



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Institute of Local
Government Studies

The Participatory Council

June 2026

Institute of Local Government Studies (Inlogov)

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The Participatory Council

Summary

Councils need to develop participatory governance arrangements to address the declined levels of public trust in government, by giving residents a meaningful voice in decision-making, improving transparency, and ensuring policies better reflect community needs and priorities. This report examines how councils can support institutional culture change towards participatory policymaking, drawing lessons from UK and international experiences. Too often, great work by individual officers, members or specific projects is lost because the council as an institution is ill prepared for public participation.

The report argues that participatory policymaking must be deeply embedded within governance structures to enable meaningful engagement, mobilise diverse communities, and support mutual learning and transformative change. Achieving this requires facilitative leadership and the cultivation of boundary-spanning roles that bridge divides between government, civil society, and local communities. Advancing inclusive participation also demands an intersectional approach that centres marginalised voices to address systemic inequalities.

Key recommendations include:

- invest in and recognise boundary spanner roles that can support collaboration across different sectors and stakeholders;
- rebuild trust through transparent participatory processes, ensuring follow up on citizen input;
- rethink participation not as disjointed events vulnerable to the political cycle, but as coherent processes embedded into day-to-day policymaking;
- build on existing community assets and resources, recognising and supporting their diverse roles and activities;
- incentivise alliances across diverse community, voluntary and grassroots groups to strengthen synergies and collaboration, rather than engendering competition over limited resources;
- adopt an intersectional approach to encourage inclusive participation that centres marginalised voices and experiences.

1. Introduction

Many councils across England are developing collaborative initiatives to address persistent inequalities and maximise opportunities within their communities. These efforts recognise that complex social and economic challenges require coordinated action across public services, private sector organisations, educational institutions, voluntary groups, and local communities, brought together around a shared vision for place-based improvement.

Central to this ambition is the recognition that achieving meaningful and lasting change requires more than traditional, top-down governance. Instead, it calls for councils to adopt more participatory approaches that enable them to share power with residents and partners, fostering more collaborative, inclusive, and responsive forms of decision-making.

While consultations and one-off engagement exercises have their place, the greater opportunity lies in embedding participatory approaches within governance structures and policymaking processes. This involves developing sustained and systematic mechanisms through which residents can shape decisions. For councils, this represents not only the adoption of new participatory practices and designs, but also a broader cultural shift in which participation becomes a core feature of organisational ways of working.

This report results from research conducted last year with Birmingham City Council, linked to their Shaping Birmingham's Future Together programme, but the learning is relevant to all councils. It addresses a central question: **How can councils support culture and institutional change towards participatory policymaking?** Specifically, we examine what we can learn from other contexts and how these lessons can be applied considering local challenges and opportunities in English councils.

The report is structured as follows. After this introduction, section 2 examines developments in participatory deliberative processes, or democratic innovations, and why moving beyond tokenism requires both embedded participation and intersectionally inclusive approaches. Section 3 draws lessons from UK and international experiences, critically examining how other places have tried to embed participatory governance and the factors that contributed to their success or failure. The conclusion outlines key actions for councils wishing to embed inclusive participation in their governance.

2. Understanding Embedded and Inclusive Participation

What Are Democratic Innovations?

Over the past two decades, governments at all levels, across the UK and internationally, have increasingly experimented with new approaches to citizen engagement in decision-making. This includes the institutionalisation of democratic practices such as participatory budgeting processes or citizen assemblies, but also grassroots and civil society-led initiatives, and digital democracy platforms ([Elstub & Escobar, 2019](#)).

This trend reflects the growing challenges facing traditional democratic institutions and increasing pressures on public service delivery, which affect local government:

- **Declining trust:** Public confidence in politicians and democratic institutions has fallen significantly ([Valgarðsson et al., 2025](#); [Uberoi & Johnston, 2021](#))
- **Limited engagement:** Beyond voting, which also continues to decline, many residents feel disconnected from local decision-making ([Mycock and Tonge, 2012](#))
- **Complex challenges:** Issues like climate change, housing, and economic crisis require diverse perspectives and local knowledge that councils alone may not possess ([Ansell and Gash, 2007](#); [Bryson et al., 2009](#))
- **Resource pressures:** Local authorities face increasing demands for services while operating under sustained budget constraints and taking on expanded responsibilities through decentralisation, often without receiving adequate funding or the necessary powers to fulfil these roles effectively. In the UK context, recent Labour reforms perpetuate this "conditional localism" approach, where central government maintains tight control over resources and decision making processes, even as it transfers responsibilities to local councils ([Bailey & Hildreth, 2024](#)).

Democratic innovations promise to help re-build trust and co-create more effective policies that better respond to local needs, but they should not be understood as a panacea. Innovative participatory designs only go so far and changing organisational culture and day-to-day working practices are crucial to meaningfully embed citizens' lived experience and expertise in policymaking.

Beyond Tokenism: Embedded Participation

There is growing recognition that one-off participatory events have limited impact on government decisions, and that participatory democracy requires involving residents throughout the full decision-making cycle - from identifying problems and setting priorities to policy development, implementation, and evaluation (Reuchamps et al., 2023). This means making citizen engagement integral to day-to-day council operations, rather than treating it as separate from or an add-on to “real” decision-making.

However, achieving this is more difficult than simply introducing new participatory structures. Embedding participatory governance requires making public participation a routinised and meaningful part of how decisions are made. It goes beyond formal processes, strengthening connections between institutions, everyday practices, and community activity so participation becomes a natural part of governance (Bussu et al., 2022b). Participation can also extend beyond agenda setting and co-production into oversight and scrutiny, reshaping accountability systems.

Embedding depends more on cultural change than on new designs. Even where participatory processes are formalised, significant challenges persist:

- **Operating at the margins:** remaining peripheral rather than central to decision-making (Baiochi & Ganuza, 2014).
- **Recommendations ignored or cherry-picked:** citizen input is used selectively or sidelined (Font et al., 2018).
- **Vulnerability to political change:** processes weaken or disappear with leadership shifts (Bussu et al., 2022b).

Formal participation without genuine influence becomes a tick-boxing exercise, entrenching disengagement and undermining trust.

Overcoming these challenges requires clarity on what embedding looks like in practice. Participation should be sustained over time, becoming routine within budget cycles, policy reviews, and service planning. It must also connect clearly to decision-making power and be supported by organisational culture change across all levels (Bussu et al., 2022a). Crucially participatory work has to be recognised and incentivised rather than being perceived as something extra, which creates more work for public servants without adding much value.

Achieving this requires attention to three key drivers that together enable sustained participatory governance: facilitative leadership, the role of boundary spanners, and working closely with civil society.

Facilitative Leadership

Research shows that leadership plays a crucial role in determining whether participatory processes succeed or fail in practice. As Ansell and Gash ([2012](#)) demonstrate, leadership is widely recognised as an important ingredient in successful collaboration, with collaborative leaders typically playing a facilitative role, encouraging and enabling stakeholders to work together.

Participatory governance requires a different style of leadership than traditional public administration or local politics. In regular government operations, senior managers can direct staff to implement decisions through clear chains of command. But participatory governance involves citizens, community groups and external partners, and accountability lines can be blurred ([Bussu, 2019](#)). While non state actors may formally choose whether to participate, in practice, many lack the power to refuse or challenge participation expectations and face significant barriers to meaningful involvement due to entrenched power inequalities. Collaboration ideally operates in a 'shared power' world where different stakeholders control distinct resources and have their own bases of power and authority (Ansell and Gash, 2012). However, power imbalances persist even in the most inclusively designed spaces, making facilitative leadership essential for recognising and addressing these inequalities rather than simply assuming equal participation.

Building on this, Bussu and Bartels ([2014](#)) define facilitative leadership as a relational process. Facilitative leadership is not about having one charismatic leader who drives everything. Instead, it's about creating and holding space for different partners to lead at different points in the process, developing collaborative skills and practices across an organisation or cross-sectoral partnerships. The focus is on creating the right conditions for effective collaboration ([Bussu, 2019](#)).

The Role of Boundary Spanners

Boundary spanners are individuals who operate at the critical interface between organisations and communities, playing a crucial role in enabling transformation of governance practices ([van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018](#)). They can be found at various levels of organisations – from frontline staff to senior managers – and include both dedicated boundary-spanning roles and those for whom cross-boundary working has become an integral part of their mainstream job functions ([Williams, 2013](#); [Durose et al., 2021](#)). In practice, boundary spanners can take various forms, including community leaders who serve as translators and bridge-builders, leveraging their access to networks within their own communities ([Agger, 2012](#)). In that sense, boundary spanners act as bridges between different organisational worlds, intermediating between formal institutional governance and informal, creative and subversive community practices ([Bartles, 2021](#)). This involves: (i) filtering and channelling information flows between organisations and communities, helping each side understand the other's perspectives, constraints, and opportunities; (ii) investing significant time in developing and maintaining networks of trust across organisations and communities; (iii) engaging in pragmatic improvisation, finding innovative ways to connect community needs with organisational capabilities; and (iv) helping different groups - with different professional backgrounds, organisational cultures, and community experiences - understand each other's different ways of thinking and operating ([Williams, 2012](#)).

This boundary-spanning function increasingly requires public professionals to move beyond traditional institutional approaches, adopting more creative and informal methods to facilitate citizen engagement through deep community embedding and long-term relationship building based on trust and openness ([Escobar, 2022](#)). These skills are also very relevant to local policymakers. Recent research on the [21st Century Councillor](#) has identified similar competencies and practices, including the ability to 'zoom in and zoom out' between different organisational levels, act as 'multi-level diplomats' building partnerships despite limited formal authority, and function as 'hybrid connectors' who build relationships both online and offline.

Working Closely with Civil Society, grassroots and voluntary organisations

Embedding a participatory approach in governance requires embracing the vital role of civil society organisations and grassroots groups as partners in democratic decision making. Instead of expecting these partners to fit into top-down participatory processes and forcing them to adapt to bureaucratic language and ways of working, councils should build their participatory policymaking around existing communities, assets, and networks.

Effective collaboration with community organisations requires what Pera and Bussu (2024) describe as sustained "relational work" - the often invisible efforts to build trust, manage conflicts, and create shared understanding across different organisational cultures. This relational dimension involves creating "buffer zones" (Bennett et al., 2020), spaces where public officials and community representatives can work through disagreements and build shared visions, with support from intermediary organisations and boundary spanners.

Working with community anchor organisations offers a particularly valuable model for doing so. These include community development trusts, community-controlled housing associations, and other bodies that are deeply connected to their neighbourhoods. According to Henderson et al. (2021), effective partnerships require community organisations to maintain both independence from the state and a good working relationship with it. This balance involves supporting organisations in becoming self-sufficient, without burdening them with responsibilities they may lack the resources or capacity to manage. It also requires allowing organisations to challenge decisions. So rather than wanting groups that always agree, good participatory governance needs community organisations that can speak up for local people and question policy decisions when needed. Finally, it is important to realise the mutual benefits that the councils and communities gain from working together well, recognising that supporting capable community organisations makes local governance and services stronger.

This approach can be strengthened by enhancing councils' role as anchor institutions within broader networks of locally-rooted organisations. For instance community wealth building, whereby public procurement benefits local economies by prioritising local businesses and social enterprises, is an effective way for local authorities working alongside other anchor institutions – e.g., housing associations, universities, and large social sector organisations - to retain wealth and opportunity within local communities rather than allowing it to be extracted to distant shareholders (CLEs, 2020).

We should avoid romanticising community organisations and the voluntary sector, as they may not always represent the full diversity of community voices. For example, when councils open collaborative spaces, this can give more power to groups that are already well-organised. Richardson et al. (2019) warn that this risks 'capture by vested interests', meaning that established groups with existing power and networks may dominate the process, while less organised community voices get left out (ibid, p. 127).

Intersectionally Inclusive Participation: Centring Marginalised Voices

Participation is not inherently inclusive. Effective partnerships require actively centring groups historically excluded from governance, as participatory spaces can otherwise be dominated by more resourceful citizens, reinforcing inequality.

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how identities - such as class, race, gender, age, and ability - interact to produce overlapping forms of discrimination and privilege. It highlights how systemic inequalities shape participation and helps inform more equitable policy design.

Intersectionally inclusive participation recognises that barriers - such as time poverty, limited resources, and institutional mistrust - are interconnected. Addressing them requires moving beyond treating identities separately and instead designing processes that reflect these complex realities.

This approach is not only about access but about shifting power. While inclusive logistics and trusted intermediaries (e.g. community organisations) are important, participation must also value lived experience alongside professional expertise. This can be achieved by:

- enabling diverse forms of knowledge in all stages of policymaking;
- designing flexible and adaptable participation pathways;
- using creative and varied methods to support inclusive co-production.

The promises and shortcomings of Digital Participation

Within a project of embedded participatory governance, digital participation has transformative potential. Civic technology (civic tech) or FLOSS technology (Free/ Libre OpenSource Technology) refers to digital tools and platforms, such as [Decidim](#) or [Consul](#), explicitly designed to enhance democratic participation, public engagement, and governance transparency. Civic tech platforms can serve to integrate digital and in-person participation, enhancing accessibility and flexibility. Decidim, for example, allows uploading outcomes from face-to-face events, enabling asynchronous engagement and broader reach ([Mello, 2021](#)).

While its promise lies in the ability to scale up deliberative processes and support bottom-up innovation, digital participation also faces significant shortcomings. Despite inclusive rhetoric, digital platforms can reproduce existing inequalities. The digital divide - manifested in unequal access to technology, broadband, and digital literacy - excludes many from meaningful participation ([Francis & Weller, 2022](#); [Lythreatis et al., 2022](#)). Assumptions that young people are “digital natives”, for instance, overlook disparities in skills and access, particularly along class, race, and gender lines ([Pawluczuk et al., 2020](#); [Bussu et al., 2025](#)).

Moreover, although civic tech tries to address this, digital participation overall tends to privilege individual engagement over collective deliberation, risking superficial or tokenistic involvement. As Dean ([2023](#)) notes, digital platforms often resemble “civic online shopping,” sacrificing community mobilisation. Another limitation is the lack of institutional capacity to process and respond to citizen input. As participatory platforms scale up, public officials often struggle to manage the volume of proposals, leading to delays and limited feedback ([Bussu et al., 2022b](#); [Strandberg & Grönlund, 2013](#)). This undermines trust and discourages sustained engagement.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is emerging as a powerful tool in participatory and deliberative democracy, offering new ways to enhance citizen engagement and streamline participatory processes. AI can analyse large volumes of data to identify trends and sentiments, providing valuable insights into public opinion. This can help policymakers understand the needs and preferences of citizens more accurately and respond more effectively. [AI-powered platforms](#) can also provide real-time translation services, making it easier for non-native speakers to engage in discussions.

However, the use of AI in participatory democracy raises important ethical considerations. Issues of data privacy, algorithmic bias, and transparency must be carefully managed to ensure that AI enhances rather than undermines democratic processes. It is crucial to involve citizens in discussions about how AI is used in governance to build trust and ensure accountability.

To sum up, to deliver on its transformative potential, digital participation must be critically reimagined. This requires centring marginalised voices, embedding digital tools within broader participatory ecosystems, and ensuring institutional responsiveness.

3. What Does a Participatory Council Look Like?

Democratic innovations have emerged across diverse contexts worldwide at local, regional, national and global tiers of governance (see the recent [Global Assembly on the Climate crisis](#)). This section examines five cases at local and regional level that demonstrate different approaches at deepening democratic participation beyond traditional electoral systems. While each context presents unique challenges and opportunities, examining these experiences provides valuable insights for understanding how a local authority can move beyond *ad hoc* consultation toward embedded participatory governance.

As outlined in our theoretical framework, successful embedding requires sustained participation that becomes routinised rather than exceptional, clear connections between citizen input and actual decision-making power, and organisational culture change ([Bussu et al., 2022a](#)). Two key considerations emerge before delving into these cases. First, institutionalising participation does not automatically mean it is embedded, and these cases need to be examined critically for this distinction. Second, there is no single solution for councils seeking to change their strategy and culture - successful approaches must be tailored to local contexts, histories, and political moments. These principles are illustrated across the case studies, where policy actors - despite sharing the common goal of driving change through power-sharing - face a range of challenges. These challenges provide valuable insights into how participatory democracy can be embedded through effective leadership, the role of boundary spanners, close collaboration with civil society, and, crucially, by centring marginalised voices to achieve intersectional equity.

The detailed descriptions of each case can be found in the accompanying online version of this report, while the following section focuses on some of the key lessons and insights for embedding intersectionally inclusive participatory governance.

Lessons for Embedding Participatory Governance

Participatory governance requires sharing genuine decision-making power and the capacity to bridge citizen demands into institutional processes.

Porto Alegre exemplifies this commitment to power-sharing exceptionally well through its unprecedented transfer of budgetary authority to local communities - over USD \$300 per inhabitant annually - through participatory budgeting. The community movements had a central role in promoting participatory budgeting, but without the decisive contribution of the Workers Party administration, the implementation of PB would not have been possible. Rebecca Abers ([1998](#)) conducted a study on Extremo Sul, a very poor district in Porto Alegre that prior to 1989 only had few neighbourhood associations, largely dominated by better off residents with ties to political parties. Her research shows how the participatory budget furthered mobilisation, discouraged corruption and promoted the emergence of local participatory groups, which in the process also learnt to collaborate with other neighbourhoods to pursue broader goals. Solidarity emerged through the deliberative process, where confrontation between local concerns and concerns of others forced participants to change their opinion, and those from better-off areas recognised poorer neighbourhoods' greater needs and voted to transfer more money to them.

The Porto Alegre model of participatory budgeting (PBPA) is a celebrated case where citizens were theoretically in control. However, it is important to recognise that bureaucrats assessed proposals for technical feasibility and collaborated with neighbourhood delegates in developing viable policies ([Smith, 2009](#)). The PBPA stands out from among most other participatory processes because it is the earliest example of participatory system, including different spaces of participation (i.e. open assemblies in each neighbourhood and delegate meetings across different neighbourhoods) at different points in a process embedded in the city's budget approval cycle. Overall, the merits of PBPA lie in its outcomes in terms of wealth and power redistribution. The pro-poor rule sets were specifically designed to promote social justice and wealth redistribution ([Wampler and Touchton 2019](#)). Many PB programmes in Brazil, which developed on the back of PBPA, use a 'Quality of Life Index', which mandates resource distribution based on neighbourhood poverty rates, encouraging poorer citizens to participate. However, as the PB process abstracts from the results of initial participation and begins to connect these with decision making at higher levels, elite actors might have more power to shape policies, limiting some of the gains made by PB in empowering marginalised sectors of the population ([Smith, 2009](#)). Furthermore, the literature tracing the diffusion and globalisation participatory budgeting (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014) coalesces loosely around the finding that as PB travelled the globe it dropped its critical edge, diminishing its focus on distributive justice in favour of "good governance".

Barcelona offers another example of embeddedness, where Ada Colau's leadership between 2015 and 2023 was crucial for widening the scope and radical ambitions of the historical participatory infrastructure in the city. Back in 2011, the Indignados movement sparked a wave of political innovation in Spain, leading to the rise of new parties like Barcelona en Comú (BeC) and Podemos, which brought grassroots activism into institutional politics. Ada Colau brought to government a coalition of activists and progressive politicians that were able to bridge between the instances of community activists and the practical challenges citizens face when engaging with formal institutions. BeC, after winning municipal elections in 2015 and 2019, maintained strong ties with civil society, embedding participatory governance into its agenda through initiatives like the open-source platform Decidim. This platform enabled citizens to co-create policies via online and offline engagement, shaping major decisions such as the 2016–2019 Municipal Action Plan, which allocated 40% of the city's budget. BeC also pursued bold reforms, including re-municipalising services, promoting cooperative economies, and reclaiming digital infrastructure from corporate control. These efforts positioned Barcelona as a global leader in democratic innovation, inspiring cities worldwide and anchoring the international "[Fearless Cities](#)" network ([Bua and Bussu, 2021](#); [Russell 2019](#)).

While institutionalisation of participatory processes provides important stability and protection against political changes, it doesn't automatically ensure that participation becomes truly embedded in governance practices. The experience of Barcelona and Porto Alegre illustrate this challenge. Despite being one of the world's most celebrated examples of participatory democracy, PAPB had a significant decline following leadership changes after 2004, with citizens' control dropping from 100% of the capital investment budget to just 9.6% by 2008 and further to 5.4% by 2016. Similarly, in Barcelona, Colau's charismatic leadership, as former spokesperson of an anti-eviction movement that gained much visibility during the anti-austerity protests, had been extremely important to the success of BeC in driving a process of democratic renewal. However, reliance on personality politics can expose these projects to risks of co-optation and makes them more vulnerable to changes in government.

Iceland offers another interesting example. Following the 2008 financial crisis, this country experienced a profound legitimacy crisis that catalysed democratic experimentation. In Reykjavik, this led to the creation of two digital platforms - Better Reykjavik and Better Neighbourhoods - designed to crowdsource citizen ideas and implement participatory budgeting. These platforms, developed by the grassroots NGO Citizens Foundation, were initially embraced as innovative tools to rebuild trust between citizens and institutions. Better Reykjavik allowed residents to submit, debate, and vote on policy proposals, while Better Neighbourhoods enabled participatory budgeting for local improvements, allocating around €2 million annually. Within four years, over 70,000 users submitted more than 1,800 proposals, with nearly 350 implemented or under consideration. The open-source nature of

the software and rapid iteration cycles facilitated grassroots engagement with minimal investment ([Lackaff, 2016](#)).

However, Reykjavik's experience also illustrates the limits of digital participation when not embedded within a broader institutional framework. Over time, participation declined, and the platforms struggled to maintain their relevance. Although citizen generated content was formally connected to policy processes, the platforms themselves remained peripheral, treated as temporary projects rather than institutionalised mechanisms. This institutional ambiguity created tensions and what Adenskog ([2018](#)) terms "deliberative ambiguity," where actors avoided confronting the platforms' shortcomings, fearing political backlash or reputational damage. The ambition to embed a participatory governance in Reykjavik was linked to the rise of the populist Best Party. Best Party emerged during the 2008 financial crisis, campaigning on transparency and citizen engagement; once the party was no longer in power the platforms stagnated ([Gnarr, 2014](#)).

The Ostbelgien Model, established in 2019 by the Parliament of the German-speaking region of Belgium, is another example worth noting as it represents a pioneering effort to institutionalise citizen deliberation within a parliamentary framework. It is the first permanent deliberative system directly linked to a legislative body, consisting of a Citizens' Council agreeing the policy agenda and recurring Citizens' Assemblies with randomly selected members from the local population to deliberate on the issues agreed by the Council. This model was not the result of grassroots mobilisation but rather a top-down initiative led by political elites and supported by the G1000 organisation, which provided design expertise and facilitation ([Macq & Jacquet, 2023](#)).

One of the model's key strengths lies in its legal anchoring as it created accountability mechanisms. The Citizen Assemblies' recommendations must be formally considered by parliament and the minister in charge, with public justification required for any rejection ([Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020](#); [Macq & Jacquet, 2023](#)). Another factor of success was the separation of powers between the Citizens' Council, the Citizens' Assemblies, and the Permanent Secretariat – which handles administrative and organisational aspects of the process. This structure created mechanisms of checks and balances that mitigated elite capture. For instance, while the Permanent Secretariat plays a central role in organising deliberations, it is monitored by both the Citizens' Council and parliament ([Junius, 2025](#)).

The involvement of [G1000](#), a civil society-led organisation dedicated to democratic participation, was instrumental in building cross-party consensus and designing a process perceived as credible and non-partisan. Their role helped overcome initial scepticism among opposition parties and facilitated a unanimous parliamentary vote in favour of the model's creation ([Macq & Jacquet, 2023](#)). However, Ostbelgien's top-down design, while enabling rapid institutional establishment, has struggled with deeper community ownership precisely because it was conceived without citizen participation in the initial design phase,

highlighting the tension between institutional efficiency and genuine democratic co-creation (Macq and Jacquet, 2023).

A UK case study that stands out is **Camden's Citizens' Assembly Model**, which emerged as a municipal-level deliberative innovation through the institutionalisation of recurring citizen's assemblies. Since 2017, Camden has held assemblies on planning, climate change, and health and care, positioning them as tools for civic empowerment to co-create alternatives to austerity through deliberation. The Camden Model is integrated with representative governance, and assemblies are commissioned by council boards, which commit to formally considering recommendations and providing public justification if rejected. This procedural commitment echoes Ostbelgien's legal accountability mechanisms, though Camden's assemblies remain consultative.

The 2019 Climate Assembly had noticeable policy impact. All 17 recommendations were endorsed and incorporated into Camden's Climate Action Plan 2020–2025, with the plan referencing the assembly 29 times. Participant satisfaction ranged from 75–100%, and support for final recommendations reached 75–90%. However, it is worth noting that this assembly also faced several challenges. First, the limited duration of the process (just 12 hours), restricted participants' ability to engage meaningfully with the complexity of climate issues. Second, the participants had uneven levels of knowledge and confidence which led to some voices dominating discussions. Third, there was confusion around the participants' roles in the generation of ideas which created frustration. Finally, many recommendations extended beyond the council's remit, underscoring the limitations of local deliberation in addressing broader systemic challenges ([Cain and Moore, 2019](#)).

Implications for Local Contexts

These international experiences demonstrate that while there is no universal template for participatory governance, certain principles consistently emerge as important for successful embedding. They also show that context matters. For example, Reykjavik's digital platforms emerged from a specific crisis moment that created unusual openness to democratic experimentation. Barcelona built on decades of social movement activism and a particular political moment, the mobilisation against EU imposed austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis, which brought movement leaders into formal governance roles. Porto Alegre's success reflected specific Brazilian political dynamics and local organising traditions.

These lessons suggest that successful transformation will require understanding local contexts, building on existing community relationships, and developing an approach that fits each council's particular context rather than simply importing models from elsewhere. In Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting was introduced in 1989, following the end of a military dictatorship, through a coalition between a fairly new party, the Workers' Party, eager to build a wider support base and active neighbourhood associations enjoying high levels of legitimacy among the local population. Collaboration from municipal departments (particularly GAPLAN - Departments of Planning and Budgeting, and CRC - Community Relations Coordination) was crucial to the success of PB but there was initial resistance from professionals in the public administration. Skilled political leadership, the support of civil society and increasing uptake of the PB programme among the poorest areas eventually helped drive a shift in the way the public administration worked. Similarly in Barcelona close alliances between political leadership and social and grassroots movements, which continued to act as critical allies when BeC won the elections, were key in encouraging important reforms. Pera and Bussu ([2024](#)) examine how creating structures such as a dedicated office for Participation, *Active Democracy*, helped nurture buffer zones between public administration sectors and the local commons.

Conclusions

This report has explored how English councils can become more participatory, drawing on UK and international experience alongside academic research. It shows that while there is no single model for participatory governance, a consistent lesson emerges: participation must be embedded in everyday governance. Without this, it risks becoming superficial, unsustainable, and ultimately reinforcing public scepticism.

The five cases examined demonstrate that meaningful participatory governance requires sustained political commitment, integration into routine policymaking, and genuine power-sharing. Porto Alegre highlights vulnerability to political change; Barcelona underscores the importance of broad alliances and facilitative leadership; Ostbelgien reveals how structural inequalities can undermine inclusion; Reykjavik shows the challenge of sustaining engagement without visible outcomes; and Camden illustrates how confidence and recruitment approaches can help foster equitable participation.

Two key insights emerge. First, councils must move beyond ad hoc engagement and develop sustained participatory mechanisms across governance structures, supported by facilitative leadership and shared ownership across sectors. Second, achieving inclusion requires addressing structural inequalities and actively centring marginalised voices, rather than relying on top-down design alone.

To support this transformation, councils should:

1. Rebuild trust through transparency and follow-through
2. Embed participation in day-to-day policymaking, through clear incentives and recognition of participatory work
3. Foster facilitative leadership and collaboration
4. Co-create solutions with communities
5. Design for intersectional inclusion
6. Strengthen strategic partnerships

By adapting these lessons to local contexts, councils can develop participatory governance arrangements that enhance trust, broaden inclusion, and enable more responsive decision-making

Acknowledgements

This short document is based on a [report co-authored by Susana Higuera Carrillo and Sonia Bussu](#) at the University of Birmingham. Our thanks to the wider Inlogov and City Redi teams at the University of Birmingham for their support for this work.

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The bibliography is available in the online version of this report.

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Identification Number/DOI: 10.25500/epapers.bham.00004443

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Annex 1 – Examples of Democratic Innovations

Ostbelgien (Belgium) - Regional Level

Population: 77,000

Democratic Innovation: Permanent Citizens' Council with constitutional embedding

Established: 2019

The German-speaking region of Belgium created the world's first permanent deliberative system directly linked to a legislative body, consisting of a 24-member Citizens' Council setting policy agendas and recurring Citizens' Assemblies with 25-50 randomly selected members. The model's strength lies in legal anchoring— Citizens' Assemblies' recommendations must be formally considered by parliament with public justification required for any rejection. The separation of powers between Citizens' Council, Citizens' Assemblies, and Permanent Secretariat created checks and balances mitigating elite capture. The involvement of G1000 helped build crossparty consensus and design credibility. However, the top-down design without citizen participation in the initial phase struggled with deeper community ownership. Despite formal demographic stratification, participants skewed toward older, highly educated men, revealing how formal inclusion mechanisms can be undermined by differential availability and resources.

For more information see: Niessen and Reuchamps ([2020](#)), Macq and Jacquet ([2023](#)), Junius ([2025](#))

Barcelona (Spain) - Metropolitan Level

Population: 1.6 million

Democratic Innovation: Transition from technocratic to movement-led participatory governance **Established:** 2015

Under Ada Colau's leadership (2015-2023), Barcelona transformed from governancedriven to democracy-driven participation ([Bua and Bussu, 2021](#)), building on the 2011 Indignados movement and grassroots activism. The movement party [Barcelona en Comú](#) (BeC) won elections in 2015 and embedded participatory governance throughout policy processes, strengthening links with grassroots, commons and social movements. The open-source digital platform Decidim enabled over 40,000 citizens to co-create 70% of proposals for the 2016-2019 Municipal Action Plan, allocating 40% of the city's budget. This process successfully combined online and offline engagement. Decidim is now used by 31 cities, 13 regions, and 23 organisations globally. BeC also pursued bold reforms including re-municipalising services and promoting cooperative economies, positioning Barcelona as a global leader in democratic innovation and an anchor of the international "Fearless Cities" network. However, reliance on charismatic leadership exposed the project to risks of co-optation and vulnerability to government changes.

For more information see: [Bua and Bussu \(2021\)](#), [Russell \(2019\)](#), [Smith and Martin \(2021\)](#)

Camden (London, UK) - Municipal Level

Population: 270,000

Democratic Innovation: "Camden Model" of recurring citizens' assemblies integrated with representative governance

Established: 2017

Camden institutionalised citizens' assemblies as regular tools for major policy development, running assemblies on planning, climate change, and health and social care. The model integrates citizen assemblies with representative governance through council board commissioning and formal commitment to consider recommendations with public justification if rejected. The 2019 Climate Assembly demonstrated tangible policy impact – all 17 recommendations were endorsed and incorporated into Camden's Climate Action Plan 2020-2025. Camden used community researchers for face-to-face over-recruitment of the assemblies to achieve demographic representation of wider communities. This helped the organisers successfully reach historically underrepresented groups, and in particular racially minoritised groups. However, challenges included limited duration of the citizen assembly, uneven participant knowledge levels leading to confidence gaps, and confusion around participants' roles. Many recommendations extended beyond council remit, highlighting limitations of local deliberation in addressing broader systemic challenges.

For more information see: Cain and Moore ([2019](#)) and King and Scully ([2020](#))

Porto Alegre (Brazil) - Municipal Level

Population: 1.3 million

Democratic Innovation: Participatory Budgeting **Established:** 1989

Porto Alegre pioneered participatory budgeting, transferring unprecedented budgetary authority to local communities – over USD \$300 per inhabitant annually– through neighbourhood assemblies and delegate meetings. Citizens controlled 100% of the capital investment budget, creating strong participation incentives, particularly among poorer districts. The process delivered measurable improvements: sewer and water connections increased from 75% to 98% of households, schools more than quadrupled, and health and education spending increased from 13% to nearly 40% of total budget. The pro-poor rule sets specifically promoted social justice and wealth redistribution through a 'Quality of Life Index' mandating resource distribution based on neighbourhood poverty rates. However, the process declined significantly after leadership changes in 2004, with citizens' control dropping to just 5.4% by 2016, highlighting vulnerability to political change.

For more information see: Abers ([1998](#)), Smith ([2009](#)), Wampler and Touchton ([2019](#)), Calisto Friant ([2019](#)), Schugurensky and Mook ([2024](#))

Reykjavik (Iceland) - Municipal Level

Population: 130,000

Democratic Innovation: Digital-physical hybrid participation **Established:** 2010

Following Iceland's 2008 financial crisis, Reykjavik created two digital platforms: Better Reykjavik and Better Neighbourhoods – both developed by the grassroots NGO Citizens Foundation to crowdsource citizen ideas and implement participatory budgeting. Within four years, over 70,000 users submitted more than 1,800 proposals, with nearly 350 implemented or under consideration, allocating around €2 million annually. The open-source platform facilitated grassroots engagement with minimal investment. However, the platforms struggled to maintain relevance beyond the crisis moment, experiencing declining participation over time. They remained peripheral to policy processes, treated as temporary projects rather than embedded mechanisms in policymaking. The attempt to embed participatory governance was closely tied to the populist Best Party, and when the party was no longer in power the platforms stagnated, illustrating the limits of digital participation without broader institutional embedding.

For more information see: Lackaff (2016), Adenskog (2018), Gnarr (2014)



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