

Deliberative Democracy: exploring fresh approaches to consultation

Introduction

Test Valley Borough Council led a Government-funded pilot to explore how a deliberative approach could inform decision-making on important local policy and service issues. Following that pilot the Council are keen to adopt that model for citizen engagement where it offers the best approach to informing decision-making.

The Council commissioned the Southern Policy Centre to lead a seminar designed to help their senior managers understand how deliberative democracy works and discuss when best it may help them shape policy. This report offers a summary of that discussion, held on 13 July 2021. It is not intended to be a verbatim record, but aims to draw out some of the key issues and opportunities which arose.

What does a deliberative approach offer?

The UK has a long history of representative democracy and, more recently, has begun to make use of referenda, albeit that we have still to fully understand how they fit with our electoral system. Local councils are well versed in public consultation, albeit that it does not always go smoothly or deliver clear conclusions.

Deliberative democracy is different. Its focus is on informed deliberation, discussion and consideration of issues and possible ways of tackling them. It is not the same as consultation about a proposal or set of proposals, which only ever present limited, pre-determined options. A deliberative approach encourages exploration of options and the reaching of consensus.

Deliberative democracy can serve various purposes within a representative democracy: telling decision-makers what should be done, informing debate or helping guide the decision-making process. Any organisation beginning a deliberative process should be quite clear why they believe they are doing so and how it fits with their decision-making processes.

A council might use a deliberative model when they want to:

- See and hear what people think about an issue
- Explore where consensus on that issue may lie
- Help guide decision-making on complex or difficult topics where elected members may be nervous about public reactions

A deliberative approach will have a number of core elements:

- Posing a question in a way which allows people to explore complex topics in some depth - the key is to ensure you are not limiting discussion with specific propositions or options
- Engaging a representative cross-section of local citizens - this is very different from the usually self-selecting audience for most consultation exercises, which only attract, and even favour the articulate minority, often white, male and middle-aged
- Structuring the session to allow informed discussion on a topic - the event must have an emphasis on learning and listening, to avoid people simply adopting a position and being difficult to shift from there
- Using experts to help stimulate that informed discussion - finding people who know about the topic and can present the facts and issues clearly, sharing their knowledge rather than advocating a solution
- Ensuring discussion is expertly facilitated - to encourage all to participate, ensure every voice is heard and draw out points of agreement and difference

This approach can inform decisions in a representative democracy, but is not intended to replace the democratic decision-making process. It can be a highly effective way of exploring complex issues, testing public perceptions of how those issues might be approached and developing options. Because it encourages informed debate, it can be more open and less confrontational than approaches which offer restricted choices. Properly run, the process can give elected members some confidence in taking tough decisions.

Test Valley's experience

Test Valley Borough Council is open to engaging with local citizens in a variety of ways, including through consultative events, surveys and a variety of partnerships. They are proud of their positive record of dialogue, led by Elected Members who have in the past taken a direct role in seeking people's opinions.

However, they are keen to broaden that approach for a number of reasons, most notably to:

- Encourage wider participation from all parts of the Borough's diverse community
- Find ways of building consensus on some of the more complex and challenging issues the Borough faces
- Ensure they are regularly challenging the "corporate assumptions" about what is right for the local community

Attendees agreed a deliberative approach could build on the good work already done on consultation and engagement. The approach can help the Council to build empowered communities who are able to articulate their concerns and identify solutions that work for them. It can also enable discussions in which all voices are heard, not just those shouting loudest. Participants also saw it as an opportunity to empower Elected Members, allowing them to understand what the 'real' community voice was saying and advocate with confidence.

A deliberative approach was seen as a more constructive way of tackling some of the difficult and potentially contentious issues the Council faced, what one participant called the "hot potatoes". Rather than delay considering these issues, that approach would allow a proper and informed discussion about the options. Participants suggested issues such as the local

response to climate change, changes to the Council's model for service provision and Andover regeneration may all be suited to a more deliberative dialogue.

Participants in our discussion also recognised that this fresh approach to dialogue will challenge the Council's own in-built assumptions about how services could be delivered. The professional judgement of senior officers is a vital part of shaping policy, but it should not 'over-rule' public views. Of course, not every option discussed will be viable, and there is a challenge in managing the expectations of those taking part. But that is not an excuse for closing minds to novel or different ideas.

Practical concerns

The Council's senior officers are open to the idea of using a deliberative approach. They recognise it requires a degree of courage, with the Council - both Elected Members and Officers - being open to new and different ideas. But there was a genuine desire to find new ways of responding to community needs.

The seminar discussed how a deliberative approach could benefit the Council's own policy-making if introduced early in the process and without any preconceptions. Participants emphasised that Elected Members must be fully engaged in developing Test Valley's approach to deliberative democracy. They should be encouraged to see it as complementary to their own representative role rather than disenfranchising them as local leaders. Both Members and Officers will need to be open minded and ready to consider less conventional ideas which emerge from these debates.

There remain practical issues to consider as the Council develops its use of deliberative models:

- Ensuring that the participants in a deliberative event are truly representative of the local community. One Officers spoke to the importance of "involving the apathetic" - those who generally don't see the value in taking part in consultative events.
- The cost of the process remained a concern, and particularly the necessity of incentivising participants to take part to avoid inadvertently excluding some. Councils did not traditionally pay to seek residents' views, and this was a big step.
- Some concerns were raised about the time a robust deliberative process might consume, both to plan and conduct. However, it was acknowledged that this proper project planning this could be accommodated.
- Council staff will need to develop the skills to conduct deliberative debates, and there was some discussion about whether there should be a 'corporate pool' of such people which could be drawn on.

Conclusions

Test Valley's senior officers are keen to find new ways of engaging the local community in discussions about the future of the Borough. They see a place for deliberative approaches in this, particularly as a way of exploring solutions to some of the more complex and sensitive issues the Council faces.

Deliberative democracy can be a powerful way of driving constructive and consensual debate. However, it will only add value if care is taken in structuring the deliberative events to

ensure a representative sample is involved, the discussions are suitably open and good facilitation ensures all contributions are sought and captured.

The Council also needs to be ready to hear what can emerge from such events. That is not to say they should automatically accept all that is said, but both Members and Officers must remain open minded and ready to explore ideas which emerge.

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