Pathways through participation

Local engagement in democracy

October 2011

The Pathways through Participation research

The Pathways through Participation project is a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explores how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives and within the communities they belong to. Through improved understanding of the reasons for, and the contexts of participation, the project also aims to influence policy and practice, and encourage the development of opportunities for participation that are better suited to people's needs and aspirations. It focuses on the following questions:

1. How and why does participation begin and continue?
2. Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?
3. What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

The research methodology placed individuals' own experiences throughout their lives at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three different geographical locations and contexts (suburban Enfield, rural Suffolk and inner city Leeds). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, enabling people to tell their story in their own words.

01 Introduction

This briefing paper summarises the findings and implications from the Pathways through Participation project relevant to local engagement in democracy.

The research identified three broad and overlapping categories of participation that cover a wide range of participation activities:

- **Social participation:** the collective activities that individuals are involved in
- **Public participation:** the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy and the state
- **Individual participation:** people's individual actions and choices that reflect the kind of society they want to live in

This briefing paper is concerned with the findings relevant to public engagement in democracy, and so focuses specifically on activities within the public participation category. However, these categories are interrelated and overlapping, and the research identified different pathways connecting activities within these categories.

Interviewees identified their public participation activities as including:

• being town and parish councillors

• voting

• standing for political office

• membership of political parties (including sitting on committees)

• attending meetings of political parties

• contacting MPs

• being a patient representative on health service issues

• attending area forums and conservation committees

• taking part in demonstrations and protests

• being part of an activist network aimed at political change

• signing petitions, campaigning and lobbying related to government and other public policy decisions.

In relation specifically to local engagement in democracy, three interconnected issues emerged from interviewees' stories of participation, all described in more detail below:

• **Language and image**
• **Practice**
• **Accessibility**

02 The language and image of local engagement in democracy

Perceptions of different participation activities, and how that reflected on the participants themselves, were very important to our interviewees – particularly any suggestion that they were 'do-gooders' or 'political'. Though many were cynical about the value of voting, the majority were consistent and committed voters. It was common for interviewees to refer to voting as a civic duty and to attribute their views on voting and their voting habits (though not necessarily who they voted for) to a sense of duty fostered by their parents rather than to a general interest in politics or political beliefs.

There was also a common view that safe seats, where one political party regularly received a large majority of the vote, did not encourage political participation, as people did not feel that their involvement would make any difference:

'. . . you do feel sometimes you could vote for the local hedgehog and it wouldn't actually matter.'

There was also a sense from some interviewees that the possibility of political change could encourage people to get involved and vote:

'. . . we've just had a shift in local government and it seems like it's maybe more worth getting involved here because there's a fight to be had…'

However, voting did not necessarily reflect a commitment to wider political engagement. On the contrary, being political was often seen as very negative. Even some interviewees who held public political roles, such as parish councillors, or who were in frequent contact with political representatives, maintained that they were *'not political'*.

Across our interviewees, levels of confidence and trust in the political system tended to be low. Interviewees described this as resulting from the parliamentary expenses scandal, the Iraq war and their view that politicians were self-serving, only in it for the money or only took an interest when it was in their own political interest. In general, interviewees' propensity to contact a political representative for any reason tended to be determined by their overall sense of confidence and trust in the political system.

'…I don't like politics with a capital P I suppose because I don't believe that one particular group of people has all the answers.'

Despite holding negative perceptions of the political system, collectively our interviewees identified many examples of contacting local political representatives and MPs – by email, telephone or face to face, or through Facebook campaigns, letters, petitions and by attending council meetings, councillors' surgeries, public meetings and election hustings. And some interviewees gave positive opinions of particular MPs or local councillors, often because they had engaged with and supported a cause the interviewee was involved in rather than because of the political party being represented, although these first hand experiences did affect people's voting intentions. Interviewees reported a number of positive outcomes from contacting political representatives, including:

• getting funding for projects

• getting practical help (e.g. salt for roads around a day centre)

• creating a formal conservation area

• stopping a specific housing development

• creating a tree management strategy

• raising the treatment of asylum-seekers in Parliament.

Implications
• The likelihood of elections changing things affects people's willingness to vote: the government should consider ways to increase the impact of every individual's vote.

• Lack of trust and confidence in the political system can be overcome through the direct engagement of politicians with people and the issues and causes that matter to them. Trust can be built if elected representatives engage with citizens on their terms, and respond to individuals when asked.

• People are very sensitive to how their participation is perceived and described. Language referring to 'do-gooders', the 'usual suspects' or 'NIMBYs' is not only pejorative to those it is aimed at, it also creates a negative mood around active participation generally. Those already participating should be valued, respected, supported and seen as a resource, not a burden or a nuisance.

03 The practice of local engagement in democracy

The research found an enormous range and level of local participation activities, which varied in type and depth over peoples' lives. In terms of engagement in local decision-making, the nature of the opportunities presented were important to whether and how people became involved.

While interviewees reported examples of successfully bringing about change in their local area through lobbying local political representatives, they did not give any examples where local councils or other public organisations had proactively engaged with them.

Indeed, the majority of opportunities to formally participate in the decision making processes of public institutions that we found were restricted to reacting to (and usually against) changes proposed by a council or other public body. Several interviewees spoke of taking part in these ways, including resistance to:

• a school closure

• a 'private finance initiative'

• a new housing development

• a change to the local school system

• a hospital closure

Interviewees' experiences of formal public consultations were almost entirely negative. Concerns included:

• Consultation processes feeling tokenistic or repetitious, with lots of consultations on similar issues and no sense that anyone was bringing together the results.

• Decisions already having been made prior to the consultation, which was only carried out to meet a legal obligation or as a public relations exercise.

For many interviewees, these negative experiences reinforced an existing ambivalence and lack of trust in political processes in general. As a result of this lack of faith in the system, people often stopped attending consultations and public meetings and sought to express themselves in different ways; one interviewee's experience of a consultation concerning the closure of a local hospital was that:

'. . . it was so poorly done that you could say that's why I went on the march in the end because I felt your voice wasn't being heard as part of that [consultation] thing.'

As this example shows, interviewees' perceptions of the impacts of their activities affected whether and how they started and continued to participate, especially in local decision-making. Some described evaluating the impact of their participation and adapting their engagement activities towards those that did actually make a difference.

Our research highlights the tension between the motivations of citizens and the needs of public bodies in public participation. It shows that people are motivated to get involved in the issues and activities that have personal meaning and value to them, but these do not necessary

match with the needs of public bodies, which may have other interests and priorities. The research also shows how much people want to see the impact of their participation on themselves, their networks and communities, or further afield, but this may not always be achievable or appropriate for public bodies (at least to the extent that individuals may expect).

Implications
Public bodies need to improve the design and management of formal public consultations so they are more positive experiences for participants. This means, for example, that consultation managers need to:

• Involve people early and be genuine

  - Consider opportunities to involve people throughout the decision-making process, from scoping and defining the problem to implementing the decision.

  - Involve people early enough in decision-making cycles to be able to make a difference (not after the decision has been taken).

  - Be clear throughout about what can (and cannot) be changed as a result of people's engagement.

• Understand peoples' motivations and be flexible

  - Provide ways that people can participate that fit their everyday lives.

  - Provide a variety of participatory options so that those who want to participate in depth can do so as well as those who just want to know what is happening.

  - Provide opportunities to participate that are sociable and enjoyable.

• Show the impact of peoples' participation and limit the cost to them

  - Let participants know what difference their views have made, and how they are being taken into account.

  - Let participants know what the final decision is.

  - Manage consultations so that people are asked once for views on a topic, not over and over again on similar issues.

04 The accessibility of local engagement in democracy

Our research found that people participated because they wanted to, and sometimes because they needed to. They got involved in activities that had personal meaning and value, and that connected with the people, interests and issues that they held dear.

We identified a range of factors that fostered people's participation: personal motivations, external triggers, appropriate resources and access to participation opportunities. We found that people juggle many competing demands for their time and attention and their priorities vary according to personal circumstances and life stage. Participation opportunities therefore need to complement people's lives and respond to their needs, motivations and expectations, rather than being based on the assumption that people will join the comparatively narrow, highly formalised and structured forms of participation often used by public bodies. These forms of participation exclude many people.

The uneven distribution of power, social capital and other resources means that not everyone has access to the same opportunities to participate, nor do they benefit from the positive impacts of participation in the same way. We found that lack of individual resources was a key factor in whether people were able to participate, particularly:

• practical resources; such as time, money, access to transport and health

• learnt resources; such as an individual's skills, knowledge and experience, and

• felt resources; such as their confidence and sense of efficacy.

Lack of these resources could be the result of systemic inequalities, requiring long term action, but there were also simpler practical reasons why people did and did not participate that can be tackled more easily (e.g. by providing low intensity participation opportunities, taking into account transport issues, and using appropriate language).

Our research suggests that the link between social and public participation is an important one. In terms of local engagement in democratic decision-making, people described individual acts of voting and signing petitions, but their

public participation more generally was often an extension of their social participation: that is, their engagement with a political process often came directly out of their involvement in a group or organisation and was driven by a desire to achieve a particular aim on behalf of the group – from raising funds to influencing a council decision. Beyond this, social participation – the ability to take part in collective activities and form groups around common interests or issues – itself is an important aspect of democratic society.

Social participation therefore plays a role in the accessibility of local engagement in democracy. We observed that well-run and welcoming groups, the right physical locations in which to meet and sufficient funds could create the right growing conditions for people to participate and provide a positive experience that encouraged them to continue participating. The importance of physical spaces where diverse groups could meet, and bonds and networks could be formed and maintained, was found throughout the research: without access to a hall or a room many collective activities would simply not happen. The spaces that provided access to a range of activities and people allowed pathways and connections to be established that supported sustained participation. But we found that individuals were frequently unaware of the local support networks and infrastructure that was specifically designed to facilitate and encourage participation.

Social connections emerged as being critical to whether individuals participated and how successful their participation was. Our interviewees' stories suggest that being well-connected could afford an individual better access to decision-makers and make it more likely that they would gain support for their ideas.

Interviewees also suggested that once decision-makers get to know a participant or group through their involvement in one issue, they are more likely to return to them for their input.

'We've encouraged local councillors to come and we have a monthly informal meeting in the local pub, 8.30 in [the pub] . . . as you get to know the councillors, they tend to be more interested in what you think about other things that are happening.'

This sometimes reinforced a divide between insiders and outsiders, making a relatively small group of insiders quite powerful in shaping a local agenda. However, those who were deeply engaged also emerged as an important resource to support participation and to connect to others.

Implications
- Communities and individuals who may be excluded by their circumstances or lack of resources need to be specifically encouraged to feel they will be welcome and valued, and some outreach should be targeted at those groups not yet involved.

- Social participation can be important for encouraging and enabling public participation. It can be supported by linking people and groups, and by ensuring the existence of multi-purpose spaces.

- There are valuable opportunities to work with those people already actively engaged to connect with others within a group or a place.

- Some of the factors affecting people's participation are easier to influence than others; recognising this can help define institutional and organisational strategies, policies and initiatives (see diagram below).

We suggest that an individual's:

- **motivations** are difficult to shape in any predictable way but policy makers and practitioners should *acknowledge* their importance and aim to understand them

- **resources** cannot be wholly shaped by policy makers and practitioners, but can be *influenced* by their decisions and initiatives

- **opportunities** to participate can be *shaped* collectively by policy makers and practitioners.

05 Further information

This paper has highlighted some of the key findings and implications related to local engagement in democracy and is intended to be a platform for discussing how local engagement in democracy can be better supported in the future. Detailed findings, the full report and other briefing papers are available on the Pathways through Participation website.

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the website http://pathwaysthrough participation.org.uk/

Find out more about:

NCVO:
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR):
www.ivr.org.uk

Involve:
www.involve.org.uk

Acknowledge	Influence	Shape
Motivations	**Resources**	**Opportunities**
...including an individual's personality and identity, and values, beliefs and world view	...including an individual's practical, learnt and felt resources, relationships and social networks	...including the presence and effectiveness of groups and organisations, and local spaces, events, institutions and politics

Difficult to change
for policy-makers or practitioners

Easier to change
for policy-makers or practitioners