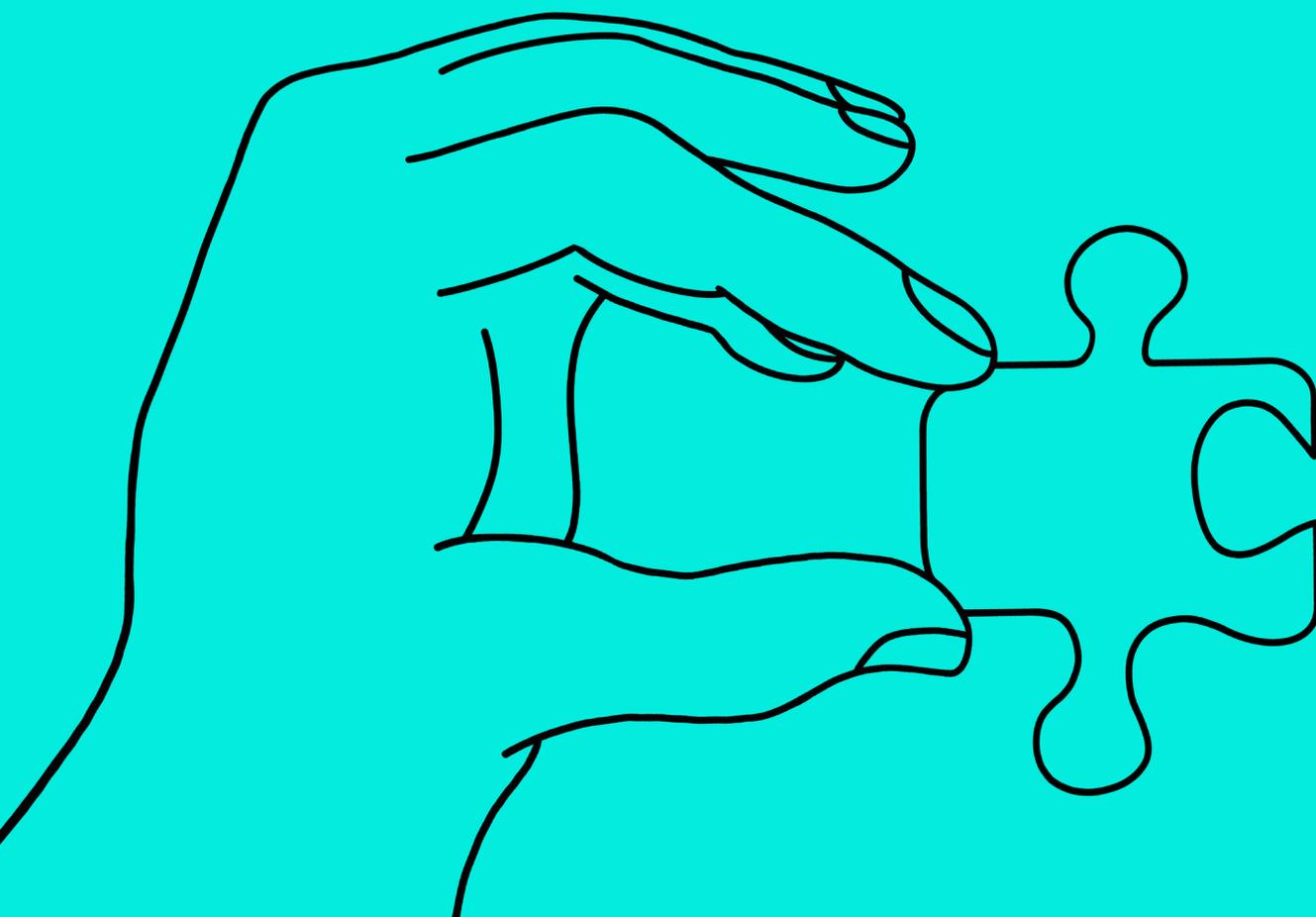


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Transitions to participatory democracy:

How to grow public participation in local governance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive summary

Working alongside the UK Inclusive Growth Network the RSA has spent the last six months exploring how local places can advance and embed the use of participatory democracy.

Planning a public engagement exercise

Involve have proposed four sets of questions that can help organisers work through the key decisions that need to be made in the design of public engagement:

Why?

Organisers should start by asking themselves why they are engaging with residents and what specific outcomes they want. The answer to these questions should inform the other three answers.

Where?

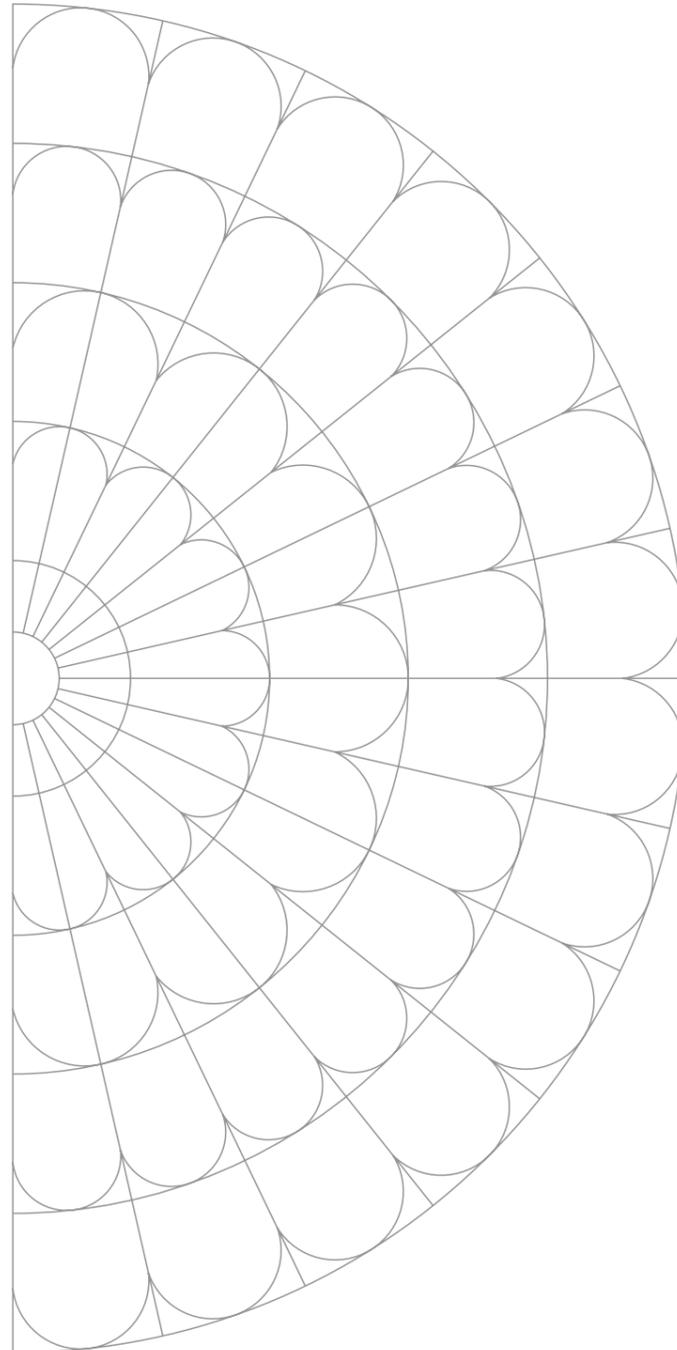
What is the context of engagement? What internal and external factors might influence the ability of the organising agency to realise their desired outcomes and purpose?

Who?

Who needs to be involved in the process from the organising agency and from the community? How can the target group(s) be brought on board?

How?

How can a process be designed so that it engages the right people, accounts for the local context and delivers the right outcomes? Organisers may want to consider engagement methods that have worked elsewhere (we have compiled a list of these in the main report), though these will need to be tailored to the local context and considered in light of the four preceding questions.



Transitioning into the future: building participative systems

Our research has highlighted six broad transitions in policy and practice that will help local authorities advance and embed local participatory democracy:

Transition	Key guidance and recommendations
Participation is... entitled → enabled → embraced <i>Equalising participation opportunities for residents.</i>	Engagement leaders should take a mixed-methods approach to local engagement, recognising that different approaches will attract different people. They should use straightforward language and proactively address offline and online access requirements. Especially on high-stakes issues, engagement leaders should also consider (i) compensating participants; (ii) using targeted recruitment methods; (iii) using trained facilitators; (iv) working alongside community partners; and (v) engaging residents where they feel most comfortable. As part of a wider community development strategy, local authorities can also (i) support the establishment of community support services and community-led social hubs; (ii) promote civic education and participation in local schools; and (iii) conduct an audit of local engagement to understand who is not participating and where future resource should be prioritised for recruitment and community development.
Participation is... sporadic → repetitive → ongoing <i>Building sustained participation journeys for residents.</i>	Each individual participation event should be designed to reaffirm local relationships, relay helpful civic skills and habits and redirect participants to future engagement opportunities. Local participation should have a low floor and a high ceiling. Convenient, low floor 'gateways' to local participation might include (i) SMS-enabled engagement; (ii) highly social or 'gamified' approaches to local participation; (iii) and engagement in informal/community-led spaces. Agencies should consider developing 'participation personas' (general profiles that show how different residents participate), from which more tailored 'participation journeys' could be designed to appeal to different persona types.
Engagement is... cosmetic → accountable → empowering <i>Delegating decision-making authority to residents.</i>	Organisers must clearly communicate (i) the aims and remit of any engagement process they run, so participants understand the influence they can expect to have; (ii) the timeline of decision-making and key milestones along the way; (iii) where burden of responsibility for the decision lies and how the local political system works; (iv) how residents can track/monitor the uptake of public input. To secure political buy-in for public engagement, organisers should (i) align their advocacy with politicians' pre-existing values and incentives; (ii) involve politicians in the design process; (iii) facilitate training, peer-support and induction for politicians; (iii) create a clear strategic vision for participatory democracy; and (iv) broker cross-party support for engagement. Once this buy-in is secured, authorities can start experimenting more routinely with approaches that delegate genuine authority, perhaps by (i) establishing spaces where the power dynamic between residents and elected representatives is equal and shared; and (ii) trialling approaches that put final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Transition	Key guidance and recommendations
Engagement is... methodological → experimental → mainstream <i>Embedding participation as standard practice.</i>	<p>The best participatory experiments are catalysts for lasting change in the institutions that administer them. The most transformative experiments are those that are evaluated, refined, designed and redesigned, with learning regularly shared widely across the organising agency.</p> <p>Through a process of agile experimentation, evaluation and cross-organisational learning, local and regional authorities in the UK should over time seek to 'institutionalise' robust forms of public deliberation, either through the creation of new standing deliberative bodies or the specification of definite conditions under which a deliberative process is required.</p>
The public and VCSE sector are... gatekeepers → door-openers → valued partners <i>Engaging residents in partnership with the VCSE sector.</i>	<p>During the Covid-19 crisis, many councils have swapped the traditional bureaucratic and managerial approach to the VCSE sector for a more collaborative and facilitative approach. Councils and community organisations alike have had to adapt to their ways of working to accommodate one another, potentially prefiguring a more pluralistic approach to local governance and service delivery.</p> <p>Provisions should be made for an inclusive and facilitated dialogue about the appropriate roles of different public and VCSE sector local institutions in the aftermath of Covid-19. In the longer term, a coordination forum (perhaps modelled on our proposed Local Office for Public Engagement and Innovation) should be established for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between local VCSE sector and public sector in both service delivery and resident engagement.</p>
Engagement is... team-led → organisation-led → system-led <i>Securing broad support for participation, within and beyond public authorities.</i>	<p>Some factors to consider in coralling cross-organisational support for participatory democracy include (i) establishing a local charter/vision for public engagement; (ii) aligning job descriptions, performance benchmarks and training strategies with long-term engagement aspirations; (iii) setting up peer-support networks and learning hubs within and between local agencies</p> <p>Money and staff capacity - two fundamental barriers to expanding engagement practice in organisations – can be addressed practically through (i) mapping of staff competencies; (ii) clear delineation of roles and responsibilities; (iii) clear information about the resource-intensiveness of different engagement methods; (iv) the reprioritisation of existing funds; and (v) support from local businesses or philanthropists.</p> <p>The goal of achieving whole-system support for participation could be supported by a Local Office for Public Engagement and Innovation – an independent body for research, advocacy, training and system-wide coordination.</p>

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