Public Participation in Policymaking

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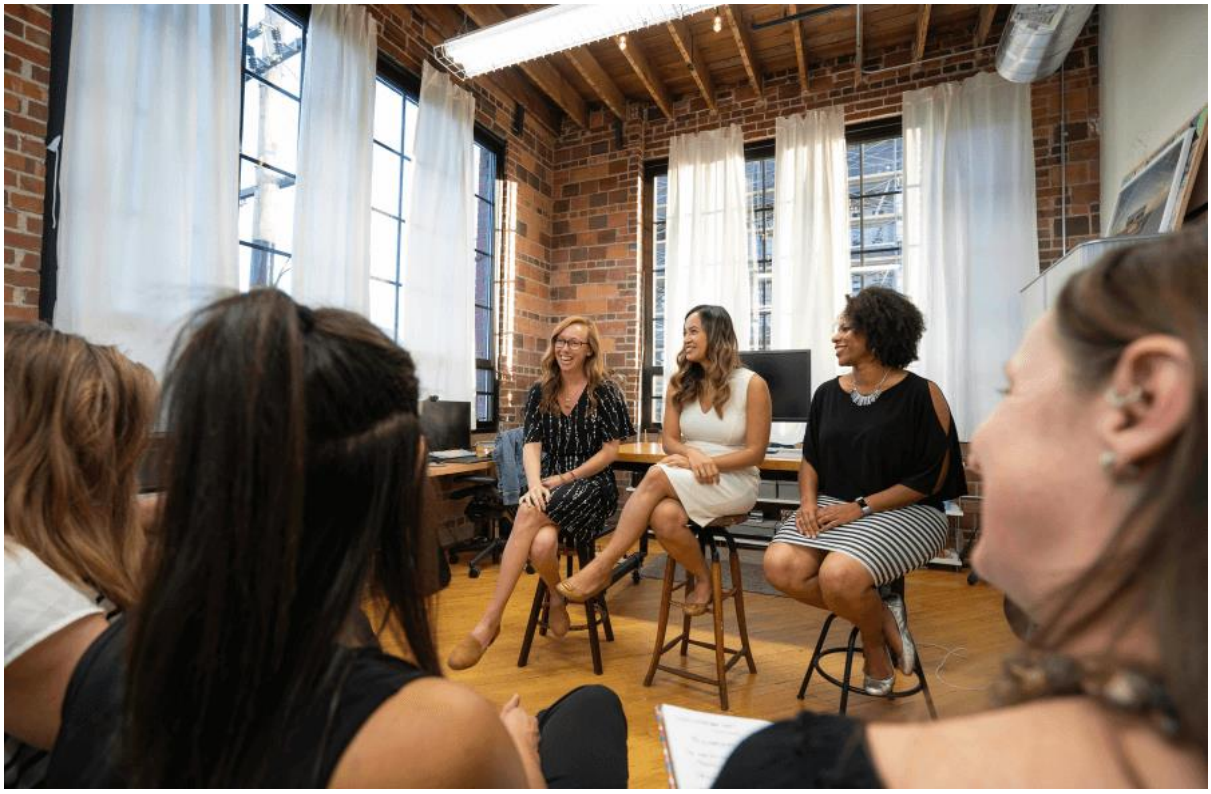

Figure 1- Image from Canva

This review was carried out as part of the '[improving public funding allocations to reduce geographical inequalities]' project, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Economic and Social Research Council. The project aims to propose better ways of allocating public funding in England, based on a much clearer understanding of the funding system and the policy problems arising from it.

This is a multi-partner project led by the University of Birmingham.

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Involving the public in local government decisions fosters democratic participation and ensures that citizens have an influence over policies that affect their lives. This document sets out how public participation can take place, its strengths and challenges, and its application to policy issues relating to fiscal devolution.

Summary

- Public participation in policymaking can take several forms, granting citizens a range of influence in relation to policy decisions.
- Participatory approaches have faced barriers in the UK due to the centralised nature of Westminster model, know-how in their use and limited evaluations legitimising their value to policymaking.
- That said, it is increasingly viewed as an appropriate way to respond to policy issues which are contested or salient in the public consciousness.
- One of these issues is fiscal devolution – whether local authorities or regions should be granted more power over tax and spending in their areas.
- While there have been some attempts to involve the public in decisions around devolution in the UK, these have been few and far between. At the time of writing, recommendations that have emerged from such exercises have not enjoyed any binding power over future government action.

Context

Definitions and principles

Public participation is a broad concept that can involve many or few citizens, offering a range of opportunities to influence policy - from informing policymakers' actions to having an empowered decision-making role. Such participation can vary in duration and involve different actors, from members of the public to representatives of associations or organised groups (Bobbio, 2019). At its core, public participation is the direct or indirect involvement of concerned stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans, or programmes that affect them (Quick & Bryson, 2022).[1]

The key principles of public participation are based on democratic values, such as transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in the policymaking process (OECD, 2017; Falanga & Ferrão, 2018). Necessarily in this regard, participants' inputs to participatory exercises should be valued and their contributions lead to policy changes, rather than merely being tick-box exercises

[1] Public participation is one of a number of terms used to describe the basic premise of involving citizens, a public or a subset of a community in the decisions that affect their lives. Other common terms include citizen or community engagement and civic participation which can be used for different means in different contexts. We use public participation here for its normative use where individuals engage with various structures and institutions of democracy.

(Involve, n.d.a.). Moreover, the process should provide space for social learning and deliberation between conflicting views (Bobbio, 2019). Successful participatory processes help to renew relationships between policymakers and citizens – this is essential in times of declining voter turnout and low trust in public institutions (OECD, 2017).

When applied in the context of devolution, the Local Government Association (LGA) states that the following three principles should underpin effective public participation (LGA, n.d.a):

(1) **Deliberative**: Citizens should be given the time and resources to digest, explore and discuss information with each other before being asked to give their opinion or recommendations. Beginning this process early enables the public to shape not only answers to questions, but also the questions asked and the topics under discussion.

(2) **Responsive**: Combined authorities or devolved areas should commit to considering the public input emerging from the process described above - providing feedback on subsequent courses of action.

(3) **Legitimate**: Via representative sampling, the citizens involved should be able to speak on behalf of a wider area population.

However, participatory methods often face challenges due to limited evidence of their success (Falanga & Ferrão, 2018). Furthermore, the UK's 'Westminster model' of policymaking is often seen as antithetical to public participation due to its centralised and elitist structure - a facet which some scholars claim leads to inappropriate and ineffective policies due to a lack of *on the ground* insight (Richardson, 2018).

Tools and frameworks

Policymakers can involve citizens at different stages of the policy process, from design to evaluation, rather than defining everything within a policy measure a priori (Bobbio, 2019). The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum outlines five stages which define the influence of public participation:

1. **Inform**: Providing balanced information to assist public understanding.
2. **Consult**: Obtaining public feedback on analysis and decisions.
3. **Involve**: Working directly with the public to ensure their concerns are understood.
4. **Collaborate**: Partnering with the public in decision-making.
5. **Empower**: Placing final decision-making in the hands of the public.

   (IAP2, n.d.).

The IAP2 is based on Arnstein's seminal "ladder of citizen participation" – the first model designed to describe the influence of participatory exercises on policy decisions (Arnstein, 1969). In practice, public participation rarely goes beyond the "involve" stage (OECD, 2017), as policymakers can view the public as 'misinformed, individualistic, short-term or self-interested' (McHugh et al., 2023). Limited evidence of the success of participatory exercises (Falanga & Ferrão, 2018) likely contributes to the lack of confidence policymakers have in using them. The

meagre amount of decision-making power typically granted to participants can make their involvement feel tokenistic, impeding public buy-in (Bobbio, 2019).

Benefits and challenges

Benefits

Public participation in policymaking offers several benefits. It enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies by relying on local knowledge and lived experiences (Involve, n.d.a; Richardson, 2018; Bobbio, 2019; Quick & Bryson, 2022; McHugh et al., 2023; Cairney et al., 2024). It also fosters trust and transparency between policymakers and citizens (OECD, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Cairney, 2024) and promotes inclusiveness by incorporating diverse voices in policymaking (OECD, 2017; Cairney et al., 2024). Additionally, it fosters positive relationships and social cohesion (Involve, n.d.a.) and enhances participants' capacity for democratic citizenship (Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Challenges

There are also challenges associated with public participation. For example, there is limited evidence of their success from rigorous evaluations (Involve, n.d.a.; Falanga & Ferrão, 2018) and implementation is often inconsistent across different policy stages and contexts (OECD, 2017; Bobbio, 2019; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Public participation is resource-intensive, requiring significant time and effort from both policymakers and citizens (Involve, n.d.a.; OECD, 2017) as well as high financial costs related to staffing and hiring venues for face-to-face events (Involve, n.d.b).[2] Additionally, there are varying levels of engagement across different sectors (OECD, 2017), and perceptions of the public as misinformed or self-interested (McHugh et al., 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022) can hinder effective participation. Sometimes, participation only serves to legitimise pre-made decisions (Bobbio, 2019), and ensuring the inclusion of diverse and normally excluded voices remains a challenge (Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Applications

Participatory exercises are often used in areas like health and finance (OECD, 2017), but are generally seen as effective for issues which are highly salient in the public consciousness or where public opinion is contested and divided (McCabe, 2021). They can be employed at various stages in the policy cycle depending on the influence that policymakers are willing to grant participants (McCabe, 2021; Levin et al., 2024). The examples which follow were participatory projects held in England. They connected with policies at various stages in their lifecycles. None appear to have *collaborated* with participants in policy design or *empowered* them to make policy decisions, though this likely reflects the sparsity of participatory engagements that grant citizens that level of power.

[2] Online engagement exercises provide an opportunity to minimize budgets that confine the scope of in-person approaches (Hussey, n.d.).

- **Oxford Citizens' Assembly on climate change**: Forty-one participants convened to consider whether Oxford should seek to achieve Net Zero sooner than 2050. The assembly provided a space where participants learned of the scale and need for change. Participants came to broad consensus on the core question of the dialogue, as well as *how* this could be achieved (Ipsos, n.d.)
- **Deliberative workshops on the conditionality of welfare payments:** Thirty-seven participants from London and Manchester came together to hear information about and produce recommendations for conditions placed on benefits payments. Participants discussed how conditions impact public trust and opportunities for improvement through reform (Involve, 2024).
- **Citizens Assembly on Social Care:** Forty-seven citizens convened to consider how adult social care in England should be funded long-term. The assembly developed a set of recommendations, principles and conditions for a future approach (Involve, 2018).

Devolution in England: Transferring powers to local areas without Public Participation

Overview

What is noticeable from the extant policy and practice, is the insufficient attention paid to the role that citizens and residents can play in decision-making processes on and around devolution.

Devolution aims to provide local and regional authorities with greater flexibility and freedom to improve public services and outcomes in their areas (LGA, n.d.b). There is a growing consensus that transferring powers from Central Government (i.e. Whitehall) to local and regional leaders promises to improve the well-known, weak economic performance of many areas across England. The overarching goal is to tackle and reduce the high and well-documented levels of regional inequality (Henderson et al., 2023). The transfer of powers is happening via 'devolution deals' which are understood as negotiated agreements between Whitehall and local and regional leaders that pass down a set of specified powers in return for agreed governance and structural reforms at local and regional levels.

One consequence of the limited involvement that the public have had in devolution-related decision-making is that the literature on public participation in devolution processes has remained relatively sparse — with comprehensive accounts and studies (Mawson, 2007; Stokes, 2012; Ercan et al., 2013; Flinders et al. 2016; Dean, 2017; Prosser et al., 2017; Levin et al., 2024) championing substantial public involvement few and far between.

The Local Government Association (LGA) puts this down to the fact that '[t]he devolution agenda in England is new and emerging and so too are the approaches to civic and democratic engagement that are being used' (LGA, n.d.c: not paginated). Given that England has a long history of centralised government and associated elitism (Tomaney, 2016; Leach, 2018), this sounds persuasive. The LGA helpfully suggests that although there exists no 'one size fits all' approach, there are examples and methods of public participation and/or citizen engagement

from which processes of devolution can learn. The following five approaches are considered most common in the context of devolution:

(1) **Citizens' assemblies** which are formed of citizens to deliberate on a particular issue;

(2) **Digital engagement** which involves online conversation about government issues;

(3) **Participatory budgeting** which comprises a process whereby citizens decide on how public money is spent;

(4) **Community organising** which involves engaging with existing community networks to make decisions; and

(5) **Co-production** which involves citizens and professionals co-designing and co-delivering public services.

(LGA, n.d.c)

A fairly new approach called 'community review panels' involves encouraging people with valuable lay knowledge of an area, and rich lived experience, to contribute to planning and place-making initiatives (Earle, 2024).These approaches to public participation share much in common, particularly - as mentioned in the prior discussion around definitions and principles - the democratic goal of engaging citizens and residents in decisions that affect them.

Case Examples

Here, we have selected two case studies that illustrate how the principles outlined above were operationalised: Assembly North (Box 1), and Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) (Box 2).

Box 1: Assembly North

A commonly cited example of public participation and/or citizen engagement in the process of devolution is Assembly North (Democracy Matters, 2016; Flinders et al., 2016; LGA, 2016). Assembly North was a pilot citizens' assembly in South Yorkshire conducted by Democracy Matters — a group of academics from the University of Sheffield, the University of Southampton, University College London, the University of Westminster and the Electoral Reform Society. Following agreement of a devolution deal proposal for the Sheffield City Region between local leaders and business stakeholders on the one hand, and Central Government on the other, the assembly was convened as a pilot over two weekends in October and November 2015. Discussion focused on whether a new regional body should be formed as part of the deal and, if so, what form it should take. The assembly consisted of a broadly representative group of 32 randomly selected citizens in the four local authority areas in South Yorkshire. Assembly North cost £32,000 — excluding facilitation time.

To build up knowledge and in-depth understanding of the life cycle of the devolution deal process in general, and the deal proposal in particular, members of the assembly heard views from key negotiators, academics, councillors, and community advocates. Evaluation of the efficacy of the assembly later revealed that this equipped assembly members with the capability to engage competently with complex issues. At the end of the process, the assembly put forward a series of recommendations. In addition to strongly favouring proportional representation as a system of voting, the assembly recommended devolving:

(1) significant tax-raising and law-making powers to the region;

(2) policy-making powers for transport and communications;

(3) powers for economic development; and

(4) powers for education and training.

Interestingly, these recommendations turned out to push for a much more ambitious devolution deal for South Yorkshire than had initially been agreed by local and regional leadership. Sheffield City Region leaders neither responded to the recommendations nor incorporated them into decision-making on the grounds that the assembly was a pilot, and its input, therefore, non-binding. This proved to be a source of frustration for assembly members who indicated they had otherwise enjoyed their involvement. In part because of Assembly North's huge success, the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority has recently convened what it is calling a 'climate citizen assembly' to feature 'diverse, often unheard voices' (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, 2023: not paginated) to contribute to the region's response to the climate crisis. This 100-member assembly, which includes a sample of citizens randomly drawn from a pool of 30,000 residents, is contributing to decision-making driving South Yorkshire's Net Zero economy. Noteworthy assembly contributions include making homes more energy-efficient, creating new green job opportunities, and making communities healthier.

Box 2: Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) Community Review Group

In West London, the 'community review panel' approach is routinely deployed to enable local people to review development proposals and influence planning decisions shaping regeneration schemes in the Old Oak and Park Royal area. The area encompasses Park Royal industrial estate, the Old Oak development area around the new High Speed 2 Old Oak Common Station, and protected land at Wormwood Scrubs. Spanning the boroughs of Ealing, Brent, and Hammersmith and Fulham, regeneration in the area is administered by the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) — a Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC) established by the Mayor of London (GLA, 2024a). According to OPDC (GLA, 2024b), the Corporation works closely with a 'Community Review Group' (henceforth the Group) to ensure that new development schemes consider opportunities to create a better urban environment for the people living and working in the areas. The Group meets approximately every six weeks to discuss policy and development proposals and to give its views. The Group's input is written into formal reports which, in turn, feed into decisions made by OPDC and the OPDC Planning Committee. Developers are required to respond to these.

The Group consists of twelve people whose appointment follows recruitment, application, and interview processes run by an external partner of OPDC called 'Frame Projects' — an established company that manages design review groups in London. In addition to managing the Group, 'Frame Projects' also offers development and training opportunities on behalf of OPDC to help Group members in their roles. Central criteria for Group membership are that people must live locally, reflect different ages and backgrounds that mirror the diverse make-up of the Old Oak and Park Royal resident communities, and bring along experiential knowledge of the area and its surroundings to review work. Membership is reviewed annually. Members contribute as individuals and not as representatives of an organisation. Group members are bound by the same code of conduct that OPDC planning officers follow. For example, members must keep all information confidential, except for reports that are in the public domain.

For the purposes of this review paper, this presents a real problem. As recent analysis has shown, because OPDC does not normally permit publication of Group meeting reports, 'there is no publicly available list of schemes reviewed by the' Group (Earle, 2024:1364). Equally unclear is the extent to which OPDC takes up the recommendations made by the Group. Above and beyond the Group recommendations, it remains unknown whether 'local planning authorities are taking note of the concerns that panel members raise on issues beyond the scope of the development[s] under scrutiny' (Earle, 2024:1371). Despite these limitations and others, community review panels 'can provide an opportunity for a "laypersons' review" of development schemes at pre-planning stage [something that offers] a way for planning authorities to get feedback from a small number of residents on visioning documents and local strategies' (Earle, 2024:1371). If deployed more widely and consistently, this approach would benefit local residents and local authorities in terms of shaping places productively and sustainably.

A note on public participation in funding decisions

As highlighted above, despite an increase in activity that engages citizens in policymaking in the UK, there are few examples of where they are engaged, with authority, on funding decisions although there are tried and tested examples of how this could be achieved.

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic approach that enables citizens to make decisions on public spending (Aziz & Shah, 2021) and the most complete example of where citizens are empowered and given the authority on allocations. Originating in Brazil in 1989, PB has now been adopted by over 1500 cities globally (Röcke, 2014). This approach has gained popularity at local levels, including for example in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it has been implemented for several years. In Cambridge, residents brainstorm project ideas, develop proposals, and vote on which projects should receive funding (City of Cambridge, n.d.). Examples of how public participation in funding decisions can take place include surveys, focus groups, neighbourhood councils, and town hall meetings (GFOA, 2021). Several rounds of deliberation can be employed to help to whittle down the number of proposals (Aziz & Shah, 2021). In Cambridge MA, PB has funded various projects such as youth centre upgrades, pollinator gardens, and laundry access in public schools, with specific criteria ensuring the projects benefit the public and adhere to budgetary constraints (City of Cambridge, n.d.).

In these scenarios, effective public engagement in budgetary decisions should educate the public about different budget options, fostering informed decision-making and a shared understanding of the facts. Formats that encourage discussion about trade-offs, such as game formats, are recommended. As with public participation more generally, it is important to include typically underrepresented groups as well as those most affected by budget decisions. Keeping group sizes manageable ensures all members can contribute to discussions and debates (GFOA, 2021). The benefits of public engagement include increased governmental accountability and responsiveness, improved public perception of governmental performance, and enhanced transparency, which builds government credibility and trust (ibid; Abelson et al., 2007). However, poorly designed efforts can waste resources and increase public cynicism if the public feels their input is not valued (GFOA, 2021).

What might good citizen engagement practise on fiscal devolution look like?

Reflecting on the preceding review there are several implications for good practice:

- It is important to be transparent at the outset about the intended outcomes of any project and the likely scope for citizens' influence.
- As far as possible, inclusivity of diverse voices and seldom-heard groups should be sought, without compromising the need (in most circumstances) to be broadly representative of the total population.
- Participants need to be provided with impartial, expert information, such that they can make informed decisions on the topics being discussed.

- It is important to provide a space where different perspectives can be explained and considered. In the case of citizen engagement events on fiscal devolution, where possible, participants need to be able to have a say on the design of new proposals, as well as providing feedback on pre-existing financial models.
- Those responsible for commissioning/ leading citizen engagement activities need to consider how local/ regional/ national leaders can have sight of, and respond to, public recommendations.

Conclusions

- Public participation enables input and insight into, and responses to, key policy issues that affect the general public. It can be adopted at various stages in the policy cycle.
- Potential benefits include enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies by taking account of local knowledge and experiences.
- Public participation is resource intensive and inclusion of diverse and normally excluded voices can be a challenge.
- Approaches that have been used include citizen's assemblies, digital engagement, participatory budgeting, community organising, co-production and community review panels.
- Limited attention has been paid to the role that citizens and residents can play in decision-making processes on fiscal devolution and devolution more generally. Hence there is an evidence gap here that it would be useful to fill.

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