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Institute of Local  
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# Rewiring local government for citizen engagement

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# Summary

The relationship between the government and citizens needs reimagining as a matter of priority. Amid structural reforms, declining trust, attitudinal polarisation, and increasing social and economic pressures, this paper argues for a fundamental shift toward citizen engagement.

Key challenges include:

- Low public trust in both central and local government.
- Structural changes such as the creation of mayor-led Strategic Authorities and new large unitary authorities.
- The demand from citizens for greater involvement in decisions that affect their lives.

Many councils are already pursuing democratic innovations such as neighbourhood-level devolution and citizens' assemblies, and Parish councils are booming. The English Devolution White Paper offers useful new powers but more needs to be done to make citizen engagement effective.

Learning from academic research and practice evaluation, we identify the need for a multifaceted approach where engagement is embedded in the fabric of local governance. In particular, developing three essential conditions for effective engagement:

- 1 Convening democratic spaces** – enabling deliberative and dialogic processes that help rebuild trust between citizens and institutions.
- 2 Building community capacity** – supporting citizens, especially those groups and communities that are often marginalised in public life, to co-create solutions and strengthen social cohesion.
- 3 Co-producing services** – involving service users in the design and delivery of public services to ensure responsiveness and innovation.

Effective citizen engagement both builds on existing local engagement activity and cultivates purposeful experimentation with new approaches. The legitimate concerns of some local politicians need to be carefully addressed and support provided to develop their community leadership roles. Engaging young people and making appropriate use of digital engagement are important areas for development.

The paper concludes that democratic renewal requires more than structural reform - it demands leadership, reform and investment. By further embedding citizen engagement, councils can foster trust, improve outcomes, and build a more inclusive and resilient democratic society.

# Democratic Challenge and Opportunity

**The relationship between government and its citizens is at a critical juncture. Major changes to the structure of local government in England are planned, including new large unitary authorities and further development of Combined/Strategic Authorities. This is happening in a context where council spending per person has been cut by 18% in real terms since 2010, public trust in central and local government has declined, people feel more distrust to those with opposing views, and citizens want more involvement in decisions affecting their lives.**

This paper explores the potential for enhancing local democracy through more effective citizen engagement. By examining current practices, drawing on international evidence, and highlighting proven solutions, we aim to identify key actions to foster engaged, inclusive and participatory governance. Our focus is on creating conditions that strengthen trust, mobilise community power, and ensure that public policies are responsive to the lived experiences and aspirations of all citizens.

Local government restructuring is both an opportunity and a potential threat for local democracy. The English Devolution White Paper seeks to establish large unitary councils in current two-tier county areas and to extend mayor-led strategic authorities across the country. The average population covered by councils in England (about 176,000) is already exceptionally large for lower tier councils by European standards – for example, the average council population in Germany is 6,900, in France 1,800, and in the Netherlands 390<sup>1</sup>. International evidence suggests that the amalgamation of councils often has negative effects on local democracy including lower voter turnout, fewer candidates in local elections, diminished political self-confidence among individuals, and a weakened sense of community among residents<sup>2</sup>. The move to bigger councils, fewer elected representatives, concentration of decision making in fewer hands, and increased heterogeneity of the populations covered by councils risks reduced local autonomy and influence.

Levels of trust in government in the UK have declined in recent years and remain comparatively low, although precise estimates vary between surveys. These differences are partly explained by different question wording and timing of the publicly available survey evidence. For example, the OECD Trust Survey explores people's perceptions of different public institutions in their country and the degree to which they trust their government<sup>3</sup>. In 2023, 27% of people in the United Kingdom reported high or moderately high trust in the national government, below the OECD average of 39%. The UK result was a decrease of 8% in two years, three times the average decrease in other countries. Reported trust in local government is slightly higher (34%). In other recent surveys, the ONS found one in three trusting local government and one in four with 'moderate' trust in national government<sup>4</sup>, the LGIU found 42% of residents trusting their council and councillors to act in the best interests of local people and only 29% trusting the UK government<sup>5</sup>, whereas the LGA<sup>6</sup> found 50% of respondents trust their council 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'.

People want greater say in the decisions that affect them. Over 80% of people believe residents should always have a say in decisions that impact on their area, and many people want to be more involved in decision making<sup>7</sup>. Almost two-thirds think citizens should be more involved than they currently are in making decisions about their area<sup>8</sup>. Importantly, the OECD Trust Survey analysis shows that people in the UK who feel that the current political system does not let people like them have a say tend to trust the

government significantly less (by 41%) compared to those who feel they have political voice.

There is increasing affective polarisation of views between different groups in British society, where individuals begin to distrust and dislike people from the opposing side, irrespective of whether they disagree on specific policy issues<sup>9</sup>. The issue of Brexit has been particularly important in developing this polarisation, with an ideological divide particularly tied to specific cultural issues concerning state identity and immigration<sup>10</sup>.

There are important policy drivers to increase citizen engagement in local governance. The English Devolution White Paper expects the new councils to 'take a proactive and innovative approach to neighbourhood involvement and community governance so that citizens are empowered'. The government has ambitious plans in many policy areas whose achievement will require citizen engagement, such as the move to more preventative public services. Councils will be making difficult choices when working within restrained public spending levels. These policy priorities will require the engagement of citizens who are affected by the changes and can suggest, develop and test solutions that may not otherwise be considered by or appear palatable to politicians and officers.

Although hampered by reduced resources and capacity, local authorities are well-placed to grow public trust, building on examples of effective citizen engagement. By fostering inclusive engagement and leveraging the diverse knowledge, skills, and resources within communities, local authorities can ensure that public policy, investment decisions and associated community benefits are more closely aligned with the lived experiences, priorities, and aspirations of local people. The inherent tensions that sometimes arise, for example between what can be refused or approved in planning processes and the views/perceptions of communities, should be acknowledged. However, too often citizen engagement processes by various public agencies end up shelved and change is not delivered because these processes and outcomes are not embedded in day-to-day policymaking and implementation.

Councils face significant structural change, a challenging fiscal environment and low citizen trust in government. Now, more than ever, there is a need to reimagine the relationship between government and its citizens, placing communities at the centre of shaping public services and decisions that affect their everyday lives. Councils are well placed to lead this process.

# From Tokenism to Transformation

**Local councils have been handicapped by the draconian cuts in funding since 2010 but nevertheless many are delivering important democratic innovations. Local Government Reorganisation provides new opportunities and powers which can accelerate progress. Research and practice evaluations suggest effective ways to move from community consultation, which often feels tokenistic, to transform local governance through citizen engagement.**

Public spending cuts have inevitably adversely affected councils' capacity for citizen engagement and led to the loss of many venues where communities used to meet, such as youth clubs, libraries and community centres. However, at the same time, many councils have adopted important democratic innovations, such as the devolution of powers to neighbourhood levels, initiatives to build more inclusive local economies, and experiments with approaches such as digital engagement, citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries. Area Boards and Place Boards in [Wiltshire](#) and the community network of Area Partnerships in [Cornwall](#) are two examples of large unitary councils with arrangements for devolution to a very local level. Some local authority scrutiny committees also have a significant role to amplify the voices and concerns of the public. Almost 300 new Parish and Town Councils have been established in the first two decades of this century<sup>11</sup> and they cover over 90% of England's geography. Parish and town councils are elected corporate bodies with variable tax raising powers which represent the local community, deliver local services, and improve community wellbeing.

Local Government Reorganisation provides new opportunities and powers which can accelerate progress. The new local government structure of Strategic Authorities and Unitary councils could provide a framework for a closer partnership between local and central government. The English Devolution White Paper sets out a range of relevant new powers including an enhanced 'right to buy' community assets, new powers to address empty high street shops, and a new community-led regeneration programme building on the Long Term Plan for

Towns. There have been calls for further powers, for example New Local's *Labour Vision for Community Power*<sup>12</sup> argues for a new community right to shape public services by participating in the strategic decision-making and design of services.

Further concerted action is required to provide more opportunities for consequential citizen engagement at the local level, embedding participation to identify and address today's challenges, opportunities and solutions. Current governmental practices often fail to harness this resource effectively. Participation is frequently solicited without a commensurate institutional capacity and willingness to engage citizens at a stage at which their input can have an effect and to respond substantively to citizens' input. The result can be that trust is damaged rather than strengthened.

## Learning from research and evaluation

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Over three decades of academic research into democratic innovations<sup>13,14</sup>, deliberative democracy, participatory governance<sup>15</sup>, social innovation, and co-production<sup>16</sup> provides robust evidence of the value of collaborative approaches involving diverse communities and stakeholders. Mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting have demonstrated their capacity to foster mutual understanding across divergent perspectives, generate effective and context-sensitive policy decisions, and develop considered responses to complex societal challenges.

The research shows that engagement approaches that ensure strong and equitable representation of stakeholder interests, employing open and flexible formats for engagement, are consistently associated with higher levels of stakeholder support<sup>17</sup>. Democratic innovations that promote contact between different groups can reduce prejudice, foster understanding across social divides and lead to more equitable outcomes - engaging with diverse perspectives helps shift attitudes and broaden support for inclusive policies. Finally, the research emphasises the importance of including marginalised and silenced voices and experiences, to build social equity.

Practice guidelines and programme evaluations also help to identify effective approaches. Published guidance<sup>18</sup> often identifies good practice underpinning effective public engagement, such as ensuring time for citizens to deliberate and discuss information, insights and experiences; commitments from councils to respond to the conclusions of the engagement exercises; and a legitimate approach to deciding who is involved. Evaluations of community

and economic development programmes with important citizen engagement elements across the UK programmes, such as the New Deal for Communities, the Big Local programme, and Neighbourhood Agreements Pathfinder Programme, have identified common issues. The insights from these programmes highlight the importance of creating conditions where communities can harness their agency and resources, maintaining long-term commitment, fostering flexibility, communicating effectively, working in partnership, building capacity and sustainability, and setting realistic targets.

Fostering effective citizen engagement requires a multifaceted approach. The real challenge lies in ensuring that engagement practices are not merely tokenistic but are embedded in the fabric of local governance. Embeddedness involves engagement being rooted in the political and policy systems. The 'when, where and how?' of engagement are critical here: whether it is a one-off event or repeated regularly over time, whether it takes place where decisions are being made, and what formal and informal practices are adopted<sup>19</sup>.

# Embedding citizen engagement

**As the demands on public services grow and democratic trust continues to face challenges, there is an urgent need to rethink how institutions engage with citizens. Effective engagement is not simply a matter of consultation, but of creating the conditions in which citizens can meaningfully shape the policies and services that affect their lives. This section outlines a framework for strengthening citizen engagement by focusing on three interrelated areas: convening inclusive spaces for dialogue and deliberation, investing in community capacity and relationships, and enabling the co-production of services with citizens. These approaches are essential for building trust, fostering innovation, and ensuring that public institutions are responsive to the diverse needs and aspirations of the communities they serve.**

Creating the conditions for effective engagement requires a shift in institutional culture and practice. It involves recognising the value of informal and locally grounded forms of engagement, supporting councillors and public officials to act as facilitators and mediators, and addressing structural barriers that inhibit citizen influence. It also means embracing experimentation with new methods, such as digital tools and youth-led initiatives, while ensuring these are adapted to local contexts. By embedding engagement in everyday governance and supporting citizens as active partners, government can help to renew democratic life and build more inclusive, resilient communities.

## Creating the conditions for effective engagement

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Effective citizen engagement requires central and local government to create the conditions for three key types of activity. The first involves convening spaces and processes for democratic engagement, through consultative, deliberative and dialogic approaches that build support for change and innovation. A second key activity is building community by supporting and mobilising citizens, particularly those groups and communities that are often marginalised in public life, to strengthen community relationships and co-create solutions, and investing in community activities, groups and assets. Finally, governments must enable the co-production of local services with service users, allowing their experiences to inform service design

and delivery. Co-production is a way of developing policies and services through the active involvement of citizens and affected groups as well as professionals, for example around decisions on how government functions are digitalised<sup>20</sup>. This requires public officials to develop the capacity and expertise to collaborate with citizens, such as facilitation and mediation skills<sup>21</sup>, and support for citizens to take on these opportunities.

By supporting democratic innovations, investing in community building, and co-producing services with citizens, public institutions responsible for services can harness the collective power and resources of their communities. This approach not only strengthens trust but also ensures that policies are responsive to the lived realities and aspirations of all citizens, transforming local governance and paving the way for a more inclusive and resilient democratic society.

## Rethinking institutions for meaningful engagement

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Citizen engagement should both build on existing cultures of engagement and cultivate a spirit of experimentation. In many communities, citizens are already engaging in creative and often informal ways to solve collective problems and hold power to account, sometimes outside formal institutional structures. These practices, grounded in local knowledge and relationships, offer valuable entry points for more inclusive and consequential



policymaking. By recognising and harnessing the engagement approaches people already use, local governments can bridge the gap between citizen voice and institutional action. The emphasis should be on approaches that are grounded in the lived realities, priorities, and everyday practices of communities. Rather than imposing externally designed or uniform models of engagement, public bodies should support contextually embedded processes that reflect and reinforce community agency. This orientation fosters more sustainable and meaningful forms of engagement, rooted in local ownership and driven by community-defined goals, assets and needs.

At the same time, it is important to remain open to experimenting with new approaches of engagement, particularly those that have an established record in other contexts, such as citizen's panels, arts-based youth involvement or digital engagement. Resource-constrained or deeply divided settings can offer inspiration, especially where they have succeeded in building trust between citizens and institutions<sup>22</sup>. Deliberative and participatory approaches have been applied in post-conflict societies, as well as in areas facing acute poverty and inequality, across both the Global North and South. These experiences demonstrate that even in challenging environments, meaningful engagement is possible. However, such experimentation must always be grounded in local realities. Policymakers should be wary of importing engagement models wholesale simply because they are popular elsewhere, without adapting them to their specific cultural, political, and institutional context.

International evidence underscores the value of approaching service users and communities with openness and reciprocity<sup>23</sup>. Such engagement fosters trust, supports the co-production of solutions that respond to both immediate needs and systemic inequalities, and strengthens the social contract between institutions and the public. Existing organisational practices, administrative routines, and regulatory frameworks within local government may sometimes inadvertently

inhibit meaningful citizen engagement. Without addressing these structural barriers, there is a risk that engagement initiatives will be perceived as tokenistic, with limited capacity to influence policy outcomes. To ensure the implementation of citizen-generated initiatives and proposals, it is imperative to interrogate and, where necessary, adapt institutional processes that constrain citizen engagement.

## Equipping councillors

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A more deliberate focus is needed on how to enhance support for councillors as part of this process. Some councillors have understandable concerns about how participation relates to the democratic decision-making process and their role as community leaders. Some politicians may also be concerned about the public's ability to understand complex problems and help to identify effective solutions. But councillors have key roles to play, working with the community in their wards and in local decision-making.

Whilst councillors will always have a key role as democratic representatives, their roles are also expanding as facilitators who put the community at the heart of decision making and 'keep the system human', as we found in our recently refreshed research on the [21st Century Councillor](#)<sup>24</sup>. Councillors are well-placed to mediate between institutional systems and community knowledge, fostering mutual understanding and co-creating policy solutions that are both effective and locally legitimate. Scrutiny committees can also create a framework to listen, frame and ask key questions to the public. Councils and political parties each have important roles in supporting councillors in developing these extended roles. There is potential for engagement in local politics to restore trust and engagement in the political process.



## Engaging young people

The engagement of young people will be especially important in the context of an expanded voting franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds in England later in this parliament. Children and young people are valuable sources of critical insight to policymaking future-focused development. Citizenship is a required subject in the National Curriculum, so is taught in all maintained schools in England at key stage 3 and 4. This aims to prepare pupils to 'play a full and active part in society', fostering understanding of democracy, government, and law. In addition, young should be recognised and engaged as active stakeholders in age-appropriate ways<sup>25</sup>.

Beyond developing civic skills and democratic confidence, engagement approaches should affirm young people's agency and ensure their perspectives are meaningfully integrated into decisions that affect their lives, from youth mental health support<sup>26</sup> and equitable access to employment, to social media policies or the use of mobile phones in schools, and other areas where technology, education, and wellbeing intersect. This approach can lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and future-oriented democratic culture, grounded in early and ongoing engagement with young citizens.

## Digital approaches

There is significant potential in using new digital approaches to public engagement which engage with communities of interest, as well as geographic communities. Digital technologies can help some groups to engage, for example those who find it difficult to travel, who have caring responsibilities or disabilities, or who face financial or emotional barriers to attending events. It may also help reach adults in their 20s and 30s, who are traditionally less likely to participate in engagement initiatives<sup>27</sup>. The use of AI could help to identify people's interests, so that the engagement can be targeted in a more meaningful way than in the past. Unfortunately, there remains a digital divide for some groups which needs to be considered when adopting digital approaches to avoid deepening these inequalities.

# Conclusions

**The challenges facing central and local government today, including declining trust, fiscal constraints, intensifying polarisation, and increasingly complex public policy issues, demand a renewed commitment to citizen engagement, inclusion, and collaboration. The opportunity presented by England's evolving devolution landscape must be seized not simply through organisational restructuring, but as a chance to reimagine and revitalise the relationship between citizens and the state. This also has an important ethical dimension - linking decisions to the people who experience their impacts.**

Local government is uniquely positioned to facilitate this renewal. It operates closest to communities, understands the granular detail of local conditions, and has demonstrated growing capacity for innovation in democratic practice. Yet to unlock this potential fully, citizen engagement must become embedded in local government, rather than a side activity.

This report has outlined a compelling evidence base for doing so, drawing on decades of academic research, public policy experimentation, and both local and international practice. Deliberative and participatory approaches to local governance provide a framework for action that harnesses existing practices and capacities within communities to drive citizen-engaged governance and create space for innovation in responding to the fast-changing needs of communities under increasing financial pressure. These approaches enhance the legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness of policy and public service delivery. When designed and delivered well, they strengthen social cohesion, reduce inequalities, and generate solutions that are owned by communities themselves.

However, the institutional barriers to embedding these approaches remain significant. Organisational cultures, officer and elected member attitudes and skills, and dominant policy logics often constrain meaningful and impactful engagement. Addressing these requires more than rhetorical support - it calls for leadership, reform, and investment.

The future of democratic renewal lies not in technocratic fixes but in fostering citizen engagement, institutional trust, and collective ownership over decision-making. This paper argues that government needs to create spaces and processes for citizen engagement, build community, and enable co-production of local services. Councils can lead this work locally by embedding participatory culture and spaces in local governance. Councillors have key roles as community facilitators and should be supported to develop this role.

By embedding a culture of citizen engagement across all levels of governance, we can lay the foundations for a more inclusive, resilient, and democratic society.

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