

## PARTICIPATIVE GOVERNMENT

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### Introduction:

During the last decade there has been a determination within central government to encourage greater involvement and participation by individuals, communities and users of public services. This is based on beliefs about the type of society that government needs to build and it is also based on a pragmatic view that effective involvement will drive improved quality of service by directing resources to meet the needs of service users. This paper considers the practical implications of participative government and looks at the competencies required within central and local government if this approach is to be successful.

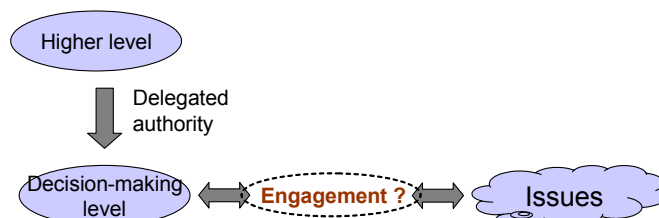
### The case for participative government:

The complexity of the decision making process, coupled with the pace of change, presents significant challenges if decision making is controlled by the top layers of a hierarchical structure. Decisions will be more responsive and of better quality if those who understand the issues are directly involved in the decision making process, therefore, the argument for subsidiarity is that government operates more effectively if it delegates responsibility to the lowest practical level that has the competence to make decisions.

However, this premise assumes that each delegated area of responsibility has the competence to identify and understand the issues that are relevant. There is a presumption that greater proximity to the issues results not just in *better* understanding (which is probably true), but sufficiently *detailed understanding* of the wider interdependencies to make well informed decisions, (which is not necessarily true). Unless there is the competency to manage the process of collection and assimilation of all relevant information, then the goal of participative government will be marred by frustration, failed promises and failures.

### The engagement process:

Effective engagement is a two-way process. Firstly, it will ensure that all relevant issues are fed into the decision making level. Secondly it will also ensure that the decision makers are able to communicate the rationale that underpins the relevant steps of the decision making process.



Effective engagement will help all parties to:

- understand issues & requirements
- define the service provision collaboratively with users
- become advocates for the proposed outcomes
- enable user feedback on quality of service
- strengthen links between partners, suppliers and service users
- identify options for efficiency savings & reducing wastage
- adapt services to meet changing requirements

The engagement process will be a complex and iterative process that seeks to ensure that the right participants are involved in the relevant issues in an appropriate way. It will rarely be a 'once off' event but rather a continuing programme of work.

The implementation of any engagement process will need to meet five core principles:

- clear objectives
- transparent processes
- appropriate participants
- appropriate agenda & format at each step in the process
- outcomes are communicated

All five of these conditions must be fulfilled otherwise the process will fail, which in turn will cause participants to lose confidence in future engagement activity. At best, engagement will become seen as ineffectual. At worst it will be regarded with suspicion and cynicism.

## **Essential competences:**

Those responsible for managing the engagement process will need a specific set of competencies. These will include the ability to:

- define a clear objective
- identify and work with different stakeholders at different phases of the process
- assimilate large amounts of information – much of which may lie outside their personal area of expertise & therefore require facilitation skills to engage with relevant stakeholders
- manage communication activity to reach diverse stakeholder groups
- produce an accurate record of events and conclusions, tailored to different audiences
- design the format of each specific engagement activity so that it:
  - meets the needs of the participants
  - achieves an effective outcome
  - ensures effective use of time

This last point (and its' three sub-points), disguises the complexity that lies behind the task of designing an appropriate "format". The format defines the tasks and activities that enable the participants to be creative, share knowledge and develop options to address identified issues. An ineffective format will produce a poor quality outcome.

## **Developing organisational capacity:**

The desire for participative government at both a central and local level will require the capacity to design and manage engagement processes to address challenging and complex issues. If the level of skills is only sufficient to manage simple and uncomplicated issues, then the role of engagement will need to be limited to simple consultative processes. Attempts to undertake engagement where the issues are complex and uncertain will have damaging consequences and bring the concept of participative government into disrepute.

## **The need for skills and expertise:**

There has undoubtedly been investment in building the necessary skills but anecdotal evidence suggests that there is still some way to go. More significantly, there appears to be little consistency in the methods and techniques being used. A review of publications and guides available on web sites for government departments and public sector bodies reveals that some information provides excellent guidance, while others offer techniques that are alarmingly simplistic and destined to fail in anything other than at the most elementary levels of engagement.

## **Building the culture:**

For some parts of the public sector, developing the required skills and competencies will need to be accompanied by a change in culture. Research undertaken by the author has identified that there are a number of preconditions that need to be met before the engagement process can be effective. Failure to fulfil these preconditions will result in failing to achieve sustainable outcomes. These preconditions lie exclusively within the control of senior management and even the most competent of engagement processes will be ineffective unless senior leadership take responsibility for meeting these preconditions.

## **Where are we now?**

A study for the Department of Communities and Local Government provides an excellent summary of issues relating to Community Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement within local government during the period 1998 – 2007. It considers a number of issues, including 'barriers to change' and also a view on the variable quality of stakeholder engagement.

It provides the following paragraph on barriers to change.

*The main barriers to change that have been identified consistently throughout the evaluation include poor leadership of local authorities (from leaders and chief executives), unsupportive cultures and a lack of local capacity (within organisations and individuals).*

With regard to the quality of the engagement process it states:

*The level of organised stakeholder engagement has increased in volume since the launch of the 1998 and 2001 white paper policies but it is less clear whether the quality of engagement has improved.*

## **The future - legislation for greater engagement:**

The 'Sustainable Communities Act' represented a landmark in the move towards participative democracy as it provides communities (where the local authority opts in), with the right to have their views formally considered by their local authority. This legislation requires a fair and accessible engagement process that is competent to gather and assimilate the views of community groups. The new legislation will start to take effect from the end of 2009 and will provide useful information about the capability to undertake engagement processes at a local level.

## **Summary:**

The desire to involve stakeholders and as a consequence, empower citizens to influence the quality of services and driver greater local accountability is an important component of efficient and responsive government. Fulfilling this ambition will require the capacity of the public sector to manage effective engagement and will also require an understanding of the interdependency between leadership and organisational culture.

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## Useful websites:

Citizen Involvement: Opportunities & Obstacles. Professor John Stewart.  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmpubadm/79/91130a02.htm>

Characteristics of World Class Services: Cabinet Office:  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/excellence\\_and\\_fairness/report/html/characteristics\\_world\\_class.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/excellence_and_fairness/report/html/characteristics_world_class.aspx)

Excellence and Fairness Model:  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/excellence\\_and\\_fairness/flowmodel.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications/excellence_and_fairness/flowmodel.aspx)

Dept. for Communities and Local Government.  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/>

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## References:

Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (March 2005)  
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The State of Governance of Places: Community Leadership and Stakeholder  
Engagement:  
Helen Sullivan