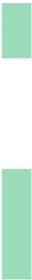


# Can you hear me? Citizens, Climate Change & Open Local Government

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June 2014



involve

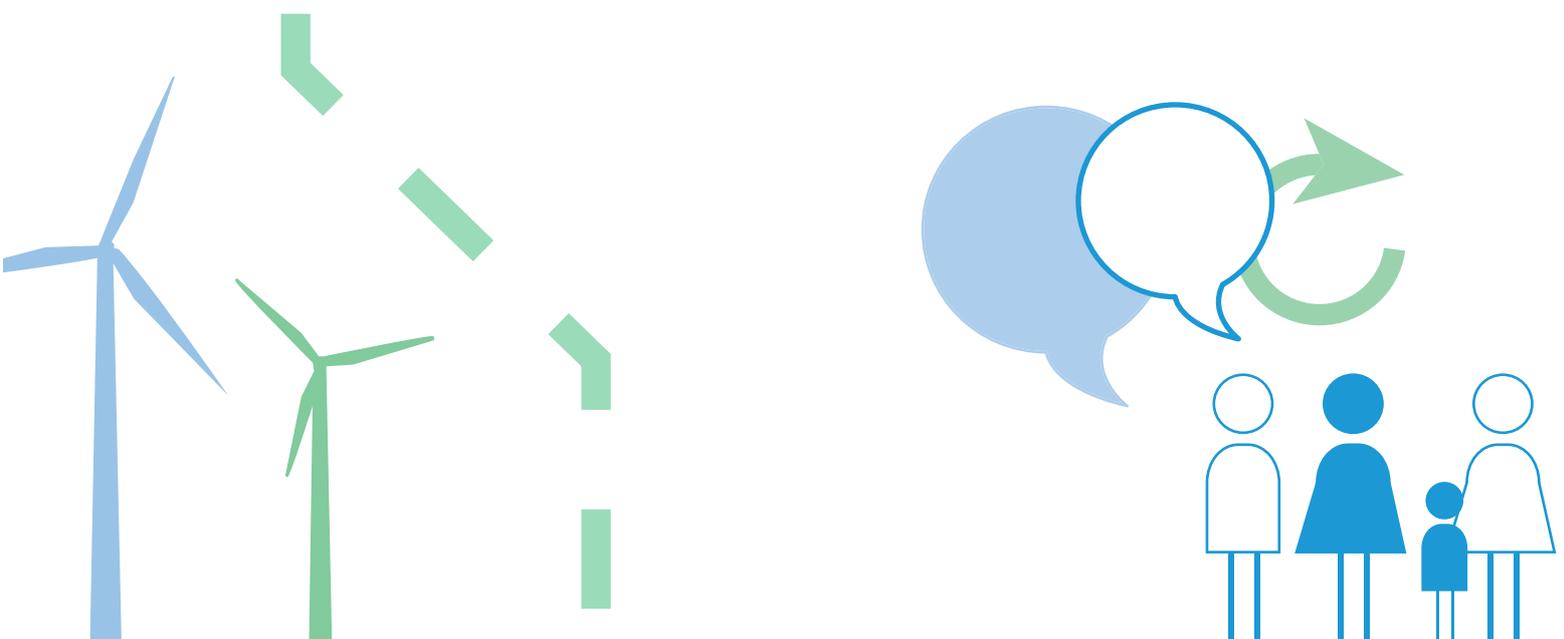


# involve

...are experts in public participation. We believe passionately in a democracy where citizens are able to take and influence the decisions that affect their lives. Through both research and practice we seek to radically transform the relationship between citizens and their governments to better use the creativity, energy, knowledge, skills and resources of all.



This study looks at how local authorities are engaging with citizens on climate change, energy futures and sustainable living. It explores how an open government approach might lead to improved governance of these complex issues



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# 1 Introduction

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The climate is changing and it is likely that more communities in the UK will be affected by increased incidences of flooding, heat waves, droughts and extreme weather events.<sup>1</sup> The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment Report states that warming of the climate system is ‘unequivocal’ and that the evidence of human influence is clear.<sup>2</sup>

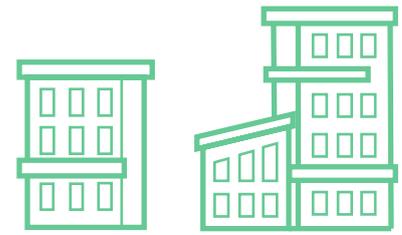
The UK’s challenging and legally binding target<sup>3</sup> to reduce carbon emissions will require major changes in our energy supply, demand and usage. Some difficult decisions and trade-offs will need to be made on issues such as nuclear power, carbon capture, large-scale renewable energy generation, and the balances between costs and benefits. The anticipated impacts of climate change (including more frequent and severe weather events, flooding and coastal erosion) mean that we also have to take steps to adapt our infrastructure and make our communities more resilient. Climate change is one of the many complex and controversial areas of public policy where national and local government cannot make the changes required alone. While some people continue to believe that it is possible to tackle these challenges through better communications that resonate more deeply with the public, Involve (along with many others) believes that

the evidence demonstrates conclusively that this is not the case. Citizen participation in climate policy making is essential if decisions are to adequately reflect the full range of public values, bring in practical insights and solutions and help ensure that decisions are more socially acceptable and effective at reducing carbon emissions while delivering public goods that work for citizens.<sup>4</sup>

However, simply engaging citizens in more collaborative processes is not sufficient. This publication explores the extent to which effective citizen participation, situated within a wider system of open government – specifically greater transparency and more effective accountability mechanisms – could help lead to more effective action to tackle climate change. This paper focuses on how this wider approach to open governance could apply to UK local government. It builds evidence, presents practical examples, and develops a set of core ideas about how local government could rethink the way it governs on complex climate-related issues. The first section makes the case for the vital role that councils have in climate-related policy and decision making. The paper then goes on to explore how councils could govern in this more open way.



## 2 Framing and re-framing



### 2.1 Why Local is important

**W**hy is the local level important for addressing climate change? Why are councils central to this?

People connect to climate change issues in many different ways, but it is in their homes and communities where they experience the direct impacts of the climate. The devastating floods in the Somerset Levels in 2014 were experienced by the people living and working in the Levels. Visitors could come and go, but the people living there had to deal with the real and dreadful impact of being flooded.

It is also in their local communities where people experience many of the changes to our energy system and infrastructure. Wind farm construction, community energy projects, shale gas drilling, coastal erosion schemes, household energy bills – this is where we as citizens personally experience what is happening in climate and energy policy.

So the local level is important for the impacts of climate and the steps being taken to change and adapt our infrastructure. But what part do local authorities play here, and how does this complement policy-making at a national and international level?

Councils do not just empty the bins. They play a key role in supporting recycling and reducing the amount of waste we throw away. They have critically important roles in shaping and maintaining local infrastructure: as transport authorities, in the strategic planning of housing provision, in flood management, and in deciding planning applications for local infrastructure. These strategies and decisions have a direct impact not only on the resilience of infrastructure in the face of climate impacts, but also the sustainability and carbon footprint of things like housing and transport provision.

Councils are also community leaders and experienced partnership brokers. They can play an important role in supporting the growth of the green economy through their Local Enterprise Partnerships.<sup>5</sup> Reforms, such as the government's Community Energy Strategy,<sup>6</sup> provide a framework for councils to facilitate community-led initiatives. Councils are the forums for convening a locality's response to the long-term disposal of nuclear waste.<sup>7</sup> They are major asset holders and can play a community leadership role in leading the way on energy efficiency. They also

have a leading role in protecting and improving public health and convening the development of health and well-being strategies for their areas.

National policy making clearly plays a critical role in addressing climate change but, as outlined above, local authorities have wide-ranging roles many of which directly and significantly influence how we mitigate and adapt to climate change.

But adapting to and mitigating climate change is not easy or straightforward. Many decisions are complex, contested and involve significant trade-offs that touch on public values, the allocation of scarce resources and direct impacts on people's lives. Examples include approving novel and controversial energy infrastructure and making trade-offs in managing retreat from coastal erosion.

Traditional 'top-down' approaches to consultation and engagement are just not going to be fit for purpose if councils are to navigate this complexity, hear the diversity of voices in their communities, balance all the different pressures and then make policy that is more socially acceptable. Consultation very often meets neither the needs of the policy makers nor of the public.<sup>8</sup> It often has limited visibility and openness, it does not facilitate a genuine conversation between citizens and decision makers and the extent to which consultation actually influences policy is often questionable or at the very least unclear.



### 2.2 A different framework

**W**hat is needed is a different way of thinking about the relationship between local government and citizens. This paper proposes that an open government framework provides a powerful way of re-framing this relationship, one which is better suited to tackling complex problems, creating a deeper and more mature conversation about public policy, supporting innovation and co-production and greater community resilience.

The next section will explain this open government framework further and explore what this might mean in practice for the relationship between local government and citizens.

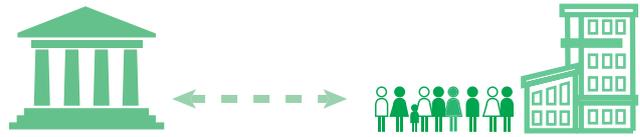
# 3 Open local government – a framework

## 3.1 What is open government?

Open government is a framework for reform that explicitly gives citizens a role in governing, including holding the governing authority to account, being involved in decision making processes and evaluating public services.

For some people, open government is predominantly about access to information and data. Involve would argue that this is only part of the picture. Access to good quality information and data is important, but a passive ‘if we build it, they will come’ sort of government is not enough. Government (national and local) needs to view citizen participation as central to good governance and therefore be much more proactive about engaging citizens.

This proactive model implies co-creation with citizens, not just of future scenarios, but of understanding the problems in the first place and coming up with solutions. This is particularly relevant to difficult and contested policies like responding to climate change. An open government values citizen participation and actively facilitates it. It requires strong and visible



leadership, to change organisational behaviours and tackle deeply entrenched interests and silos. It takes energy and commitment.

In this model of open government citizens have ready access not just to information, but to the machinery and influences that work beneath the surface of decisions. It is government that rebalances power a bit more in citizens’ favour and listens to the voices of those who whisper as well as those who shout. It is a highly accountable form of government, not just at election time but all the time.

This chapter explores how this model of open government - with its dimensions of **participation, transparency** and **accountability** – could be applied to the way that local government addresses climate change issues. The chapter explores current and potential practice, some of the challenges involved and asks questions about how the model could be used and developed further.

### BOX 1 Open Government: a potted history

The term ‘open government’ is generally understood to mean a more transparent, accessible and responsive governance system, where information moves freely to and from government, through a multitude of channels.<sup>9</sup>

The open government agenda has gained momentum over the last decade, reflecting growing consensus that openness lies at the heart of effective democratic governance.<sup>10</sup> The international Open Government Partnership<sup>11</sup> represents one example of this momentum. Proponents of open government argue that this more open form of governance can lead to more efficient decision making and services, safeguard against corruption, enable public scrutiny and promote trust in decision making processes.<sup>12</sup>

It is perhaps useful to contrast open governance with more hierarchical forms, where power is shared in very limited ways. In its Civil Service Reform Plan,<sup>13</sup> the UK Government contrasts a highly collaborative model of

open policy making with one that is much less collaborative. In the least collaborative form policy design is top down, government closely controls the agenda, the data underlying policy is restricted or redacted, and policy is not tested in the real world and accountability is opaque and therefore fudged. Open government requires policy makers to be transparent, responsive to the needs of citizens and to actively promote participation.

There is no single way to open up government; it depends on the political context and the decisions being taken. However, some common basic international indicators exist, including those relating to access to information, ombudsman bodies and audit institutions.<sup>14</sup> A number of organisations are working on the development of open governance indicators and standards, including Transparency International<sup>15</sup> and Access Info.<sup>16</sup> Another key resource is the Open Government Guide which sets out useful indicators for initial, intermediate, advanced and innovative steps that governments can take towards more open governance.<sup>17</sup>



## 3.2 Participation

The acid test here is: to what extent are citizens able to influence the policy and decision making process?

Traditional top-down forms of citizen engagement do not, traditionally, result in much citizen influence. Involvement, and others, have written at length about how much government outreach fails to engage citizens effectively and sustainably.<sup>18</sup> This outreach also often fails to create much in the way of *participation* by citizens.

Councils need to look afresh at their models of participation. One way of thinking differently about participation is to see it as a series of networks which can be nurtured and tapped into. This networked approach to participation is also being facilitated by the growth of social media. An example of digital engagement in Bristol is outlined in **Box 2** below. A networked view of the world also lends itself to another innovation in participation: delivering things with citizens. Councils are very well placed, because of their closeness to communities, to co-create solutions. An example of this co-creation in Ham and Petersham is set out in **Box 3**.

### Box 2 Digital engagement in Bristol

The city of Bristol has won the 2015 European Green Capital Award,<sup>19</sup> partly due to their emphasis on the use of digital engagement. In the face of low voter turnout, the organisers of the city's award bid (Bristol Green Capital Partnership) felt that using digital engagement methods would help to address the disconnect

between decision makers and citizens at a local level. A 'Back the Bid' website was launched, asking organisations to pledge their support and submit new ideas for future projects, of which 160 usable entries were collected.

### Box 3 Ham and Petersham Street Champions

Ham and Petersham (part of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames) became one of 10 Low Carbon Zones (LCZ)<sup>20</sup> funded by the Greater London Authority to help residents, schools and businesses go green, save money and create jobs. Each Zone was awarded a share of £3 million by the Mayor of London to cut carbon by 20.12 per cent by 2012.<sup>21</sup>

A key component of the Ham and Petersham LCZ was the 'Street Champions' approach, a separately funded project managed by a local charity South West London Environment Network partnering with Ham United Group.<sup>22</sup> Thirty local residents were recruited as volunteers to encourage their neighbours to take up energy saving measures. This was based on principles of peer education in recognition that social processes are critical to widespread and sustained adoption of environmentally sustainable behaviours.<sup>23</sup> For example people are more likely to install energy saving measures in their

homes if one of their family or peers have done so. In fact, the number of applications to join the LCZ was 24 percent higher in streets with a Street Champion compared to streets without one.<sup>24</sup> Residents reported an improvement in the general environment and also said they felt more confident engaging with other members of the community.<sup>25</sup> Overall the Ham and Petersham LCZ achieved a 29 percent emissions reduction amongst participants in the domestic sector.

Part of its success can be attributed to working collaboratively with the community. The Street Champions initiative was successful in building networks and creating enthusiasm. Street Champions continued to be active for a period following the official end to the LCZ, running advice sessions and distributing free energy saving items at Ham Library.

The Ham and Petersham experience (and that of many other councils) shows that it is possible to work with the grain of what interests citizens and tap into and nurture community capacity to help change things. Whilst the council commits resources to facilitate this, the networks within the community achieve much more than the council could on its own. But it's not just about rethinking models of participation in *delivery*, councils should also look afresh at co-creating *policy* with citizens. This is where it can become more challenging for officers and councillors, as shaping policy is traditionally very much their territory.

This is not about replacing representative democracy with direct democracy. The buck still stops – and should stop – with elected councillors. They have the difficult task of balancing the whole range of different opinions and demands and making the best decisions they can. However, some of the issues we face (like climate change and transforming energy systems) are complex and contested. The evidence indicates that a policy making process which is open, accessible and able to bring in the perspectives of citizens makes for better governance, as well as having a greater chance of engendering trust. This becomes increasingly important and pressing given the unprecedented cuts in funding that councils face. Difficult decisions need to be a common endeavour.

Many councils struggle to turn innovations in participation and co-creation into mainstream practice, and to move from small to larger scale. The barriers are ones that are well understood but not always well addressed:

- **Resources – one-off project funding is useful but it is not a sustainable model**
- **Leadership – this is absolutely key: if the senior leadership does not want something to happen, it won't happen**
- **Organisational inertia and resistance – the biggest challenge for determined leadership can often be here**
- **Skills and behaviours – many council staff have not created policy with citizens before or are anxious about opening up the policy-making process: it takes different skills and behaviours which need to be supported and nurtured. Councillors may also be wary of opening up the decision-making space.**
- **Keeping citizens and communities engaged and interested – it's not easy to sustain.**

In respect of climate and energy issues, there are other challenges as well. For example:

- **Planning for energy infrastructure is notoriously difficult, particularly if the infrastructure is novel and controversial. The planning system – whilst providing opportunities for public consultation – is often technical and bureaucratic, is not well suited to deliberation, and does not always hear the diversity of citizen voices nor of all the issues that concern citizens.**
- **The same critique can also be applied to the strategic planning process, where councils look ahead to longer-term policies on land use, sustainability, etc.**
- **Local authorities are scaling down or de-prioritising their climate change programmes, often focussing solely on their own emissions.<sup>26</sup>**
- **Notwithstanding the newsworthiness of dramatic weather events, the broader political discourse and more immediate pressures (such as the financial crisis) tend to squeeze climate change off the news agenda. As GlobeScan chairman Doug Miller has said, "evidence of environmental damage is stronger than ever, but our data shows that economic crisis and a lack of political leadership mean that the public are starting to tune out".<sup>27</sup>**

### Some questions about Participation

1. *What will help councils to change their world-view of participation and embed it, sustainably, into their behaviours?*
2. *How do councils ensure they hear the diversity of citizens' voices, including those with less power and influence?*
3. *How best to engage the interest and involvement of citizens?*
4. *How can existing statutory frameworks (such as the planning system) be made to operate in much more open and deliberative ways?*



### 3.3 Transparency

The acid test for transparency is whether citizens understand how the decision making process works and have access to it.

Clearly, good access to information is a fundamental requirement for this to work. Information needs to be easily accessible, in formats that are welcoming, useful and easy to understand for all citizens who might want access. This might require councils to think about different channels for different audiences, and also think about how vulnerable communities (e.g. citizens with learning disabilities) are able to access information.

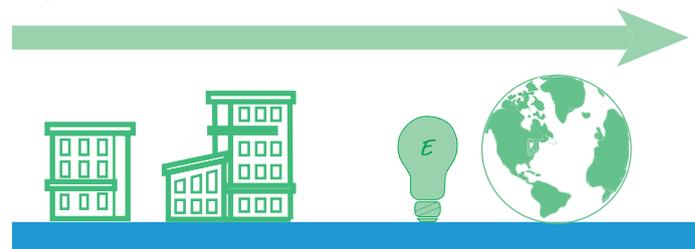
The information needs to come out of an organisational culture that sees its information as part of the commons, in other words something that is owned by us all. Councils should be open by default, with a basic presumption of openness about everything they do, tempered only by proper considerations of statute, privacy and protection. Citizens and stakeholders should not have to resort to the Freedom of Information Act to find things out.

But transparency is about much more than access to information. It is also about things *happening* in the open, about the process of governance being visible and accessible. If a council goes out to public consultation on a controversial policy, particularly one that is going to generate a lot of public concern, then it is not going to help itself or the cause of good

governance if the subsequent deliberations and real decisions are then made behind closed doors. Access to the *process* of decision making is a key element of transparency.

Transparency can, in turn, help the council and its community to work together in improving local quality of life and working towards more sustainable communities, as the example in **Box 4** below shows.

Transparency works both ways. Councils should also listen to the conversations already taking place in the public space, not just in well-established media such as local newspapers and radio, but also online. Just as councils will be ignoring some voices if they go exclusively digital, so they will miss hearing others if they just stick to what they are used to. Adapting to the dynamics of new media may not be easy for local authorities: online conversations are much more immediate, and some councillors may be resistant. The key point here is not about being new and flashy for the sake of it, but rather connecting in a meaningful way with citizens.<sup>28</sup>



#### Box 4 Open data: 'Frome Energy Hub'

In 2008 Frome Town Council conducted a community engagement exercise to develop a Community Plan. The key concerns emerging were local resilience, reducing energy consumption and increasing renewable energy generation. Frome Town Council is working with Converging World, a local charity that invests in renewable energy and uses returns to invest in environmental and social projects in the UK and India.

Converging World collects baseline energy consumption data on electricity, gas and transport and identifies potential renewable sources of energy. This data is presented in a report and published on Converging

World's Energy Hub website, which also provides a variety of online tools to help communities understand, analyse and reduce energy usage.<sup>29</sup> Through the Energy Hub the council is piloting a new approach to collect and present data in an accessible and digestible format. It intends to share data and ideas with the community, identify challenges, as well as to inspire residents to take action on energy consumption and generation. The Energy Hub could potentially be a useful tool in opening up discussion and action between the council, stakeholders and the community. With 50 communities already signed up, the Energy Hub is also potentially a powerful tool to inspire and encourage others.

### Some questions about Transparency

1. *What will incentivise councils to open up their decision making processes and to become open by default?*
2. *How can councils support their officers and councillors to become better listeners?*
3. *What barriers do residents encounter when trying to find out things from, and engage with, their council?*

## 3.4 Accountability

The acid test here is that citizens can hold local government to account for its decisions.

Genuine accountability to citizens is a critical foundation for good democratic governance. Arrangements in place to promote accountability in local government include:

- **Regular elections of councillors**
- **Scrutiny Committees, set up under the Local Government Act 2000, which are there to scrutinise the work of the council's executive**
- **External audit, which looks at how well the council manages its finances and whether it has proper financial controls in place**
- **Local press and radio.**

The challenge for local government is whether these existing routes are working well enough. Voter turnout in local government elections is low and declining over the longer term – average turnout in the 2012 local elections was just over 30 percent.<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding the good work on scrutiny by some councils, in 2009 the Committee on Standards in Public Life concluded that “there is little doubt that in practice in many local authorities the scrutiny function is not working as effectively as intended”.<sup>31</sup> Financial audit reports can be fairly impenetrable for the layperson.

In a world where councils are co-creating openly with citizens, where information flows more openly between citizen and council, where citizens are seen as active stakeholders in local governance, these more traditional forms of accountability are not sufficient. Councils need to think creatively about how accountability can be made more effective from a citizen perspective:

- **Being held to account can be uncomfortable for those on the receiving end. It is right that accountability is always robust, but it does not always have to be adversarial. Citizens want their institutions to learn from mistakes and fail-**

ure, and they very often have ideas about how things can be improved. If that learning takes place in and with the public, then the process can be a more co-creative one, deepening the evidence base and leading to more effective decisions. It can of course expose differences between senior leaders and create uncertainties, and so requires mature and confident leadership to navigate the process.

- **Scrutiny Committees could take the lead on drawing citizens into deliberative conversations about difficult and contested policy issues, such as the local strategy for energy infrastructure or improving the planning process.**
- **Citizen-led audit and citizen-led performance assessment (something that already happens, for example, in some social care services, with users assessing how well services meet their needs).**

**Box 5** outlines an example of a sustainability action plan that can be used as the basis for evaluating progress against commitments.

### Some questions about Accountability

1. *What practical steps can councils take to develop and nurture an organisational culture that welcomes accountability, one that focuses on solving problems with citizens?*
2. *How can citizens and councils innovate and create meaningful accountability mechanisms to improve climate change mitigation and adaptation?*

## Box 5 Brighton “One Planet City”

The One Planet model in Brighton and Hove, accredited by sustainable development charity BioRegional,<sup>32</sup> is intended to enable residents to live well using a fairer share of the world’s resources. It provides a framework by which to assess challenges and plan for the future.

The One Planet principles are outlined in the City’s Sustainability Action Plan,<sup>33</sup> which was unanimously agreed by all councillors in March 2013. The Action Plan will be used to meet two of the council’s key priorities: creating a more sustainable city and modernising the

council. The One Planet Principles<sup>34</sup> cover the following areas: energy, waste, transport, materials, food, water, land use and wildlife, culture and community and health and happiness.

The One Planet Living approach and ten principles framework provides a narrative linking action on a number of different areas under one programme. In addition to planning for the future, the council’s action plan also provides an opportunity to publicly evaluate progress and impact.



## 4 Afterthoughts

This short paper has briefly explored the connections between climate change and open local government. We have explored some of the challenges and posed questions for further exploration.

One important point to make is that the three elements of this open government framework – partici-

pation, transparency and accountability – are mutually dependant. All three are essential for a healthy local democracy.

Finally, here are some potential indicators of what this more open approach to local government might look like:

What this might look like in local government	
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constantly seeking citizen participation (beyond statutory requirements)</li> <li>• Innovation and co-creation</li> <li>• Genuine scope for influencing policy</li> <li>• Leadership and buy-in from decision makers</li> <li>• Core competency of staff</li> </ul>
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making process is visible, transparent and accessible</li> <li>• Data openly available, in accessible formats</li> <li>• Clear communications, free flow of information between citizens and council</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies are subject to public scrutiny</li> <li>• Citizens help define indicators and outcomes</li> <li>• Independent or community led audit</li> </ul>

Table 1 Some indicators for open local government

# Acknowledgements

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**Peter Wheelhouse**, Frome Town Council

**Philip Revall**, Sustaining Dunbar

**South West London Environment Network**

**Susan Sheeham**, Lambeth Council



# Endnotes

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