

Citizen power in recession?

The case for public
engagement in local
government

Simon Burall
Jonathan Carr-West
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Foreword

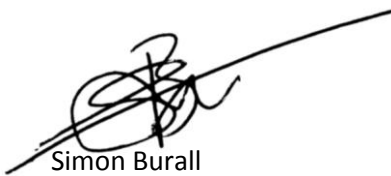
This report presents the insights and shared learning from a joint Involve, Local Government Information Unit and Department for Communities and Local Government seminar on *Empowerment and the Economy*.

The word empowerment provokes different reactions. To its advocates it's a key concept in giving people authorship of their own lives, to its detractors it's a piece of essentially meaningless policy jargon that hides as much as it reveals.

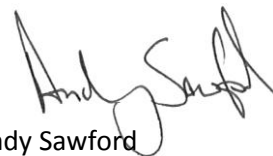
LGiU and Involve share an interpretation of empowerment that goes deeper than rhetoric. For us it is about making sure that ordinary people have control over their own lives. The 'Empowerment Agenda' has come and gone as the recent political label for this, but the idea is far older and transcends party political lines. In its formulation under the current Labour Government it is as valid today as it was during the 1951 Conservative Government's "bonfire of controls". The idea remains visible in John Denham's *Strengthening Local Democracy* consultation and in the current Conservative Party green paper *Control Shift*, which proposes a transfer of power to local people and institutions.

It is undeniably true that the current financial constraints facing government, at all levels, will prove challenging. Budget cuts will make it more difficult to find the staff time and adequate resources to engage communities and individuals in ways that will make a difference to their lives. However, participants at this seminar identified ways in which investing effectively in building communities and individuals into the activities of their institutions saved far more money than it cost, provided more responsive and effective services for citizens, and ultimately led to individuals and communities who value the services and the people who deliver them more.

LGiU and Involve believe that in the current challenging climate, those councils who continue to prioritise engaging citizens are likely to find that their services improve and become more efficient; with the result that voters place increasing value on their institutions, their work, their staff and elected representatives.



Simon Burall
Director of Involve



Andy Sawford
Chief Executive

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Introduction

On 6th May 2009 a diverse group of practitioners from local government and the third sector met for a seminar on *Empowerment and Economy* designed by Involve and LGiU, and supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The seminar was set-up to explore how the worsening economic climate would impact on the Department for Communities and Local Government's empowerment and engagement agenda. This report was produced following the seminar and draws together the findings from its discussions. Alongside this it contains insights and comment from the LGiU and Involve's on how this agenda will be shaped in the shifting economic and political landscape.

A long line of government policies from the Conservative Government's "bonfire of controls" in 1951, to John Major's Citizens' Charter can all be seen as part of this effort to give people more meaningful control over their lives. In the past few years this 'empowerment agenda' has been a central part of government policy encapsulated in the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, the *Communities in Control* White Paper and the current Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill. It should be stressed however, that there is a cross party consensus on the need to devolve more power to communities, even if there is disagreement on how exactly to do so. The Conservative party's recent green paper *Control Shift* makes clear their intentions in this direction and David Cameron recently argued that "the next election won't just be about whether to transfer power from Labour to the Conservatives. It will also be about whether to transfer power from the central state to local people and local institutions. Neither transfer can come soon enough."

But although this agenda appears firmly embedded, it will be challenged by a recession that will pose significant questions for the public sector, as public spending is squeezed tightly over the next decade. For local authorities and their partners, faced with unprecedented spending cuts and communities experiencing the stresses of unemployment and limited incomes, this will require an increased understanding of the role that citizen empowerment plays in economic renewal. While there is ample evidence that engaging with citizens can lead to increased efficiencies in the delivery of services, many local authorities would benefit from a greater understanding of how and when this is the case.

This is a critical scenario on economic and democratic grounds. The 2009 budget looks to raise an additional 3.7% of national income on top of the 2.6% announced in the 2008 Pre-Budget report. 10% of this additional 6.3% of national income is due to come from announced tax rises, 40% from announced spending cuts, the remaining 50% will come, perhaps ominously, from measures not yet announced, which will be implemented from 2014 onwards. With growth in real spending on public services being cut from 1.2 % to 0.7% from 2011 and public spending as a whole set to fall from 48% of national income to 39% in 2017-18 on current Budget expectations, this represents the most sustained constriction on public sector finances for many years. Despite the planned extra investment in houses, jobs and the low carbon economy, public sector capital investment will also drop.

It is clear that local government will continue to operate within tight financial constraints for a generation, with cuts in grant exacerbated by declining local council income. Many will think it a struggle to squeeze out further efficiencies and radical thinking about how councils fund and deliver services will therefore continue to rise up the agenda. Partnership working, co-production, effective

commissioning and community empowerment will all be crucial elements of a council's strategy to meet these challenges and to avoid compromising the value of what it provides.

A key task is to tackle these issues in a way which involves local people. Trust in public services and confidence in democratic decision-making can only be maintained if people feel their voices have been heard. The imperatives of the empowerment agenda apply in bad times as well as good, and will be significant drivers in achieving effectiveness and efficiency. Councils are already working with communities on asset transfers and budget consultations; they are involving people in choices about policing, community safety, and other community action plans. This represents the start of a process, implementing new forms of participation. How much people feel they can have a say in local decision-making will be an explicit criteria for success under Comprehensive Area Agreements.

Councils will be under pressure to minimise the costs of participation, but giving way to these pressures would be a significant failure of nerve and capacity. Initiatives to protect local services can involve providing coordination and support; these require little if any funding. Of necessity, councils must provide communities with the basis to build their own resilience, enabling individuals and families to use their skills within a structure which supports economic recovery. But beyond this it will be necessary to make difficult decisions about resources, and the remit and extent of services. How can the business case for including the community in these decisions be made?

To quote the former Secretary of State, Hazel Blears, at this seminar, "The fact is that efficiency doesn't mean doing less, it means doing things differently". Addressing the big picture will involve mapping flows of public spending and making links between services to identify ways in which public money can be spent more effectively. It will also involve a rigorous understanding of local needs and priorities: services may be leaner but will also be more responsive and used more efficiently.

The big picture must also take account of cohesion, and the social and economic cost of community dissatisfaction and unrest. As the former Secretary of State pointed out, "When people feel anxious about their homes and jobs, opportunists are quick to stir trouble and set people from different backgrounds against each other". With councils now required to make an additional £600 million efficiency savings a year, it will be a central to keep the public onside.

Themes

Following three short interventions, including one from the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, a diverse group of participants from local government and the third sector took part in world cafe style deliberative sessions. The fluidity of the world cafe format offered participants a degree of autonomy. Each session they decided whether to move tables and who they would like to talk with. This discussion format allows for what might be termed 'cross-fertilisation' of ideas. This cross-fertilisation was evident in the transcripts in which similar comments appeared in several different contexts each time eliciting a new set of questions to be explored.

A series of key themes surfaced from the conversations. The overarching message that emerged was that *empowerment in local government must be a way of working rather than a specific set of programmes or initiatives*. It is a way of working which will enhance the ability of local government professionals to deliver services to local people. Through good public engagement councils can stimulate creativity and innovation in order to really make efficient decisions that enhance the lives of local people.

Three key themes were identified from the conference:

1. **Giving power to citizens is already being used as a way to support economic resilience.** Councils are rising to the challenges of increased unemployment and tighter budgets. Devolving control over decisions down to citizens and communities can make local labour markets more resilient and local people more able to meet the challenges of recession. Giving power to citizens can also build the 'internal' capacity of councils to work more effectively.
2. **Public engagement can be used to gain useful customer insight and find efficiency savings.** Empowerment should not be a bundle of new measures and initiatives or something additional to the work councils already do. Good public engagement can be part of a way of working that helps councils to take tough decisions, find efficiency savings, and innovate through the economic down turn.
3. **But, we need to go further and (re)think more fundamentally about how we engage with citizens and deliver services.** Conversations explored the nuances of the empowerment agenda, looking at the different conceptions of public engagement, the relationship between citizen power and the localism agenda and the politics of empowerment.

Giving power to citizens is already being used as a way to support economic resilience.

Economic resilience requires communities, employers, and local government to respond effectively to the challenges of rising unemployment, reduced budgets, and declining private investment. Councils need to find innovative solutions in order to continue to deliver services which maintain the level and quality of provision. At the same time the 2009 Budget requires councils to continue to find efficiency savings. In order to achieve these seemingly conflicting imperatives, councils must avoid entering into a zero-sum game in which budget cuts mean a reduction in services or jobs. As some of the largest employers in the community, the economic resilience of councils is fundamentally tied up with the economic resilience of the communities they serve. The difficult decisions that councils are required to make are therefore also the concern of communities.

In hard economic times it will be tempting for councils to lower their ambitions, maintain existing levels of service provision, and hope to ride out the recession. This would be a mistake. The economic down turn does not, as the former Secretary of State noted, mean that councils can play safe by maintaining the status quo. "Tough times make empowerment more important and reform more urgent", she stated; the economic downturn is an opportunity to do things differently. But in order to grasp this opportunity, local government needs to develop a culture of flexibility which allows working practices to adapt and change to meet the new challenges thrown up by recession. Instilling a culture of flexibility in local government is what might be called the 'internal' goals of the empowerment agenda. It is about ensuring that the participation of local people in the business of councils is built into working practices across all council functions. This requires councils to build and maintain strong relationships across communities, and most importantly, to collect information from

"It's easy to engage on crime and housing. But how do we engage on unemployment and skills?" **Conference participant**

local people which is relevant to their work. Fundamentally, empowerment is about councils making good decisions, because good decisions are efficient and cost effective.

The flipside of developing the internal working practices of councils is an equivalent focus on developing the capacity of people and organisations in the local area to meet the challenges of recession. As unemployment rises, it is a priority for every local authority to avoid the creation of a new cohort of long term unemployed. With

few employment prospects, the new jobless are faced with potential long term unemployment, which can lead to worklessness becoming a way of life. As much as empowerment is about a culture of flexibility 'internally' within councils it is also about developing the capacity of local people to respond to the challenges of the economic downturn. Unemployment caused by structural changes will mean that whole industries may disappear. Those out of work from declining industries may no longer find their skills in demand and diminishing prospects of returning to work. To avoid long term unemployment increasing, local authorities must engage with the unemployed to move them closer to the job market. Public engagement strategies which can also foster the development of skills in the unemployed will lead to more dynamic local labour markets.

Conference participants emphasised the widespread benefits of volunteering as a way of "keeping people close to job market"; pointing to the key role councils can play in the removal of barriers to volunteering and stimulating the creation of voluntary opportunities. Volunteering was by no means the only strategy or option suggested for addressing rising unemployment. A number of conversations focused on the opportunity for developing apprenticeships, and apprenticeships specifically in local government, as a way to re-train and re-skill labour. But what these discussions highlighted more broadly was the need for councils to take an active role in stimulating the creation and take-up of opportunities for local people. It is only by playing this active role and engaging local

people that councils can prevent increases in long term unemployment. In this recession it is vital that councils act to ensure the newly unemployed don't end up joining the most marginalised and excluded social groups.

It is important to recognise the role of the third sector in fostering economic resilience in communities. Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations are critical agents for giving power to local people, as they often engage far more effectively with the most excluded groups than councils can. Local VCS groups provide vital support to those who most need it. But VCS groups also play a vital part in stimulating the local economy and can help build the ability of individuals to get back into the labour market. However, the VCS is often heavily dependent on funding streams from local authorities in order to carry out its work. It is likely to experience uncertainty of future revenue as budgets tighten and local government funding streams come under threat. Ensuring sustainable funding for VCS groups is vital to making local people feel they have power and is critical to maintaining a dynamic local economy.

There was widespread recognition among participants of the value the third sector can offer local government. Increasingly, participants noted, this is resulting in the outsourcing of service delivery to VCS organisations. Outsourcing is often the most effective and efficient way for some services to be delivered. However, at the same time it is important to recognise the capacity gaps that exist within the third sector.

“Councils could take on apprenticeships and set an example for private sector.”

Conference participant

There is particularly an issue regarding third sector commissioning, with local government rarely recognising the pressures put on VCS organisations who are involved in commissioning processes. Increased outsourcing to the third sector must be accompanied by the appropriate support from councils to ensure that VCS organisations can effectively participate in the commissioning and delivery of services. As the capital available in councils for such support decreases, participants saw the potential to foster greater collaboration between business and local third sector organisations. Businesses often have skills which are limited or lacking from VCS groups. By lending its capital and expertise, business can help develop the VCS as a pillar of the local economy.

The current recession throws into relief the interconnections and dependencies between councils, business, VCS groups and local people. As unemployment increases, the fragility of these connections is exposed and the knock-on implications felt far beyond the site of their immediate impact. Economic resilience is about maintaining these interconnections as well as being able to innovate and forge new ones. This ensures that when one link in the chain breaks it doesn't bring down the entire structure. Public engagement offers the opportunity for new links to be forged between people and the organisations that serve them and can help maintain the stability in local economies. By working closely with the public councils ensure that the dynamism needed to overcome the difficulties of an economic downturn exists in the local economy and help secure the future well being of local people.

Public engagement can be used to gain useful customer insight and find efficiency savings.

As the impact of the economic downturn is felt more widely in local communities, there is a danger that slashing public engagement initiatives becomes seen as a way to find short-term savings. This 'quick wins' strategy relies on a perspective that views engaging the public as something additional to everyday functioning of local authorities; it is something which is nice to do but not essential to the business of local government. It is a danger for this agenda that some factions within local government remain unconvinced by the case for involving local people in decision-making. The 'quick wins' strategy potentially poses a threat to this agenda and diminishes the power of local people to influence important decisions in tough economic times.

Many participants at the conference are working on the frontline, tasked with engaging the public in the development of services. Among these participants, the 'quick wins' strategy was widely considered ill-conceived and based on a misunderstanding of the job local government professional do. To see engagement with the public as an optional add-on assumes a default way of working, in which decisions are taken which exclude the views, insight, and feedback of those who they affect. This assumption is neither an accurate nor compelling. Decisions in both central and local government have, historically, rarely been taken without the consideration of the views of people who will feel the impact. The 1942 Beveridge Report argued this very point stating that "social security must be achieved by the co-operation between the state and the individual"¹. The 'quick wins' strategy would not only crudely axe a raft of measures designed to improve the way local government works, it would also go against an historically embedded way of working.

"Engagement will help us rethink the relevance of services to people and will focus down on issues." *Conference participant*

What was clear from the conference's conversations is that local government is ahead of the game. Many local authorities already "do" empowerment and have been doing so for some time. The battle over whether or not to engage the public in the business of local government has largely been won, if indeed it ever needed to be. From the transcriptions of the conversations it was clear that the benefits of involving people in decision-making and service design were obvious to participants. The challenge, however, is to ensure that this way of working is embedded across the authority and not left to one or two champions. To create an empowering organisation is a challenge that many of the conversations addressed. This challenge is not unique to local government and will found in the boardroom discussions of most large companies as CEOs try to work out how to get the best from their staff and maximise returns from the market. The challenge is to stimulate what one participant described as an "epiphany moment" in officers, in order to reach a point where talking to the public "is just part of everyday business". This scale of change is of course not something which will happen overnight. As participants noted, embedding this way of working in an organisation requires us to think in the long term and towards a future vision for local government.

For participants, this way of working is about "how resources can be maximised, involving people in making difficult choices, [and] sharing difficulties with residents". Good decisions are efficient decisions; this is commonsense. However, during the economic downturn it is likely difficult decisions will have to be made that will be negatively perceived by the local public. Well managed communication can be effective in countering anticipated hostility in local populations, but in many cases it will have limited impact. Engaging the right people at the right time can not only provide the evidence base for effective communication but can also in some cases gain local support for a course

¹ Beveridge, William. 1942. Social insurance and allied services (The Beveridge Report).

of action. Empowering citizens is therefore also about councils being up front about difficult decisions with local people. Tough decisions will be efficient decisions if they have the support of the public.

“There is a need to embed engagement in everything we do”

Conference participant

The public also have a role to play in finding solutions. The former Secretary of State argued in her speech: “When it comes to finding efficiencies, empowerment is part of the solution, not part of the problem”. If empowerment is

approached simply as a bundle of separate measures rather than as an overall way of working it is unlikely to find efficiencies. Solutions to tough decisions can only be effective if the problem has been clearly defined. How a problem is approached is to a large extent dependent on who defines it. The reason top-down solutions so often fail is because the problem they addressed was poorly defined. In order to access what participants described as the “real problem” local government professionals must talk to local people. By bringing together diverse and heterogeneous groups of people, councils can tease out the nuances and multiple dimensions of what might superficially appear simple problems. Engaging local people can open up an issue, make visible previous unknowns and otherwise invisible connections, and broaden the horizons of decision makers.

The search for effective solutions, the participants argued, requires local government professionals to move away from being “experts” who can solve problems in isolation from local people. This requires them to approach public engagement as something more than local people just giving feedback on proposed ideas. Talking to citizens should not only happen at the end of the policy making cycle but throughout the various stages, and should even be allowed in some cases to shape the cycle itself. Giving power to local people requires local government professionals to shift their role from one in which officers determine the policy cycle to one in which they *guide* the decision making process and *facilitate*, rather than *deliver*, the outcome. An empowering local authority is one in which local government professionals see talking to local people as fundamental to defining complex problems and accessing effective solutions.

“Professions need personalities. Not seeing themselves as experts and being much more open to customer’s needs and ideas.” *Conference participant*

This shift in the working culture of local government will make the delivery of services by councils more targeted and efficient. Efficiencies are not found by entering into simple zero-sum trade off games when budgets are cut. Participants at the conference instead saw the recession as an opportunity for problems to be redefined and priorities reassessed. Empowering authorities serve the interests of service users but also local government professionals who are able to shift towards a fluid way of working in which policy direction is as likely to come from local people as from senior management. Talking to local people can open up the possible courses of action in any decision-making process and make visible potential efficiencies which were previously hidden from view. Ultimately, participants noted, empowering authorities are efficient authorities.

But, we need to go further and (re)think more fundamentally about how we engage with citizens and deliver services.

Among the practitioners present, there was broad agreement of the potential benefits that might be gained through empowerment initiatives. There were, however, competing and potentially conflicting understandings of what empowerment is. These contentions offered participants the opportunity to explore the nuances and meaning of empowerment. The notion that empowerment is simply increasing the number of mechanisms for local people to have a voice can be seen as akin to turning up the volume on an old stereo; it gets louder but the quality and content remains the same. If councils want to improve the quality of what they listen to they must ensure that empowerment is not simply about voice but instead look to establish, what some participants termed, “relationships” with local people.

Extractive vs. discursive engagement

In order for public engagement to be meaningful, participants argued, initiatives need to allow local people to “get beyond the shouting phase”. This draws our attention to the differences between what we might term “extractive engagement” and “discursive engagement”. The former approach sees public engagement as a one way channel through which councils can “extract” information from local people. Extractive approaches to public engagement are over-concerned with the structures or channels at the expense of the people who take part in them. All too often, it was noted, channels developed to enhance the voice of local people are ineffective because they fail to get beyond immediate, knee-jerk responses. The challenge is for practitioners to get past these basic superficial forms of engagement towards more meaningful “discursive” conversations, in which local people are partners in a two way dialogue.

As local authorities engage the public across their various functions, important distinctions between different modes of public engagement will arise. We are likely to become more sensitive to the difference between being engaged in varying capacities as, for

example, a “service user of x” or as a “resident of ward x” or as a “member of community x”. In order to meaningfully talk to citizens, local government professionals will need to pay close attention to the distinctions in the way citizens are defined by different functions of local government. These distinctions will have implications for the way councils involve local people. The different functions of local government define local people in different ways. They will therefore determine the boundaries, expectations, and possibilities which structure public engagement initiatives. For example, if a local person is being engaged as a “service user of x” they are much more likely to talk a language which focuses on their own experience, and which demands value for money, and convenience of access as a consumer would. If, on the other hand, a local person is engaged as “a member of community x” they are much more likely to talk a language which emphasises a common purpose or vision shared with other members of that community (regardless of whether the community is spatial, a social grouping, or a special interest). These various vocabularies are structured by different metaphors each of which privilege different norms and often conflicting objectives. A template approach to public engagement will therefore fail to effectively connect with the people being engaged and will gain little useful information or insight. A discursive approach to public engagement requires a sensitivity to these different vocabularies and offers the opportunity to get beyond what some term the “first 10 minutes” or “the shouting phase”. A discursive approach allows participants to adjust to the terms and conditions which structure their participation and therefore achieves a deeper level of conversation. Discursive engagement is a fundamentally more effective way to engage local people and ensure the quality of information, intelligence, or data captured.

“We need different types of evidence for different decision makers”

Conference participant

Empowerment and localism

The introduction of the Comprehensive Area Assessment will make it easier for councils to engage local people on their own terms rather than those prescribed by central government. And, as the final round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment draws to a close, many in local government hope to see a new era issued in. This has the potential to be a time in which councils will be freer to innovate, no longer stifled by centrally devised targets. This could shift the focus of local government away from appeasing civil servants in Whitehall towards empowering local people through local solutions. It is important to recognise that the deference of local government to the centre, fostered by the culture of top-down targets, has created what one participant described as “the imperative to tell a good story”. In reporting local performance to central bodies a process has developed in which local government initiatives are spun in a favourable way to present the “good practice” which is required. The participant noted that there is a “danger of believing this truth”, and that empowerment may become another local government narrative with little real impact on the ground. It therefore remains to be seen if the shift to locally agreed targets will allow councils to move towards a more honest form of appraisal.

Questions of measurement were at the forefront of many conference discussions. The focus was largely on National Indicator 4 (NI4) – the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions. Several participants argued that NI4 is a “crude” measure which they felt was too nebulous and of little use to councils. Methodological concerns about how data is collected for NI4 in, for example, the Place Survey, also throw up questions about the reliability of measure and its comparability across different local areas. There are also likely to be a whole host of factors beyond

“If local people have a good relationship with their local authority, people will feel engaged. This is more about relationships than ‘physical involvement’” *Conference participant*

the control of councils which will influence NI4 results, including the state of national politics and the influence of national media. However, most participants view NI4 as a useful shift in focus towards local people and

turning away from the priorities of Whitehall. NI4 is, if nothing else, a useful reminder for councils about where their priorities lie or should lie. While NI4 is inextricably part of the empowerment agenda, it is also important that this and other similar measures are not seen as the only barometer of whether engaging citizens is or isn’t working.

A number of discussions drew attention to the fact that, even with a new orientation of councils towards locally agreed priorities, there still exists in local government professionals a culturally induced fear of failure, which creates a barrier to innovation. A number of delegates argued that if local government is free to innovate then it must also be “free to fail” and learn from its own mistakes. This is not a desire in participants to “celebrate failure” or to encourage it. Failure is rarely, if ever, complete, and often only partial or limited to one facet of a project. The freedom to fail is a working condition which is necessary for councils to adopt in order to achieve progressive change and innovation. If coupled with robust evaluation, failure can in fact be a very effective driver for stimulating culture change and improved ways of working. In order to innovate during the economic downturn it is important that failure is not regarded negatively but rather viewed as a way of learning and ultimately a precursor to success.

The politics of empowerment

The political dimension of the empowerment agenda was pointed to by many conference participants; they observed the potential for conflict between elected members and officers conducting public engagement. Ensuring political buy-in for public engagement initiatives, and maintaining political support for doing them, is essential to giving citizens real power that can lead to

visible change. The “defensiveness of councillors” was pointed to in many discussions exploring the tension between officer-led public engagement initiatives and the legitimacy of elected decision makers. The debate about tensions between representative and participatory democracy is, as the former Minister noted, an age old debate; the terms of which have been set for a long time. There is however, she noted, no reason to see directly engaging the public as in anyway challenging or undermining the legitimacy of elected members; rather it should enhance the democratic authority of the council to make tough decisions.

Political cynics might suggest that engagement with local people on difficult issues is simply what Sherry Arnstein² called “therapy” or “manipulation”. Public engagement does of course run the risk of presenting politicians with a “get out clause”; enabling them to say of service cuts: “well you voted for it”. When involving people in tough decisions are participants being given power over the decision or merely being co-opted? Participants recognised that there is a legitimate question about whether or not it is empowering for local people to be involved in tough decisions. After all, one participant asked, “is empowerment about giving away power or not?” Power is of course never something which can be given or taken but is embedded in the structures and processes of government working. However, the consensus among participants was that there is nothing sinister about councils being honest with local people. If local people are involved in decisions at a variety of levels across the local authority, then it is unlikely that engagement will be viewed as simply a reactive “fire fighting” measure.

The questions raised here highlight some of the factors that will shape the way local government works during the recession. Many of the tensions that exist when involving people in local government will not easily be resolved; in fact many of these do not necessarily need solving. Rather, they should serve as a descriptive guide of where the opportunities and pitfalls within this agenda might lie and which those responsible for delivering public engagement initiatives will have to navigate. The conversations demonstrate wide spread support among local government professionals for this way of working and a commitment to continue through the downturn. Importantly, there is an optimism, evident from these discussions, that involving local people in decision making can make a tangible difference to their lives. Here is an opportunity for local government professionals to re-imagine their relationship with local people and look for shared answers to difficult problems.

“Councillors should get more involved. This would take the weight off Council officers to some extent and increase accountability.”

Conference participant

² Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224

Conclusion

The three themes set out in the body of this report capture the broad dynamic of the conversations that took place. It was clear however that a great deal of thinking and activity was already underway in trying to engage communities in innovative responses to current challenges. Equally, as we have seen, a great number of unanswered questions, uncertainties and even anxieties were expressed. There was a strong sense that councils had to get beyond using citizen engagement to tweak existing ways of working, and start to have some fundamental conversations about what services they delivered and how. At the same time participants were clear that entering these uncharted waters, and the decisions they make, will have real consequences for individuals and communities.

Local contexts heavily influence both the innovation that was happening and the questions that participants raised. There was a strong sense that engagement cannot be imposed from above, councils have to design activities appropriate to the circumstances, needs and aspirations of their communities.

Despite this emphasis on the local some common recommendations emerged:

- Working in partnership helps efficiencies – partnership working was seen as key to generating efficient responses, but it was also felt that partnership was not always a panacea. Time and effort are required to determine suitable partnerships and establish shared objectives. It was also felt that councils needed to take a more imaginative and holistic approach towards identifying potential partners.
- Developing skilled staff and investing money in community skills – working proactively with the community – requires particular competencies from council staff (and indeed from elected members). Core skills were no longer those appropriate to a service delivery model, but also include those more centred on collaboration, network management and facilitation. Investing in those skills is an important, though often overlooked, aspect of taking this agenda forward.
- Equally, if we are asking the community to adopt a more wide ranging set of political responsibilities and to engage more actively in the co-design and delivery of services, we need to recognise that the knowledge and skills required do not necessarily exist everywhere they are needed. Again, upfront investment in developing these skills was felt to be an important though challenging goal.
- Context is always different, needs to be understood, and as remarked above, is all important. The general view was that councils had a much better understanding of communities than almost any other body, but that there is still room for a richer understanding of the types of community they serve and the way in which those communities (few of which are determined by geography) define themselves, relate to each other, attach value to different activities, generate social relations and use services.
- Tough decisions need to be made transparent – one thing on which there was universal consensus was that the fiscal climate means that tough resource allocation decisions are going to be necessary and that some of these decisions were bound to be unpopular. It is vital that such choices are made in a transparent manner so that people can understand the processes behind them and even feel they have some influence.

- Councillors are central to the whole agenda – the question of democratic legitimacy was discussed at length throughout the event. There was a strong feeling that, while there was a democratic as well as a practical benefit in greater participation in decision-making, this did not invalidate the role of elected councillors. Indeed their role is vital for providing continuity, retaining focus on the big strategic questions, facilitating the engagement of citizens, holding the ring between competing interests, and speaking for those voices that do not shout loudly. Crucially, councillors also have to mediate between local decision-making, central directives, and the complex realities of implementation and delivery.
- Participants thought it is vital that the dilemmas, trade-offs and compromises involved in policy development are shared and that the community takes some ownership of them. As one participant put it “It’s crucial that we don’t simply create more sophisticated ways for people to demand things we can’t deliver. If we do that we just create a huge disappointment mechanism.”

There was, predictably, less consensus on how to avoid this danger and get the community to claim ownership of problems. This was seen as one of the key learning edges in relation to this agenda.

While all the participants in the event had their own questions and obstacles to overcome, there were some other key questions for further investigation that were flagged up. These included:

- What new systems and processes do you need? What new skills will make this agenda come alive?
- How do you collect evidence that engaging communities in decision-making leads to better results in relation to economic recovery; indeed what would constitute evidence in this context? What is the best way to engage the community in order to develop understanding about the hard choices that are being made, and to avoid increasing demand that cannot be met?
- What is the link between participation and a broader notion of community resilience than is encompassed by the focus on economic renewal? How does it connect to skills, employment cohesion etc.? What would a resilient, engaged community look like?

Interestingly, there was a feeling that these questions transcended immediate political considerations. While specific articulations of the ‘empowerment’ agenda have been associated with particular politicians over the years, the strong view was that the complex, post hierarchical nature of contemporary society meant that any government would have to find answers to these sorts of questions sooner rather than later.

Aside from the current recession, contemporary social challenges such as climate change, social cohesion, economic recession or ageing populations are characterised by their complexity, scale and unpredictability. Business as usual cannot solve these problems, so if we are to develop innovative responses to them, we will need to harness the talents and potential of all members of the community. That means giving people both a voice and a meaningful role in local decision making.

The overarching question remains then, not whether, but how?

Case studies

It is evident in the themes emerging from conference discussions that there is no one single correct interpretation of this agenda. It is therefore important that councils are free to implement what they see as the right approaches for their area and populations. What we want to achieve in this section is to show that many local authorities already connect effectively with local people. The ease with which councils can find the right process or initiative for their area is enhanced by a turn away from central targets and a focus on locally agreed priorities.

This series of case studies, some of which were presented at the conference, highlight the different directions this agenda can take within local government. The range of the aims and objectives shaping these case studies demonstrates the potential range of approaches local authorities have at their finger tips. These examples also remind us that engaging the public is often not about single, discreet interventions but long term, sustainable processes. Our attention should also be drawn to the variety of actors local authorities can potentially draw on in their local areas to connect with the public. We hope that these case studies will heighten the awareness within councils about what public engagement is and what it can be. This will also, we hope, broaden the horizons of local government professions and help them think about where and when they engage the public, what their aims are or might be, and how they could do this more effectively.

The case studies are presented here feature the following local authorities:

- **Devon County Council** illustrate how service cuts can stimulate citizen action and how this can be harnessed for greater collaboration between citizens and the local authority.
- **City of York Council** highlight the merits of participatory budgeting and its potential application to difficult decisions.
- **Essex County Council** show how innovative local approaches to finance could be used to benefit local people.
- **Salford District Council** remind us that established ways of working like Neighbourhood Management are already effective in connecting with local people and are complementary to new processes like participatory budgeting.
- **The States of Jersey** show how involving local people at an early stage can bring difficult long term problems to life and help build support for difficult decisions.

Case study: Devon County Council

What was the problem?

In May 2007, the Government made the decision to close up to 2,500 Post Office branches around the country. 37 of these were located in the Devon, Plymouth and Torbay area for closure in autumn 2008. This was a decision made on financial grounds to modernise the Post Office system, but the closure of Post Offices in Devon would have more far-reaching consequences.

Due to Devon's demographic characteristics, reliance on Post Office services is higher than in many other areas. Devon is primarily rural and its population is ageing faster than the general population, with 24 percent over the age of 50. This age group is far more likely to rely heavily on Post Office services. In addition, Post Offices in these areas often serve as centres for small communities and their closures would have an adverse effect on community cohesion.

What did they do?

As a result of these concerns, the Devon and Torbay Post Office Task Force was created to form a response to the area review proposing the branch closures. Made up of a combination of elected members, council officers and community representatives, the Task Force aimed to take diverging views into account when determining which branch closures should be contested. Ten of the proposed branches were decided as necessary to their communities and should remain open and the Task Force responded to the government consultation with this stance. The Task Force's role in the debate in Devon was crucial and it raised public awareness of the issue.

In addition to the formal process of the Task Force's review, community action groups were formed across the County with the goal of saving their local branches. Several protests occurred and Post Office Limited received 7,500 representations about the Devon Local Area Plan showing the strength of local commitment to saving Post Offices in Devon.

What was the result?

Unfortunately, in the end only two of the contested ten branches remained open. However, the experience has proved to be unexpectedly beneficial to local communities in Devon. Coming together to fight for a local facility has helped people learn new skills, demonstrate their shared commitment to their locality, as well as improved their abilities to respond to future threats.

What lessons can be learnt?

This case study demonstrates how making cuts to public services in a time of economic downturn risks affecting community cohesion, but also how such cuts can spur citizen empowerment in local areas. Although the Task Force was unsuccessful at saving all the Post Offices under threat, the effect of bringing local people together to protest for local services has shown that recessionary pressure can generate collaborative citizen led action and empowerment that has benefits far beyond the immediate area of concern.

Case Study: City of York Council

What was the problem?

Dealing with the recession has been difficult for councils across the country, due to rising unemployment and much tighter public budgets. City of York, like other councils, has had to deal with these pressures and adapt involvement methods to the current economic climate.

What did they do?

City of York Council has taken the approach that the empowerment agenda is intrinsically linked with helping local citizens get through the economic downturn. By working in wards and using participatory budgeting, York has shown that using tools that are already available is often a successful way to efficiently involve and empower citizens during difficult economic times.

There are 18 Ward Committees in York; each holds meetings at least four times per year, where people can discuss local issues and propose solutions. In addition, each Ward Committee has a devolved local budget, and local people can influence its spending. A specific response to the recent economic situation is the introduction of 'credit crunch surgeries' as a topic for Ward Committee meetings. These help local residents deal with financial problems they might be having.

Participatory budgeting (PB) has proven a particularly useful tool in coping with decreased resources while also engaging citizens in local decision-making. York has a long history of using a system of devolved budgets, and was announced as one of the Government's latest round of PB pilots. The process begins with local households being given lists of suggestions for budget spending, and residents are invited to ward committee meetings to prioritise their choices. Not only is this an effective way to allocate scarce resources, but it involves citizens in a proactive way and empowers them to be active in their community.

Each ward also produces newsletters called 'Your Ward', featuring content such as volunteering opportunities, credit crunch surgeries and other suggestions to help people through the recession. The results from participatory budgeting are published in these newsletters so that local residents are informed and can feel like they could make a difference in the spending of scarce public money.

What lessons can be learnt?

In summary, York has taken a 'business as usual' approach to dealing with the recession. With involvement of citizens already built into the agenda of ward committee meetings and participatory budgeting. The only change necessary was to be resourceful, and slightly adopt the agenda to suits local people's needs and concerns.

Case study: Essex County Council

What was the problem?

The economic downturn has affected people in numerous ways. Loss of access to credit has placed a huge strain on individuals and on small businesses. In Essex, the reduced availability of loans and capital is especially problematic due to its large proportion of small businesses and self-employed people. Essex has also noted the concern of small businesses about the increasingly complex and difficult to access business support that is available.

What did they do?

Essex decided to take innovative measures and started the 'Banking on Essex' initiative. 'Banking on Essex' provides credit as well as business support to small businesses, not only for the short term but also to help them to plan beyond the recession. The Bank is using £50 million of its own money as well as acting as an intermediary to deliver European Investment Bank funds. Loans of up to £100,000 will be made available to eligible, viable small businesses in the county.

Many of the problems caused by the current economic crisis can be traced to the corporate model of banking. 'Banking on Essex' aims to base itself upon a more traditional model, focussed on lower risks and on providing support to prevent business closures. In this way, unemployment can also be reduced by keeping businesses afloat.

In addition, Essex has set up a scheme to provide apprentices to small businesses. Not only will this help small companies, but providing people who are out of work with training will be crucial in growing and retaining skills in the workforce.

What was the result?

Though 'Banking on Essex' seems to be responding to purely economic issues, the implications for citizen empowerment cannot be underestimated. Creating a bank that is focussed on local needs, personal contact and support of customers can not only help boost small businesses through turbulent times, but restore some faith in the banking sector, as well as in the council. Essex is aiming to respond to community needs whilst helping to build capacity and resilience in local people to survive the economic downturn.

What lessons can be learnt?

The Banking on Essex municipal scheme has only just been launched, so it's difficult to predict what impact it will have. Essex is hoping that it can be used as a model for other councils looking to support local people and businesses through the recession. By introducing a more personalised, local model of banking, Essex hopes to empower local entrepreneurs; giving them control over their response to the currently economic challenges.

Case study: Salford City Council

What was the problem?

During a recession, social cohesion can be adversely affected by rising unemployment and increased tension in communities. In Salford, neighbourhood management has proven an effective way to empower local people; increasing their abilities to react and adapt to difficult financial circumstances.

What did they do?

Salford is comprised of eight neighbourhoods, each of which has a neighbourhood management team attending to their particular needs and issues. By working with partners such as the police, community groups and PCTs, neighbourhood management teams help determine which priorities local people have, and budgets are allocated accordingly.

Neighbourhood management is also a way to make sure that local people are involved in the decisions that affect them directly, including local services and community safety. Each neighbourhood has a Community Committee, providing residents' forums for local people to voice their concerns and priorities.

What was the result?

This way of responding to local issues and listening to peoples' needs has been particularly well suited to helping local people in Salford respond to the economic crisis. Devolved budgets, enabling local people to make decisions through participatory budgeting, have allowed Salford's neighbourhoods to make the most of decreased resources. Neighbourhood managers also are able to harness other resources, such as local skills, in order to organise events or supporting allotments. These activities are crucial in promoting cohesive communities.

Through a programme called Spotlight, Salford has helped to mainstream community regeneration by choosing an important issue in each neighbourhood and focussing the Neighbourhood Management team's efforts on it in every area of policy. This has brought problems, particularly unemployment, into clearer view and has enabled Neighbourhood Management teams to better pinpoint causes and solutions. Salford Neighbourhood Management has begun to tackle unemployment by recognising and highlighting opportunities in communities and by taking a whole systems approach; focussing on getting both newly and long-term unemployed back into work.

What lessons can be learnt?

Neighbourhood working is an example of innovative practice in difficult economic times; it is a more localised way of helping people adapt and be resilient. By devolving some management to the neighbourhood level, specific community-level issues can be more effectively and efficiently dealt with. Through the Spotlight programme, Salford Neighbourhood Management was able to get a clearer picture of the most important issues facing each neighbourhood, and could thus more effectively plan which projects were most appropriate where.

Case Study: The States of Jersey

What was the problem?

The Island of Jersey faces serious challenges in the years to come because of its ageing population. The Government of Jersey (States of Jersey) has difficult decisions to make balancing tax rates, public services and pensions. These decisions could change life on Jersey dramatically, and it is therefore important that policies are informed by the public's views and supported by the community.

What did they do?

The States of Jersey decided to run a large public engagement initiative with the purpose of raising the awareness and understanding among the general public of the challenges and tradeoffs facing the States of Jersey. This would help the States of Jersey in turn to understand the public's views and preferences on these issues.

The States of Jersey commissioned Involve to design a process which was tailored to the specific situation in Jersey and which built the skills of the government. The consultation combined two deliberative conferences (one for citizens of mixed ages and one for young people), an online survey, and a written consultation. Involve recorded and analysed the results of each of these elements and produced a final report of the findings.

At the conferences, participants watched presentations on the ageing society, some possible policy choices and then discussed the issues in small groups facilitated by trained State officials. After the discussions participants used electronic voting pads to vote on pre-agreed questions. In the cases where participants were unhappy about the wording of the questions these were clarified or changed accordingly on the spot.

At the conference, participants were given cards with different policy options showing how much money each option would generate or save. Each group had to choose a combination of policies to address the projected annual deficit for 2035. This encouraged participants to consider the options as part of the wider whole and recognise the tradeoffs involved.

As part of the preparations Involve ran a one day training session on public engagement and facilitation. This built-up the skills of States of Jersey staff to organise and run future consultations.

What was learnt?

The event changed the political climate, allowing the States of Jersey to gain a much clearer understanding of which options the public would support, which they would accept, and which they would oppose. The process also enabled the States of Jersey to design future engagement initiatives and facilitate discussion with citizens