

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

TRENDS IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: PART 2 – CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVES

VIVIEN LOWNDES, LAWRENCE PRATCHETT AND GERRY STOKER

INTRODUCTION

British local authorities are employing an increasing number and range of public participation initiatives, in the context of New Labour's 'democratic renewal' agenda and as the result of longer-term processes of innovation in local government. Central government is imposing new requirements upon local authorities to consult with the public – over 'best value' in service delivery, over securing community 'wellbeing', on new political management arrangements, and as a criterion for 'beacon' status (DETR 1998, 1999). At the same time, leading local authorities are at the forefront of developing innovative methods of consultation and deliberation – interactive websites, citizens' juries and panels, visioning and community planning (MAPIT 1999; Lowndes *et al.* 1998a; LGA 1998). Such methods of engaging the public are now spreading across the public sector and even to central government itself – through the 'People's Panel', the 'Foresight' visioning programme, and the on-line 'Democracy Forum' (Cabinet Office 1999).

A previous article in *Public Management* provided a unique mapping of local authority activity in relation to citizen participation (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001). Based on survey and case study work with local authority officers and members, the article documented the growth – and

Vivien Lowndes is Professor of Local Government Studies and Lawrence Pratchett is Reader in Local Democracy in the Department of Public Policy, De Montfort University, Leicester. Gerry Stoker is Professor of Politics at the University of Manchester.

increasing diversity – of activity designed to enhance public participation. At the same time, the article showed that participation initiatives are not always well-supported by the public and often fail to influence final decision making. This article takes the debate further by probing the views of citizens themselves about the prospect and reality of public participation – a perspective often neglected in research (although Seargeant and Steele's 1999 work is a notable exception). Exploring citizens' views is particularly important in the context of the deep scepticism about participation that persists among many local politicians (see Lowndes *et al.* 1998a); it also helps us to move beyond the 'motherhood and apple pie' tone of much government policy and think-tank output. A better understanding of citizens' attitudes and behaviour is necessary if practitioners are to address the very real problems of 'apathy' (and social exclusion) that bedevil participation initiatives, and if they are to maximize the impact and cost-effectiveness of participation strategies.

The findings reported below are drawn from 30 focus group discussions carried out with citizens in 11 contrasting local authority areas. Particular attention was paid to recruiting citizens from traditionally excluded groups, including people from minority ethnic groups and from disadvantaged areas. Each focus group involved ten participants (each of whom received a small honorarium) and lasted around an hour and a half. There were four different types of focus groups:

- 'Participators' – those who had participated in a local authority initiative.
- 'Activists' – people from local community and voluntary organizations.
- Young people – from local colleges and youth groups.
- 'Ordinary citizens' – randomly selected by a market research agency.

Half of the focus groups, therefore, concentrated upon individuals who had some knowledge of, or contact with, local government, while the other half addressed those who were largely detached from local politics. (For further details of the research methodology, including the topic guides employed, see Lowndes *et al.* 1998.)

While not claiming to be in any way 'representative' of public opinion, the focus groups provided an opportunity for in-depth research into citizens' own accounts of their relationships with local government. This article presents our research findings (in the context of other relevant research) on why it is that citizens *do* participate, and why – more often – they do not.

WHY DO CITIZENS PARTICIPATE?

The dominant view within the focus groups was that people would participate in consultations on 'the issues that mattered'. The issues most often mentioned were: environmental (litter, graffiti, dog fouling), open spaces and children's play areas, crime (particularly with relation to drugs), housing maintenance and allocations, planning (specifically rural housing

developments), and health. The issues highlighted varied among citizens, relating to people's own experiences and priorities (e.g. as council tenants, young people, parents, village residents). Citizens were clearly unaware of (and uninterested in) the specific limitations of local authority responsibilities: people suggested that their councils should consult on 'the state of the hospitals' and on 'dealing with paedophiles', for example. Citizens' immediate concerns also often spanned the responsibilities of several agencies, reflecting the findings of the government's 'integrated service teams' on the range of agencies involved in typical 'life episodes' (e.g. having a baby or becoming unemployed) (Cabinet Office 1999). Our local authority survey shows that 81 per cent of councils claim to undertake consultations in collaboration with other agencies (Lowndes *et al.* 1998a, p. 50), although focus group participants were unaware of any 'joined-up' approaches in their area.

Although our focus group respondents claimed that they would get involved on the 'big issues', very few people had actually done so – for instance, one person identified the closure of six secondary schools in his city as an example of a 'big issue' but admitted he had not got involved. (Indeed, officers at the city council confirmed that the initial meeting on proposed closures had attracted just 50 people, while a second meeting was attended by 35 – most of whom had been present at the initial session.) It is possible that when citizens refer to the 'big issues', they are identifying matters on which they feel they *ought* to participate, rather than reflecting upon their actual practice.

Members and officers in the 11 local authority areas repeatedly referred to public 'apathy' and their belief that people would only get involved if their own interests were directly affected (Lowndes *et al.* 1998a, p. 64). Focus group participants attributed less importance to 'self-interest' as a motivator for public participation. Nevertheless, it was clear from people's accounts of their own experience that involvement with the council was largely reactive: a personal reaction to a decision or action affecting one's own family (e.g. housing allocation or repairs or school exclusion), or an attempt to generate a collective response to a development with implications for a group of residents (e.g. anti-social neighbours, a new housing development, planning permission for a new take-away). People's *real* experiences of participation were more likely to relate to the protection of their own or their community's immediate interests, rather than to the wider 'issues' that they referred to in the abstract.

Even on immediate matters of self-interest, citizens commented that it was difficult to maintain participation efforts, and that there was a tendency to rely on a few committed individuals. Clearly such people did not exist in all communities, but it was striking how readily people from the same neighbourhood could identify 'natural' leaders. Although – as we shall discuss later – people often complained that 'the same people dominate everything', it was clear that the efforts of local leaders and activists were also

appreciated. Some people were ready to identify themselves as natural joiners or leaders, although they had varied views on the possibility of widening public involvement. A local business person typified one school of thought: 'People either have it or they don't. There are leaders and there are followers'. A voluntary sector representative made the alternative argument: people can be encouraged to participate via community development and 'capacity building'.

The people who had themselves participated in local authority initiatives did tend to be 'natural joiners' – members of community groups or active in other forms of consultation. The exception to this was the case of citizens who had been personally invited by the council to participate in a particular initiative. The reaction of citizens who had been telephoned as part of a random selection for a citizens' jury indicated the potential value of direct invitation. They variously felt that: 'It sounded interesting', 'It was worth a try', 'Better than watching the telly'. They were very supportive of the principle of random selection, noting that it avoided 'getting people with strong ideas – people who bang on a drum'. Interestingly, opinion poll data for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) suggest that, not only are people prepared to join 'juries', but the public at large is willing to trust their decision making – even over that of elected representatives. Given the example of building development, people were asked: 'Who would come to the best decision "always" or "most of the time"?' In response, 54 per cent chose a citizens' jury, and 33 per cent elected councillors (Bromley *et al.* 1999, p. 66).

Among our focus groups, it was the ex-citizens' 'jurors' who were most positive about public participation in local government; they were particularly pleased to have been 'well-treated'. People were very positive about the food provided, the payment of expenses, the pleasant surroundings, the level of information, the skills of the consultants who had managed the process, and (in general) the attitude of the council officers and members they met. People seemed almost surprised that they should receive such treatment, highlighting the low expectations that people have in relation to involvement with the council (discussed below).

The experience of the ex-'jurors', and of young people who had participated in a local Youth Council, threw light on the issue of incentives for participation – the 'what's in it for me?' question. It appears that 'self-interest' can be satisfied, at least in part, by the intangible benefits of participation – new skills and knowledge, greater self-respect or stronger community identity – and does not require that citizens 'succeed' in protecting their individual material interests. Those with experience of 'deliberative' participation emphasized what they had learned (over specific service-related outcomes): 'We saw how complicated it all is – it's not just a case of "the council's useless", we realised it's a hard job', 'I felt I'd never be able to do something like that – there was a feeling of euphoria at the end'. Our qualitative research with members and officers showed that they too

valued the learning that came through participation exercises (for themselves and citizens), even though the 'official' justifications for participation put 'hard' gains ahead of 'soft' benefits (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001).

Although our survey demonstrated the increasing range of participation methods being used by councils (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001), it proved difficult to probe the relative 'popularity' of different approaches due to citizens' limited knowledge and experience of consultation. However, the following reflections from the focus groups appear to confirm the value of developing a repertoire of different participation methods to suit different citizen groups and circumstances (Lowndes *et al.* 1998b, pp. 21–3; Goss 1999, p. 176; Stewart 2000, p. 261):

- *Public meetings* were the most readily identified form of public participation. They were seen as an opportunity for the public to voice its protest over a particular issue; there was a common feeling that council officers and members came to listen but had 'already made up their minds'.
- Most people indicated that they would be willing to complete a *questionnaire*, although the young people in our groups were less enthusiastic – as typified in this comment: 'It's got to be face to face – paper ain't facing the person'. Citizens' main concern was: 'Will they listen to the results?'. There were also some concerns about the cost of such exercises: 'If they send out a questionnaire and then don't listen to the results, it just costs us money'.
- Those who were involved in *ongoing forums*, such as youth councils, felt that such bodies 'give you a say' on a wide range of issues.
- People who had been involved in a *one-off deliberative exercise*, like a citizens' jury, saw the method as appropriate for complicated issues where it was necessary for members of the public to absorb a lot of information.
- Young people particularly liked the idea of *small group discussions* – particularly if honoraria were paid! They felt that they were more likely to 'be heard' in a focus group than at a big meeting.
- People across the board liked the idea of *one stop shops* which could act as a local focus both for accessing services and 'having your say' (discussed further below).
- There was also enthusiasm, particularly among young people, for forms of *citizen education* which explained how the council worked and what opportunities there were for participation. As one young person put it: 'I don't vote because I don't understand what it's all about. If I did, I would'.

Our findings are broadly confirmed by opinion poll research for the DETR. Of eight possible forms of consultation, the most popular forms were the postal questionnaire (47 per cent of respondents would take part), face-

to-face interviews (30 per cent) and the public meeting (23 per cent). The data suggest that there may be a mismatch between citizens' interest in participation and their actual experience: only 10 per cent of respondents had actually been asked to complete a questionnaire (4 per cent had been asked to take part in a survey interview, and 11 per cent had been asked to attend a public meeting). The survey found that 55 per cent of respondents would be interested in being more involved in the decision-making of their local authority (Bromley *et al.* 1999, pp. 62–3). According to the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey, more than eight out of ten respondents felt that councils should make more effort to find out what local people want (Rao and Young 1999, p. 58). These data need to be treated with some caution; people may like the *idea* rather than the *reality* of participation, mirroring the over-reporting of voting behaviour (see Young and Rao 1999, p. 48). However, like our focus groups, they do point to some latent interest among citizens in opportunities for participation – an interest that local authorities need to tap in to when responding to the 'democratic renewal' agenda.

WHY DON'T CITIZENS PARTICIPATE?

To activate – or expand – any public demand for participation requires that local authorities understand the reasons behind current levels of non-participation. Our focus group discussions revealed the critical importance of four sets of factors, outlined below.

A negative view of the local authority

Those focus groups made up of randomly selected 'ordinary citizens' and of young people had overwhelmingly negative views of their local council – its services, its officers and its members. Such views were sometimes based on personal experience but were often delivered simply as 'common sense', based at least in part on prejudice. All felt that the council tax was 'too much'; all could list poor services but had to be prompted to comment on those they found satisfactory. At best, council officers were seen as polite but likely to pass you on to someone else or promise to respond and then not deliver: 'There's no problem getting officers, but what happens next?' At worst, citizens' comments echoed the traditional mantra of complaints against bureaucrats: 'They fob you off – they keep you waiting', 'They just say they'll look into it', and so on.

Citizens had very negative views of councillors too – in fact, other than someone who was related to a councillor, there was a complete absence of positive comment about councillors. Among those who had any awareness about the existence or role of councillors, the dominant view is best summed up by this comment: 'They say good things at election time, but they don't do it'. There was a clear view that councillors were 'in it for themselves', or even 'for the money!' They were seen – particularly by young people – as 'men in grey suits', as inaccessible and unlikely to be

interested in their concerns. Representatives from community and voluntary groups were largely negative about councillors, as reflected in a typical comment: 'They are keen to be on things but they don't turn up, or when they do they try and dominate with their own agenda'. Indeed, Seargeant and Steele found that voluntary organizations were actually *more* negative than the general public in their attitudes to local government participation initiatives (1999, p. 6). Many voluntary groups expressed frustration at the fact that they had 'discrete' relationships with individual council officers (focusing on grant and service issues) and very little access to policy-making forums.

There was a strong feeling – particularly among the minority of citizens who had contacted their local councillor – that elected members should be 'out and about' more, coming out to look at the problems raised by the public. A common view was that councillors should live in the areas they represent in order to really understand local issues. Among those who had contacted a councillor, the dominant experience was of disappointment – the councillor had not turned up for the surgery, had not responded to the issue at hand, or had 'fobbed them off'. (People in several groups suggested that going to a solicitor was a better option.) While these negative experiences may not be typical of public perceptions, it seems that the health of representative and participative democracy are intertwined. Prospects for enhancing public participation are likely to be linked to the success (or failure) of new political management arrangements designed to increase the accessibility and responsiveness of local councillors (DETR 1999; Pratchett *et al.* 1999).

A lack of awareness about opportunities to participate

Among 'ordinary citizens' in the focus groups there was very little awareness about opportunities to participate or influence their council. Few people knew that they could attend council meetings, or how to find out about them. Among 'ordinary citizens' there was little awareness of tenants' associations or other standing forums in their area. At the same time, the focus groups revealed considerable enthusiasm for more information about how to contact the council: more 'eye-catching' information on services and activities, more regular and reliable delivery of council newspapers, and A-Z type directories of council services and contact points (with direct 'phone lines to named people).

Problems of access were seen as a deterrent to 'having your say', particularly among those in full-time work: 'If you are at work how can you get into the [council] office during the working day? There should be weekend or late night opening so that people who are at work all day can get in'. Those who regularly visited council offices – council tenants and single parents – complained about being kept waiting or being passed on to a different office. There was considerable support for the 'one stop shop' concept – both in theory and among those who used such facilities (or had

heard about them in neighbouring councils). The key advantages were seen in terms of opening hours, local access, and a capacity to deal with a range of services or issues: 'You need somewhere that's open all day – where you can pop in and voice your opinion'. Our research suggests that good 'customer care' is a precondition for meaningful citizen participation, and that service interfaces (like one-stop shops) may be important sites for consultation on wider issues. The communications infrastructure required to meet the government's target of 24-hour service access could also provide new opportunities for enhanced consultation (Cabinet Office 1999).

A lack of council response

The biggest deterrent to participation of all was citizens' perception – or experience – of a lack of council response to consultation (echoing the message of other participation studies, e.g. Audit Commission 1999; Goss 1999; Seargeant and Steele 1998 and 1999). Our focus groups found that many people were deterred from participating because of a perception that the council 'wouldn't do anything'. Such views were often based on experience as well as prejudice and hearsay. People felt that: 'They are prepared to listen but then they do what they want'. The following experiences from the focus groups illustrate the point.

- A group of Asian residents in an inner-city area who had organized a petition against planning permission for a new 'take away' had not received even an acknowledgement from the council.
- Another group who had campaigned for the removal of anti-social tenants complained about the length of time it had taken for the council to act.
- A man who had repeatedly reported stolen wheelie-bins was disheartened when the council simply replaced the bins rather than 'tackling the problem'.
- A group of pensioners who had been involved in a campaign against a new rural housing development felt that: 'It will happen, whatever we want'.

While such reports could easily be dismissed as anecdotes, they all fed into a near-universal feeling within the focus groups that their local council thought it 'knew best' and was ultimately unresponsive to public concerns (whatever its stated intentions). This view is further bolstered by our survey which found that only one-third of local authorities felt that public participation had a significant outcome on final decision making (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001). In a survey of 'best practice' authorities, the Audit Commission found that three-quarters failed to link the results of consultation with decision-making processes (1999, p. 41). Effective public consultation requires that council's *internal* decision-making processes are redesigned to take account of public opinion. Even (or especially) when final decisions go against popular opinion, local authorities need to inform the

public of the outcome and the reasons for the decision. Clearer statements of the scope and limitations of participation, and better feedback on outcomes – whether positive or negative, ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ – are necessary to challenge citizens’ cynicism and their resultant reluctance to participate. Our survey of local authorities revealed officers’ concerns about raising public expectations through participation (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001); the focus group research, however, suggests that *low expectations* present a far greater challenge for those pursuing democratic renewal.

‘It’s not for people like me’ – issues of social exclusion

There was a strong sense among many involved in the focus groups that participation was for ‘other people’. For some, this was a general sense that getting involved simply ‘suited’ particular people. A stronger version of this argument was that: ‘You get put off because the same people dominate everything’. Others expressed a clear sense of exclusion on the basis of who they were. While these views did not necessarily have a ‘logical’ basis (and were often based on citizens’ own prejudices), they were strongly held and acted as a clear deterrent to participation, while fuelling generally negative perceptions of the council. The following examples serve as illustration:

- Time and again, young people (from all different backgrounds) argued that: ‘They are not interested in what young people like us think’.
- Single parents in an inner-city area felt that: ‘They take advantage of women with children – they think you’ll accept anything and not complain’.
- The dominant view within a group of white single parents was that: ‘There’s nothing for white people. People should be treated as equal’.
- A group of African-Caribbean young people in the same area complained that: ‘Asians get special treatment’.

Survey evidence indicates that councils are increasingly recognizing the difficulties involved in making consultation inclusive (Lowndes *et al.* 1998a, pp. 47–8; Audit Commission 1999, pp. 33–41). Our focus group findings underline the fact that ‘more participation’ is not the same as ‘more democracy’ – participation initiatives may reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage. The findings support the principle that different participation methods are necessary to reach different citizen groups: it may be unrealistic to seek ‘balance’ or ‘representativeness’ within each type of forum. Direct invitations to participate, and appropriate incentives, may be particularly important in engaging those who would not ordinarily take part. There may be something of a dilemma for local authorities in terms of, on the one hand, building the competence of those already involved in participation initiatives and, on the other hand, continuously widening the process to include new groups of citizens. Long-term community development and capacity building initiatives can help to develop the confidence and trust of traditionally excluded groups, and citizen edu-

cation – from school onwards – may assist in challenging the attitudes of ‘those who dominate’ (Lowndes *et al.* 1998b, p. 35).

CONCLUSION

Our focus group research reveals a range of interacting motivations for participation. It challenges the idea that the public is universally apathetic and throws light upon current deterrents to participation in local government. The research findings point to the potential value of local authority strategies which:

- Ground consultation in good ‘customer care’.
- Address the stated priorities of local residents and involve all relevant agencies.
- Mobilize and work through local leaders (informal as well as formal).
- Invite or actively recruit participants, rather than waiting for citizens to come forward.
- Employ a repertoire of methods to reach different citizen groups and address different issues.
- Recognize citizen learning as a valid outcome of participation.
- Show results – by linking participation initiatives to decision-making, and keeping citizens informed of outcomes (and the reasons behind final decisions)

Citizens in our focus groups had no difficulty in coming up with evaluation criteria for public participation initiatives, despite the difficulty encountered in this area by local authorities (Lowndes *et al.* 1998, pp. 68–70; Lowndes *et al.* 1998b, pp. 25–9). Succinctly stated in their own words, citizens’ core criteria were: (a) ‘Has anything happened?’; (b) ‘Has it been worth the money?’; and (c) ‘Have they carried on talking to the public?’ Local authorities might do well to monitor all participation activity against this checklist.

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