

Democratic renewal and the information age

Mary Reid at the e-democracy '06.

<http://www.headstar-events.com/edemocracy06/>

In the workshop this afternoon, I will be giving an update on the two projects I am involved with – Local e-Democracy National Project and the International Centre of Excellence for Local e-Democracy.

I've been given a last minute opportunity in this spot to talk about the wider issues of democratic engagement – in fact, I'll hardly mention anything beginning with 'e' at all.

Models for democratic renewal

The central government model is not necessarily the best one for local government democratic renewal.

The Cabinet structure for local government, which has been adopted by most councils, was introduced to sharpen local decision making. But one serious effect has been to set up an unpleasant divide between the executive Cabinet and other members. More significantly, it has been widely perceived as weakening the role of most councillors, reducing them to a status similar to that of most backbench MPs.

Most MPs do not have any real decision making power. They can use their constituents' concerns to ask questions, put down Early Day Motions or develop policy within their party, but most of them have little real influence over the decisions that affect their constituents.

It need not be like that at local government.

All councillors are ward councillors

Yesterday I was welcoming a delegation from Korea to the Mayor's Parlour. When I went home I was phoned by a resident of my ward whose bin had not been emptied.

All councillors want to make decisions...

Not just recommendations, about issues that affect their ward. Residents expect them to have that power.

My experience in Kingston suggests that where **all** councillors are given decision making responsibilities for their wards then citizens are encouraged to participate more. And it works.

The Local Government White Paper does recognise that a new approach is needed at a local level. But you will not be surprised to hear me say that the White Paper does not go far enough. Fortunately it is permissive, and what I am about to describe will continue to be an option in the future.

Now you may think that I am using this platform to promote Liberal Democrat policy – as if I would! But what I am about to describe has full cross-party support in Kingston. That matters to me – all councillors are the custodians of local democracy.

Consultation

This word is used in many different ways.

At local level there is a temptation to use a panel and refer to that as a consultation. Panels can be carefully balanced to be representative of the population. They can give a fairly useful indication of the general views of the whole population. They are a useful business tool.

But they are not a form of consultation.

Consultation means giving everyone who is affected by a proposal an opportunity to express their views. And crucially a consultation must collect qualitative as well as quantitative data. Because it is not just views that are collected, but also hard facts which may not have been understood by those who are doing the consulting.

For example, it is common practice that when a planning application is submitted all the residents living near to the property receive a consultation letter. If they object to the application then they are asked to state the reasons. These reasons are important. Through them issues emerge that might not otherwise have been considered by the applicant, the planning officers or the councillors. Issues such as disabled access to a neighbouring property, protection of a tree or wildlife habitat, fears of noise nuisance. The input by residents makes for much better decision making.

Note that it is not numbers here that count but the quality of the argument.

Referenda are not the answer either. These assume that issues boil down to fairly simple either/or questions – whereas the real problems lie in the complexities.

In Kingston we are committed to consult residents wherever possible. Most consultations are limited in geographical scope.

For example, Roebuck Road leaflet. It was sent to 614 households. Responses were received from 109 = 18%. But in the road itself 33% responded, with a drop off in surrounding roads, down to 6% in the road least affected. Again, details emerged in the comments about the impact of the proposals on particular houses or residents.

At the last Council meeting I chaired a debate on whether we should have a threshold of 40% response rate to a consultation before taking action. It was not agreed, but where else would a 40% response be even on the radar?

Participation

In Kingston residents may contribute to the discussions at any Council committee, with two exceptions:

- Full Council – we have 48 assertive councillors all wanting to speak. But there is still an opportunity for citizens to present a petition or bring a delegation – in either case they can address the Council for 10 minutes.
- Scrutiny Panel – run by opposition, have taken controversial decision not to allow any contributions except those that they have called as witnesses.

All other committees, including the Cabinet, allow anyone to contribute to any debate, at the chair's discretion.

Devolution

But the jewel in our Royal Borough's crown is the devolved Neighbourhood system, which we have been running successfully for 12 years. This is a form of devolution that we have shown to work, certainly in a Metropolitan Borough or Unitary. It is much stronger than Area Forums or anything envisaged in the White Paper. It is currently perfectly legal and would certainly be permitted under the White Paper.

The borough is divided into four Neighbourhoods. The membership of each Neighbourhood consists of all the councillors in those wards. They share executive power with the Cabinet and they are subject to scrutiny as well. They have substantial budgets.

This makes every councillor a decision maker – including me! (As Mayor I have to be politically neutral, but I sit on my Neighbourhood Committee just like any other ward councillor)

The principle of subsidiarity is applied – devolve everything unless there is good reason not to. Decisions made on:

- Road improvements
- Traffic management
- Environmental improvements
- Planning applications
- Management of local Council resources eg community centres and parks

Scrutiny and overview role on libraries, youth provision, local implementation of Council wide contracts, such as street cleaning and refuse.

Political control of Neighbourhoods varies. Under a current Liberal Democrat administration, two Neighbourhoods are Liberal Democrat, one Conservative and one NOC. The principle is that the Cabinet or Council will never overturn a decision properly made by a Neighbourhood.

We get a high turnout of residents at Neighbourhood meetings, often for specific issues (pink slips). For example, 20 to 30 residents from Roebuck Road attended when the results of the consultation came to the Neighbourhood Committee. All meetings are held in local venues.

Combination of:

- Consultation on local issues

- Decision-making powers of ward councillors
- Meetings held in local venues
- Participation by residents at meetings encouraged (pink slips)

Benefits

- Active local participation.
- Officers are more accessible to public as well as councillors.
- Transparency and accountability
- Better local decisions?

Downside

- Longer meetings.
- Longer processes.
- Exposure to public - sometimes uncomfortable situations.

Resident/officer groups

But I've kept the best to last. Residents are consulted and they take an active part in the Neighbourhood meetings. But they also set the agenda and help to determine the proposals in the first place.

The problems of lorry intrusion in Roebuck Road were raised by residents through contacting councillors and officers, and also through a petition. We invited all the residents in the affected area to a meeting which helped to identify the scope of the problem. Volunteers were sought to serve on a working group.

The working group consisted of council traffic engineers, residents, businesses and a ward councillor who together did some very detailed work on the issues and possible solutions. The residents were expected to discuss the issues with neighbours.

This consultation was the result of that work, so by the time the proposals were formulated they had already been through detailed analysis.

However, the final decision on what to implement lay with the Neighbourhood Committee. Councillors are elected to make these decisions, and they are accountable to the electorate, not just at election time but throughout the year.

e-Democracy

Where there is this level of participation, it is easy to add extra channels of communication. Online consultations, e-petitions, online forums all fit happily and uncontroversially into this way of working. In fact, in Kingston we haven't implemented all of these yet!

In my ward I am insisting that in future all working groups set up websites using the development version of the Voice toolkit. This means that there will be a repository of reports and background information, as well as a discussion forum.

The e-tools, of course, build on but do not replace other methods of communication. They increase the reach and encourage participation from groups that might not be able to attend meetings.

But perhaps e-democracy does have another role. Working the other way round, it can act as a catalyst for change. It can start a debate amongst councillors and officers about participation in council meetings. It can give tools to citizens that will help them to pressurise for greater involvement. It can encourage councillors to try new ways of communicating with their residents.

Maybe e-democracy can be the lever for democratic renewal.

I hope so.

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