

Civic Participation in Public Policy-Making: A Literature Review

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This literature review of civic participation in public policy-making forms one part of a wider study aimed at investigating civic participation activity undertaken by the Scottish Executive. Other elements of the overall study comprise a survey of civic participation activity and a mapping of Scottish Executive activity undertaken since devolution which aims to build capacity for, facilitate or assist public participation in policy-making. The aim of the review was to provide a picture of the range of civic participation activity in public policy-making across different national jurisdictions and to draw out generalisable lessons and issues to emerge where these were of relevance to the Scottish context.

Main Findings

- Amongst the trends in civic participation to emerge over recent years was a broadening of the range of activities undertaken by public bodies, and increased attention paid to quality and fitness of use of different techniques depending on the policy and other contexts.
- Within the UK, local government has appeared to be at the forefront of pushing forward the boundaries on innovation in techniques.
- A general lack of critical assessment and systematic evaluation curtails the identification of lessons to be learned from previous civic participation activity.
- Use of deliberative approaches in civic participation attracted a significant body of comment in the literature reviewed, not only on account of its gradual increase in use, but also because of the many perceived benefits of adopting such approaches.
- Concerns were raised regarding difficulties in engaging with particular groups such as minority ethnic communities, older people, younger people, local business people and those living in rural locations.
- The rapid increase in both use and nature of civic participation activity in public policy-making does not appear to be grounded in empirical evidence of what works and why.
- Although many people who have participated in civic participation in Scotland felt that their contribution has been listened to by policy-makers, others were not sure what had happened to their input and if it had affected policy.
- Across many different contexts there was concern that, to date, civic participation appeared not to have made a significant impact on decision-making.

Background

This literature review forms one part of a wider study aimed at investigating civic participation activity undertaken by the Scottish Executive. Separate reports present the findings from the associated survey of civic participation in the Scottish Executive and mapping of civic participation capacity-building activity undertaken since devolution.

The commissioning of the study reflects a growing interest in the use of civic participation in Scottish national policy-making fuelled in particular by the principle enshrined in the report of the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament that: *“the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation”* (Section 2, paragraph 2).

Remit

The remit for the review was to provide a picture of the range of civic participation activity undertaken across different national jurisdictions within the policy-making context. The focus was on the participant as a *citizen* rather than as a consumer. Further aims were to explore the reasons for using specific activities within particular contexts and to draw out generalisable lessons and issues to emerge from their use where these were of relevance to the Scottish Executive.

Methodology

The literature review was desk-based and involved the identification of both published and unpublished material. Several different approaches to locating relevant literature were adopted. These included:

- Web-based searching of major databases
- Search of IDOX Information Service database
- Scottish Executive library search
- Searches of the websites of key international institutions such as OECD
- Searches of the websites of UK Government and Government agencies
- Personal contact with relevant experts in the field

Overall, much of the literature identified as relevant appeared to be lacking in empirical grounding and reflected a rapid spread in activity but with relatively little academic or professional foundation. The literature abounded with guides

to good practice yet tended to take a rather uncritical stance, leaving doubts about the potential application of practice to other jurisdictions and circumstances.

The literature also demonstrated the spectrum of definitions, understandings and frameworks deployed by different commentators in their examination of civic participation.

Whilst much of the material reviewed was UK-based, the OECD Citizens as Partners project provided a particularly rich source of cross-national experience along with other international sources extending from Canada and the United States through to Europe and Australia.

Range, Nature and Trends in Civic Participation Mechanisms

The summary of several main surveys and studies of civic participation over national and local jurisdictions demonstrated a number of trends to emerge over recent years. Whilst authorities have held onto many of the traditional approaches which have stood the test of time, local authorities appeared to be at the forefront of pushing forward the boundaries on innovation in techniques. However, lagging somewhat behind this pioneering work appears to be evidence of strategic planning regarding civic participation with much activity reflecting a reactive rather than pro-active schedule of activities.

A general lack of critical assessment and systematic evaluation curtails the identification of lessons to be learned from previous activity. Those activities attracting most critical assessment include citizens' juries, the consensus conference, written consultations, people's/citizens' panels, web-based approaches and public meetings.

Deliberative approaches to civic participation attracted a significant body of comment in the literature reviewed. Such techniques were seen as offering a less confrontational and more constructive approach than other activities such as public meetings. Compared with other approaches, deliberative techniques were seen as making participants more amenable to change and making dominant views less entrenched.

Overarching Lessons and Issues

Engaging Hard-to-Reach Groups

Concerns were raised in the literature regarding difficulties in engaging with particular groups such as minority ethnic communities, young people, older people, local business people and those living in rural locations. Two main

approaches to tackling such under-representation were observed. These were taking positive action to build a level playing field for participation and undertaking special exercises tailored to the particular target group.

Many examples of initiatives to engage with young people have been supported by the Scottish Executive. Local authorities in particular have been innovative in attempting to engage with hard-to-reach groups. A key message to emerge was that engaging with such sectors required an adaptation of methods of participation, not an adoption of ready-made approaches.

Evaluating Civic Participation Activity

Many commentators identified difficulties in designing robust evaluations of civic participation activity. Where evaluations have been attempted these have tended to focus on the process of the activity rather than its outcome. Different views emerged on what constituted effective civic participation.

Citizens' Views

The importance of previous participants finding out “what happened next” emerged repeatedly in the literature. Participants' perceptions of their experiences are greatly influenced by aspects of the participation process. Some participants felt that they had more to offer and did not demonstrate signs of consultation fatigue. Participants were seen as becoming more critical of the participation process and more discerning about their involvement.

Contextual Issues

Previous innovative developments in civic participation have been dominated by examples from the health policy domain. There was some evidence to suggest that local authorities in urban areas tended to be more active in promoting civic participation than those in rural locations. Across different jurisdictions, the nature and ethos of governance appeared

to exert an influence over the effectiveness of civic participation. The notion of civic “self confidence” emerged and was viewed as a pre-requisite to effective civic involvement in public policy-making.

Challenges and Future Directions

Across different contexts, there was concern that, to date, civic participation appeared not to have made a significant impact on public policy decision-making. The public's lack of awareness of the scope of power at different levels of governance created a difficulty in meeting their expectations of impact. The need to clarify the respective roles of participatory and representative democracy emerged in order to address the perceived tension between them.

There was a growing need for guidance on how to handle weighting of views provided by different sectors of respondents to civic participation exercises.

Accurate estimation of the resources required for civic participation appeared to be challenging with lack of adequate resources identified by local authorities as a key problem.

The notion that public apathy towards civic participation could explain low response rates was contested by some commentators who argued that apparent unwillingness to engage may reflect negative perceptions of representative democracy rather than the participatory process *per se*.

A number of influences on the future development of civic participation were identified, and included: advances in e-Government; further growth of civic society organisations; increasing globalisation; increasing complexity of issues and tighter time frames; the development of systematic civic participation evaluation frameworks; and increasing strategic planning of civic participation activity.

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