

Civic participation

Civic participation is the involvement of people and civil society in shaping their governments and society.

It is a critical element of open government, underpinning many other aspects of openness, which require an engaged and active citizenry to scrutinise government decisions, services and outcomes, in order to improve and hold them to account. Though this scrutiny is essential, meaningful civic participation goes far beyond this to recognize the fundamental role of citizens and civil society as a partner to government in improving and shaping society.

Democracy in the UK is changing - devolution of power to the UK nations and now to major cities brings a rich mix of approaches to the development and reform of public services. This means that civic participation is all the more important. It is no longer an optional extra for governments, nor an event that happens every five years. As old challenges persist and new ones emerge, governments must make difficult trade-offs that will only be effective if they are informed and understood by the public. Governments alone cannot solve the complex societal challenges that face us; the knowledge, experiences and energy required to do so is distributed across society.

The challenge

To create the conditions for people in all corners of the UK to be involved in and influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Civic participation has great potential to benefit government and society, but it is not a panacea, and it is often not easy for governments to get right. Even where there is enthusiasm to work with citizens, the processes, technology, culture, timescales and demands of government often present barriers to doing so. The ever-present challenge is to make engagement work for citizens and for government.

Innovation is not easy, there is no single rule book and each country will tackle it differently. The challenge is to make the best use of the growing partnership between government and civil society around open government, developing a movement to promote the benefits of engagement – sharing, learning and testing out ideas together.

Outcome

By 2018, there will be greater involvement of citizens in the development of policy and service design at the regional, local, and national level. This should make citizens confident that their perspectives are being heard, and should enable policy makers to access a wider range of expertise in the development of policies and services and better target resources.