

Engagement at the local level should be citizen-led rather than institution-led

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By Democratic Audit UK

2015-10-28

*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. In responding to the piece, **Jessica Studdert** of the New Local Government Network looks at the potential for heightened engagement at the local level, and puts the case for a citizen-led, rather than institution-led, process of political and community engagement.*



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While the focus of [Involve's new report](#) is our national democratic health, it is timely to consider the merits of a deliberative systems approach in light of devolution reforms within England. Disconnect between the “empowered space” of Westminster’s institutions and citizens is well recognised, weakening the legitimacy of decisions made in the former. Remedies are less apparent in an age of increased complexity and fragmentation in the “public space” through which citizens, civil society and the media – traditional and social – interact.

There is a risk that moves towards greater decentralisation of power to newly empowered spaces – institutions of local government – simply replicate on a smaller scale the weaknesses of the national system. With the focus on new models of governance – directly elected mayors and combined authorities – crafted to suit the accountability requirements of Whitehall, it is important that new opportunities to strengthen accountability of decisions to the public space are not missed.

At core, the challenge for democratic institutions is to blur the boundaries between the governed and the government, creating more space for the former to engage with the latter while ensuring equity of participation and

access. In practice at a local level there are more opportunities for this interaction – not simply due to proximity enabling direct engagement but because shared space in communities creates a focus for deliberation. There are already examples of local authorities pioneering new approaches, such as [Oldham's Co-operative Borough](#) (as opposed to council), which involves developing the community leadership skills of elected members. The devolution of the entire health budget to Greater Manchester will be an interesting chance to consider how aligning health resource and decision-making more effectively across a place can create greater individual engagement in healthy choices and outcomes.

Methods to increase the deliberative capacity of democratic systems aren't singular or static. With new freedoms will come new opportunities which may prove healthily disruptive to traditional structures: open-policy making drawing in new expertise; increased transparency in decision-making processes; online/offline techniques like hackathons and crowdsourcing; and more sophisticated data tools providing user insights to shape services. Ultimately, engagement should be citizen-led rather than institution-led so that as wide a range of viewpoints and narratives as possible can be drawn in. This will challenge local politicians and policymakers alike but the prize of a healthier and more connected local democracy will ensure devolution is here to stay.

This blog was 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](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK, or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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