



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 31 August 2016

Witness: Sarah Allan

Sarah's work at Involve centres on how to connect people with politics and decision-making, giving them a greater say over decisions that affect their lives.

Her work often focuses at the local level. Notable projects include: People InSpired, a series of local events on democracy issues around the general election; reviewing Newham Clinical Commissioning Group's Patient and Public Engagement Strategy; and MH:2K, a youth-led peer-to-peer project giving disadvantaged young people a voice in mental health decision-making in Oldham.

Sarah is a member of the Wellcome Trust's working group on patient engagement, and an adviser to the Centre for Public Scrutiny on engagement around devolution.

An experienced facilitator, Sarah has over 10 years' experience working on engagement in the arts, campaigning and democracy sectors.

Summary of Discussion

Engagement with Local Citizens

Sarah explained that there is real space for more citizen engagement in decision making between elections. This needs to involve Councils thinking in advance who it needs to hear from in order to make sure that the decision is fully informed. This involves recognising that the knowledge exists, accessing it and designing the most appropriate approaches to facilitate engagement. The fact that decisions are issue based provides a real opportunity to effectively engage as participants are more likely to understand issues as opposed to processes and structures.

Sarah explained that, as part of this process, it is important to look at the councils decisions and determine those that would benefit the most from that input. Such approaches need to be achievable for the council which is why it is important to access existing groups where they exist.

Other forms of engagement are carried out on an ongoing basis, from the bottom up, which is a key area for councillors as “community connectors” alongside the ongoing role of councillors using social media as part of a two way process. In terms of challenges there are three tensions / opportunities between representative and participatory democracy:

- The Leadership role of the elected representative and how it squares with the approaches set out above;
- The Councillor role between elections which can involve bringing people together to understand the “trade-offs.” In this context councillors will be leading on this type of engagement.
- Different types of accountability from elections to engagement on specific policy decisions in between those elections.

Sarah acknowledged that in the context of austerity it is always easier to engage when councils and councillors have the ability to change. With this in mind it is important to be very clear about the parameters of the process in order to effectively manage expectations. Furthermore it is always possible to engage citizens around the challenges e.g. Melbourne Citizens Jury. Other approaches can be place based and involve people at an early stage and take people through a process co-production.

Sarah went onto explore the important considerations in terms of the representative nature of groups. In this context it is important to recruit widely and also ask people to act as community champions and reach out to other stakeholders and their peer groups. This can be advantageous in co-designing outreach approaches and ensures the engagement is framed in a way that relates to people in the right way.

Sarah explained that it is important to recognise that stakeholders are not being asked to make a decision so there is not a requirement to be strictly representative. The council or councillors is looking for information to inform a decision from people with a different, relevant perspective.

Council Communication with Citizens

In the context of engagement generally Sarah set out the Involve [9 step approach](#) to planning public engagement. Sarah explained that it is crucial to:

- Determine the scope of your engagement;
- Make it clear,
- Understand the citizen perspective you want to hear;
- Be clear who you need to hear from.

The answers to these questions will determine the next steps, including how best to communicate, how the issue will be framed and understanding where people are starting from in terms of the specific issue.

Examples of where this have been done well include Bite the Ballot who work with young people to design the approaches and the materials.

In terms of engaging with young citizens Sarah explained that it is important to understand why young people aren't engaged or involved in decision making. Once the barrier to participation has been identified the focus should then be on thinking about what can best be done to overcome that barrier. One approach could involve giving the problem to a group of young people and asking them to solve it or design the engagement approach. Sarah explained that where you do get a group of young people to look at something you don't have to start from scratch it is important to give them information to help them in planning what they do.

Sarah discussed engagement with young people in the context of digital and explained that an important starting point is to ensure that councils optimise their web site in terms of mobile accessibility.

Citizenship Education

Sarah recognised that there is an issue in terms of the current short fall in political literacy for young people, particularly with regards to local democracy "education". Sarah explained that there is a strong case for political education in schools which would assist in removing one of the barriers to equality of participation. That said, it is questionable as to the extent to young people need to understand the workings of local democracy in order to engage in some of the processes. It is more important to start with the issue and then engage with the process which does not require an understanding of how local democracy works.