in Brussels both provide compelling prototypes for this kind of collaboration.
- **Trialling approaches that put final decision-making in the hands of the public.** For some time, Scottish councils have been deploying forms of participatory budgeting to allocate public money. This has signalled to residents a clear intent to build a more responsive local democracy, while also priming the ground for larger decisions being put in the hands of the public in the future.

Box 2: Key challenge 1: securing political buy-in for ambitious forms of resident engagement

Councillors are essential to the success of participatory processes. As civic leaders and community representatives, they are the ideal people to champion local participatory democracy. They are also well-placed to advise on local political constraints helping organisers determine an appropriate scope and remit for engagement. And most importantly, they ultimately decide whether residents' feedback and/or proposals ultimately influence local decisions. Without broad political support, any significant changes to engagement practice within an authority will likely be transient. However, public participation can seem a challenge to elected authority and councillors' traditional role as the primary – and relatively autonomous – representatives of local residents. Political accountability ultimately rests with politicians, so councillors often fear they will be in the firing line if a process goes badly.

In trying to bring councillors – and other senior figures in an authority – on board with a participatory process it's important to consider the following:

- How to **make a case for participation that aligns with a councillor's existing values.** Involve have set out a range of different arguments that can help to persuade stakeholders.
- It can help to **involve councillors in the design process** and invite them to engagement sessions to familiarise them with the mechanics of the process and its aims and desired outcomes.
- A number of authorities have created **public engagement 'charters' or 'ordinances'** to demystify participation and support inter-council advocacy, setting out a (i) shared vision for local democracy; (ii) series of principles that characterise good engagement; (iii) range of methods that have previously worked; (iv) summary of evidence on why and when participation is valuable; (v) an outline of roles different stakeholders, including councillors, can play in local participation.
- Participatory processes can give councillors a **mandate to act on contentious and difficult issues.** Understanding which decisions are challenging for councillors and explaining that engagement can provide them with confidence and legitimacy to act, can be key to securing their support.
- Councillors are likely to play a subtly different role in a more participatory democracy – they will sometimes enable and convene, rather than always drive change. **Councillor training, peer-support and induction** call help to create new norms, expectations and standards in the local authority for what characterises a 'successful' local politician. Listening to residents, responding to their concerns and forging relationships within the community should all be seen as core competencies that help councillors to fulfil their duties as a local representative.
- **Participatory initiatives should not be used for political point-scoring.** The integrity and legitimacy of participatory democracy depends on it being at least somewhat insulated from partisan loyalties. It helps if senior politicians, particularly in the majority party, try to establish consensus and support for participation across the aisle.

## Embedding participation as standard practice

As we argued in the first section of this report, rather than taking a scientific approach to method-selection, it is advisable for processes to be designed through engagement with a series of open questions about the aims of the process (the why?), the context within which it's being conducted (the where?), the people that need to have a voice in the process (the who?) and the resources and assets the public agency has at its disposal to run the process and follow-up on its outcomes (the how?).

As part of this planning process, organisers should consider the intended impact of the project on institutional culture, working

patterns and staff skills and behaviours. The best participatory experiments are catalysts for lasting change in the institutions that commission them. A UK government evaluation of participatory budgeting – a budgetary approach that is currently being 'mainstreamed' by many Scottish local authorities - suggested that processes can inspire far-reaching cultural change in public sector bodies, encouraging them to share power more systematically with communities.<sup>20</sup>

The shift from small grant participatory budgeting to 'mainstream' participatory budgeting in Scotland has been the culmination of a sustained period of piloting, evaluation, upskilling and learning, through which participatory budgeting tools and methods have been refined and

### Box 3: Institutionalising public deliberation

#### The creation of new standing deliberative bodies

- In Ostbelgien (the German-speaking community of Belgium) a permanent, randomly selected citizens' council can set the agenda for up to three separate citizens' assemblies each year.
- In Madrid, a since-disbanded 'observatory' of randomly selected residents was instituted to monitor municipal action and recommend improvements. It could also propose city-wide referendums on issues proposed by citizens using the online citizen participation tool CONSUL.
- In Toronto, randomly-selected 'reference panels' meet every two months for two years. One discusses the city's public transport and the other discusses planning issues.

#### The requirement for deliberative engagement in certain circumstances

- In Oregon, the Citizens' Initiative Review is formalised in the state's referendum process. A group of 24 randomly selected residents weigh up the pros and cons of the referendum options and release a statement which is included in the official voters' pamphlet.
- In the Austrian state of Vorarlberg, 1,000 signatures proposing a particular topic triggers a government-sponsored citizens' council.
- In Gdańsk, Poland, the mayor is required to run a citizens' assembly on any proposals with at least 5,000 signatures.

20 According to the UK PB Network, "the challenge of Mainstream PB is to enable citizens to have their say, and be involved at all stages of the commissioning cycle". It reflects a goal "for PB to move beyond its predominant model of allocating small pots of money... towards repeatedly distributing mainstream public budgets". Available at: [pbnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PB-Mainstreaming.pdf](https://pbnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PB-Mainstreaming.pdf)

### Box 4: Innovation without experimentation: The Royal Observatory of Madrid

The Madrid Observatory, an ambitious attempt at institutionalising public deliberation, suggests some risks of taking more 'prescriptive' approaches to embedding innovation. Having been instituted in the highest level of municipal law, the design and terms of reference of the new body had to be established in advance through negotiation with the municipal authority. Although this gave the new body legal status, the absence of prior testing and iteration meant the body had shallow roots in the municipal system and lacked sufficient political support. After only a matter of months, the Observatory was disbanded by the newly elected government. The Observatory may have fared better had it been preceded by a more agile piloting process to refine the model, grow its legitimacy and build cross-party support.

adapted. This spirit of experimentation persists, even where participatory budgeting has been mainstreamed. Fife council, for example, have been exploring options for sequencing a future visioning process, a citizens' jury and a public vote as a means to allocate large-scale budgets.

North Ayrshire Council is similarly exploring ways of applying principles of participatory budgeting across the board, including in the commissioning and procurement of services, local capital spending, service redesign, community asset ownership and service evaluation participation, creating economies of scale for public authorities. Two of the most ambitious models for authorities seeking to hard-wire participatory and deliberative processes into their standard decision-making procedures.<sup>21</sup> The mainstreaming PB agenda reflects a growing global trend of local and regional This can help to guarantee and regularise public 'institutionalising' public deliberation were summarised in the final report of the UK

government-commissioned Innovation in Democracy Programme (liDP).<sup>22</sup>

There is no single roadmap to institutionalisation - it will always be complex, contextual, and messy. Institutional change should be the culmination of sustained experimentation and evaluation, design and redesign. Rather than an end point on a journey, the mainstreaming of participation is a significant step on the journey towards more consistent and empowering local participation. Rather than stifling innovation, it should create a more enabling context for future experimentation and learning.

### Key recommendation

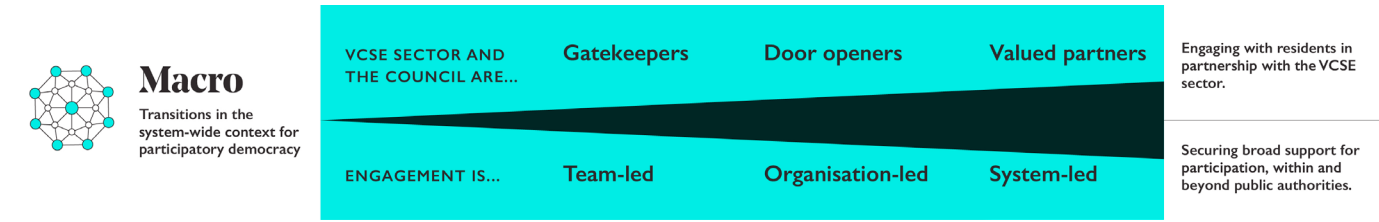
Following international best practice, **local and regional authorities in the UK should experiment with and, over time, seek to institutionalise robust forms of public deliberation**, either through the creation of new standing deliberative bodies or the specification of definite conditions under which public deliberation is required of a local/ combined authority.<sup>23</sup> In the UK context, the scrutiny function could provide a good 'dock' for new institutions (as suggested by the Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission). However, these processes should be designed ground up, tailored to local institutional contexts and refined through agile piloting. The institutionalisation of deliberation should not preclude or stifle ongoing learning, experimentation, evaluation and innovation and its viability will depend on not being overly allied with any one political agenda or party.

21 Earlier this year, Newham Council became the first in the UK to commit itself to a 'permanent citizens' assembly'. Newham residents have voted for the assembly to focus first on 'greening the borough'.

22 The RSA, Involve, the Democratic Society, mySociety (2020). How to run a citizens' assembly: A handbook for local authorities based on the Innovation in Democracy Programme. Available at: [www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/iidp-citizens-assembly.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/iidp-citizens-assembly.pdf)

23 The OECD have outlined a set of good practice principles for robust public deliberation. Available at: [www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/good-practice-principles-for-deliberative-processes-for-public-decision-making.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/good-practice-principles-for-deliberative-processes-for-public-decision-making.pdf)





Engaging with residents in partnership with the VCSE sector

The VCSE sector often functions as a gateway through which (i) residents can become more involved in local democracy and (ii) local and combined authorities can engage with residents.

This intermediary position means VCSE organisations are well-placed to broker relationships between residents, community groups and public institutions. However, as some of our interviewees suggested (echoing arguments made in 2018’s UK Civil Society Futures inquiry) the VCSE sector can also gatekeep interactions between residents and public authorities.

There may be legitimate reasons why parts of the sector play this role. They may, for instance, have witnessed abuses of institutional power in the past and some public authorities have an excessive tendency to withhold power, information, resources and support from the VCSE sector. Local authorities can place heavy-handed accountability requirements on their VCSE clients, but this is often a manifestation of their own resource constraints and onerous bureaucratic obligations.

Overcoming these differences of interest, whether they are real or perceived, will require a well-resourced coordination mechanism that facilitates ongoing dialogue and engagement between the public and VCSE sectors.<sup>24</sup> The Office for Public Engagement and Innovation, proposed in the previous section, would

be one potential forum for this kind of conversation, which would be intended to:

- Help public authorities to better understand the information, resourcing and infrastructure requirements of community organisations and how they may provide support.
- Help community organisations to better understand and, over time shape, the local authority’s vision/ charter for local engagement, including the role the VCSE sector may play in supporting the local authority’s engagement and how they may hold the authority to account when it falls short of its vision.

The pandemic has accelerated changes in the relationship between the public and VCSE sectors, making this kind of constructive dialogue even more important and urgent. Due to imperatives of crisis response, many councils have swapped the traditional bureaucratic and managerial approach to the VCSE sector for a more collaborative and facilitative approach. Working together with a shared sense of mission and purpose, councils and community organisations alike have had to adapt their ways of working to accommodate one another, potentially prefiguring a more pluralistic approach to local governance and service delivery.

- Some councils have stepped back from managing important aspects of the Covid response (ie food deliveries to shielding residents) instead supporting VCSE sector partners to take the lead by sharing resources and information

24 Partnership bodies already exist in many areas in the UK, though they are often poorly resourced and underutilised.

- with them, introducing them to potential local partners and providing light-touch governance oversight.
- In some places, the council has become something of a central learning and information hub for the VCSE sector; monitoring what is happening locally across the sector; tracking what is working and facilitating learning and collaboration between community groups.

While recognising that certain aspects of the status quo will inevitably need to be reintroduced once the pandemic has passed (many councils have already reinstated more formal accountability and oversight mechanisms), community organisations and public authorities should not miss this window of opportunity to have a genuinely open, creative, independently facilitated conversation about the future of their place and the role that different organisations may play in that future.

Key recommendation

In places where the voluntary sector has grown or taken on new responsibilities during the pandemic, provisions should be made for an **inclusive and facilitated dialogue about the appropriate roles of different public and VCSE sector local institutions in the future**, including the partnership structures, accountability mechanisms and hard/soft

infrastructure that can enable a more pluralistic and collaborative ecosystem of local governance, civic participation and service delivery. In the longer term, a coordination forum (perhaps modelled on the Local Office for Public Engagement and Innovation we recommend in the next transition) should be established for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between local VCSE sector and public sector in service delivery and resident engagement.

Securing broad support for participation, within and beyond public authorities

Although designating a public engagement function to a single team gives it a clear home within an organisation, creating clear lines of responsibility and accountability, it is likely to lower the internal status of public engagement and imply that other teams are not required to engage with residents. Isolating the engagement function may put it in competition for resources with other service areas and may ultimately make it easier to do away with in the event of an organisational restructure or budget cut.<sup>25</sup>

**Box 5: Example: the suspension of PB in Porto Alegre**

In March 2017, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre – one of the most remarkable and long-standing experiments in local democracy – was suspended. The suspension has been. In large part, put down to changes in the local administration’s structure.

From its institutionalisation in 1989, PB had been central to the organisational structure, directly linked to the office of the mayor with power to oversee and coordinate other teams and to supervise investments made by the local government. However, from 2005 onwards, PB lost its cross-cutting function and instead became a single programme within a single secretary, putting it into competition with other departments for funding. This loss of power coincided with a sharp reduction in the resources available to PB, ultimately leading to the suspension of PB in 2017.

25 Nuñez, T. Porto Alegre, from a role model to a crisis. In Dias, N. (ed), Hope for Democracy. Available at: [www.oficina.org.pt/uploads/710/611/70619115/hope\\_for\\_democracy\\_-\\_digital.pdf](http://www.oficina.org.pt/uploads/710/611/70619115/hope_for_democracy_-_digital.pdf)

Where local engagement seems to work most effectively, it is embedded centrally within the organisation and backed up by well-resourced cross-cutting networks of participatory specialists (including capable facilitators, process designers and community organisers) who engage regularly with local residents.

From our research we have identified several factors that might help engagement specialists to secure wide-ranging support for participation and deliberation across an authority. The steps to achieving political buy-in, set out in challenge box 1, may be complemented by the following considerations which are focused on organisations as a whole:

- **Single experiments should be recognised for their potential to generate wider institutional change.** Engagement leaders should proactively consider from the outset who could benefit from being involved in the planning process, what skills they could develop, how the learning from the process could be shared within the commissioning authority and how the relationships staff build with residents can be maintained once the process has concluded.
- **Local authority staff should understand where the engagement process fits in with the organisation's long-term strategy.** Working with staff and residents (especially from marginalised communities) to establish a local charter for public engagement could help to underpin a shared vision for engagement, including the principles that make engagement effective and authentic, the resource-intensiveness of different engagement methods and the organisation's long-term vision for community engagement. This should include practical information about the important roles that local politicians,

different teams and individuals within the organisation and individuals and groups in the wider community can play in the future participation system.

- **Staff job descriptions should support the organisation's engagement aspirations,** specifying the skills that are required to successfully design and deliver participatory processes. Professional development strategies and performance benchmarks should emphasise public engagement experience and skills.<sup>26</sup>
- **A 'hub and spoke' approach to internal communications,** as one of our interviewees suggested, could support inter-organisational advocacy. In this model, an engagement hub is supported by distributed engagement champions, who relay vital information and knowledge between the core team and the different service areas. It helps to consider which teams might be instinctively averse to public engagement (such as the finance department or teams that preside over traditionally more contentious services) and to proactively involve these groups in the process. It also helps for the engagement hub to bring together both policymakers and frontline staff. Breaking down this hierarchy may enable community insights to percolate upward through the organisation, via frontline professionals who work with and engage regularly with local communities.
- **Peer-support networks can be set up between organisations to facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge.** Communities of practice for leadership development can be helpful in identifying and supporting the trailblazers within authorities driving the participatory agenda in their local areas.

26 One example is a job description created by the City of Santa Rosa, California. Available at: [agency.governmentjobs.com/srcity/default.cfm?action=specbulletin&ClassSpecID=816665&headerfooter=0](https://agency.governmentjobs.com/srcity/default.cfm?action=specbulletin&ClassSpecID=816665&headerfooter=0)

### Box 6: Key challenge 2: resourcing participation; money and staff capacity

Money and staff capacity are, inevitably, two of the most fundamental barriers to the expansion of local engagement practice. Leaving aside fundamental matters of political and fiscal devolution, our research suggested some practical options that could help local authorities alleviate these challenges in the short-term.

#### Staff capacity:

- **Specialist training in core engagement skills** (such as group facilitation, process design and deep listening), while requiring up-front investment, will enable trained staff and/or residents to plan and facilitate more effective engagement, perhaps saving public agencies money and time in the future. The distinctive skills required for running successful engagement can be embedded in a whole range of other activities, including internal comms, chairing meetings, brokering disagreements.
- **Distinguishing statutory consultation from 'community empowerment'** frees up capacity for more facilitative, developmental and experimental work led by community empowerment specialists.
- **Local authorities can build an inventory of different skills in their organisation,** through a process of competency mapping. Cross-referencing this data with job descriptions (see above) and training opportunities would enable (i) the creation of more personalised career pathways and (ii) a more strategic approach to peer learning.
- **Local authorities should keep a record of community partners, backup staff, recent leavers and trained facilitators and volunteers** who could bolster engagement skills and capacity in the organisation should bottlenecks occur.

#### Money:

- Staff should understand the resource-intensiveness of different engagement methods. This information could be included in a local charter or internal ordinance for public engagement (see above). Starting with expensive showpiece initiatives is not always the best option.
- It may be possible for authorities to reprioritise or reallocate existing money (for instance, money previously spent on more cosmetic engagement processes or underspends on capital projects).
- Businesses, anchor institutions and philanthropists, locally and from further afield, may be open to supporting local authorities in their engagement efforts – see, for example, the partnership between Barking and Dagenham Council and the Lankelly Chase Foundation.

A key point that emerged from our conversations was the importance of establishing funding and support mechanisms that are not solely dependent on transient political will, or one-off budget commitments. Public authorities may want to consider how the measures listed above could support the creation of more consolidated funding streams and durable staff support.

Corralling cross-organisational support for public engagement will be an important and necessary step towards a local place becoming more democratic and participatory, but a system of local participation will be far more vibrant and dynamic if it is supported by a range of local organisations, networks and assets rather than simply the local and/or combined authority. There are two key reasons for this.

**1 A more systemic approach to engagement better reflects how most people view the world and could deliver more comprehensive impact.** Citizens don't see the world as disconnected policy spheres and issues – their ideas cut across organisational boundaries and levels. However, local participation opportunities can be disjointed and siloed, channelled through separate institutions (including local councils, schools, universities, VCSE organisations, healthcare organisations, police forces and trade unions), each with a limited remit to respond comprehensively. While maintaining clear accountability and responsibility for administering and responding to participatory initiatives, how can local authorities coordinate a more joined-up ecosystem of local governance that could accommodate more holistic resident input and potentially deliver more cross-sectoral impact?

**2 A more systemic approach to local engagement could unlock resources and coordinate resident input.** With greater pooling of learning, resources and know-how, local organisations could significantly expand their engagement potential. Residents could move more seamlessly between participation opportunities in different sectors and contexts and the outcomes of different participation exercises could be better compared,

coordinated and combined to create more of a common, coherent local voice.<sup>27</sup> The local system of engagement should amount to more than the sum of its parts.

Our research has highlighted some encouraging examples of collaborative participatory governance forms, including:

- i. In Bristol, where the One City Approach (which includes representatives from the education, VCSE, business and health sectors) formally received and welcomed the recommendations from the recent Bristol Citizens' Assembly.
- ii. In North Ayrshire, where the Community Planning Partnership has been progressively reimagined as a key institution of local participatory budgeting.
- iii. In Manchester, where, in 2018, an 'inverted citizens' jury' on home care convened a cross section of professionals, technical specialists and decision-makers to hear evidence from citizen witnesses, before collectively identifying and challenging the professional siloes and institutional divides that might inhibit effective action on the issue.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For an example of a whole-system approach to mapping and combining different forms of engagement, see plans for an Observatory for Societal Engagement with Energy, proposed by the 3S research group at the University of East Anglia. Available at: [ukerc.ac.uk/research/see/](http://ukerc.ac.uk/research/see/)

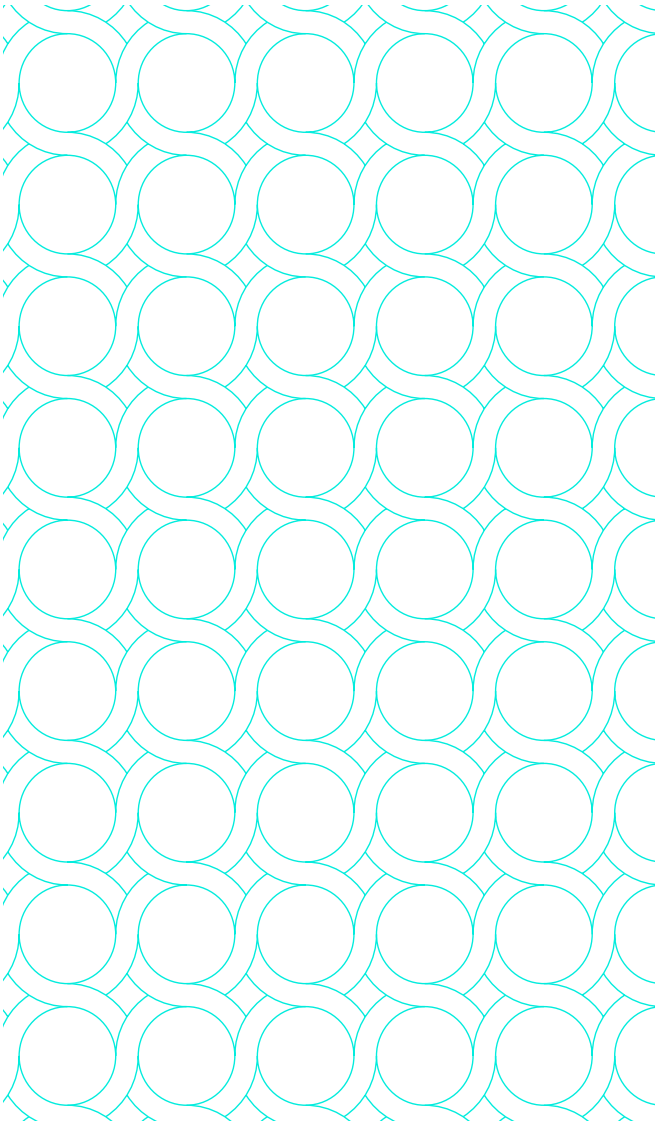
<sup>28</sup> Shared Future CIC (2018), An Inquiry into the Challenge of Care at Home. Available at: [jamandjustice-rjc.org/inverted-citizens%E2%80%99inquiry-care-home](http://jamandjustice-rjc.org/inverted-citizens%E2%80%99inquiry-care-home)

Key recommendation

**Local authorities should work with local partners to establish a Local Office for Public Engagement and Innovation** - a local democratic infrastructure body tasked with building civic engagement into the fabric of the area.<sup>29</sup> Alongside permanent staff (administrators, network leaders, researchers, practitioners) such an office should include representation from the local authority and other local public sector organisations, major VCSE sector bodies and educational institutions. Despite being a separate entity, the office should work very closely with community engagement leaders and networks in the local authority. A Local Office for Public Engagement and Innovation could:

- Review process evaluation results to provide advice and recommendations regarding continuous improvement of engagement policies and practices.
- Systematically map and strategically align democratic assets, civic institutions and participatory opportunities in the area (local organisations, training programmes, media institutions, youth clubs, online forums, representative bodies, PTAs, CICs etc) and create stronger links between formal decision-making and engagement structures and the informal, community based networks and spaces in which most people participate.
- Serve as an information hub and coordination mechanism to better enable relevant local organisations to pool their resources, knowledge and skills in service of a more developed participatory ecosystem.

- 'Socialise' the local authority's vision (or charter) for public engagement within the local community and canvass feedback, hopefully over time enabling different service areas and local leaders to coalesce around a shared vision.
- Train a pool of local facilitators and process designers.



<sup>29</sup> This proposal is adapted from an earlier recommendation made in RSA (2017). Citizens and Inclusive Growth. Available at: [www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa\\_citizens-and-inclusive-growth-report.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_citizens-and-inclusive-growth-report.pdf)



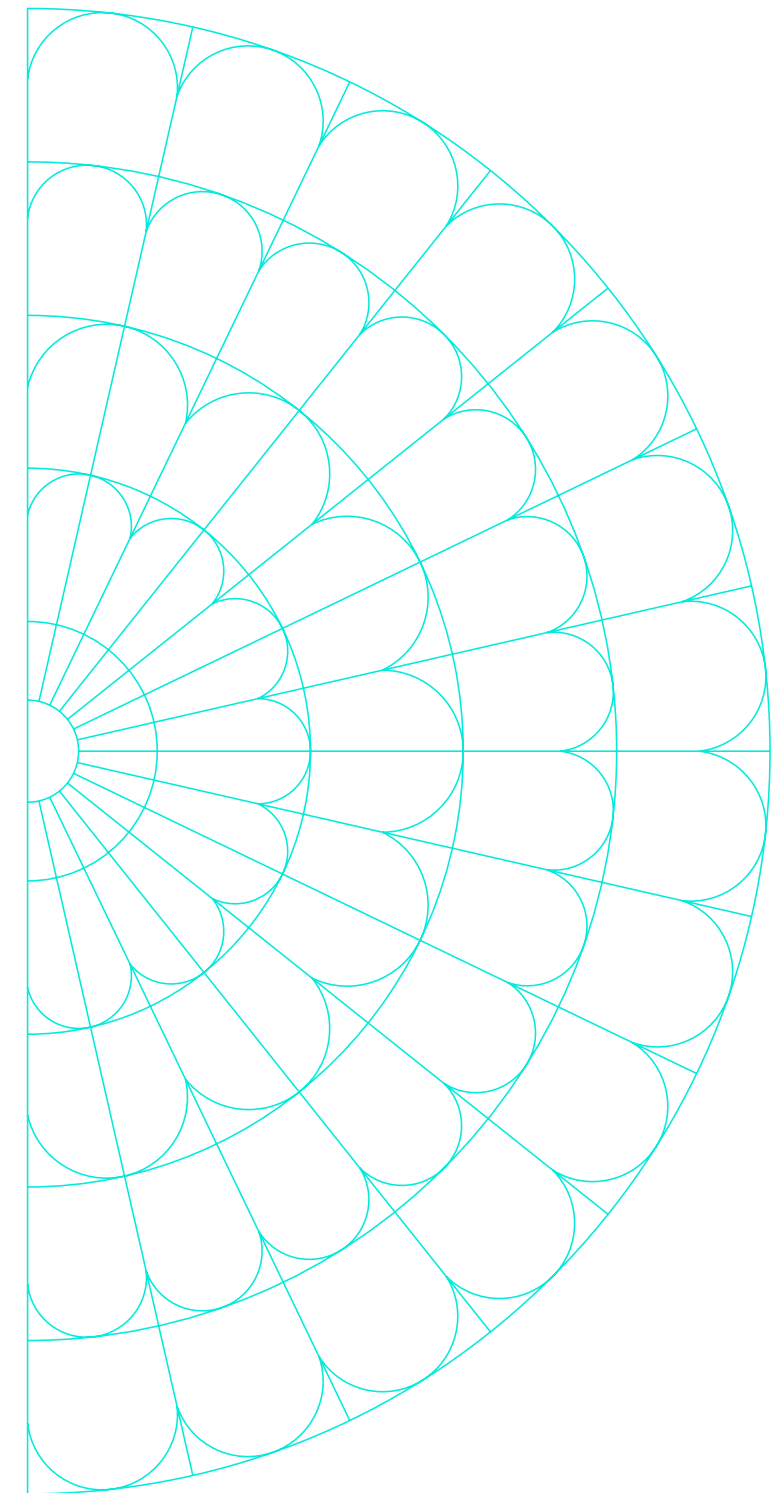
# CONCLUSION

## Conclusion

**N**otwithstanding the huge challenges Covid-19 has created for local government, the past year has been one of rapid learning and experimentation in local places. Public and VCSE sector bodies have rallied together, and promising innovations have emerged in all aspects of local governance, from digital engagement and remote participation to service integration and cross-sector collaboration. This holds real promise for a more integrated and pluralistic approach to place-based governance in the future.<sup>30</sup>

But residents must be at the heart of any new local governance settlement. Our research has shown that with the right encouragement and support, residents can and should be active partners in local change, rather than passive subjects. As we slowly transition into a 'new normal' it is incumbent on local authorities and other major institutions to embrace and enable this shift to more empowering and ongoing public participation in local democracy.

There is no 'silver bullet' approach to local participation, nor are there linear pathways to follow. Any local change process will be highly contextual and every local democracy is at a different stage of development. However, in this report, we have set out some general transitions and pragmatic guidance, principles, considerations and recommendations that, according to our research, can support local places on this journey. We hope the findings can be of practical use to anyone seeking to improve local democracy.



<sup>30</sup> The RSA's Future Change Framework offers one way of thinking about how we respond to crisis and how that can drive positive change: [www.thersa.org/approach/future-change-framework](http://www.thersa.org/approach/future-change-framework)

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