

# **Local Vision Forum - Forum**

## **Neighbourhoods - Public services and citizen engagement**

Like other countries across Europe, we face two central challenges: to secure sustainable improvements in our public services; and re-engage our citizens with the institutions of government. These two challenges are closely interconnected.

Public services must meet the needs and expectations of the public, and be delivered at a cost that is broadly acceptable. And by enabling communities to help shape decisions on local policies and services, we will support civil renewal and strengthen the legitimacy of the institutions of government.

We believe that the more effectively communities are engaged in shaping services, the more likely it is that quality will be delivered.

The aim is to bring together a coherent and flexible user empowerment package which enables people, whether as individuals, communities of place or communities of interest, to help shape decisions about the public services they use and the things that matter to them. As part of this package we will set out the shared vision and actions that participating organisations are committed to promote and support.

This will provide the basis for local neighbourhood charters and a menu of practical options for neighbourhood action. The menu of options could include (amongst others): community calls for action in response to failure or under-performance in local services, delegation of budgets and parish arrangements. These arrangements are designed to work through the Council, not around it, with councillors at the heart of the neighbourhood arrangements acting as community leaders and advocates

- What support will councillors need to be more effective advocates for their community?
- What can Government and national organisations representing local government and the voluntary and community sectors do to help make it happen?
- How could we make sure community calls for action make a real difference, adding to established complaints procedures?

### **Welcome**

Posted by Ross on Fri, 24/03/2006 - 18:05

We hope that you will find this forum a useful way to contribute to the consultation on the future of local government.

Contributors should feel free to add their name, position and organisation to posts if they wish. It could help contextualise some people's comments, but of course some people might prefer the anonymity.

Regards,

Moderation Team

## **You ask: What support will**

Posted by macb on Mon, 27/03/2006 - 17:05

You ask: What support will councillors need to be more effective advocates for their community?

If Government allowed councillors to be able to lead debates rather than gagging them, as with current planning rules, this would help. Constant Government so called guidance and mountains of regulation and control from Whitehall only allow councillors very limited areas to be advocates for their communities.

You ask: What can Government and national organisations representing local government and the voluntary and community sectors do to help make it happen?  
See above!

You ask: How could we make sure community calls for action make a real difference, adding to established complaints procedures?  
See above!

## **Representation**

Posted by k84 on Mon, 27/03/2006 - 21:51

I am an undergraduate at the University of Durham. I recently wrote my dissertation in Politics on community engagement with the delivery of public services in a deprived, ex-mining community in County Durham. Throughout my research, it quickly became evident that statutory service providers are not doing enough to be inclusive. I talked to dozens of local citizens in a small community about service provision, what improvements or changes they would make and so on. All people I spoke to had never engaged with the delivery of a public service before, despite numerous 'engagement activities' on offer in their community. However, almost every single person had a strong opinion or suggested improvement they would like to make to a service - opinions that are currently unvoiced. Public service providers were missing out on a rich seam of information that was easily accessible simply by immersing myself in the community for a few hours with a clipboard. I believe that in order for community engagement to be more representative of community views, service providers need to actively engage with users rather than waiting for users to come and engage with them. In communities where a minority of citizens are engaging with service providers, are the opinions of the current

'silent majority' not essential to make engagement and subsequent changes to service delivery more viable?

## **The Parish Council Model**

Posted by Bryan Metcalf on Mon, 27/03/2006 - 22:00

As a clerk to a parish council, I can see the benefits of a Quality Council, including a trained clerk as the model for neighbourhood government.

The legal status, the elected body, the precept levy, the close links with the community, the corporate decisions, the audit process all contribute to this good model.

## **Search for examples of where this is happening**

Posted by Dominic Macdonald-Wallace on Tue, 28/03/2006 - 07:49

It would be interesting to know where there are considered to be examples of good practice in this area - either in the UK or elsewhere.  
People quote France or Denmark, but no one seems able to provide names of the places in those countries considered to be good examples.  
Can anyone help please?

## **Community Engagement**

Posted by edbrown on Tue, 28/03/2006 - 18:27

What support will councillors need to be more effective advocates for their community?

Primarily Councillors do not need more support but to learn to listen and act on the wishes of their electors. There is no point in saying "It is up to the people to decide." and then, when the decision doesn't go the way the council wants turning round and saying "It wasn't a referendum." - it may be technically correct from a point of law but the vast majority of people when they are told to make a decision expect the majority decision to be the one that prevails. This simply doesn't happen in Northumberland where the councillors ignore the public and there is no effective scrutiny of any decisions.

What can Government and national organisations representing local government and the voluntary and community sectors do to help make it happen?

First of all we could get rid of the idea that the voluntary and community groups represent the people. Let Parish councils have more say in matters that affect the local people. Too often the voluntary and community sector are used as pawns to avoid facing the reality of dealing with local people. Too often councils try to claim good consultation, or well developed plans without ever talking to the public and often actually excluding them. This is what happened in Northumberland over the Local Area Agreement and the Children and Young People Plan - the public were excluded from participation despite

numerous requests to be involved in the production of the plans. The result - there is no public support for the council or its future plans with 97% of the public giving a vote of no confidence in Northumbria County Council.

How could we make sure community calls for action make a real difference, adding to established complaints procedures?

It should be easier to lodge a complaint against councils and councillors. Councillors should be obliged to make information available to the public.

Councillors should be obliged to act on the wishes of the majority.

There should be heavier penalties for councillors found to breach the Standards Code and the code should be strengthened to make it a criminal offence for officers and councillors to lie to the public.

The Standards Board for England should be required to treat an investigation as if it were a criminal investigation, still assuming innocence unless proven guilty.

Councillors should be required to resign if they lie to the public.

## **Representing the people**

Posted by Stephen Townsley on Tue, 28/03/2006 - 21:31

In our local area the councillors are finding it very difficult to represent the views of the community when faced with large sums of money in the pathfinder housing renewal project.

Having spent £600,000 on consultants to get the answer that would give them government money they faced a grassroots campaign against demolition. The campaign gathered 1,400 signatures in an area with some 6,000 properties in a few weeks.

All three ward councillors, one who was the leader, support demolition. The council is Gateshead. In December 2005, just before Christmas, they announced that their surveys showed 74% in favour of their plans including the demolition of 440 homes.

They did not release the raw figures until last week at their full council meeting. Only then did residents discover the figures were somewhat misleading. Around 20% opposed their plan and 25% were in favour. A large 49% approved of the plan BUT crucially were against demolition. So in fact 69% of people either opposed the plan completely or opposed the plan if it included demolition.

However the council wants the cash so they fiddled the figures to get the cash. Local residents did call for a referendum on demolition last year. The council turned them down on the grounds it was too complicated a question for local people to understand.

Questioned at the council meeting of how they could view the 49% as approving of the plan that included demolition, the council answered by claiming that the consultants were so experienced they knew that when local residents said no to demolition they really meant yes.

The next stage in the process is the pathfinder board. This is an unelected quango which meets in secret and allows neither the public or press to attend. The quango has just two representatives of local government. Of course these representatives have an interest in getting the cash. So in fact local communities are not represented at all.

Finally approval is from the ODPM. Well pathfinder is a flagship policy. Local communities have no method of lobbying civil servants or the Deputy Prime Minister.

So in housing market renewal a system has been devised so that at every level people have an interest in getting the cash. So in actuality the plans are devised to please central government and it is purely luck if they happen to coincide with what communities want because they have little or no input into the process. If they make an input contrary to what officials want to provide then they are ignored.

Of course it will be a success. The same consultants that devised the plans will be brought back to dutifully report success and communities being revitalised. After all a flagship policy spending billions with private partners can't be seen to fail.

The only people who have little or no input into the process are the communities who have to live with the results of the policy. If a community dares to say renovation instead of demolition it is regarded as somewhat quirky and perhaps a little mad.

Whether pathfinder succeeds as a housing project is still up for judgement. It has already failed the test of democratic credibility.

## **Structure**

Posted by Ross on Wed, 29/03/2006 - 09:35

Hello,

There are some very interesting posts coming through. The diversity of experiences is something I'm sure that the ODPM will find useful.

I wanted to ask that before making posts, participants carefully consider their arguments. Be mindful of backing claims up with evidence.

Keeping posts succinct is also advisable in terms of readability and the impact of your point. At the start of each post summarise your point, then expand on the detail, at the close, try to give a 'lead on' question to allow other participants to respond.

Ross Ferguson  
Hansard Society

## **Provision of Information**

Posted by PaulaJS on Wed, 29/03/2006 - 10:16

I would remind all posters that the council is legally obliged to provide information. Under a number of pieces of legislation including the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Under FoI anyone has the right to ask for any information from a public body so if the electorate is unhappy or wants to know something they must ask - they must make use of this legislation since I know from personal experience that many public authorities pay lip service to the electorate.

Having that splashed across the papers though is a different matter.

## **Public Services**

Posted by ILATHAM on Fri, 31/03/2006 - 08:36

Has anyone else found the irony in this forum? We are discussing the improvement of our public services - how can councillors, national organisations, voluntary sectors etc assist in providing a quality of service which meets the needs and expectations of the public - while at the same time the Government appears to be attempting to ensure that no-body in their right mind would want to work in the Public Sector? The latest attack on public sector pensions has hit at the very heart of those workers you are trying to engage to provide these acceptable services!! The Government needs to realise that the desired level of service can never be provided when you have a workforce who is increasingly disillusioned with the continual unbelievable exaggerations and downright lies that the government and its protagonists are using to again place the burden of local government mistakes (i.e. pension holidays) on some of the lowest paid members of society.

Individuals such as Digby Jones (he of the 6 figure pension) continually lambaste the public sector for its 'golden hand-shake' pensions, I'd like to see what is golden about an average £3800 a year, and £1800 for women!!

Until this argument is sorted you are wasting your time discussing the possibility of improving public services with the 'involvement of communities to help shape policy' and 'effectively engaging communities' because if the LGPS pension is 'downgraded' then which public sector will be next? And no-one is going to want to work hand-in-hand with the government knowing they are carrying a pension axe behind their back!!

## **The Parish Council Model**

Posted by Peter Greening on Fri, 31/03/2006 - 15:21

As chairman of a Quality Parish Council I agree with Bryan Metcalf and believe that continuing the Quality Council Scheme to embrace all parish councils will significantly improve the effectiveness and accountability of this the first level of government. This will almost certainly require reconsideration of community size. There should be an aim to achieve commonality such that councillors each represent a similar number of the population (an optimum size of community). Once a general standard of performance has

been achieved every effort should be made to delegate more responsibility and accountability to each community.

## **Northumberland County Council**

Posted by SMcKee on Fri, 31/03/2006 - 16:43

At Northumberland we believe that generating a healthy debate about the future of local government is of vital importance, so it is with reluctance that I have to submit an item which is just to correct statements made about Northumberland County Council which remain on this forum.

Mr Ed Brown asserts that '97% of the people say they have no confidence in the county council'. This refers to an item on Mr Brown's own website which I believe has had around 200 hits on this particular 'survey'.

With reference to the lack of participation in developing the Local Area Agreement – all local authorities, local strategic partnerships and coordinators, and voluntary sector consortium have been involved and signed up voluntarily to the LAA. There has been a dedicated LAA website, regular media coverage, and regular public reports.

Regarding the Children and Young People's Plan, Northumberland has in fact been held up as a model in terms of consulting with young people to prepare the plan and indeed we have just finished a major consultation which has involved over 11,000 school children across the county.

I hope this helps put Mr Brown's comments into context.

## **Citizen engagement**

Posted by Jill Sanders on Fri, 31/03/2006 - 18:56

I'm a volunteer with this community network of local portals in Richmond upon Thames (9th year of development), which the UK Centre for Economic and Environmental Development has just commended in its SustainIT Digital Inclusion Awards. This is citizen engagement, as you will see. This engagement is also open to ward members who have their own councillor community pages. However, despite having the freedom of an independent community website direct to voters, few have shown the courage to use it! It is not just citizens who are reluctant to engage.

I'd be interested in comment about this network, an example of unique practice!

[www.oncom.org.uk](http://www.oncom.org.uk)

## **Government and Local Government**

Posted by Stephen Townsley on Mon, 03/04/2006 - 21:00

I agree with much of what you say. I was on strike last week and I resent MPs, who voted themselves the best pension arrangements available, telling the public sector that pensions are greedy.

As with many things opposition politicians are in favour of localism and in government politicians just cant resist being in control and undermine giving power down. I would like regional government. Not the talking shop for aging politicians that was offered in the North East last year but real government with power.

I think we will wait a long time before local people get any real power.

### **Local councils and citizen engagement**

Posted by localcouncilclerk on Tue, 04/04/2006 - 11:52

Local councils should be encouraged to engage more actively and constructively with their communities and, thereby, bring about greater interest and involvement in local government. The accountability of minor authorities means that purposeful engagement with our communities could only strengthen local democracy. My own council has divided the town into a number of areas and residents in each area are invited to meet councillors on a regular basis to talk about local issues etc.

For many local people public activities are determined by their recreational interests or the demands of their children. Such citizens involve themselves in voluntary organisations like In Bloom groups, Allotment Associations, Scouts and Brownies and governorships of local schools. This does not mean they are apathetic about local government; more that their priorities (once the demands of career and family have been met) lie elsewhere within the community. When issues arise that are deemed to be important eg in this locality, the management of traffic, local people are more than willing to engage in local government. Therefore for some local people empowerment comes through participation in voluntary organisations or, for example, educational institutions. Such organisations as well as local councils have their contribution to make to the viability and vitality of communities. It follows that local government reform should not be prescriptive as communities would differ one from another; however, local councils should be required to engage the people they represent in ensuring their communities' well being.

### **What about Young People**

Posted by jpmason on Tue, 04/04/2006 - 12:46

It is always interesting to hear that on issues of local government, young people are always left out of the conversation.

With initiatives like this, their views are hardly ever sought and when they are, it is done tokenistically and they have very little feedback on what will happen, if anything, with their contribution.

At the British Youth Council (BYC), we have long championed young people's involvement in decision-making at all levels, including the call for them to be involved in the design, deliver and evaluation of services that affect and concern them.

By this we don't just mean their involvement in elections, which the forum on governance seems to be prioritising, but also their involvement in local authorities decisions on spending plans etc.

BYC advocates and supports youth councils, as an effective method for engaging young people in local decision-making. Youth Councils vary in geographical coverage, age range etc, but have a constant factor of representing the views of local young people to local decision-makers.

BYC strongly believes that young people must be involved at every level of decision-making – this can be realised on a local level through the development of existing young people led infrastructure – particularly through local youth councils and forums linking in with Children's Trusts.

In the statutory guidance accompanying Youth Matters, youth councils were the first recognised model for involving children and young people in local decision-making.

With the Next Steps for Youth Matters calling for Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund, provide an initial opportunity for local authorities to engage with young people on a wider range of issues than just consultation.

Their engagement in decision-making on local young people's facilities should open the door to their wider involvement in all local decisions, from transport and the environment to schools etc.

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**I have dealt with the issue**

Posted by edbrown on Tue, 04/04/2006 - 16:07

I have dealt with the issue of the statistics elsewhere.

With regard to the Local Area Agreement it was specifically stated by the Government Office North East that the public had to be involved in the process. There was a specific request from the Northumberland Education Action Group to be involved in the process as they represented a large number of taxpayers. However, this request to participate in producing the Local Area Agreement was declined.

With the Children and Young People's plan a similar set of circumstances arose. I do not deny that the consultation with Children has been fairly well handled - I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education to compliment Northumberland on the way they have involved children - so no, I'm not all negative. The way they consulted children is a good example of involving those affected by a plan. However, as a parent, governor, and parish councillor I have not been involved. Why is this the case when these groups should be involved.

I searched the Northumberland website just now 17:00 3 April 2006 for Local Authority Agreement, LAA, CYPP, Children and Young People Plan, and Every Child Matters and the result was none of these were found.

The issue I have is the way Northumberland are trying to portray these plans as having the agreement and support of the public when they do not appear to have made any real effort to involve the public.

Where has the press coverage appeared?

Where are the pages on the Northumberland website for these plans?

Why as someone active in Education was I not consulted on what I wanted?

Why as a parish Councillor wasn't I consulted on these plans?

Ed Brown

## **Citizen Power**

Posted by Chris Gillie on Wed, 05/04/2006 - 08:51

"How could we make sure community calls for action make a real difference, adding to established complaints procedures? "

Having heard the principles of so called "double devolution" and "neighbourhood power", it remains unclear to me how a lot of this will work in practice, please tell me we are not moving to "he who shouts loudest wins"

The concept appears to be based on the false notion that communities are one cohesive body, whereas they are in fact a fractured collection of different and very often competing interests even at the smallest level of say a residential street.( any whittness to neighbour disputes will have all the evidence they need on that)

Anyone working in local government or politics at any level will have seen many examples of the vociferous minority pushing forward their own proposals/ views with no mandate from the remainder of the community.

The concept of my unelected neighbour forcing a particular course action in my neighbourhood "by default", unless I start a counter campaign fills me with some alarm.

It has always been the case that someone has had to arbitrate and make a decision whether such proposals/views are reasonable/affordable.

Logically we elect local councillors to make such decisions and arbitrate for us, accepting at times we may not like that decision and ultimately having the opportunity to express our displeasure through the ballot box.

We may of course put in place measures to help them understand the views of residents when they weigh up their decisions, and much work has been done on this. But is this proposal going beyond this and amounting to community instructions and if so whose instructions prevail?

Is this proposal instead to run the area by non negotiable petition ?

If it isnt, what practical difference will there be from what happens now? Community lobbying and influence, but with the decision ultimately resting with locally elected members (at whatever level)

Are we just reinventing the wheel here?

Confused!

### **Moving things on....**

Posted by Maggie Crosby on Wed, 05/04/2006 - 14:11

A big thanks to everyone that is taking part in the forum but can I make a plea. The local:vision debate – and this forum - is about seeking your ideas for local government in the 21st century.

It is not about the performance or decisions of current local authorities. Please do not use it to complain about what your particular local authority – or indeed central government - is doing or has done in the past in policy terms –there are other avenues for that.

We want your vision – your ideas – your contribution to a mature debate about change. All levels of government have to make difficult decisions – not all of which are welcomed. This debate is partly about how such decisions are made in the future and how to make local people feel engaged – not a debate on what decisions have been made in the past.

There is a comment that we are not asking the right questions – when considering your comments please bear in mind that we are looking at these issues (structure, governance, neighbourhoods) as “a piece”.

We accept, for instance, that if larger strategic local authorities are the answer then there is a need to strengthen the neighbourhood level – indeed we want to strengthen that level in any event- so the question is how?

As for other issues – the debate should be as much about making local people feel more involved – perhaps by giving clarity to the processes of decision making – and giving them the ability to influence service delivery. So it is more than just about structures. In sum this is debate about governance of places.

Maggie Crosby  
Democracy and Local Governance Division, ODPM

## **Government and local government**

Posted by ValerieC on Wed, 05/04/2006 - 16:53

When talking about consultation and governance for the 21st century local people where I live do not feel involved in decision making because government appears so often to walk over them and snatch power back. An example of this is that parish councils and the local council is supposed to be able to make decisions about local planning. In fact on the Isle of Wight much of the real power has been taken away and vested in the ODPM and the unelected South East Regional Assembly. We did not ask for this assembly and we do not know what duties and powers it has. That is hardly open government. I am not the only person on the Isle of Wight who considers that the Island is already full and cannot sustain any more housebuilding. However John Prescott has decreed that more homes will be built. When do we get to say and be listened to that the Island and the UK is full.

## **neighbourhood charters**

Posted by Ian Scott on Fri, 07/04/2006 - 10:22

Neighbourhood councils will enable greater accountability of service providers at a neighbourhood level but neighbourhood councils will cost money to administrate, e.g cost of a neighbourhood council clerk/officer. Local people will not be keen to pay additional local taxes for this unless the government could introduce match funding

arrangements whereby the national Government provided funds to neighbourhood councils to improve local democracy.

## **Neighbourhood Forums Online**

Posted by netclift on Tue, 11/04/2006 - 16:37

E-Democracy.Org established two pilot local Issues Forums in England last year - Brighton & Hove and Newham. They continue to this day as online places citizens can engage each other on local issues. Because they are designed for agenda-setting, a number of local Councillors also read the forums and some even post.

See the forums in action from:

<http://e-democracy.org/uk>

Download the guidebook if you want to start one in your community.

This connects to the neighbourhood agenda in this way - in order for citizens to have a voice they need "public" places where they can visibly discuss the issues that matter to them. E-Democracy.Org is exploring the creation of online neighbourhood forums in addition to council-wide spaces. These forums would have a mix of "community life" and local issues. A post on a local community art fair might be followed by a personal account of a property crime, etc.

Now it just so happens that E-Democracy.Org is based in Minnesota. In Minneapolis, where we have had a city-wide forum since 1998, we are now planning neighborhood forums with a planning grant we received. We'd love to find a way to extend this concept to our UK-based locally run forums. Read up:

[http://www.e-democracy.org/wiki/Minneapolis\\_neighborhood\\_forums](http://www.e-democracy.org/wiki/Minneapolis_neighborhood_forums)

[http://www.e-democracy.org/wiki/Example\\_neighborhood\\_forums](http://www.e-democracy.org/wiki/Example_neighborhood_forums)

So as the UK develops their neighbourhood agenda, I encourage you to develop "anywhere, any time" ways people can "be part" of their local neighborhood. This might be one key trick to getting people out their homes and to in-person community events.

Steven Clift

Board Chair, E-Democracy.Org

[clift@publicus.net](mailto:clift@publicus.net)

## **Moving forward**

Posted by edbrown on Tue, 11/04/2006 - 19:16

Maggie,

I can appreciate the wish to move forward with the discussions but to move forward you have to understand the past and where people are coming from.

Why have people become disengaged with local government. I know why it is for me. If it works and I get services delivered that I want at a price that is acceptable then I'm happy.

However, once this ceases to be the case then I expect something to be done about it. This is where I became disenfranchised. The Local Government Ombudsman and the Standards Board for England both do whatever possible to avoid dealing with matters. In fact the only person who had the guts to stand up and be counted was John Prescott, and for that I'm grateful.

So what are the issues that need to be addressed. Firstly a much stronger code of conduct for elected members and serving officers that is enforced.

At present the results of consultation on Standards is that the majority want the expected standard dropped and the requirement for councillors to report abuses to be dropped.

Personally I'm against this as there needs to be stronger monitoring of council actions. I'd like to see recording of all council meetings in the same manner as Hansard. AN accurate record of events. Ideally televised and recorded. This would start to address a lot of the issues I've experienced where minutes of meeting say things like "Cllr X asked for an explanation of whether the money was available to deliver the services and clarification was provided." What clarification - is the money available, isn't it. Nobody can tell from the minutes.

To re-engage the people councils have to show they mean to re-engage.

What we're seeing in our area is a rash of web pages, press releases, consultations, mailshots but these are against a background of the people knowing that the Council will not listen to their views.

Some practical suggestions:

- \* Election districts should not be geographically aligned. For example in Northumberland where I come from - split the Electoral Districts to be half rural and half urban - so for example combine half of a Blyth Town ward with half of a Hadrian ward - they're about 50 miles apart and one is around 150 square miles compare with around 10 square miles. However, this would mean that those elected represented a cross section of the public and not a small sub-section.

- \* Record all council meetings and publish a transcript of the discussions.

- \* Record and publish all sub-committee meetings. For example we have a sub-committee discussing Post Ofsted Action Plan and recovery but the minutes are never released, we have headteachers discussion reorganisation against the wishes of the people - the minutes of this are never published.

- \* There should be a rule that no meetings are confidential unless there is an over-riding need for the information to be confidential.
- \* Plan and monitoring of plans should be published openly. For example risk analysis, budget monitoring.
- \* Monitoring should be up to date and not on historical information which is often 3-4 months old.
- \* All councillors should be trained and must each year provide a written report to demonstrate how they have met the requirements of their constituents
- \* There should be a way to remove a councillor from office if the public feel they are not doing their job properly - something like a third of the electorate can request a by-election if the councillor fails to meet their needs.
- \* The rules governing standards should be strengthened and not weakened as proposed.
- \* Council should not be allowed to spend money on PR and marketing except in specific circumstances. So for example they should be allowed to promote waste recycling, changes to services, but should not be allowed to spend money on promoting their views on reorganisation of councils, schools, or in promoting a particular view during a consultation.
- \* Scrutiny committees should have more external representation.
- \* It should be compulsory to get the approval of the majority of the public to any plans.
- \* LSPs should not be appointed or funded by the councils but should be appointed and funded by taxpayers.

Ed Brown

## **E-Forums**

Posted by SHC on Wed, 12/04/2006 - 08:48

This is a complicated issue - and have a feeling that US models are not fit for purpose in UK and quite possibly Europe.

Councillors seek to protect the institution and rate payers (from their officers normally). The fact that local government in the UK is reasonably unaccountable and awful is identified by the 'organisations' that oversee it and seek to serve citizens. The fact that there are so many.. highlights the fact that everything in the garden is not rosy... These include...

Standards Board, Local Government Ombudsman, Audit Commission, Planning Inspectorate, Valuation Tribunal, Electoral Commission, Citizens Advice Bureaux, CRE, EoC, DRC, Human rights Commission (emerging).. etc...

We then come to Council's own complaints mechanisms - Complaints Panels and Insurers.. and then end up with the Courts (they have a lot of business dealing with decision making of local authorities)...

None of the complaints mechanisms work very well.. and Councillor's don't take very much notice of their constituents. The fragmentation of complaints systems makes it very difficult for people that experience poor quality service and/or negligent services that can cause them an injustice to secure redress.

There are not surprisingly a number of forums established by people upset at the failure of existing complaint procedures... Good ones include:

<http://www.bushywood.com/>  
<http://www.ombudsmanwatch.org/>

and good practice is networking reasonably rapidly between these 'upset' consumers of local government services.. and the communities of interest they form. They are helping local government to develop better ways of working (in some cases quite rapidly).. It is very real external pressure being placed on local government (and their regulators) by informed consumers that have had their Human Rights infringed by local government. There needs to be support for organisations like bushywood and ombudsmanwatch from central government.. as they have the potential to act as very independent regulators for local government.

The easiest way to sort out the machinery problems would be to examine the role of the emerging Human Rights Commission in England and Wales. A lot of positive change happened in Northern Ireland following introduction of a HRC..

Support for the consumer forums would enable the 'problems' of local government to be 'defragmented' and common problems to be identified and solutions found... when they muck up.. it is normally in the same area.. and affects one or two consumers in each geographic location (district, county, etc.). Reinforcement of geographic based complaints systems is not the answer...

There also needs to be a common interface to the government sponsored organisations that are expected to operate as consumer champions... These all operate under different regulations.. and it could easily be argued that a number of these don't take full account of the Human rights Act.. (i.e. decision making is contrary).

## **Fragmentation of review bodies**

Posted by edbrown on Wed, 12/04/2006 - 09:35

SHC hits it on the head when he highlights that the review bodies fail us.

One of our councillors recently stated in the press that Northumbria had had over 30 "frivolous" complaints lodged against the Council. On top of this there were six which were upheld but no further action taken.

In these complaints it was stated that councillors broke resolutions, councillors failed to make information available contrary to a council resolution, councillors misled the public and elected members. However, on each count it was decided that no action should be taken.

If I was running a complaints review body I'd be concerned when there were so many complaints regardless of the merit of the complaints as it shows a concern among the electorate. In my case the complaint two complaints were investigated and only council employees or elected members were interviewed. The press, public, and other independent bodies such as the DfES and other councils were not interviewed.

It was still found that there were serious issues but nothing was done. Why were independent sources not interviewed?

Perhaps having one strong body would be beneficial. It would certainly help in the situation I'm in where the Local Government Ombudsman say that they are aware of the problems and how they affect the majority of the electorate but since it doesn't directly affect an individual they can't do anything about it. The Standards Board say that they can't investigate collective responsibilities and only the actions of an individual councillor, The Audit Commission say that they are aware of the poor reports and will investigate this as part of the Joint Area Review in 2008.

Until something is done to enforce the rules and regulation then consulting on the future is fairly pointless. It won't be long before citizens in England are so fed up with the lack of accountability that they will openly start refusing to pay council taxes and obey regulations.

People are governed because they are lazy and leaders lead them in the direction they want to go. Things have deteriorated so far that some serious action will need to be taken to address the situation.

Hopefully the ODPM is watching these forums and John Prescott, who I have met and have a lot of respect for, will knock some heads together and ensure local government is open and transparent so we can look at the future.

Things that are in place could be improved in the short term, ie in a matter of days if ODPM were to insist that council and the review bodies act in the best interest of the taxpayer.

Open and transparent government with tough regulation. Review bodies that act in the interest of the public and not the councils need to be established with representation from the public on their management boards. Too many of these organisations are run by people who are intimately connected with the system and not there to police it effectively.

### **As a school governor with a**

Posted by Mike B on Wed, 12/04/2006 - 14:22

As a school governor with a special interest in extended schools and youth services I have been amazed by the increasing diversion of power and funding to quangos. I don't think community volunteers will stay interested if their task is 90% locating and chasing funding from different bodies. Control should be given back to some of the various elected councils.

It was hard for me to say that, as my own county council, in Northumberland, has not impressed me at all with any enthusiasm to listen to its electorate. They are currently soldiering on with education changes for which their own poll of residents showed 22% support and 59% opposition. The county population is split about 50/50 between a small ex-industrial area and a large and generally very sparsely populated rural area. Control of the council is very marginally in the hands of the urban areas and the ruling party seems to resent the expression of any opinion but its own. Despite a very high Council Tax charge, the money does not seem to be there to support sustainable communities in the rural areas. Recent decisions will remove much rural public transport and almost all Sunday rural services in what purports to be a tourist area.

Perhaps there is a need to review council areas and structures but not in the backdoor regional assembly way which seems to be happening with our services.

### **Getting people engaged**

Posted by JudyLloyd on Wed, 12/04/2006 - 16:32

I appreciate Maggie's wish to see this debate looking to the future and not the past but part of the question you must be asking is why do people feel so cynical about their chances of making a difference? Two years ago my local authority set up a Democracy Commission of individuals from many walks of life who went round the county interviewing people about their feelings for local democracy. The results were very depressing and indicated widespread disillusion. Many believed that councillors were only in it for themselves and had no sense of responsibility for the people or views of the people they represent. Others believed that the elaborate and costly attempts at community engagement which have been a growing feature of recent years, and one very much promoted by the ODPM, have been done so the councils can tick the right boxes or meet the CPA targets rather than listen or take any notice of what people are telling them. Two years ago, when I got involved in a debate of widespread public concern in my

area, I didn't subscribe to either of these views and was idealistic enough to think that, as long as you researched the issue properly, produced the evidence and marshalled the arguments, you would be able to influence debate. Not so, I'm afraid. The council will spend thousands, if not by now, millions of pounds of tax payers money refining its consultation procedures but, when it commissions a 95% accurate independent telephone poll to find out what the electorate thinks about its plans, and gets a response which shows that 59% are against them, 22% in favour and the rest unsure or confused, (and that the people who know most about the subject seem to be the ones most strongly opposed), it decides that having 'taken the views into account' it can ignore them anyway. Alternatively, on some specifics, it can appear to have listened by tinkering around with one or two details at the edges to show how attentive it is. The problem is, if public engagement as an ideal is so clearly abused, people very quickly stop participating or contributing lest they give what they can see to be a sham, some credibility. We are all busy people and if you are going to ask us to be involved we need to feel that it will make some kind of difference. At the risk of being accused of looking backwards rather than forwards I would make some observations on what I have seen over the last two years.

1 There are real problems with Cabinet government. There is a growing stifling of democratic debate as more and more power becomes concentrated in the hands of around half a dozen individuals from a political party which, as in the national scene, represents only a minority of voters. Full Council decisions are delegated increasingly to this group and they, in turn, delegate decisions to individual councillors and officers. Full councillors are not properly informed about key information or decisions or even meetings and find it impossible to know what is going on (or, perhaps in some cases, prefer not to know).

2 Scrutiny Committees where nobody appears to think any higher than the party advantage of their own ruling group, or, alternatively, what crumbs they might acquire from the ruling group's table if they don't cause it too much embarrassment. The honourable function of opposition appears not to be understood and councillors of the ruling group appear to be quite unable to vote against their party or offer anything more than the mildest criticism. There would seem to be no real concern for core principles of good governance and accountability and virtually nobody brave enough to insist on such principles.

3 Opportunities for the public to question their councillors in the full council forum or committee over key issues are carefully controlled and managed and, when individuals are occasionally put on the spot, their colleagues seem to be reassured by simplistic sound bite responses. When important information is gleaned through rare opportunities to question elected representatives, that information is omitted from the official minutes of the meetings. There is no full record of council meetings which would identify who said what.

We need opportunity for rigorous holding to account, as in the select committees of national government. Perhaps there need to be Scrutiny Committees which involve more members of the public but, in that case, a key criterion for membership would have to be that the members of the public are voted in by the public and not selected by the council.

They need to be a real 'ginger' group and not a tame set of yes people who can be neutralised!

4At the level of community engagement with local people in their own neighbourhoods, over issues which concern them, there seems too often to be a preconceived agenda by councillors or officers who may well not have the local wisdom or experience of the people they approach for endorsement of their own position and show little respect for what those people are already doing to help their communities. There needs to be a willingness to collect information from and listen to, a wide group of affected people, and to see how their knowledge and expertise can be made to work on the ground in a facilitating endeavour. I believe that communities do have a personality and an energy that should be respected and empowered rather than marginalised but their identity is being increasingly compromised by bigger agencies/quangos whose task is to follow agendas set by central or regional government, over which the local people have no control. Things are increasingly done to them for their good, (as that is perceived by some remote agency,) and not done by them.

A lot of the above is, really, about the climate or ethic of local government, its scale and its capacity, or not, to respond to the needs of local people. It requires a kind of intangible and shared sense of public and community service that goes far deeper than party or group loyalty.

When I was at university, many years ago I studied the history of political thought and came to believe, as my old school History teacher had said on so many occasions, 'There's nothing new under the sun'. We might do well, perhaps, to look back to collective experience and the wisdom and insights of political theorists before we plan our future brave new world. I remember the fascination of reading Machiavelli's Prince and Discourses and trying to reconcile the completely different approach to political ethics in each. The key seemed to be whether or not the people and their rulers retained a sense of that wider public duty and honour which Machiavelli calls 'virtu'. If they do then the health of the body politic is safeguarded. Once it is lost, and people become cynical or complacent about politics, then, really, we are on a slippery slope where self interest and bad faith rule the day. This is sobering stuff and I hope we are not yet stuck irreversibly on this down hill journey. We need strong, fair and participatory local government based on community values. We need local political fora and local politicians to be a focus for our community goals. Remote bodies cannot themselves be a substitute, but new statutory agencies could have a vital role in providing independent checks where things go wrong. Such bodies would have to be well resourced, clearly above party interest and command public confidence. They would become, in effect, the watchdogs of good local governance, upholding and promoting the involvement of local people and the accountability of their local politicians.

Above all, such a scheme would require central government to hold a strong concept of the integrity of local communities and their need for a strong measure of self determination. If it simply sees them as a medium through which it can promote its own policies then this consultation, like some of the others we have participated in, will very quickly be viewed with suspicion and cynicism.

## **Specific complaints**

Posted by Ross on Thu, 13/04/2006 - 08:55

Hi,

I want to prevent the forum from becoming dominated by a focus on specific councils.

The ODPM has said that it does want to hear about examples of good/bad practice. However, it also wants to hear these examples in the context of ideas about change and how to move forward.

**Look again at the core questions set for each topic space. Aim to address these in your posts.**

Specific complaints about councils should be directed to the councils themselves or to the ODPM directly by post or email – see [www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1161804](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1161804).

Grand. On with the discussion.

Ross  
Hansard Society, Moderation Team

## **Reasons for Governance**

Posted by SHC on Thu, 13/04/2006 - 09:19

People agree to be governed because they get benefits from the method of social organisation. These benefits might be lousy.. at the local level but they are better than nothing. The situation before the introduction of modern local government was appalling.

There are seven main tiers of government - International, European, national, regional, county, district (and/or unitary) and town, parish. The rule of thumb is.. the further away from the lives of real people government is the better it operates (and is much more useful)... The problems all become apparent when government provides services to real people... as individual consumers... People have no choice but to accept the services (health, education, social services, planning, landcharges, courts, etc..).. otherwise you end up with anarchy.. and no services..

The problem's are highly apparent.. as any costs associated with poor service - should result in a remedy. It would under normal market rules. However, it does not in 'publicsector land'... The reasons for this are straightforward.. 'poor quality service' is the responsibility of the service outlet (Council). They self insure and/or insure through big insurers (aka ZURICH). Any costs that they incur get added to the Council Tax.. In the NHS there is a compensation fund as it is recognised that Doctor's muck up.. (it is to be expected.. and need not be related to incompetence and/or poor quality service)...

There are at least two examples where Council's have been taken to task.. and this is always through the Courts... former District of Wansdyke (£700,000 payment to a BME business).. and Welwyn Hatfield (£17 million payment to building company).. there are also reported cases in Northumberland (Alnwick DC).. In the first two cases.. Wansdykewas merged with a neighbouring authority 1996.. and Welwyn Hatfield complete change of political control.. and loss of £17 m of community owned funds (would have paid for a lot of services)..

Understand that for a typical District Council.. for every payout of £50,000 to meet insurable costs (i.e. areas where officers and members have been stupid and/or naughty) would lead to a ONE PER CENT INCREASE IN COUNCIL TAX.. Most Council's should be making 'payouts' well in excess of £1 million a year .

This is a significant cost for a minority of individual consumers to bear - these are the ones that have valid claims against Council's.. The costs they experience are massive.. and they have their lives totally wrecked.. to support the Common Good infrastructure. This is where the mess with the Local Government Ombudsman stems from - as they don't seek to provide redress (infact are stopped from providing redress in many cases)..

We live in a world where individuals are regarded as important.. However, the collective is more important.. Government has to sort out fair ways of sorting out the incompetence of local government.. as it is more than slightly arguable that it can veer into corruption.. as the mechanisms are available to support it (members and officers) acting in this way..

You then come to the lousy collective services like education.. Will pupils in a school seek a class action against a LEA for harming their prospects in 20 years time (loss of earrings, etc..) unlikely.. as probably the organisation responsible will no longer be there..

Until you have government putting in place mechanisms that support people against Council incompetence..- incompetence that can be used to support fraud (and making them pay) there will be no improvement.. Just increasing discrimination.. and more upset consumers..

The most interesting thing is the growth in number of upset consumers. The growth is disguised due to the increase in number of regulators (i.e. delay in examining issues by Information commissioner).. as most are looking for tools that would enable hem to get redress from Council's..

The only answer appears to be.. privatise all service provision.. [and don't allow it to be provided by public sector] and only allow policy to be determined by orgs representing local government. This has all sorts of procurement implications.. as for it to work properly a whole lot of issues need to be resolved. There is no need for multi-nationals to become the service providers.. Services can be provided just as easily by Community based SMEs.. The insurance issue around sevice provision appears to be key.

**Forum posting during Local Government Elections (13 Apr - 5 May)**

Posted by Ross on Thu, 13/04/2006 - 10:17

Due to local government elections, the local:vision webforum has been temporarily suspended and will be re-opened for debate in early May where we hope to expand the range of topics for discussion.

However, if you cannot wait until May to share your thoughts on the local government debate, the ODPM would welcome comments via the following email addresses:

localvision@odpm.gsi.gov.uk – for general comments on the debate;

neighbourhoods.localvision@odpm.gsi.gov.uk – for comments on neighbourhoods;

lsp@odpm.gsi.gov.uk – for comments on Local Strategic Partnerships;

structures@odpm.gsi.gov.uk – for comments regarding local government reorganisation and structures.

Thanks to everyone for their interest and comments so far and look forward to picking up on the debates in May.

Ross  
Hansard Society, Moderation Team

## **E-Forums Reply**

Posted by netclift on Sun, 21/05/2006 - 12:47

I am not sure if SHC is commenting to my suggestion about Issues Forums/Neighborhood forums and where the model originated.

Citizens come from a place and don't segment their opinion about government based on which institution is serving (or not serving) them well. You are right, the complexity of where input is supposed to go means that "private" input often isn't directed well nor taken as seriously as something that breaks out in the local media.

Issues Forum are organised based on the citizen perspective where they can discuss local governance and services from their perspective. In this way, they promote "public" government accountability as well as citizen to citizen accountability.

Here are some of the recent topics in the Brighton and Hove forum:

- \* Flyposting
- \* Library opening
- \* Police response to local arms trade protests
- \* Council "booze" ban

- \* Local planning
- \* Pedestrian issues
- \* etc.

See for yourself:

<http://forums.e-democracy.org/brighton-hove/groups/bh/messages>

Now imagine if every Council had a respected, citizen-led agenda-setting online space to discuss specifically local public issues? That would be a major step forward in local democracy.

Steven Clift  
E-Democracy.Org

P.S. In Newham they are discussing:

- \* Local election results
- \* The impact of the Olympics
- \* Ice cream vans
- \* Local cancer rates
- \* Mosque construction

See:

[forums.e-democracy.org/newham/groups/newham-issues/messages](http://forums.e-democracy.org/newham/groups/newham-issues/messages)

## **Citizen Participation**

Posted by stokey12 on Sat, 17/06/2006 - 09:12

The main reason why citizens are unlikely to get involved in local democracy is a lack of ability to effect change. Even where local neighbourhood forums or committees have non councillors on them the non councillors do not have a vote. If neighbourhood forums are to be effective in engaging local citizens in getting involved in local democracy then where they have non councillors on them they should also have voting rights. Also neighbourhood forums should not be merely advisory they should have some decision making powers.

In my local area where we have neighbourhood forums the non councillor members do not have votes this is fine where decisions are reached by consensus but where there is a disagreement it renders them potentially ineffective.

## **Partnership problems between citizens and local councillors etc**

Posted by Ann C on Tue, 25/07/2006 - 13:04

I have read with interest and sympathy some of the postings that comment on the disengagement of citizens or community members where they try to contribute to their community through Local Strategic Partnerships and other forums.

I have recently come across a piece of research that looks at the reasons for this and why its so important to get over these problems.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/9781859354988.pdf>

This paper is called Active Governance: the value added by community involvement in governance. Its worth having a scan through.

One of the interesting things in it, is how many community members feel that agenda items are 'chosen' so as to avoid the situation of many people having many different views. But that is exactly why community members should get involved - the results may involve disagreement but they will be much more diverse and creative for it! AND people will feel that they have avenues for involvement. I think the problem that forums and committees of all sorts have is that the members often have limited communications skills - communications skills aren't just about confidently speaking in public but also about listening skills and valuing and respecting others. When people feel heard, they themselves generally start to listen properly to others. Whoever chairs these forums needs to have facilitation skills and if they don't have them to either get themselves trained or, if the meetings are particularly significant or contentious, get a trained facilitator or mediator to come and help. Once people have been through a facilitated or mediated meeting they are far better able to communicate themselves for the future.

There is so little opportunity for engagement for members of the community that we need to make the best of them.

### **Topic space closed**

Posted by Ross on Mon, 07/08/2006 - 13:50

Hello.

This topic space has now closed.

Follow-up comments from the relevant policy team will appear shortly.

The forum will reopen in September. You will be updated by email.

The Hansard Society is currently compiling its evaluation of these exercises and will publish the data also in September.

Best wishes,

Ross Ferguson  
Hansard Society eDemocracy Programme

## **Closing Statement**

Posted by Ellen Brazier on Thu, 07/09/2006 - 15:28

Thanks to all participants for sharing your thoughts on the neighbourhoods agenda. These interesting views have been added to the wider feedback received on our discussion document 'Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter.' We look forward to hearing more of your views on neighbourhoods and empowerment after the publication of the Local Government White Paper.

*Exported on 14/09/2006 - 14:13*