

Together We Can

The Challenge of Citizen Engagement

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THANK YOU, I am delighted to be here at this Together We Can event. Before I was appointed to the Cabinet, I was the minister at the Home Office with responsibility for establishing the Together We Can agenda across Government.

Of course, as a Minister, you get on with whatever job you're given. But I was especially pleased to develop the Together We Can agenda, because it fits so closely to my own political outlook and background, and for me it is the central part of the government's approach.

One of the key themes of our public service reforms in recent years has been the need to engage local people in the planning, running and future direction of public services.

There are two reasons why I think this is so important:

1. **Public services need to be efficient, successful and popular** if they are to justify their tax-based funding, and one way to virtually guarantee that they are efficient, successful and popular is to fully engage people in their design and running.

Old style social democracy – where state services were doled out like dollops of porridge onto the plates of grateful recipients – has run its course. People want choice; they want information; they want to be treated as an individual; they want the sense that they matter, that they are important within the system. Indeed they want to feel that the system is being run for *their* benefit, not for the staff and suppliers.

Who knows better what services the local Sure Start should run than local Mums? Who knows better what services local home helps should provide than pensioners? I never fail to be impressed at ingenuity, dedication and common sense of the people actively running local services. There's a reservoir of common sense problem-solving at the core of every working class community – often it is the women in the vanguard – and our job is to tap into that reservoir. So Together We Can can identify community champions, give them support, and create better local services and stronger communities as a result.

2. The second reason is more subtle, but no less important: **citizenship engagement is vital for our democracy**. Democracy cannot be left to the politicians, planners and pundits. Democracy should be an active, not a passive state. It means people taking control over the decisions that affect them, having the platforms on which to stand to influence what happens in their homes, on their streets and estates, in their neighbourhoods and in their country.

If we can revitalise democracy at this very local level, with people getting engaged at street level, then we can see a better future for our democratic politics more generally.

Why? Because at street level, people learn the skills they need to become active citizens and community champions. There are 3.6 million people who have carried out at least one act of civic activism in the last year.

So for these two reasons – the need to constantly improve and win approval for public services, and the need to revitalise our democracy – Together We Can can play a vital role.

I am optimistic that we can forge a citizen-led revolution, to re-invent the relationship between citizen, community and government.

I think there are positive signs that the revolution fares well:

New research shows that Britain is a nation of joiners of organisations.

Ten years ago, the average Briton belonged to six organisations, from churches to trade unions and neighbourhood societies. Now the average person has 17 up-to-date memberships.

The fastest expanding membership organisations are online communities, and the average adult belongs to eight. They include video site YouTube, whose worldwide membership has grown from 2.8 million to 72 million in one year.

If we can channel just some of this energy and enthusiasm into local active citizenship, then we can transform our communities.

There is a host of initiatives which prove people will get engaged if they think they're going to make a difference:

- community justice centres, like the one in Liverpool, where local people helped to appoint the judge and help to design punishments
- the expert patient programme, which gives patients the knowledge to shape their own treatment and discuss their care with the professionals from a position of strength
- Sure Start – which involves thousands of parents in a variety of schemes. I visited one in Leeds last week and saw....[DN add anecdote]
- the Department of Health's 'Your Health, Your Care, Your Say' exercise which involved thousands of people in developing healthcare strategies

- the new deal for communities (NDC) scheme, which has elected boards which often attract higher turnouts than the council
- there are now half a million members of Foundation Trust hospitals in the UK – more than any of the political parties.
- Community asset transfers, such the one in my own City of Salford (DN add detail]
- and let's not forget the growing myriad of social enterprises. We estimate there are 55,000 social enterprises in Britain today, representing over 5% of all businesses with employees and contributing £8.4bn to the UK economy. We have recently launched the Social Enterprise Action Plan to stimulate further innovation and growth.

What matters now is for all this activity to become more co-ordinated, more joined up. That is the point of Together We Can – 12 government departments worked to get the plan up and running.

But we need to do more. For example, when the Department for Constitutional Affairs spends a million pounds trying to attract new magistrates, what happens to the names and addresses of the people who thought they might like to be a magistrate, but it wasn't quite right for them? Do we then suggest they become a school governor or a NHS board member? Or are they lost forever...

How we can ensure that our investment in active citizenship gets real returns?

I am leading a piece of work to look at how we bring together some of this disparate activity, so that we get some real bang for our buck.

I've argued for a citizenship participation agency – part-headhunters, part-Open University, part-CAB, which identifies tomorrow's civil leaders, gives them mentoring, training and support, and opens the doors to their participation.

And that brings me to the report we are here to launch today: **The Community Development Challenge**, which draws on the experience from the front line. I was especially struck by the recommendations that community development should be promoted as a nationally recognised occupation, and that high quality training should be available.

Next week, I am attending the launch of a new City & Guilds qualification in active citizenship – hopefully another step in active citizenship becoming more and more important in our society.

So to conclude – congratulations on today's event, on this report, and on all the work you do.

I remain convinced that this is the most exciting agenda on offer, with long-term benefits to our democracy and society. You are in the vanguard, and others will learn from you.

There are not many problems beyond the wit and will of working class communities to solve.

Our job is to give them the tools.

Thank you.

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