

# A Commitment to Engage

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## Public Sector Executive

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Within the space of two weeks in July, the government launched three documents aiming to make big changes in the relationship between public institutions and citizens. First, Communities and Local Government published its white paper *Communities in Control*, introducing a series of new opportunities for citizens to have a say in local and national services. On the same day, the Ministry of Justice launched a discussion paper outlining a new constitutional framework for citizen engagement. And less than two weeks later, the department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform published its updated version of the government's code of practice for consultation, the primary guidelines by which central government regulates its engagement with citizens and stakeholders.

The publication of these documents is promising. Despite the apparent lack of coordination between the departments that released them, they are clearly part of the same agenda. They have the potential to make a real difference to how decisions are made and services delivered across Britain, by providing more opportunities for citizens to influence decisions and by raising the standards of public participation across the public sector. However, what is interesting about these proposals is not just the new opportunities for influence they grant citizens and third sector organisations. It is also how the language used, in particular within the white paper, serves as a reminder of what the citizen participation agenda is really about. Namely, the redistribution of power and the effects it can have on people's lives. With its emphasis on empowerment, the white paper recognises that giving citizens the direct authority to change things around them can have a profound impact on how they perceive themselves and their role in society. This is something that Involve sees plenty of evidence of in our research, yet which is all too often forgotten when the case for citizen participation is made. Involve frequently meets people who have taken part in a public participation activity in local or national government and whose first response is to tell us how the experience made them feel: how much they learnt and how they enjoyed getting to know the subject and the other people. Often they also talk about how the experience gave them new confidence and a feeling that their opinions matter. As one former participant said: "It was good for the brain, it was good to meet other people, to engage, and to feel you matter as a human being – and everybody wants to feel that!"

It is clear that for many people, being asked for their views on a public issue is an entirely new experience which gives them insights into how society operates that they would otherwise never get. And, if the exercise is done well, it often creates an appetite for more of the same. After a positive experience of public participation many people walk away with a new enthusiasm for being involved in politics, their neighbourhood or the local health service. In other words, good participation can often foster precisely the active and engaged citizens that the government so keenly pursues.

These benefits are not only reserved for the public participants. In our work we are often equally struck by the enthusiastic responses from public officials who have been involved in a participation activity. It is remarkable

how sitting down with a group of citizens and hearing first hand what their priorities and worries are can change an official's perspective on their work. Often the realisation that these people bring insights that the official had never considered themselves is a humbling reminder of who public services are really there to serve. In the words of one civil servant: "you get a fresh and different perspective and it reminds you of where your work is headed".

The white paper rightly acknowledges the difference good participation can make; not just to the quality of decisions and services but also to people's confidence, skills and understanding of the society in which they live. As such, it represents a shift in government's thinking and practice around public participation. From a tradition of paying lip service to citizen involvement and viewing it as something incidental to policy making, recent initiatives have shown real commitment to engaging citizens in ways that are meaningful to both the public and institutions.

The challenge now is to ensure that the strength of these policies and this commitment to engage is not lost in the delivery. As ever, there is a risk that by formalising these proposals they become just another obligation for the already stretched public servants. The forthcoming duty to involve is a prime example of a policy that risks being undermined by its obligatory element. The duty, which comes into force next year, makes public engagement a statutory requirement for local authorities and many other public institutions. When these initiatives are delivered by people who have yet to be convinced of the value of citizen participation, who haven't been taught how to do it well or who lack the resources to do so, the result is not empowerment but a waste of time and money. And, whilst there are numerous examples of local authorities and other organisations doing a fantastic job at engaging the public, the reality is that many still have a long way to go.

So one challenge when delivering the white paper is that people still need convincing of the value of empowerment, and shown how to do it well. The battle for hearts and minds has not been won yet. Another challenge relates to the scale of the task. I recently interviewed a local authority official who spoke highly about how engaging the community and local voluntary sector had transformed his work. Yet he was also deeply concerned that this new way of working was under threat from the sheer scale of demands to engage the community which now face local authorities. The duty to involve, combined with other pressures such as equality impact assessments, could mean hundreds of new public engagement activities across the council over the space of a few years. This, he argued, was far more than the different teams would be able to deliver to an acceptable standard. Moreover, it would by far exceed the appetite among local residents and third sector organisations to take part in council business.

Involve works closely with public institutions to help them engage with their constituents in ways that bring maximum benefits to their own decision making and the communities they serve. We firmly believe that more citizen participation does not necessarily lead to better results. In order to be effective it needs to be done well and it needs to resonate with the people who are expected to take part. Hence the potency of the white paper, the draft constitutional framework and the new code of practice does not lie in the introduction of new structures to support citizen involvement. Alone, these structures risk becoming empty duties, bringing little value to either institutions or citizens. Rather, the strength of these proposals lies in the way these opportunities, if employed selectively and well, will help nurture a more discursive relationship between citizens and institutions.

Both the white paper and the MoJ discussion paper mention the potential for deliberative engagement methods to support such a relationship. Involve has just published *Deliberative Public Engagement – nine principles* in collaboration with the National Consumer Council and Diane Warburton at Shared Practice. The book was created in response to the growing use of deliberative public engagement methods in policy making, and a concern about the lack of quality control<sup>1</sup>. The principles are intended to help public servants ensure that their engagement with the public stands up to scrutiny; that it is honest, has impact, and is respectful of the people involved. Such guidelines are necessary, because despite the government's clear commitment to public participation, there remains work to be done to ensure that the delivery matches the policy makers' intentions. Turning the ambitions for empowerment in the new white paper into a new settlement between citizens and public services will require more than new duties or directives. Helping individuals and institutions realise what can be achieved and how best to do this is a challenge at all levels of governance and should be recognised as such. The sooner this challenge is tackled the sooner we will all be able to enjoy the full benefits of a participatory society.

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about deliberative public engagement and to download the principles document, go to [www.involve.org.uk/deliberative\\_principles](http://www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles)