

Involve's 'Room for a View' is an exciting contribution to the debate on the shape of democracy's future

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By Democratic Audit UK

2015-11-10

*Simon Burall of Involve, a think tank specialising in democracy and public engagement, recently authored a new report entitled 'Room for a View', which focusses on the idea of UK democracy as a deliberative process. Here, **Ed Hammond** from the Centre for Public Scrutiny and **Temí Ogunye** of Citizens Advice respond to the piece.*

Ed Hammond, Head of Programmes (Local Accountability), The Centre for Public Scrutiny



Looking at democracy as it works in local government, traditional representative models have brought us a long way but are looking traditionally ill-at-ease as new, more informal and more opaque decision-making arrangements are established. The systems and processes evolving to take advantage of the opportunities around English devolution are an excellent example. Leaders of local authorities, selected local partners, civil servants and Government ministers are thrashing these deals out behind closed doors. While we have confidence that those negotiating deals are doing so with the best of intentions and with the needs of local people in mind, they are bypassing traditional democratic systems, which are ill-equipped to deal with the swifter and more flexible means of decision-making that they require.

Part of the challenge is that traditional democratic systems, and traditional "openness", are seen as too slow and cumbersome to cope with the speedy, flexible decision that will be needed by local areas – first, as they negotiate their deals, and second, as the deals are implemented and councils and their partners collectively juggle their new plans and priorities. But a space has been created – a space for a similarly flexible system of governance, a space for deliberation and reflection in public. This space must be filled for devolution to lead to the transformative change that those in the sector hope it will.

Deliberative approaches to democracy provide an obvious mechanism to do this, and to reintroduce the basic principles of accountability, transparency and involvement into devolved decision-making. Moreover, the novelty of such systems presents the chance to introduce meaningful deliberative systems from the start, rather than to try to reverse-engineer them into existing arrangements in the future. We think that elected representatives can reinvigorate their role if they are recognised as being a key means of ensuring that the "transmission between the public space and the empowered space" that the report discusses actually happens. Non-executive councillors, acting through the overview and scrutiny function of individual councils, and combined authorities, will be a principal means of doing this – of creating and maintaining a formal public spaces where deliberative discussions can both happen, and where they can be directed into formal decision-making frameworks.

This is a fascinating time to be working in the sector – fundamental changes which we had thought for many years to be immutable are suddenly up for grabs. But Simon is right in his paper to highlight democracy as the critical factor in ensuring success, and we look forward to seeing this debate develop and continue in the coming weeks and months.

Temí Ogunye, Policy Researcher, Citizens Advice

Simon Burall's [Room for a View](#), is an important and timely contribution to the on-going debate on democratic reform and renewal in the UK. He rightly points out that assessments of the health of democracy should not focus on electoral participation alone; what happens outside of elections and Parliament matters crucially too.



Citizens Advice welcomes a conversation about how to reform our democracy so that it works better for citizens. Everyday, we help thousands of people to solve their problems by providing free, independent, confidential and impartial advice, online over the phone, and from 2,500 locations in communities across England and Wales. So we understand the realities and challenges of people's day-to-day lives, and recognise that it is often an inability to make your voice heard and exert influence that brings people to our doors. This is why we care about democratic engagement, throughout the political cycle: because it enables people to have influence over the issues that matter to them, everyday.

Our view is that many democratic processes and channels for influence do not fit well with people's lives. To do better, we need to reform democratic spaces so that they are simpler to understand, easier to access, and more responsive to citizens' values and experiences. This means that democratic processes and channels for influence should record and be sensitive to user (i.e. citizen) experience, and be located where people spend time (both on and offline).

Simon Burall's emphasis of the importance of the connections between different components of a democratic system – not just elections – speaks to Citizens Advice's vision of a democracy where civic and public institutions create an environment within which all citizens can have influence and agency over the issues that matter to them, everyday. Room for a View is an important contribution towards that end.

These blogs were written in response to the launch of the report [Room for a View](#) by Involve's director Simon Burall. Read the [full report](#) and follow Involve on [Twitter](#). Cover image credit: [Valery Kenski, CC BY 2.0](#).