Enhancing Public Participation in Local Government, September 1998
On 5th May 2006 the responsibilities of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) transferred to the Department for Communities and Local Government.

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'Enhancing Public Participation in Local Government'
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De Montfort University and the University of Stratchlyde

Objectives of the research:
The three key objectives of the research are:

- To provide an up-to-date picture of the nature and scope of public participation in local government via a survey of all local authorities.
- To investigate the views of local authorities and their citizens on participation initiatives in practice via selected case studies.
- To develop guidance for local authorities on enhancing public participation, covering the selection, implementation and evaluation of initiatives.

The report presents research findings relating to the first two objectives. The guidance takes the form of a separate document.
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Introduction

This summary discusses the findings of research carried out by De Montfort University and The University of Strathclyde on the current forms of public participation used in local government. It also investigates the views of local authorities and their citizens on participation initiatives in practice.

A questionnaire was sent to all principal local authorities in England in January 1998, covering the level of use and trends of take-up of a range of different participation methods. The questionnaire also investigated perceptions of the factors stimulating participation initiatives and the benefits and problems encountered in practice. A response rate of 85% was achieved. Qualitative research was also carried out in eleven contrasting case study areas, involving semi-structured interviews with local authority members and officers and focus groups with local citizens.

While the survey findings can claim to be broadly representative of English local government, the case study data provide in-depth information on specific initiatives in particular contexts. The findings from the research are outlined below.

Current use of different participation methods and trends in take-up

The survey findings show that 'traditional' forms of participation or consultation (such as public meetings and consultation documents) are well established in local government, as are many 'consumerist' approaches. Remarkably - given their short history within local government - service satisfaction surveys and complaints or suggestion schemes are almost universal in their application. The survey data show that, while traditional and consumerist methods were well established before 1992, their use continues to grow. The most striking feature from the data, however, is the take-up of innovative approaches since 1994. A significant minority of local authorities have taken up new approaches to citizen consultation and deliberation, with many more planning to do so in 1998 (particular interest is shown in experimenting with interactive web sites and citizens’ juries).

Variations between authorities

While revealing minimal differences between authorities of different political control, the survey shows that urban authorities are more active than rural authorities in seeking to enhance public participation (although there are, of course, exceptions to this general trend). Different types of local authorities appear to 'specialise' in pioneering specific approaches for instance, counties lead the way on interactive web sites and citizens’ panels, while metropolitan districts are most active in relation to visioning and community planning. The survey shows that service specific approaches to public participation are more common than corporate applications, and that it is innovative methods (such as visioning and interactive web sites) that are most likely to be used...
to address authority-wide and cross-cutting issues (like Local Agenda 21).

**A diversity of approaches**

The findings show a growing diversity and increasing volume of participation initiatives in local government. The data on trends suggest that local authorities have actively helped to set the participation policy agenda they are not simply following a new government's preferences. The continuing development of 'traditional' and 'consumerist' approaches demonstrates that there is no simple ditching of 'old' methods in favour of new fashions. As the case studies show, local authorities are working with an increasing repertoire of participation methods, finding benefits in applying different techniques to different situations and work with specific citizen groups. The focus groups indicate that citizens also recognise the different uses of a range of approaches to participation (in the general context of a low awareness of opportunities). Citizens' stated enthusiasm for the further development of 'customer care' initiatives confirms the need for local authorities to continue to tackle basic issues of access and information, whilst also experimenting with more deliberative approaches to involving the public.
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**Strategies for enhancing public participation**

The case study findings reveal the dominance of informal strategies for public participation within local authorities, which often rely heavily upon the support of key individuals. A preference for informal strategy arises in the context of many members' nervousness or even hostility towards the idea of enhanced public participation. The case studies reveal how a lack of formal strategy can reduce the legitimacy and robustness of public participation activity, leaving initiatives vulnerable to political and personality-based changes. It is clear from both the survey findings and the case studies that local authorities perceive their approaches to public participation to be driven primarily by internal and locally specific factors. Whilst recognising that participation activity is shaped by central government policy, there is a lack of support for 'prescriptive' central guidance.

**Inter-agency approaches**

The survey shows that the great majority of authorities claim to be developing their approach to public participation in collaboration with other local agencies. The case studies indicate that new policy initiatives (and associated funding requirements) can provide a spur to inter-agency approaches to public participation (notably in urban regeneration, but increasingly in areas like health, education and the 'new deal'). Case study findings also point to the difficulties involved in sustaining inter-agency approaches over time, and to the persistence in some areas of old-fashioned 'turf wars' between agencies. Focus group findings confirm that many of the issues that most exercise citizens cut across agency boundaries, and that citizens have little awareness of (or respect for) traditional demarcations. The research points to the need to link debates about enhanced participation with the agenda for 'better government' that is, simpler and more transparent relationships between the different agencies which make and implement public policy.

**Selecting participation methods**

The case studies show that most local authorities accept the principle of 'fitness for purpose' - the value of using different methods to work on different issues and with different citizen groups but in practice adopt ad hoc approaches to the selection of public participation methods. The survey shows that, while there are some basic forms of participation that all authorities employ, individual local authorities use a wide variety of combinations of methods. There is no clear relationship between political control and the level or type of participation activity. The case studies show that the selection of participation approaches is guided by a strong preference for 'home made' initiatives and by considerations of cost and, in leading authorities, by a search for continuing innovation. While ad hoc approaches can lead to the inappropriate application of particular techniques (and to reduced impact and learning), the case study findings draw attention to the problem-centredness and adaptability of 'suck it and see' approaches. Central guidance needs to promote flexible and locally appropriate
approaches to enhancing public participation.

**When not to involve the public**

The survey and case study findings are valuable in identifying the situations in which local authorities are most likely to feel that it is *inappropriate* to involve the public on matters of internal management or commercial-sensitivity, and on issues where a clear political commitment exists, where participation could create or exacerbate community tensions, or where legal and cost constraints restrict policy options. Those who defend the principle of maximum public participation do so on the basis that local authorities should explain their actions to citizens even where they cannot satisfy their stated preferences. Central guidance needs to ensure that pro-participation rhetoric does not mask a critical analysis of where public involvement is, and is not, appropriate.

**Levels of public participation**

The survey and case study findings indicate widespread concern among local authority officers and members about low levels of public involvement in participation initiatives. Findings from the focus groups provide valuable guidance on citizens’ own views about the attractiveness (or otherwise) of taking part in local authority initiatives. The focus groups show that citizens are most likely to participate in initiatives which address their stated priorities (with an emphasis on practical concerns rather than abstract ‘issues’); mobilise and work through local leaders (informal as well as formal); and exploit the potential of inviting or actively recruiting participants, rather than waiting for citizens to come forward. On the other hand, citizens are deterred from participation by negative views of the council; a lack of awareness and information about opportunities to participate; assumptions that the council will not respond to their concerns; and a perception that initiatives are dominated by certain groups.
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**Social exclusion**

The research shows that it is not only overall levels of participation that concern local authorities. A sizeable minority of survey respondents acknowledged difficulties in involving people from particular citizen groups. Survey and case study findings show that patterns of social exclusion can be reproduced within participation initiatives young people and citizens from minority ethnic groups are identified as particularly 'hard to reach'. The focus groups show that many citizens see participation initiatives as dominated by particular groups and definitely not for 'people like us'. The case studies do, however, provide examples of good practice in adapting participation methods to increase their accessibility and acceptability to different citizen groups. The research suggests that developing a range of participation methods to reach different citizens may, in many instances, be more important than seeking the illusive goal of 'representativeness' within a specific initiative.

**Local authority responses to participation**

It is clear from the case study research that levels and patterns of public involvement relate not only to the design and implementation of participation initiatives but also to the capacity of local authority decision-makers to respond to the results of participation. The focus groups show that lack of council response is perceived by citizens to be a major deterrent to participation (and a source of almost universally negative attitudes towards local government). The survey findings show that local authorities themselves recognise that participation initiatives frequently have a minimal impact on final decision-making. The research indicates the importance of linking debates about enhanced public participation with the consideration of new councillor roles and political management arrangements. A 'demand' for public participation can only be stimulated in the context of a 'supply' of real opportunities to influence decision-making.

**Outcomes of participation initiatives**

The survey shows that local authorities see improved services and decision-making as the main benefits of enhanced participation. However, the case studies reveal with reference to specific initiatives wider benefits in terms of local authority learning and citizen education. The focus group data indicate that 'satisfied' citizens tend to identify benefits primarily in terms of personal development and increased understanding of local issues (and local government in general). Despite 'official' claims, the case studies show that members, officers and citizens often find it difficult to pin-point specific service or policy-related outcomes. The research points both to the need for more systematic evaluation of participation initiatives (see below) and for greater legitimacy to be accorded to process-related benefits.

**Negative experiences**

The focus groups show that 'dissatisfied' citizens are preoccupied with a perceived lack of council response to their concerns and a feeling that members and officers do not take them
seriously. Citizens may, however, perceive an initiative to have failed if it does not meet their personal concerns. Mirroring this, survey and case study data show that members' and officers' biggest concern is that enhanced participation may raise public expectations which the local authority cannot meet - thus fuelling further public dissatisfaction. The research findings underline the need for local authorities to express to citizens as clearly as possible the scope and limitations of particular participation initiatives, whilst also addressing the challenge of raised expectations by investing in broader community development and citizen education activities.

**Approaches to evaluation**

The case studies demonstrate an almost total absence of formal approaches to evaluating participation initiatives. The absence of formal evaluation is explained with reference to resource constraints, the lack of established benchmarks, and problems of timing. The lack of formal evaluation renders local authority learning on public participation haphazard and personalised. However, a potential for more systematic evaluation is evident from interviewees' capacity to reflect critically on past experience and to identify (with a high degree of consistency) appropriate evaluation criteria. Proposed criteria relate to: impact on council decision-making or policy; increased understanding among the public; some degree of public satisfaction with outcomes; and evidence of sustained public participation. The focus groups show that citizens support the principle of formal evaluation and identify similar criteria to members and officers. The research provides guidance for the development of evaluation schemas, whilst drawing attention to the need for flexibility in terms of local sensitivities, the inevitability of contested viewpoints, and the importance of capturing unexpected but valuable outcomes.