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Innovation in Local Democracy: The London Borough of Lewisham

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ABSTRACT *This paper provides an account of how one authority – the London Borough of Lewisham – has embarked on a comprehensive programme of democratic innovation. The origins and development of Lewisham's directly-elected executive Mayor are discussed, along with less successful proposals for the adoption of proportional representation for local elections. The paper goes on to consider the working of three other innovations: standing citizens' panel, a series of citizens' juries, and a scheme to involve secondary school children in the election of the borough's Young Mayor.*

In the public sector it is not enough to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery, it is also necessary to improve the democratic character of public institutions themselves. In terms of the overall modernisation of public services, innovation in democratic practice, in governance and in the quality of public dialogue, is as vital as innovation in the design and delivery of services.

This is especially important in local government where the twin aims of service improvement and citizen engagement underpin the entirety of councils' purposes. Councils need to improve their services (making them more relevant, more responsive and more efficient) but they also need to improve their political governance and how they engage citizens and communities in their own governance. Just as the needs and demands of public service users change and develop so too do their demands upon democracy locally. Citizens not only want more answers to more questions, they also want to get involved on their own terms and not through the established and conventional means of meetings and the party political process. But in local government it is not just service design and delivery that needs re-shaping and refreshing. So too does local democracy.

The Lewisham Approach

This article shows how one council, the London Borough of Lewisham, has approached innovation in democracy and governance. Many other authorities can illustrate democratic innovation and change but few have attempted the range of innovation that characterises this London borough. The impulse for modernising governance and the democratic process was political. And it is necessary, here, to acknowledge the dynamism and progressive character of the political leadership of the council over a ten year period. Successive political leaders have considered that modernising the council involved both a service and a democratic dimension. And the council as a whole supported very substantive proposals for progressive governance and democratic change of a type and scale that is uncharacteristic in English local government. These include:

- A proposal for a Mayoral system of local government (begun in an all party local democracy commission in 1998 and culminating in a successful referendum in 2001 and the 'at large' direct election of Lewisham's first Mayor, Steve Bullock in 2002);
- A proposal to the Secretary of State of a fully worked out model of proportional representation in Lewisham agreed following local consultation by the full council and submitted in 2001 but ultimately rejected by the Minister;
- A long-standing Citizens' Panel of 1,000 residents – selected at random, facilitated by independent consultants and still functioning after nearly ten years, having spawned a young people's panel and an E-panel;
- A series of Citizens' Juries that put local social problems and issues to a group of residents, facilitate their investigation of expert witnesses, and sponsor their recommendations to the council for implementation;
- An experiment with the election of a Young Mayor among all secondary school pupils in Lewisham.

Citizens are not just Service Users

Nationally, the service improvement agenda has understandably raised the issue of how councils work with service users and has reinvigorated a more customer focused perspective across local government. Some consider that empowering service users is but one small step away from empowering citizens. And in very many instances they are right. If, for example, a park users' committee is comprised of a diverse group of local citizens and if it centres its attention on how the park can be improved for all potential users locally and if those with responsibility for managing the park and its activities take full account of the views of the park users' committee; then services and activities in the park can become much more responsive to locally changing demands and needs. Indeed the park users' committee could take over responsibility for managing the park itself.

This would take service user involvement on to user management and control (as is the case with Tenant Management Organisations). And some would argue that this might be a good step away from the bureaucratic control of the park by the local council. And it might. Leadbeater (2004) makes a strong case for how more personally tailored services can not only empower service users but also maintain the relevance of service design and delivery. But in some instances it also might be a step closer to 'consumer capture' – where the current group of service users captures the benefits of the park for their primary use, to the exclusion of others. Of course it would depend whether the park users' committee was sufficiently diverse and inclusive – and whether it sought to extend the purposes and range of activities in the park to include new users. At its simplest, the key test is whether the park users' committee would be pursuing 'public interest' principles in the proposed use of the park or whether less inclusive (albeit 'social interest') principles applied. Think of the private squares in central London, which were developed in the eighteenth century for the use of their rich residents to the exclusion of the public generally. They were not designed for the commons and they differ from public parks in their purpose and their accessibility – although they are still parks.

There are two main reasons for extending service user involvement in the public sector (whether it is for parks or schools or whatever). The first reason is the need to make those with management responsibility for the services more responsive to their users as consumers. These managers tend to want to 'deliver' services to passive consumers and to 'clientise' customers through increasing professionalism. The second reason is the truism that many public services are 'co-produced' with the service user. This can be seen by answering the questions, 'who is the worker – the teacher or the pupil; who promotes health and well being – the nurse or the patient?' Empowering service users tilts the balance in the provider–user relationship towards the user; this is vital in public services as very many services have become subject to 'professional capture' and exhibit strong control by professional interests and weak control from consumer interests.

However, service user empowerment does not lead inexorably to citizen empowerment. For citizens to be empowered in relation to a public service it is necessary for the democratic accountability of that service to be broadened and deepened. And for local government services, the established form of democratic accountability has two strands – first, the election of local representatives onto a council to oversee the management and delivery of the service; and, second, a continual dialogue between electors and their representatives on service related issues.

Local Representation and Local Deliberation

This democratic character of local government means that it is much more than a service delivery agent for national government. It is also a vehicle for

'self-government'. Furthermore, people do not simply expect services to be delivered locally – they want local social problems to be solved. And a good many local problems cannot be solved from Whitehall; they need to be solved locally through local public action. Moreover, very many problems cannot be solved by *in camera* discussions between 'professional experts' and elected politicians – they need to be solved through open dialogue and discussion amongst citizens locally. In this way, 'double-loop democracy' in local government requires a healthy system of elected representatives and a healthy system of deliberative channels for citizen engagement. Deliberative approaches that, for example, engage large numbers of citizens in open space conferencing style discussions or through smaller more in-depth considerations (through, say, citizens' juries) need to be accompanied by opportunities for more direct forms of democracy (such as referenda and mass balloting).

But it is important to emphasise that progress is not made simply by adding deliberative approaches to the existing system of local representative democracy. It is necessary also to change the existing representative system. Political parties need to be healthy and deeply connected with civil society locally. This is easy to state but is proving hard to achieve. Empirical studies of party alignment (such as Pharr & Putnam, 2000) point to global decline in party attachment – 'the percentage of the public expressing a partisan attachment has declined in 17 out of the 19 nations for which time series data are available'.

For democracy to work locally there needs to be a healthy competition of ideas and ambitions between political parties at the local level. Electoral competition needs to real and tangible. Elected representatives need to sustain a real connection and sense of public leadership with the localities they represent (Quirk, 2003). And the formal debate and dialogue between elected representatives needs to be mature and healthily challenging.

All these components of a healthy local democracy are necessary conditions for civic engagement and citizen empowerment. Democratic innovation has two dimensions – the renewal of the mandate of the elected; and the revival of civic virtue and public action amongst citizens generally. Very many councils work on the latter, few work actively on both.

Democracy is Based on Dissent

Local public action is both the source and the site of much of everyday politics. People want to gain access to public facilities, they want local services to be delivered fairly and they want a say in how they are developed. There may be a retreat from involvement in formal party politics but there is little retreat from everyday democracy (Bentley, 2005).

The conventional model of political action is one where politicians build support, coalition and consent for public action. And at local level political leaders also need to build consent to public action – to the development of a

housing estate, the development of a school, the renewal of a park and so on. This model of politics requires strong political executives able to articulate ambition for a community and galvanise people to realise that ambition. This underlies the increasing demand (not just in the UK) for directly elected mayors and urban political leaders.

But on very many occasions local political leaders need to build a safe environment for the expression of disagreement and dissent. People may not agree with the public action proposed but they need to be able to agree to disagree. This alternative model of politics where politicians are engaged in processes of 'conflict resolution' or 'balancing interests' or 'arbitrating between competing claims' requires very different skills and perspectives from politicians. In very many instances, public leadership through eloquent 'arguing' needs to be replaced by public leadership through community-level 'bargaining'. And in inner city environments like inner London, where competition for resources is tight and where radical diversity amongst people generates a highly plural community politics, it is precisely this 'bargaining' perspective that is needed.

People may disagree over the use of public resources and about the appropriateness of public policy solutions to certain social problems. And this disagreement may stem from two main sources. First, it may stem from people's present vested interests. Most citizens contribute to public services through taxation but not all benefit equally from all services at the same time. At any one time some citizens will be 'net beneficiaries' of a particular service (say, primary schooling) while others will be (through taxation) 'net contributors'. Not all services will be subject to strong pressures of consumer capture but some will – particularly if it involves group use of a localised facility or asset. In dealing with issues of potential consumer capture it is crucial for the elected politician to be able to appraise and then articulate wider public interests other than simply those of present service users. This can be achieved politically through the use of emotion, metaphor and the development of a strong narrative about 'the public interest' and it can be supported professionally through the use of randomised control groups (of non-users who may potentially use the service) or other citizen based forums that might help articulate the strength of non-users' needs and preferences.

A second source of disagreement is often said to arise from citizens' different political values but more often than not it stems from their sheer experiential diversity and their consequent different social outlooks. A community that is composed of very many communities and different generations of people from differing communities (as is the case in inner London and in many other metropolitan areas in the UK) are unlikely all to agree one with another about how best to solve local social problems. This is not a new problem. Over 350 years ago Thomas Hobbes wrote in *De Cive* (The Citizen) of the competition between people with different desires. People disagreed, according to Hobbes, not simply because of competition

over resources but more because the human condition would result in disagreement.

> The desires of men are different as men differ among themselves in temperament, custom and opinion. What one person praises another will condemn and call evil. Indeed, often the same man at different times will praise and blame the same thing. As long as this is the case there will necessarily arise discord and conflict.

In the modern age, the point of politics at the local level is to offer a safe haven for the expression of dissent and disagreement as well as to offer a vehicle for ambition and hope for change. People want the chance in their neighbourhood, in their locale, in their city to dispute 'why is this happening?' as well as propose 'why this should happen'.

The Move to a Mayor

The most significant governance change for Lewisham occurred in 2001, when the electors voted in a local referendum to move the council's constitution to the directly elected mayor model.

Earlier polls and surveys had discovered that very few people (about 6 per cent) could, unprompted, name the then Leader of the Council. Even fewer could name one of their three local ward councillors. This relative invisibility did not auger well for heightened accountability. An all party democracy and governance commission had investigated international experience and examined considerable external input from expert witnesses. This commission proposed a move to a Mayoral system with a Mayor elected at large rather than indirectly by way of the largest party group elected onto the council. A survey in Lewisham in 1998 discovered that some 58 per cent of residents wanted a Mayor; and in 1999, some 77 per cent wanted a referendum about a directly elected Mayor (Lewisham, 1998, 1999, 2005).

When the council formally consulted on this proposed change it contacted all borough households, all voluntary organisations, schools' governing bodies, the local business community, all elected local politicians, and relevant contacts outside the borough. The consultation took the form of seminars, briefings, independently facilitated workshops and a dedicated expert helpline. The second stage of the consultation consisted of a demographically representative sample of residents, two public meetings and sought responses from our local press and by email.

The Mayoral referendum held in October 2001 had a turnout of some 18 per cent (33,000 electors) and was won fairly narrowly by 51 per cent to 48 per cent. The election of Steve Bullock as Lewisham's first directly elected Mayor occurred in May 2002. The overall turnout was 26 per cent. The election of the Mayor was conducted under the Supplementary Vote (SV) system. This is a 'majoritarian' electoral system. Steve Bullock, standing as a

Labour candidate, gained some 20,000 votes on the first count and over 4,500 on the second count. The candidate who came second in the Mayoral vote was the Conservative candidate who gained a total of 8,000 votes on the first count and a further 1,800 on the second count. Overall, Steve Bullock gained a 45 per cent share of the votes cast in the first round of the Mayoral election. When the votes were counted on the second round between the top two candidates he gained 71 per cent of these votes.

At the same time elections were held for all of the 54 seats on the council. Labour candidates in the contest gained 41 per cent of all votes cast but, because of the effect of the first-past-the-post system of election held at ward level, were elected to 45 seats – some 83 per cent of all seats, producing a very high measure of disproportionality of 42 per cent. In summary, the 'at large' election of Mayors, using the SV system, produces a formal majority and a successful candidate with high visibility. The FPTP system for electing the 54 councillors has the merit of more localised representation but produces a highly disproportionate outcome with successful candidates who are significantly less well known even in their own localities.

The visibility and recognition of politicians heightens public accountability to the electors. Visibility does not in itself guarantee greater public accountability; although invisibility makes it less likely. Since the election of the first directly elected Mayor in 2002, the number of residents who are able, unprompted, to name the Mayor of Lewisham has increased from 16 per cent in 2002 (some six months after the first election) to 38 per cent in December 2005. The rating is now higher than for the three local Members of Parliament in Lewisham.

The Mayor is not simply the elected political executive on the council with responsibility for the functions and activities of the council. The Mayor is also chair of the multi-agency Lewisham Strategic Partnership and is therefore in a key position to influence local public services such as policing, health services and locally delivered national services such as those employment services provided by Job Centre Plus. This multi-agency model fosters clear and visible leadership for the Mayor with local public institutions and adds further to the Mayor's role.

The Case for Proportional Representation

Lewisham's approach to local democratic renewal not only incorporates the move to a Mayoral system, it also involved the detailed consideration of the case locally for a more proportional system of representation. In 1999 an independent review of the local electoral system was commissioned. The remit was to examine the prospect for implementing a fairer system of election locally.

The leading academics in the field of electoral systems, Professor Patrick Dunleavy (Chair of the Public Policy Group at the London School of Economics (LSE)) and Dr Helen Margetts (School of Public Policy at

University College London (UCL)), were commissioned to undertake the review because of their expertise gained as advisers to the Jenkins Commission. They have also undertaken work on electoral systems for the Government Office for London in respect of the new Greater London Authority. Moreover, in 1999 they published a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on proportional representation for local government (Dunleavy & Margetts, 1999).

Their report for Lewisham (*A Fairer Future*) began with an in-depth assessment of electoral outcomes in Lewisham over 20 or so years and with an appraisal of local electoral geography. Their report recommended that the council adopted an Additional Member System (AMS) with 36 councillors elected on a ward basis and 18 councillors being elected on a 'top-up' basis from three 'top-up' areas (the same as the existing Parliamentary Constituencies). Following a year of consultation with local political parties and interested bodies, their report was agreed in principle by the full council in October 2001 and presented to Government for consideration by the Minister for Local Government.

This ground-breaking initiative from a local council was not implemented as it did not receive support from Government. Interestingly, at the same time proportional representation was being considered for Scottish local government and was subsequently implemented (although using the single transferable vote, STV, method of election and not the AMS system as in the Lewisham study). Thus the disproportionate outcomes in local elections in Lewisham are not for want of the council attempting to alter the system to a fairer one.

Strands of Citizen Engagement

Since the late 1990s, the London Borough of Lewisham has made important changes to the way in which it engages people in local decision making. The number of individual consultations has not dramatically increased, but the nature and quality of local public dialogue has improved. Building on innovations – including being the first London Council with a citizens' panel, and one of the first to use a citizens' jury – Lewisham refreshed its approach to consultation activities in the first Mayoral term.

Community Meetings

In 2004, the Mayor pledged to hold locally based 'question time' events in each of Lewisham's 18 wards so that by the end of the year residents in all wards would have had the chance to hold service providers to account. These events were highly successful with many service providers (police, council and health sector providers) attending each and with several hundreds of participants attending in total. They have subsequently become a feature of Lewisham's governance calendar.

The Mayor's locality events are complemented by a cycle of area forums, attended by councillors and officers and consisting of presentations on local public problems and issues with open style public question and answer sessions. These give citizens an additional chance to raise questions about service provision and increase accountability in an open forum. These events, held in local neighbourhoods, give citizens a closer opportunity to identify and interact with their most local politicians.

However, while these meetings are reasonably successful and the community venues they are held in are often full, traditional Town Hall meetings, councillor surgeries and community meetings are losing some of their relevance to modern communities.

This raises the issue of how best to foster innovation in governance? It is commonly claimed that only one-half of all innovations are initiated at the top of organisations (Mulgan & Albury, 2003). Innovation bubbles up as much as it trickles down. In Lewisham strong consultation processes are embedded within operational management together with senior management commitment. Corporately the council has agreed a three year consultation strategy, 2004–2007, which renewed Lewisham's strategic direction and set out an action plan.

Managing Consultation Corporately

The Mayor's consultation board is a key new component of this refreshed approach. In approving all consultations, the board ensures quality standards are adhered to and that 'consultation fatigue', through repeated consultations to the same people, is minimised. It lends continuity and coherence across these activities and, as evaluations are reported back, retains a broader picture, to foster organisational learning. The existence of this Mayoral board directly confronts the three key barriers to innovation: poor risk management, risk aversion and delivery or administrative pressures (Mulgan & Albury, 2003).

Feedback to participants, decision makers and wider audiences is a required part of the process. Best practice and innovative consultation and engagement exercises are evaluated, shared and profiled across the council. This is shared internally through the Mayor's consultation board and in staff publications, externally in print in the borough's magazine, *Lewisham Life*, and online at the Lewisham Listens site, as well as with partner organisations in learning events (Lewisham, 2005). While the council is a key institution locally, others (particularly the police service and the health service) have significant involvement in citizen engagement and participation in their decision making processes.

The most effective councils are those which are open to their citizens and customers and who actively invest in their own organisational agility and adaptability (Quirk, 2003). A number of routes exist through which agility can be enhanced; and it is important that all these routes are open and

viable. Relying on one strand of citizen engagement (such as residents' surveys or citizens' juries) would be entirely unsatisfactory. Instead a multi-strand approach is required.

There is a danger in relying too heavily on formal mechanisms to engage citizens locally. Surveys and conference events can enable attitudes towards or against certain proposals to be gauged and quantified. But it is important that voices are heard and not filtered through a sieve of surveys. The council's role is to facilitate citizens to express what they consider to be their local agenda. In part this is done through dialogue, but also through exploratory events, where no decisions are made, but unstructured feedback is given and public understanding increased. In some measure the role of public servants (whether elected or appointed) is to help citizens become more informed on local issues, to heighten critical citizenry and enable them to better express their hopes and fears as well as their demands on local public institutions.

Creative Approaches to Consultation

An example of a novel and creative approach to consultation in Lewisham was the development of a Creative Citizenship conference, attended by over 80 children. The conference incorporated creative methods including dance and drama, to express how the children felt about issues that most concern them, and to share these with the Mayor. Other imaginative formats to engage people have included the 'Home from Home' events for the large scale housing investment initiative locally (the Government's national 'Decent Homes' initiative). This involved the placing of a complete furnished living room in shopping centres and festivals. The exhibition complemented the home visits already on offer to residents by creating a fabricated domestic setting to engage with people face-to-face and answer related questions.

Similarly, the town centre redevelopment programme in Lewisham developed a creative postcard competition aimed to capture people's vision and aspirations for the future of, and the interests of local community groups, schools, residents, workers and visitors to, the Lewisham town centre. In public consultation exercises, creative formats are an indispensable element in dispelling the public's apathy and motivating their interest.

Other successful events have combined dialogue between the council and the public with more novel elements which attract people and may sustain their involvement for longer. Urban Renaissance Lewisham, a town centre re-development project engaged street market traders through informal 'fish and chips suppers' to open up discussions about town centre plans in a less than conventional environment. A joint health event by the project jointly with the local health service Primary Care Trust gave five pieces of fruit and vegetable to each person who attended. Acknowledging that parents are more likely to be drawn into an event, and enabled to stay there, if their

children are also involved in some way, other events have also offered face-painting and a children's table. Offering different ways for participants to record their views, in a video booth, for example, has also attracted people who might not otherwise have contributed. Those who took pledge cards during a transport and travel event indicate a willingness to continue to contribute after leaving the event.

Examples of other creative formats for consultation have included the Rights and Participation project with 'looked after' children and young people, and targeted focus groups with Vietnamese and Somali women as part of the Women's Voices project. In addition the council provides targeted support through community equality forums to specific groups such as the Pensioners Liaison Committee and the Lesbian and Gay Panel.

Using Modern Technologies

It is important for the techniques of consultation to be systematic and yet varied. Systematic consultation enquires of everyone and varied consultation enables everyone to contribute. A range of mechanisms are available for services to employ, from traditional quantitative questionnaire surveys and focus groups, to more recently introduced techniques such as texting and the authority-wide E-panel. These newer mechanisms are in direct response to changes in public expectations and lifestyles: 61 per cent of Lewisham residents have personal access to the internet at home, work or in a public place (Lewisham, 2004). These new mechanisms need to be used with care. For example, survey evidence locally shows that seven in ten of all Lewisham residents have a mobile phone whereas six in ten have access (at home or at work) to the internet. And yet when asked whether they 'would be prepared to provide your mobile phone number to Lewisham Council for the purpose of public information alerts or other such services' just 20 per cent answered positively. This may be because mobile phones are generally viewed as personal and private and not for general use (there is not yet a Directory Inquiries for mobile phone numbers). These social and psychological limits to the use of mobile phones in particular will change over time but they present real barriers to using text messaging (other than for specific groups of citizens) for widespread consultation at this juncture.

However, an increasing number of residents now expect to have the option of providing online feedback to the council about those issues that they feel matter most and are comfortable using the internet as a route. This, aligned with Government targets, has led to an E-panel being set up in Lewisham to complement the conventional means used by the council to build a dialogue with the public.

The E-panel allows people to participate at a time and place that suits them, in an open and anonymous way, without the need to travel to events

in order to do so. Privacy and anonymity are key considerations and so all personal and demographic data are retained by an external market research agency. As a consultation mechanism, the E-panel is efficient for the council as well as the public. It is possible drastically to reduce administrative costs and the public are able to participate at a time and location convenient to them, without the need to travel and attend on a particular day.

As with traditional citizens' panels, certain sections of the community will always be harder to reach. However, the E-panel has the potential to improve engagement with different sections of the community – as for example with some groups of disabled people, as well as proving more appealing to younger people. Harder to reach groups have been targeted for the Lewisham E-panel with mixed success and the council remains aware that those groups with lower than average access to the internet, such as older people and those in certain socio-economic groups, may be particularly marginalised.

New technologies have the potential to open up local governance to a great deal more citizens, facilitating dialogue by suiting individuals' own timescales and lifestyles. For example, parents can engage without attending meetings and making childcare arrangements, and workers can connect at a time of their convenience to access services, complete an E-panel survey or email their local councillor. In addition, local employers and businesses can interact in governance and influence those local decisions which affect them at their own time and convenience. In this way, e-based communications lower the costs and barriers to influencing elected representatives.

Citizens' Juries

While e-governance techniques have tremendous potential for bringing influence and decision making right into citizens' homes and workplaces, they are less suited to more complex issues where opinions conflict and necessitate debate and deliberation. For example, in 2004 a demographically representative citizens' jury of 15 Lewisham residents was commissioned to help the council understand the range of public opinions about the position of the car in long term transport planning. This method of engagement required participants to spend two and a half days hearing evidence from specialist witnesses and working individually, in small un-moderated groups and plenary sessions to develop answers.

This jury format is particularly suited to detailed consideration of complex or controversial issues and allows jurors to modify their viewpoint in response to evidence presented. Jurors then drew up a set of informed conclusions and collective recommendations, which they presented to the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Lead for Social Inclusion. In tandem with other relevant consultations, the findings are supporting preparation of the council's Local Implementation Plan and longer term transport planning.

The Lewisham Young Mayor

The council has conducted elections for a Young Mayor for two years as part of its approach to youth and citizen engagement. Over the two years (2004, 2005) a total of 70 young people stood for election to be the Young Mayor and an average of 46 per cent of all secondary school age pupils voted in the elections. The successful candidate is obviously very involved throughout their year of office, but so too are a further 20 young people who represent youth involvement groups across the borough which support the Young Mayor in an advisory capacity.

As well as involving young people throughout the design stages of the Young Mayor project, the scheme pledged the successful candidate a budget of £25,000 to spend on young people's priorities. This, plus the further £12,000 the first Young Mayor negotiated with the PCT, clearly places the decision making with young people themselves, especially as the Young Advisors influence the Young Mayor's decisions.

A full range of PR and branded promotional materials were used during the Lewisham's Young Mayor campaign. These ranged from Young Mayor badges and stationary to a dedicated website and a promotional video of young people talking about why they want a young mayor and what they would do if elected.

As part of the ongoing consultation, young people were asked to identify a respected message carrier who could persuade their peers to participate in the election. Young people chose the logos and slogans for the project themselves: 'Our Choice, Our Voice'; 'Action not words' and 'Reclaim, respect, represent'. These appeared on posters and billboards across the borough so there was a tangible output to reflect the level of effort put in by young people, highly visible to the whole borough.

Schools and colleges played a key role in promoting the election and ensuring that ballot boxes were set up and that ballot papers and each candidates' election statements were distributed to all their pupils. Creating new communication routes is not always necessary when the existing ones can be used effectively.

Clarity of Purpose – Information or Consultation

Although all forms of dialogue with customers and citizens are obviously valuable, clarity for the public and stakeholders on the precise nature of the exercise is crucial. When is an exercise simply 'information provision'? And when does an exercise constitute 'consultation'? Is the purpose to inform the public about fully formed proposals or is to discover public opinion so that proposals can be tested with appropriate regard to public responses? Too many consultation exercises fail because of this lack of clarity at the outset. Citizens demand genuine opportunities to influence and affect decisions.

Some consultation exercises are directed to enable a long-run involvement of citizens in key public decisions rather than as one-off opportunities for involvement. For example, Lewisham's annual revenue budget consultation takes place over an eight-month period and comprises an online survey, focus groups, an interactive event with young people, discussion at the Lewisham Strategic Partnership meeting and a one day deliberative workshop. To offer a shorter consultation would offer citizens either the opportunity to influence priorities when less certain of information about the level of resources available, or to influence decision making when the budget position becomes clearer but the scope for choice is more constrained in terms of time available and the range of options that can seriously be considered. By consulting over an extended period of the budget cycle, citizens have the option of being more involved and at more than one stage or element if they wish.

Equally, a balance must be struck between the topic and its potential outcomes. It is important to tailor the process used so the public are invited to spend an appropriate amount of their time and effort on it for efficient participation.

Conclusion: A Multi-strand Approach

If local action is to be realised by citizens it is important that public agencies provide opportunities for people to engage in decisions which affect their localities, and that these processes are characterised by disclosure, transparency and informed participation.

The Government's public service reform agenda requires active public engagement to influence decision makers and to ensure that services are responsive to the needs of service users and citizens. To guarantee that citizen engagement and consultation methods continue to be relevant and appropriate it is vital that a multi-strand approach is used. No one approach to citizen engagement or formal public consultation works best for every citizen. Open space conferencing can be very effective in certain circumstances; panel or jury deliberations are useful if a subject needs exploring in-depth and over time; E-panels are useful in engaging lots of people and encouraging asynchronous discussions on hot topical subjects; and other techniques (such as the direct democracy of the Young Mayor approach) can garner the attention and engagement of those who may not usually be engaged with the world of public discussion and action.

Perhaps the most important issue is how best to ensure that an approach to nurturing active citizenship dovetails with a parallel approach to creating trust and legitimacy in representative politics. History is littered with examples of good intentions about citizen engagement being swept aside by machine politics. And this history is not confined to experience in the UK. At the height of Lyndon Johnson's promotion of the 'Great Society' in the US in the middle of the 1960s, Bobby Kennedy (then a newly elected

Senator in New York) argued that the concept lacked a local punch. He tried valiantly to add the concept of local 'community action' to Johnson's 'Great Society'. Kennedy's call was for the 'maximum feasible participation' of local people. He advocated a form of 'bootstrap politics' where poor people were involved in their own programmes of urban recovery. Kennedy's promotion of community activism challenged the political bosses of the major US cities who very clearly saw the proposed community action programme as designed principally as a 'way to fight city hall'. In one famous moment in American city politics, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago phoned the White House and bellowed down the phone 'what the hell are you people doing – don't you know you're putting m-o-n-e-y in the hands of subversives?' (Shesol, 1998). Perhaps unsurprisingly President Johnson called a halt to the implementation of Kennedy's ideas.

At present many progressive urban local councils in the UK are trying, like Lewisham, to implement the ideas set out in this paper – of maximum feasible participation and improved trust and legitimacy of elected representatives. But it requires mature local politics and skilled political leadership for these innovations to stand a good chance of working effectively. Investment in political leadership and in the professional skills of public managers to support it is the essence of what will make twenty-first century urban local government effective. The case for a stronger emphasis on deliberative democracy across the UK rests on the development of this kind of local political leadership. Leadership which has moved beyond the discourse of polemic and rhetoric; from one which focuses less on dialogue as 'arguing' and more on dialogue as 'bargaining' (Elster, 1998).

Of course the very real practical problems of achieving a fully deliberative democracy need also to be recognised. In 1970, Dahl observed that if each participant was allocated ten minutes to speak on a subject and if ten hours was allocated each day to deliberate on a subject; it would take a modest sized group of 60 people the whole of one day to reach one single decision. Hence improved deliberation can only be a complementary process to improved representation. Effective democratic politics is a matter of 'co-ordinating people's actions, of blending their diverse beliefs and desires or values into collective decisions for joint action' (Goodin, 2000).

Innovation involves more than having good ideas; it involves implementing them and being disciplined about their application. For local democracy to be healthy it requires innovation and learning. What works in inner urban areas may not work in more suburban or rural areas of the country. And what works in London may not work in other metropolitan areas. At its broadest, local government is the triumph of uniqueness over uniformity. Uniqueness of local geography (every place is different and distinctive) as well as uniqueness of local democracy. But uniqueness is no excuse for the preservation of the status quo. 'This is how we do things around here', is the cry of those trapped in the marshy lands of tradition. To engage with the fast paced modernity of twenty-first century citizens, local government

needs to embrace new politics and new democratic challenges. Improved citizen engagement with neighbourhoods, localities and governance is a vital building block in the renaissance of local government.

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