National Commission

National Commission on the future of governance in the public sector

Citizens Summit
The future of citizens and the public sector

Good Governance Institute

Context

We start from the position that this is unarguably the era in which a new deal must develop between the citizen and the state. The circumstances seem right for this to happen, provided there is a clear move from articulation of need and philosophy towards a greater focus on agency and action.

Recent decades have seen profound strains on social and public institutions. Globalisation and an increasing global interconnectedness, followed by the financial crisis have fundamentally altered the social, economic and cultural experiences of citizens. The employment and community structures which previously provided a sense of belonging and agency have been gradually eroded and fallen away, leaving only feelings of social dislocation. In the last few years, we have seen a range of groups, spanning all geographies and ages, become increasingly disaffected from decision making structures. There is evidence that they perceive these as unresponsive to their needs and no longer able to improve their living standards. The result has been an increasing and visible distrust of institutions, combined with increasing political and social polarisation.

In this context, the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, the second 'once in a generation' crisis to hit us in just over a decade. It will be unclear for some time what the sustained impacts of the virus will be on our society, as with the financial crisis, this may be a drawn-out process. However, the same mistakes must not be made again when rebuilding. There is no space for that. This time new approaches are needed to ensure groups marginalised in recent years do not undergo the same process. Another severe social and economic crisis with citizens alienated from key decisions would undoubtedly compound an already challenging situation.

The past year must act as a powerful catalyst for the renewal of citizen and community voices and lead to real responsiveness from institutions. It seems inevitable that the pandemic will necessitate highly consequential choices about the structure and tone of society. We also face equally large decisions about our future in areas like climate and technological change which will require citizen consent in order to sustain the significant societal transitions necessary to address these challenges. Citizens themselves are likely to drive this need for consent in new ways which are not linked to democratic processes or public institutions.

For these reasons, the relationship between citizens, the state and public institutions needs rethinking. The costs of inaction are great. There is a danger that changes may be held back by a culture of risk aversion and lack of ambition in political and institutional leadership, but the costs of failing to engage with citizens are far greater than any posed by change. The last decade has shown why, any response to citizen voice must be active not static. Yet the current models for understanding these concerns in the UK appear underdeveloped or inadequate for the task.

This is disappointing as there is growing evidence around effective ways that citizens and communities can be empowered and meaningfully engaged in decision making. From creating patient literacy that supports population health, to getting broader faster consent to climate action, many of these approaches can complement the existing aims in the public sector, but to succeed they will require a change in mindset, placing citizens in the driving seat.

Summit

The Summit is looking to bring these strands together and explore issues of agency and action.

The Commission can contribute to enhancing and promoting existing thinking and work in the citizens' space. Governance at national and local levels provide a useful lens to address these issues as, at its heart, governance reflects power dynamics in institutions. Governance will need to be effective at enabling public outcomes across the whole public sector and this requires the Commission to focus on the "how" issues.

Governance itself needs to be seen as a force for good. There is more work to do to promote a clearer ownership and understanding of what good governance looks like amongst individuals, communities and institutions.

This includes defining the role of citizens in governance as a foundation for addressing the range of challenges faced by the public sector in the next decade. This clearly needs space and time and for citizens to be active and engaged in deciding what these roles need to look like to achieve new social and economic outcomes.

This summit will explore the future relationship between citizens and the public sector. By bringing together academics, practitioners and public sector leaders we hope to move between the conceptual to generate original thinking on how citizens can be more empowered across the UK.

The summit will also provide an opportunity to share learning and understand approaches from outside the UK, from areas in which a culture of citizens communicating their needs to institutions has been successful. Our discussion will inform research from the Commission to help develop the roles of citizens in state and public institutions and for governance to realise its potential to act as a dynamic force for public good.

The headline question for the day will be:

What should the relationship between citizens, the state and public institutions look like over the next decade?

The sub-questions for the summit will be discussed in smaller groups and two plenary sessions:

What are current modes of citizen engagement and how are they changing?

What should the roles of citizens and communities be in public sector decision making?

How can citizens and communities be made central to public sector change?

How can institutions balance empowering citizens with their narrower statutory responsibilities for specific service delivery?

Forms of engagement

In recent years direct citizen participation in decision making has expanded significantly. Processes of randomly selecting small representative groups to engage in policy and decision making broadly span four areas: **informed citizen recommendations on policy questions**, where citizens are provided with evidence and a question and create concrete policies; **citizen opinion on policy questions** in which individuals identify their own areas that require policy change; **informed citizen evaluation of ballot measures**, where a representative group of citizens review a referendum measure to inform the wider electorate before voting on it; and **permanent deliberative bodies**, a permanent group of representative, randomly selected citizens who make recommendations to elected politicians.

These range from place-based initiatives, such as the UK's local Innovation in Democracy Programme, to national citizens' assemblies addressing large-scale policy questions, such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly whose focus included abortion and climate change. There are equivalent developments in Scotland. These processes are largely driven by perceived issues of polarisation and eroding legitimacy of public institutions, the rationale being that it makes government more open and transparent, prevents corruption and abuse of power, and allows disparate groups to come together and compromise.

The reality is that these methods have largely not been able to stem the increase in political polarisation and societal discontent. Estonia has established a highly sophisticated system of digital participation and participatory budgeting. These processes have seen Estonia's corruption perception levels grow equal to Iceland and fall below France, Ireland and Japan. Yet, in the country's 2019 elections, the right-wing, populist EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) saw a dramatic increase in vote share. Equally, the 2020 French climate citizens' assembly has not remedied polarisation or lack of trust in institutions. While it is difficult to isolate these issues given the magnitude and complexity of the social, political and economic forces which drive them, cases like this have led some to criticise citizen deliberation as ineffective.

Although the impact of specific cases may be questioned, this should not be used as evidence to dismiss the underlying philosophy. It is not surprising there have been mixed results, given that many of the societal discontents which these processes seek to address manifest in a greater desire for citizens to have agency over the world around them and have their voices heard in a meaningful, consequential way. Many citizen consultations or deliberations are in effect merely advisory with no lasting legacy in terms of power-shift or cultural impact. For example, many of the recommendations from the recent French climate assembly have been watered down or ignored. If citizen deliberation is seen as just a way of abdicating responsibility for decisions or are not accompanied by long-term consolidations which lead to visible and systematic implementation, it should come as little surprise that citizens still regard institutions as unresponsive or untrustworthy. This is not to suggest that these initiatives are not useful in many ways. Instead they should be seen as crucial first steps in a wider process seeking to increase trust and involvement by citizens as active agents in creating necessary change.

There are, however, some instances in which these mindsets have been embedded and citizen voice systematically drives decision making. Citizens' councils (Bürgerräte) in Vorarlberg, Austria offer an example of a highly developed and embedded form of public input which has developed over a 15-year period. Part of Vorarlberg's state constitution since 2013, citizens' councils are representative groups of randomly-selected citizens who may be convened by government, parliament or by a citizens' petition with 1,000 signatures. Participants gather over a day and a half to two days without an agenda, identify an important issue, discuss the problem and make non-binding recommendations to the state government.

The success for Vorarlberg's participatory process in promoting compromise and understanding was seen during the 2015 Citizens' Council on asylum seekers and refugees. The deliberative process helped to curb the fear and tension surrounding this contentious issue, and led to the development of a positive narrative for citizens to engage with the issue and become active in welcoming asylum seekers to Vorarlberg. This reflects the need for long-term consequential involvement of citizens, if the potential of engagement practices is to be realized at scale.

Local Community Empowerment

These mechanisms of citizen engagement have often been deployed to answer high-profile national questions such as climate change or abortion and for these to be seen as national policy issues. More recently there has a visible move to more localised engagement which provides greater scope for meaningful community empowerment.

Community empowerment practices encompass a range of approaches, but are unified by the principle that communities have the knowledge, skills and assets to respond to the challenges they face. Often this means neighbourhoods or local networks coalescing to provide voluntary and community services. This is driven by the notion that communities can take control of their own development by identifying and mobilising existing underused assets.

These practices aim to enable communities to take their own decisions using deliberative tools and reduce the number of services provided by local institutions, by equipping communities with the resources and skills they need to mobilise and participate in local action. After forming these local organic networks, these practices also aim to create communities which can represent themselves in dialogue with local institutions.

This can, for example, necessitate fewer health interventions by the state. By enabling citizens to establish structures which improve their health and wellbeing and take ownership over these issues. Additionally, involving people in decision making, alongside their ownership of many resources of wider social infrastructure, can enable community action to improve wellbeing and resilience locally. This could be through promotion of patient literacy among the community, or simply through the informal establishment of upstream preventative services which reduce the need for acute interventions. As such, community empowerment provides another route to a better relationship, starting a new conversation with the citizens whom local authorities serve.

Digital engagement

The digital sphere will likely be crucial to enabling the empowerment of citizens over the next decade. Technological innovations not only offer the potential to massively expand the direct democratic processes outlined above, but also expand citizen communication to institutions into a host of new areas. Many cities across the world are now employing digital issue-reporting platforms in which the public can flag a host of issues from potholes to graffiti and track the progress of them being addressed. These projects increase and diversify citizen engagement, support civic engagement and create a two-way conversation between communities and local governments. Smart cities more broadly can facilitate even greater citizen communication with institutions. Insights from open data can provide the state with far more feedback and information on citizen desires than have previously been possible and facilitate collaboration between citizens, civil society, private sector and public institutions.

The pandemic has also underlined the potential of technology to empower the public in the most difficult circumstances. Push to Talk, part of the Liverpool 5G Health and Social Care Project, is a loneliness-prevention device that has helped connect those who are isolated during COVID-19. Through use of custom Push to Talk buttons or their app, residents can be connected to other isolated individuals. This is just one of numerous innovative tools that have highlighted the role of technology in promoting citizen health and wellbeing outside a medical setting. While such innovations may appear remote from citizen influence, they share a mindset and a goal: putting citizen independence in the foreground.

Implications for public institutions

There is real potential in ideas, practices and tools for the public sector to renew its relationship with citizens. They possess the potential to increase a fundamental human sense of belonging and identity that comes with communities who feel they have agency and ownership of their surroundings. If citizens are to become more independent and empowered, the public sector must reorient itself. In the area of health and wellbeing at local level there are perhaps some green shoots visible, for example in the move towards population health and less emphasis on hospital interventions. This remains an internal, professional discussion. The gear shift will only come when the local health policy is driven by and embraces citizen voices, community agency and the range of technologies that can facilitate this. A power shift is needed. Governance has a key role here, to embed citizen orientation by ensuring more power is moved more into their hands with necessary safeguards.

Further reading

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https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/40501378/259_520_1_SM.pdf

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