



Public Square

Exploring meaningful public participation in local democracy

Year One Programme Report

Foreword: Reflections and next steps

Public Square is a two-year action research programme investigating how to build meaningful democratic participation at a local level and this report provides an overview of the work carried out in Year One.

It documents our progress, our learning and reflections and what we think this means for the second year. It covers:

- The premise for our work - the aims of the original commission for Public Square
- The appointment of a Public Square team and advisors
- Breakdown of the methodology and our activities
- How we convened a group of councils to work with
- The work with councils - Calderdale, Frome, Glasgow
- Our reflections and observations on how the work went
- Reflections and learning on the next stage (at the start of the report)

Further detail about the work we did with our council cohort can be found in the separate reports about each of the places we worked in.

At the end of the first year of Public Square, we have learnt a great deal through research and practical action and provided support to councils that they and their residents have appreciated.

What we have learned

We have learnt how to take a strategic and systemic intervention model and apply it in real places. We have opened up our process, but need to engage more people with it, to drive a positive cycle of attention and project development.

The work has not always been easy, but the difficulties with the process are also the learning in the process.

We have worked in councils that are under significant resource pressure, and that has meant that there is a temptation to use external organisations to “fill the gaps” rather than to create new approaches. We have had excellent relationships with councils, but time-pressed services often lack the free capacity needed for development and thinking. Early engagement and regular feedback are needed if this work is not to be seen as an unwelcome extra task.

Innovation as a word and concept is arguably a barrier to success. The word is something clients are often attracted to, but the reality of system change is very rarely ‘start-up’ innovation. Rather it is a set of changes in processes, cultures and attitudes that collectively shift behaviour. Much of that is already being done, somewhere in the organisation, but is

being frustrated elsewhere. There is work needed to bank what is already known, and to keep communication going.

Councils brought us their problems and we attempted to solve them. That is understandable, since we come from a tradition of project work and were seeking to create experiments. However, if we are going to move beyond point experiments into system change, the innovative and uncertain nature of the work makes it difficult for councils to commission and to engage with. For this reason, one of the most important pieces of work in year Two will be to develop our story further, based on the work in year one and explain both to residents and local authorities what they will see that is different from working with Public Square.

We also need to understand the different challenges that long-term engagement and system change will create for our own organisations and the councils we work with. Keeping open-ended listening going, rather than asking specific questions, is a different, larger scale, task than helping people with the skills techniques or arts of designing engagement. It involves being present to build relationships on the ground and supporting facilitation. It can also be more political. Moving away from the consultant/client model will need profound self-reflection.

The work we are trying to do also crosses multiple disciplinary and organisational boundaries, so there is considerable scope for thinking about how better to support the sharing of practice and offer guidance and support. In particular, we need to understand how to address the skills and needs of every element of local public services. Existing networks and groups such as NotWestminster will be essential routes for our communication next year.

The practical work that we have undertaken has given us examples to extend and deepen the playbook. As the programme shifts further to system change, the playbook will need to develop along with it.

A major challenge in our work is how to manage involving seldom heard voices alongside those more likely to speak up, particularly with light at-distance involvement rather than being embedded on the ground. This is particularly something we thought about in Frome, where the council's engagement is often with more confident voices.

The most important task that we are taking forward for Year Two is taking the learning about specific places and creating models that are generally applicable for participative democracy for the longer term. We are also aware that the councils we have been working with are by definition advanced in their thinking and willing to commit to staff time. We have to ensure that we are building for cities without the ambition of Glasgow, and town councils without the unique history of Frome. That will require a broader engagement with the sector, which we hope to do on the basis of a stronger story drawn from this year's work - both its successes and its failures.

Taking these lessons into our year two programme

The work we have undertaken demonstrates the validity of our initial thinking: the necessity of a shift from participation as a project to participation as system change that we discussed at the very start of this process. However, we have learned a lot about the difficulties of breaking out of traditional consultant-commissioner mindsets, and the difficulty of creating a single model for it that can be replicable enough to deliver at scale and tailored enough to engage with the complexities and existing infrastructure in a place.

One means of breaking out of the mindset is to consider places themselves as the “clients”, with the different actors around them as agents who are able both to contribute to and draw benefit from better public engagement. In this work we want to draw lessons from Demsoc’s developing climate work, which is starting (because of its policy focus) with a multi-stakeholder model as the default.

Expectations, commissioning arrangements and working cultures differ between councils, social innovation organisations and technology providers, and while our shared goals good personal relationships have helped, at the end of year one it is clear that the two elements of the project that we thought initially would mesh together have very different interfaces with councils, and there is not at the moment an achievable socio-technological model.

The relationship between the two partner organisations has grown closer, with a deeper understanding of how civic tech and participatory democracy can bring a holistic approach to local democratic engagement. Together, we have agreed that the second year of Public Square needs to focus on developing the collaborative governance and process innovation model, and as such The Democratic Society solely will be running and delivering the second year of the programme.

Nevertheless, Public Square is a collaborative programme, and this needs to go even further in year 2 by; working with others, building collective learning and thinking on innovative participatory work outside of Public Square and building Public Square to be a permeable open platform.

Year one investigated how to shift from a project model to a system change model, but the pull of traditional project approaches was very strong, both practically and culturally. In year two, we want to develop the work further so that both communities and councils can work with this idea and implement it more organically, as we develop a clearer offer and a clearer way of engaging across organisational boundaries.

Contents

1) Public Square: the reasons why	6
2) Where we started	7
3) Developing a learning strategy, methodology and theory of change	11
4) Mapping and background research	16
5) Advising	18
6) Convening	20
7) Co-designing and prototyping	23
7.1) Calderdale	24
7.2) Frome	32
7.3) Glasgow	39
8) Inspiring	43
9) Programme management	46
10) Themes for further enquiry	48

1) Public Square: the reasons why

The state of the UK's democratic health is, in 2019, a topic for heated debate. Following a five-year period that has seen three general elections and two referendums that is perhaps unsurprising.

However, as the UK prepares to leave the European Union and continues to mull its future, much of the debate is focused on the health of Westminster democracy, not on local councils and communities. The debate about the future of local democracy is afforded less limelight, but it is no less important. Equally, the local level is in some ways further advanced both in the acuteness of the challenge, and in the responses emerging to it.

Under the pressure of significant reductions in central-government funding, coupled with growing public expectations, and faced with a growing caseload of challenges, local authorities seem increasingly ready to consider more citizen involvement in decision making. This has led a number to look at ways through which citizens can express their views beyond the narrow confines of the electoral system. These have included a rush to invest in softer forms of 'engagement', in attempts to adopt the lessons of co-production and co-design to local government policymaking, and most recently, in experiments in deliberative democracy - to name just a few.

Across the UK, a growing number of attempts to explore this work are being conducted - both by local authorities themselves, and by different practitioners with differing backgrounds. But their impact on local democracy as a whole, however, is not well understood. Nor is it clear how the learning from these experiments might contribute, in a concerted way, to a system change for democratic involvement.

It was with this in mind that Luminate chose to invest in Public Square – a programme that would work directly with local governments to explore in more detail how meaningful participation might flourish.

The programme – delivered by The Democratic Society and mySociety – set out to work with a small number of councils in different places and contexts. By using a framework of learning and research, it would seek to understand more about how those authorities could genuinely begin to hand power and influence over to citizens in new ways. In doing so, Luminate's hope was that we would be able to make a strong contribution to global learning on the frameworks, skills and models required to develop meaningful participation.

2) Where we started

In 2018, The Democratic Society and mySociety presented their vision for the Public Square programme to Luminato. This argued that local democracy – while subject to isolated attempts at improvement – required a more systematic approach if it was to improve or transform in ways that would meet citizens' expectations. This, in a slide pack from the meeting was summed up with the following bullet points:

- Not seeing politics and democracy transform in ways that meet citizens expectations or provide full benefits for decision-makers & service providers.
- Especially true at a local level - where our most immediate experience of politics is felt
- Currently seeing lots of individual small-scale pilots within single councils. Results in fragmented engagement (bad for citizens) and duplicated effort (bad for councils)
- Need to join up efforts, ensure lessons shared (and learned from multiple services), and work with councils and develop an open, common model for civic participation

In search of a more meaningful and engaged kind of democracy...

While a growing movement for local democratic change takes for granted the need for a more participatory model of democracy to emerge, the assumption this step-change is needed isn't universally held.

But, as Oliver Escobar notes...

"Although there seems to be broad support for democratic principles amongst citizens, there is also growing mistrust in how current institutions work. Representative democracy suffers from low turnouts, political disaffection, public cynicism, and loss of legitimacy. As the grandchild of a woman who survived 40 years of dictatorship I'm bound to say the following: The answer to the problems of democracy must surely be more democracy, a more meaningful and engaged kind - a participatory kind, perhaps."

[https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/towards-participatory-democracy-in-scotland\(bc94c796-6ac0-4a98-9c13-e8211cd80f85\).html](https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/towards-participatory-democracy-in-scotland(bc94c796-6ac0-4a98-9c13-e8211cd80f85).html)

The Public Square programme's aim, therefore, was to explore within the existing structures and activities of local government how relatively novel forms of participation could be accommodated. It would do this by first developing a framework for local democratic improvement, informed by research, before then working with a small cohort of local authorities to explore facets of this work.

By doing this work, the hope was that the Public Square team could present a set of observations and learnings, leading to products for their general adoption by local authorities across the UK and beyond.

An early attempt at a Theory of Change was presented to funders, which sought to capture this general approach. Key points from this were:

- User research and design work with partner authorities helps us develop a model of what a future, more participatory, democratic system looks like.
- Learning from existing experiences, expertise and best practice informs our understanding of what this model looks like.
- This understanding is refined by prototyping and action research with our partner councils. Our work with councils helps embed a culture of participation in these local systems and improve our understanding of what is involved in this. A second wave of work with councils will refine and extend this understanding.
- Exploring a delivery and funding model will be important as this activity progresses.
- Developing a network interested in this work, along with partner authorities, provides advocates who can help disseminate learning.
- Through these activities a wide public sector audience are enthused; other democratic reform organisations join in with implementation. Leading to an emerging model of participatory local democracy being implemented cross-organisationally in multiple places.
- Ultimately leading to the embedding of participation as a new way of working.

What is Public Square: defining the programme

In August 2018, the Public Square team produced a short document to summarise the programme and its approach. That text read as follows, and is a good summary of our initial intentions:

What is Public Square?

Many organisations and individuals are working to improve democracy and citizen participation in local government in the UK. These organisations and individuals are working from a variety of perspectives, including service design, digital transformation and democratic innovation. While impressive work is being carried out in this area, this innovation is often fragmented and isn't realising the potential it could for achieving substantial change to participation in local democratic institutions.

Public Square is a two-year action research project that responds to this by bringing together disparate strands into a holistic investigation of what is needed to improve participation; and developing tools, frameworks, and approaches that match key unfilled needs.

This project is being funded by Luminate¹ and being delivered by The Democratic Society and mySociety in collaboration with Local Authority partners.

¹ This was known as The Omidyar Network at the time that the work began

What will it involve?

- Mapping the landscape - understanding the wide variety of innovations already being explored for improving participation in local government, and the organisations and programmes exploring this.
- Carrying out user research in a sample of local government test sites to explore needs. This includes situational analysis from an organisational and community lens, and looking at technological requirements and user needs from a design perspective.
- Reaching out to, and working with, the wider community of local authorities, communities, academics, civic tech organisations, and others interested in improving participation, to develop an understanding of common issues and needs.
- Developing prototypes that respond to the identified needs, with an emphasis on building upon rather than re-inventing what is already out there, and ensuring resources developed are open and reusable by default. What these prototypes look like will be determined during the project.

The research and prototypes will produce a common framework for civic participation, including a 'playbook' of techniques and resources that support improved participation. These learnings will be made freely available for others to use. We will emphasise making tools that are interoperable and available for others to use and build upon.

Our approach:

We are taking a collaborative approach to this project, working with a wide range of experts by profession and experience.

We will work in the open to ensure our learning is widely available, including leaving legacy materials that others can benefit from. We will use networks that have been prompted during this project to disseminate the project findings and encourage these to inform wider policy and practice.

As the project progresses, we will explore how learning could be applied to a wider range of contexts beyond our starting point in local government.

Workstreams

At its inception, Public Square was established with several work streams already identified through the grant creation process. As the programme developed, it was clear that these workstreams did not work in silos as our learning and activities over the year crossed across the many. For coherence in reporting, we have documented activities against the most relevant one, however, we have combined Research and Mapping into 'Mapping and Background Research' and Co-designing and Prototyping into 'Co-designing and Prototyping' for this report.

Name	Description
Advising	Assembling an interdisciplinary expert group, known as the Technical Reference Group
Researching	Background research to help inform the work, including discovery on the council's context and situational analysis. Building upon our existing knowledge of global innovators, techniques, and technologies for local citizen participation
Convening	Recruit experts and council partners and work with them to identify common participation problems
Co-designing	Take a holistic approach encompassing both organisational and technological change
Mapping	Identify the common user needs and information flows and map them on to each partner councils' individual requirements
Prototyping	Developing democratic infrastructure to support policy and organisational change, describing processes and tools that others can follow and use
Inspiring	Use our diverse networks to disseminate to decision makers and practitioners and encourage further spread
Scaling up	Through year two rollout model to further councils and driving take up by wider sector and other organisations

3) Developing a learning strategy, methodology and theory of change

Learning strategy

Our learning strategy was developed with the help of the Technical Reference Group. It defined how our work would meet its action-research demands, and helping to establish how we could engage with the local authorities we were seeking to work with.

Our strategy was to “explore how to improve participation at a local government level ... by working with a group of councils, communities, and citizens across the UK to first hear about, and then test out, what would make a difference and support better participation for all.”

We said we would “work in public to inform future work carried out both by ourselves and others within the space which will allow lessons to be shared, and for a wider range of voices to feed into our research,” and use “research and prototyping to develop techniques, tools and approaches that will be made openly available for others to use.”

Our anticipated programme outcomes were to:

- Have a deep understanding of the barriers and opportunities regarding participation in decision-making at various levels within local government (for example, the local delivery of services as well as strategy and policy decisions), and current options for citizens to participate in decision-making at a local level.
- Develop interventions that support the uptake of democratic participation and engagement at a local level in decision-making and test these;
- Inspire local government to take up more participatory practice and, where relevant, wider public-sector organisations;
- Build connections and relationships between a diverse range of people and networks that are working on the broad topic of democratic participation, highlighting what already exists and enabling collaboration.
- Explore what meaningful citizen engagement and decision making really look like for citizens in their own terms.

This led to the following lines of enquiry.

Public Square's Lines of Enquiry:

Underpinning question:

What do financially sustainable, long-term participation models, that work for citizens and local government alike, in multiple contexts, look like?

Sub-questions:

- Defining the problem
- What does meaningful participation in the wider process of decision-making look like? (for example, holding to account, scrutiny, neighbourhood planning and oversight of decisions)
- What difference does meaningful participation make to decision making?
- What gets in the way of achieving this?
- Are there wider social benefits from doing meaningful participation in this way? (for example, increasing community cohesion, increasing trust)

We sought to research:

- What is the state of current participatory practice in local government? (including Town, Parish and Community Councils) Who are the innovators?
- What is the diversity of contexts that these practices are operating in?
- Who is working on this topic in the UK and globally?
- What innovations are there in other settings that could be applicable in local government?

In order to discover:

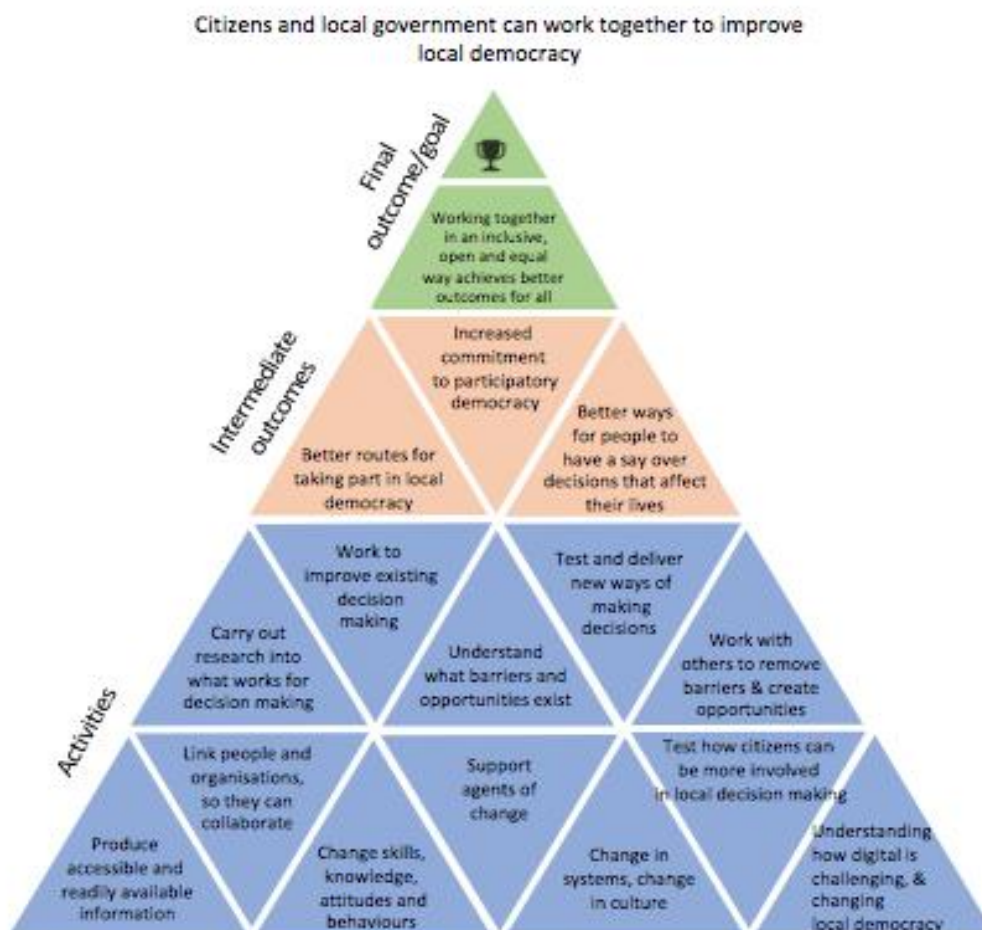
- What holds citizens and organisations back from engaging with local government, and other local public sector organisations? What motivates and enables people to get involved? How can this be overcome?
- What holds local government back from engaging with citizens and organisations? What motivates and enables council officers and elected members to engage effectively with citizens? How can this be overcome?
- How will tools aimed at supporting more meaningful democratic participation help and hurt
- How do we make participation work for those who lack skills, capacity and confidence? (This is for all actors)
- In what cases do citizens get the most ROI for active participation?
- What is needed to further help support engagement between citizens and local authorities/public-sector organisations?
- Having developed interventions, how effective are these? How do they need to be developed further?
- What are the best ways to join up efforts, ensure lessons are shared, and work with councils to develop an open, common toolkit for civic participation?
- How can our findings from our research apply to contexts beyond our initial cohort and be developed into something that will be taken up in practice?
- How best can you leverage central and devolved governments' interest and investment in participation?

Development of a theory of change

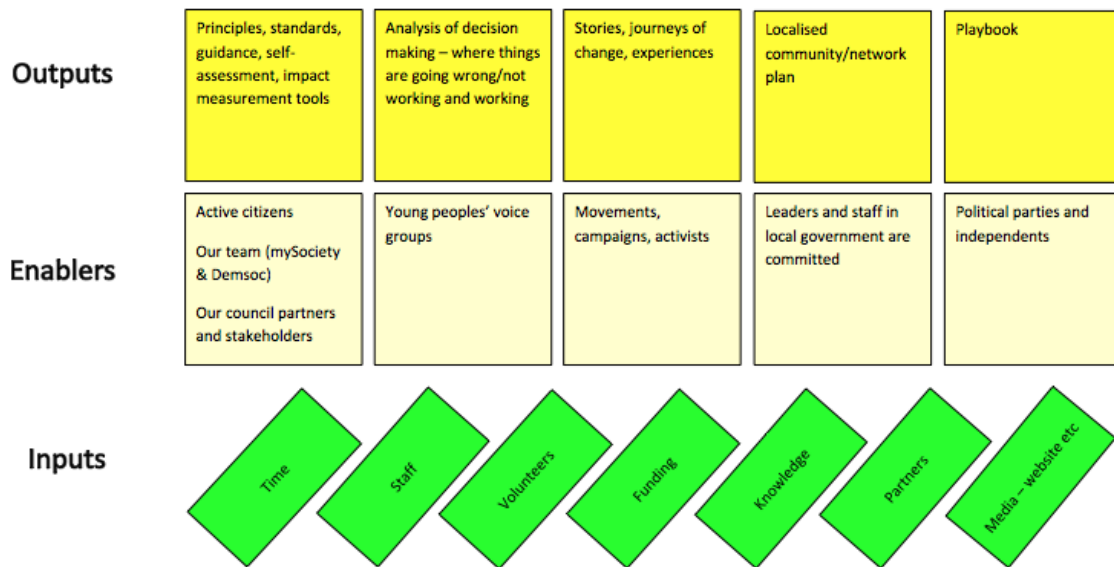
Our initial thoughts on a theory of change could be summed up in fairly simple terms from early on in the project. Namely that the development of infrastructure for meaningful public engagement in local democracy fit for a networked society needed the following:

1. Designing and co-designing participation for local democracy
2. Engaging early and locally for citizens to take part in the co-design process
3. That this work should be informed by shared enquiry with citizens
4. Treating digital and technological infrastructure as an equal, integral part of the design process
5. That by learning and testing, we would be able to inform a model for how this process could be reproduced elsewhere.

While you can see evidence of this Theory of Change in our Learning Strategy, and in the way we engaged the local authorities, we began to review the basic theory of change as the programme unfolded. The following two images show diagrams we used as part of developing our theory of change.



People and governments can improve local democracy together



Methodology

The development of the early Theory of Change, and our learning strategy helped us to fix a central focus for our enquiry:

Explore what meaningful citizen engagement and decision-making really looks like for citizens in their own terms.

In our *Signing up with Public Square* document we identified the following phases of discovery, design, prototyping and testing that make up each stage of our approach with councils.

Phases	Explanation
Discovery	Understanding the context for the council and citizens (situational analysis)
Design	Defining the problem and developing approaches
Prototyping	Implementing approaches
Testing, learning & sharing	Learning from prototyping and sharing the learning

An action learning approach

As one aspect of our action learning approach we set ourselves the objective of creating action learning sets made up of officers and citizens from the council cohorts. Unfortunately,

this proved impossible because of the delays we encountered - and because the different council projects did not run together.

While these action-learning sets never got off the ground, to some extent they were compensated by the work we did with councils to reflect throughout the programme. In particular, in both Calderdale and Frome – the most advanced of the projects – we worked closely with the teams at both councils and throughout the programme reflected on how it was going. More detail can be found in the discovery and prototype reports below.

4) Mapping and background research

Mapping

One aspect of our approach was to explore what common needs there are for building a more participatory local democracy in different places and, on the flipside, how much this challenge is shaped by local conditions. This would help us start to think about how learning in different places could be shared and reapplied.

We hoped that by carrying out user research with the different councils involved in the programme we would be able to understand user needs more. And by carrying out situational analysis in each of the councils, we would understand more about the specific conditions each council was working in.

In conversations with the Technical Reference Group, we decided it would be important to have tools that could help us understand a council's context. As a result, mySociety [extended their Explorer tool to local authorities](#). This helped to provide data which informed discovery reports about each of the places we worked in.

This helped us gather interesting insights on council context for each place we worked in. However, with such a small group of councils, this data is not sufficient to start drawing conclusions about similarities and differences in needs.

Background research to inform our work

An important aspect of our approach was to build upon what is already known. Background research was one aspect of doing this, and informed our prototyping activities. In the course of this first year several discrete pieces of research have been published to support Public Square's work. They include:

The state of digital public engagement

A [literature review](#) into digital public engagement, providing an overview of current academic research relevant to developing a meaningful, participative and collaborative digital environment.

This overview offered some helpful insights, including:

- Bureaucratic and institutional structures will exert pressure upon new digital platforms that may subvert or frustrate product development. Any digital tool needs to integrate into the existing structures while breaking down barriers between policy departments.
- Meaningful digital engagement necessarily goes beyond the transactional and should close the feedback loop. This requires not only citizen input, but a commitment that citizen input is not the end of the process.

- Social media platforms are the preferred method of contact for a large number of people. Any tool operating exclusively outside of this environment is likely to exclude those whose preference is to stay within their pre-existing media platform of choice. However, more effort needs to be made to reach those who have less engagement with social media.
- Any platform needs to treat citizens as citizens, rather than consumers, and provide as far as possible, a rounded and holistic experience.

Understanding the role of councillors in public participation

Local participatory exercises requires the buy-in of the elected councillors and this blog post explores how representative and participatory democracy fit together.

[Read: Understanding the role of councillors in local participation](#)

Digital tools for democratic participation

Research, examining the role that digital tools can have in supporting democratic participation in local government - and the obstacles to success.

[Read: Digital tools for democratic participation](#)

Other activities and resources that helped to inform our work

Additionally, we explored a small number of case studies detailing work from a number of other participatory programmes as part of efforts to inform our work.

- Le Agorà di Messina: For citizens, by citizens: This case study detailed how the citizens of Messina and The Democratic Society worked towards reinvigorating and reimagining the role of the citizen in southern Italy. [Read the case study.](#)
- Putting neighbourhoods in the driving seat in Newham: This case study looked at the ground-breaking public engagement work carried out by Andy Paice in Newham. [Read the case study.](#)
- Participatory Budgeting Case Studies: On The Democratic Society's website, a series of case studies on participatory budgeting were also significant in helping to inform us, including [Online PB in Reykjavik](#), [PB in NYC](#) and [Participatory Budgeting in Antwerp](#). The work towards these case studies was funded by our involvement in the Scottish Government's PB programme.

5) Advising

One of the programme's first acts was establishing a multidisciplinary advisory group - whose members are listed below.

Anna Randle	Chief Executive of <u>Collaborate CIC</u>
Ben Fowkes	Commercial Director at <u>Delib</u>
Cassie Robinson	Head of Digital Grant Making at the <u>Big Lottery Fund</u> and Co-founder of <u>the Point People</u>
Catherine Howe	Non-Executive Director of <u>The Democratic Society</u>
Chris Widgery	Deputy Director of Local Government Efficiency and Accountability at <u>Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government</u>
Colin Copus	Director of the Local Governance Research Unit in the Department of Politics and Public Policy, and Professor of Local Politics, <u>DeMontfort University</u>
Federico Guerrieri	Campaign coordinator at <u>EUROCITIES</u> with responsibility for the 'Cities4Europe' – Europe for Citizens' campaign
Henry Kippin	Director of Public Service Reform at <u>West Midlands Combined Authority</u>
Jacqui McKinlay	Chief Executive of the <u>Centre for Public Scrutiny</u>
Jon Alexander	Founding Partner at <u>New Citizenship Project</u>
Jonathan Flowers	Chair of <u>mySociety</u> Ltd, Portfolio Non-Executive Director and Advisor
Kitty von Bertele	Investment team member at <u>Luminate</u> with a focus on data and digital rights, independent media, and civic empowerment.
Miriam Levin	Head of Community Action and Giving at <u>Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport</u>
Oliver Escobar	Co-Director of <u>What Works Scotland</u> and Lecturer in Public Policy at the <u>University of Edinburgh</u> (Politics and International Relations)
Tim Hughes	Director of <u>Involve</u>

Pedro Prieto Martín	Researcher at the <u>Digital and Technology Cluster</u> of the <u>Institute of Development Studies</u> (University of Sussex), with a focus on Technopolitical Platforms for Urban Democracy.
Simon Cameron	Corporate Policy Manager at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (<u>COSLA</u>). He has worked in Scottish local government for more than 16 years – and until recently was the Participatory Budgeting Manager at COSLA, working with all 32 authorities in Scotland to mainstream participatory budgeting.

This group was made up of a mixture of engagement and government professionals drawn from civil society, government, academic and corporate backgrounds.

In our interim report, published in April, we reported that we carried out three meetings with what's now known as the Technical Reference Group (TRG) - a first meeting to initiate the group in October and further meetings in February and March. Our intention was to continue these meetings throughout the programme, but in the summer of 2019, we found that it was difficult for members to attend - and attempts to hold further meetings then foundered.

We sought to address this by engaging individual members of the TRG individually - and while we were able to do that in some instances, we were not able to continue to engage all the members as we would have liked.

Community Reference Group

Following the Public Square event in November 2018, we chose to rename the advisory group the 'Technical Reference Group'. This responded to concerns among participants that we had not considered the breadth of places where expertise on local democracy might come from - in particular that we had signalled that practitioners and volunteers weren't a source for expertise.

Our hope was to use the engagements with councils to find community volunteers and other sources of local engagement expertise to recruit to take a bigger role in the programme through the Community Reference Group. In the end, due to the fact that our initial engagement and set up with councils took much longer than foreseen, as described below, there simply wasn't time to undertake this recruitment.

6) Convening

Engaging an audience for the work and finding local authorities to work with

In late 2018, The Public Square team invited an audience of people mySociety and Demsoc were aware were interested in local democracy to an event introducing Public Square. Organisation and invitation were arranged once the date had been finalised, and a venue was found in Manchester.

Facilitation and engagement for the day are summarised in our blog post, [How can we improve local decision making?](#) We also shared the [raw data](#) of the event discussions, attendance information and feedback as well.

As reported in our semi-annual report, the event helped to challenge our thinking about how Public Square might work:

“The event has helped us to think more critically about how we are introducing Public Square, the way that we are using the advisors on the programme, and helped us to understand more about the central challenges that we are hoping to address. While we haven’t followed up as we would have liked with the group who came to the event, we are expecting that from within their numbers we will be able to recruit for the Community Reference Group addressed in the ‘Advising the Public Square’ section of this report.”

All these events were recorded in our Semi-Annual Report – thereafter, we concentrated primarily on our engagements with councils as this had taken longer than we expected. The focus on councils meant that follow up on and engagement with the TRG has been less active than it should have been, which is an issue we want to address in the second year of the programme.

Engaging councils

As we reported back in April, the programme struggled early on to engage a shortlist of councils we were interested in working with. While we had settled on four councils at that point, each was in a quite different place with respect to their preparations for becoming part of Public Square.

How we engaged the Councils

Each of the councils was contacted – or made contact with us – in late 2018 or early 2019 to establish their interest. Our initial conversations with contacts in the sector, and engagement since, has shown that councils are attracted by the idea of Public Square in outline, but find it hard to integrate into their thinking in the specific. This suggests that the need identified by the programme is real but that councils need more clarity and more direction in understanding how to meet it.

Those we selected were those that seemed to have the greatest enthusiasm and willingness to act. In retrospect, a broader earlier communication, quicker follow up and clearer criteria would have helped us build a pipeline of places that wanted to work with us, and would have allowed slow movers to be overtaken in the queue by those who wanted to move more quickly.

We chose a number of councils for initial meetings. After the meeting was conducted and a brief established, we asked the leads from the Councils to help us complete a 'signing up' document to confirm their interest and make our engagement transparent. You can see a draft version of the [signing up document here](#) (this is also linked to from the [resources page](#) of our website).

Below, we have included the discovery and prototyping reports from the completed programmes - and an update report on Glasgow. These reports detail the engagements with the councils and the work that has been completed, and – in the case of Frome and Calderdale – our reflections on the work.

In the case of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Glasgow, the initial engagements took longer than we had hoped.

RBKC

We reported in April that Shanan Gibson, the Head of Digital Communications at RBKC, was interested in using digital engagement to help make the Council more transparent and inclusive in their decision making. We had several meetings in order to understand the context of the council, and how Public Square might offer value. This arrived at a project that was based on the Council's City Living Local Life programme of ward-specific project budgets. However, Shanan left the Council shortly after, and while we continued to discuss the potential programme with the Council, we decided in June that timings for the Council would not be compatible with the first stage of Public Square. Therefore, we thought it would be best to pause the discussions and concentrate on the other council programmes that were already underway.

Glasgow

Of the councils we chose to work with, Glasgow's engagement was the most delayed. It took longer for the Council to come on board because it was in at a much earlier stage of development for its ideas in early 2019. As a result, a fuller report on activities, outcomes and learning cannot be written at this stage. But we have provided an update in the following section about what we have been able to do so far.

Calderdale

During our initial event in November we were approached by Mike Lodge, an officer at the local authority. He sought the engagement of his chief executive, Robin Tuddenham, and from there we started initial conversations about working with the council. Calderdale subsequently agreed to be part of the programme, announcing their involvement publicly at their 'We Are Calderdale' event on the 14 March 2019. The authority was interested in exploring the social contract for place - between residents, the council and other

stakeholders for delivering the places that residents want. The Calderdale reports on discovery and prototyping, which detail our full engagement with the council are to be found below.

Frome

We approached Frome originally to invite them to our event in November - and when Peter MacFadyen responded expressing interest in Public Square, that started a conversation that led to their involvement in the programme. We then had a series of meetings with Kate Hellard, the Frome Town Council Community Projects Manager, and Rachel Griffin, the Marketing and Communications Manager, in order to talk through how we might work together. The Frome reports on discovery and prototyping, which detail our full engagement with the council are to be found below.

7) Co-designing and prototyping

The activities of co-design and prototyping of Public Square are written up in detail in separate reports for each of the council partners we worked with: Calderdale Metropolitan Borough, Frome Town Council and Glasgow City Council. Summaries are given for each of these places below.

Calderdale

Here our work was centred around a process of co-designing a set of prototypes for use in an open-ended process of engagement dubbed ‘Calderdale Conversations’. This co-design process involved members of the wider community as well as members and officers from the council. Our involvement also concentrated on supporting the council to continue this conversation beyond our involvement, working in a context of financial pressure. Bringing a range of different stakeholders into this journey was a really significant part of our work here.

Through this process we gathered insights about the needs of councils and citizens within such a piece of engagement, and captured some learning about how these specific prototypes worked in practice – though we didn’t manage to gather as much data on this as we’d hoped. Ultimately some of the most interesting learnings were about the process of helping a council go through this journey – these are reflected on at the end of the Calderdale summary.

Frome

Frome Town Council is a very different council to the other two. A town council with a small number of staff, which nonetheless has achieved some remarkable examples of public participation. Here our work was focussed on helping design, and provide support to, the latest iteration of an existing Participatory Budgeting process. We worked just within the council on this design process, though were able gather insights into citizen needs as part of our involvement. The bulk of our learnings here were about applying this method both online and in-person within the context of a town council.

Glasgow

The work here is at a much earlier stage. Our involvement so far has been about understanding their context and ambition, and ensuring there is shared understanding. This project concerns the future of the People’s Palace in Glasgow. Ultimately the aim is to co-design an engagement plan for a conversation about the future of this iconic building; working with local communities to shape what this conversation should look like. Below we have provided an update on the process so far, but are not yet in a position to share learning from this partnership.

7.1) Calderdale



The Piece Hall, Halifax. By Phil Champion. Licensed under: [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)
<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/5640710>

This project started with the ambition for a conversation between the council and its constituents about the future of Calderdale, which would allow an exploration of how the Council and citizens could work together better in the future. While this ambition had buy-in at senior level in the local authority, it was broad and yet-to-be well defined.

In our early conversations with the Council this broad ambition was attached to a requirement for budget consultation on spending. In the autumn of 2019, the Council would be facing difficult decisions about spending, and was keen to understand how residents felt about priorities. At the same time, there was a desire to explore the relationship between residents and the Council from a more positive perspective – thinking about what could be achieved by the Council and residents, working together differently. There was a risk that this significant ambition would be lost if the conversation was approached from a starting point of the cuts being faced.

There was also some discussion about how to strike the balance between open-ended conversations with residents that could explore their priorities and aspirations, and engaging residents on more focussed topics that could more straightforwardly feed into the council's work.

These were important questions being grappled with about a significant piece of engagement for the council. This was a complicated context for our work to plug into. There is not currently a single place where engagement is held within the council, which added to the complexity of plugging into this context.

From the start it was decided that this project would involve co-design with residents. Timeframes around purdah for the May local elections meant that our first co-design workshop happened at a very early stage in the process. At this point some of these discussions about approach were still ongoing.

Despite these challenges we did establish a clearer picture of the council's aims during this time:

- The conversation should involve a wide range of citizens, not just those most likely to speak up.
- Conversations about future priorities for the borough should be informed by evidence, and deliberative.
- There should be an online aspect to reach broader numbers.
- Conversations should be used to establish relationships and techniques that can be drawn upon in future. Including that these can be drawn on by local partners, not just the council itself.

Testing the Prototypes in Practice

Once this support stage was complete, Public Square's involvement became more observational - as the Council promoted Calderdale Conversations internally and encouraged staff to sign up for making these conversations happen.

Activities from the council included:

- Allocating a member of staff to take on chasing up and encouraging staff to take part
- Developing prototypes and branding, including t-shirts.
- Creating a guide for volunteers (largely within staff, though also some council partners) for using these, including checking the engagement calendar which they created on their intranet and signing up for activities and how to book out prototypes. Creating a topic guide for using prototypes. You can [access the full version here](#), we've included an extract below.):

How prototypes were used and what impact there has been

By the end of 2019 there had been about 20 events using the prototypes developed for Calderdale Conversations. What the council learnt from these conversations has been captured internally, but hasn't currently been shared publicly.

The Calderdale Conversation events

The Calderdale Council team has been engaged in events across the borough. The team has recorded events in every township of the borough and in most wards, with between 100 and 200 people engaged in total. These have included events at libraries, dementia groups, community halls and other locations.

Website

The website has been launched and, as stated above, includes details of the events planned or carried out, as well as information to help people looking to get involved in Calderdale Conversations. You can see the site at: <https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/v2/council/our-vision/calderdale-conversations>

Interest and engagement

The Calderdale Conversations team reports that they are pleased with how the programme is going and that it is beginning to become 'a bit of a movement. Becoming a bit of a movement. "A few weeks ago, we were contacted by someone from the deaf community about being involved. We are now speaking to them about the best way to engage with them in general as well as hearing their priorities." They reported that the work from Calderdale Conversations would go to cabinet as a public document, on the 13th of January.

Staff engagement

The Calderdale Conversations team reports that staff are interested in and engaging in the prototypes - and are exploring how they can work for them. Similarly, there is interest in exploring the options for future digital interaction, even if at this time the website is used as a relatively simple shop window. Options might include making data from the engagement available to the public - and the team will explore this and other options in the near future. In fact, the team is looking at recruiting a member of staff to manage the online content and in how this content can be kept sustained throughout the development of the programme.

Partners from outside the council have also been involved in some of these conversations. The initial trail of the listening sofa involved partners from a neighbourhoods partnership. At this stage they haven't however involved volunteers from the wider community, which was initially an ambition.

Training

Following from our training workshop, the staff development team (who attended) have developed and delivered a practical training course twice more. They had 16 at one, and about 11-12 at the other. These were advertised through notices through staff bulletins. The Council now has a register of 50-60 staff members who've benefited from the training.

A continuing engagement

There is no endpoint for the Calderdale Conversations engagement. As a result, in some way this has been a rebranding of their engagement work - and has acted as a way to encourage the Council has been to think about doing its engagement differently as a result. At this time the team is not yet entirely sure what this change will look like in the longer term, but staff working on this in the council have a shared ambition that every officer should have an expectation of talking to the public as part of their role.

There has been some concern from councillors that this approach has been taken instead of running a bigger-scale and more focussed conversation about priorities that could feed into budget.

This first stage has been a conversation about priorities in general, and a more open conversation. Next these approaches will be used for specific topics including culture and climate change. It's likely that this will result in a different conversation to what would have happened otherwise.

Evaluation of the prototypes

We have encouraged council staff to reflect on how effective or not the prototypes have been. (The Learning and Reflections form we created for this is shared above.)

Whilst fewer reflections were gathered than anticipated, some of the things we heard were that the sofa helped people feel 'on a level' with the council and kept things informal. And that it helped start conversations because it was something different and out of the ordinary. You can see [initial reflections from the first trial of the listening sofa here](#).

We hope the council team will encourage people to capture more learning and reflections in the future and will be able to draw out more knowledge from those who've already trialled prototypes.



An image of a Calderdale Conversation t-shirt and a cushion used for the listening sofa resting on the voting slots.

What we've learned through the process as a whole

Towards the end of the first year we spoke with the council's project team and asked them for their reflections on this process as a whole, and of being involved in Public Square. They said that Public Square had been useful in bringing outside advisors, particularly being able to talk through digital possibilities. They also felt that the project encouraged them to think about this process of engagement harder than they would have otherwise and encouraged them to take a different approach. As we continue to work with Calderdale, we'll be looking in more detail about their experiences later on.

We have also reflected as the Public Square team on some of the points of learning that stood out from this project, beyond an evaluation of the prototypes themselves. Key reflections are captured below.

Embracing open-ended conversations is a challenge. Having enough time to reach shared understanding and ambition is crucial.

Our initial brief was expressed as a very broad ambition, with work needed to establish a clearer picture. Within these broad aims some different points of focus emerged:

- On the one hand there was a desire to discuss residents' priorities for the future which, amongst other things, could inform future budget decisions.
- In potential tension with this was the idea of having more open-ended conversations with residents, in which residents, rather than the council, would inform which direction the conversation took.
- There was interest in more directly looking at how residents could be supported to play a greater role in shaping Calderdale in partnership with the council.

It was a challenge to resolve these tensions, with wariness in some parts of the council to embracing a more open-ended approach. This included worry that the council would not have the capacity to respond to what was heard.

Being open to emergent directions does not remove the need for thinking carefully about how to build such a conversation and being adequately prepared to respond. In many ways it places increased needs on an engagement.

It may well have been productive to have explored these concerns about open-ended conversations at greater length at an early stage in the process. This would have allowed for a conversation about how to prepare for some of the challenges that come with this way of working – including setting realistic expectations as part of such engagement. This could have helped draw up a clearer shared vision for Calderdale Conversations.

One barrier that stood in the way of this was the upcoming period of purdah, which our activities had to be fitted around, and meant we moved into the co-design phase faster than we might otherwise have done. On any project there is always a period of relationship building, and councils have many different stakeholders to involve. There was little time for negotiating this before the project needed to move forward.

Local authorities are complex organisations with many internal as well as external stakeholders. Focussing on this is key to achieving change.

Councils are complex organisations embedded in wider systems of local democracy, rather than the monolithic institutions of public imagination. In these complex organisations are different attitudes, outlooks, interests and relationships – many of which face significant pressure from falling income and rising challenges.

Encouraging change within councils, therefore, requires significant commitment, sensitivity and compassion. And it requires us to think carefully about how best to support those people in organisations who can build change to do so amidst the pressures they and their colleagues face. A key question for anyone trying to build change in local government is how to best work with this reality.

While we were sensitive to this challenge it was one focus among many. This challenge is one that needs greater recognition amongst all those pushing for change.

One way in which austerity has added to this challenge is by the loss of roles focussed on providing coordination and strategy for engagement within councils. Not having someone with this overarching focus within the council added to some of the challenges of this project, and the need for greater coordination of engagement was an issue regularly raised by staff.

It's vital to manage expectations in an age of austerity

Given the well-recognised constraints on funding for local authorities, it is not surprising that councils are often grateful for professional support in their work. In an age of austerity, local councils may be tempted to see support from organisations like Demsoc and mySociety as a way of addressing immediate need or, in some cases, filling in resource.

We were able to prevent this pitfall in our work with Calderdale, because our engagement was always designed, and labelled, to concentrate on facilitating local authority, partner and citizens to engage together. Where there was delivery to do this, it was always understood that the Council, its partners and – in some cases – residents would be doing it.

However, there is still a predicament, even for this kind of engagement – largely because while it creates the space and time to think and develop new models of engagement, there may not always be the resources to support it once that thinking has taken place. We were able to explore these conversations as part of this project and thought about how our involvement could best add value, though there is more still that could have been done.

The challenge of maximising impact amid budgetary constraints

A strength of our involvement with Calderdale was that this focussed on providing space for reflection and support for building changed ways of working, rather than becoming a temporary stopgap. Nonetheless there were ways to strengthen this further, and points that it's important to emphasise for working in this context:

- As mentioned above, more time could have been spent earlier to establishing a clearer vision for Calderdale Conversations and working through some anxieties around a more open-ended response.
- Another area for improvement was managing the workload required of council staff. At times, our involvement added to the workload of staff who were regularly checking in with us and building this project internally within the council. We believe that at times we could have given a clearer picture of expectations from us earlier on and thought more about how to limit this load and use our time most constructively.

- We often heard concerns about the capacity of staff to deliver engagement activities as part of Calderdale Conversations. There was also concern that the onus might fall more on some people than others – neighbourhoods teams often pick up much of this work within councils. Our work thought carefully about how to enable wider council staff to deliver conversations alongside other work. Nonetheless negotiating these realities is an important, and sensitive, part of working with councils. Having these conversations upfront is really important.
- Achieving improved participation is not just about reaching further. It's about building trust through delivering on the expectations that are set out. It's important that this gets at least as much focus as thinking about how to reach more people. Arguably we could have done more to give this attention within our work. Doing so could have helped ease some of the anxieties we encountered about a more open-ended process of listening. There is always a risk of this aspect not receiving adequate focus in discussions of improved engagement. We could have also spent longer early on to explore current practice and to build more closely upon what was already in place.
- There is a real risk that comes with arriving in pressured councils with resources, particularly when there is openness about how these will be spent. Inevitably there is excitement around this, and a risk that this can raise expectations that are not deliverable, or that will not be sustainable beyond your departure. While we were wary of this danger there is probably more we could have done, and this is an important risk to be vigilant of.

Some of the shortcomings identified for this project are very demanding to overcome. It would be unfair to suggest that all of this could have been covered fully within this project's scope. Instead it might be more helpful to think of some of these as a checklist that need exploring with councils in order to think about how best to add to systems of local democracy.

There is a risk of digital being treated as 'a thing'

As with other councils, learning about the available digital tools and what they might be useful for takes a significant amount of effort. It took some time to work through the perception of digital as a separate 'thing', rather than a means to achieving an end. This came up working with council officers as well as amongst residents in the enthusiasm for 'an app' as one of the prototypes to be developed.

It's important that digital tools can be positioned as one aspect of a designing a functioning process of engagement, not as a separate thing.

Using co-design for open-ended processes is a sensitive task

Calderdale Conversations was planned as an open-ended engagement exercise. It can be a challenge to communicate something like this, and to involve a wider group in its design. Citizen participation and engagement is already an inherently abstract topic to think about.

It's important to think about how different groups can best be brought into the design process for topics like this, while being sensitive to the risk of closing down the agenda. It's not just councils who are under time pressure, and the involvement of other groups must always have to take account of what demands are being placed on participants and what rewards and recognition are available for them.

Co-design has a lot to add to the design process but requires careful consideration. Achieving this at pace whilst working as a newly formed team both between the project partners and with our council partners was a difficult challenge.

Creating opportunities for reflection and appetite for building a new kind of relationship

The programme and our involvement appears to have helped to build an appetite for Calderdale staff to have a new kind of open-ended conversation with residents.

We heard feedback that our work helped build space for reflecting on how engagement is working, and thinking in depth about how to go further. And that Public Square encouraged the council to work in a different way than they otherwise would have.

Participants at our events often fed back that they valued coming together with a wide range of people - either within, or beyond, the council – and working together on the task of improving engagement. The project also helped create a palpable energy – best summed up by the members of the neighbourhoods partnership who had set up a trial of the listening sofa before the workshop they were in had even finished.

The project helped spark reflection on how engagement is currently coordinated within the council and how practice is shared. It has also helped build momentum behind exploring, and learning from, new approaches and opportunities.

Hopefully this has sparked conversations that will continue about how to share practice across the organisation, how to coordinate engagement, how to engage in a more open-ended way, and how to work in partnership with partners and the wider community. These conversations aren't wholly new, but the project has helped put impetus behind them. While there was a limit to how much data council staff gathered within the early stage of Calderdale Conversations, hopefully the emphasis on evaluation and iteration will be an important part of these developments. In a time of intense pressure interventions like Public Square can help keep create room for such reflection and motivation.

7.2) Frome



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<https://ccsearch.creativecommons.org/photos/null?ref=ccsearch>

[Frome Town Council](#) (FTC) has gained a reputation in the past five years of being an exemplar in participation in decision making, with an agile approach to achieving that goal. The council has taken a fairly traditional approach in measuring impact and outcomes of engagement projects, with a focus on discussion and little written evaluation.

Engagement

We initially approached Frome to invite them to our event in November - and when Peter MacFadyen responded expressing interest in the Public Square, that started a conversation that has led to their involvement in the programme.

The focus of our work in Frome is the [People's Budget](#) programme. FTC has been experimenting with participatory budgeting in some form since 2012², with varying approaches. It has been seen as one way to build community and engage residents - a key principle of Independents for Frome. Over time, FTC has varied the programme in a number of ways: it has funded both projects delivered by community groups and by the Council, and the funding has been decided by online and paper voting (with the voting done at an event, or at the voter's convenience over a longer period of time), and with a number of different themes: parks, events, and improving the town as a whole.

What we learned

A key benefit of participatory budgeting is the ability to iterate year on year and make adjustments to how the process works. This is something that can be seen in practice in the history of the People's Budget in Frome. From the point of view of FTC officers delivering the programme, the goal of evaluation is to get a broad understanding of what worked and didn't and to take that understanding forward into future budgets.

Part of the value of Public Square was to give the officers from the council some opportunity to reflect on the process, by holding an evaluation and feedback session and writing up the process in these narrative reports as part of the qualitative evaluation of the programme. We outline below the observations and reflections that came out of this session.

Process

Overall, the programme was complicated significantly by unexpected conflicting demands on officers' time. The small team of two officers were involved in delivering multiple other projects, some with greater direct impact on resident's lives.

The process itself, with more involvement from people other than the officers, took significantly more time from the council team than they had budgeted for. There were time costs associated with working up the ideas from residents into proposals and entering them into Your Priorities, and with meeting with the Public Square team regularly. However, although the council team haven't analysed the time spent in detail, officers felt that the biggest time commitment was in communication and outreach in order to encourage people to participate over a relatively long period.

The People's Budget programme doesn't have an assigned budget for delivery, just the £10,000 budget for the chosen project itself. The general marketing budget is used to support it. The Marketing and Communications Manager thought that it would be valuable for

² <https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Agenda-Item-8-Appendix-8.1-Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>

officers to present to the council that there is a cost associated with undertaking the process too. She also suggested that officers would continue to make use of events that serve multiple purposes as a way of getting the most out of the time of paid staff.

The timing of the project was something that officers would change in future – trying to run it over the summer period into autumn was difficult both for officers and residents, with conflicts with holidays. They felt that it would be better to cut the number of stages next year, and that a condensed eight-week process might be an interesting experiment.

As mentioned in the description of the shortlisting event, officers felt that it would have been useful to have had a clearer plan for the shortlisting from the beginning in order to have a clear offer for people who might want to be involved. In general, they would aspire to separate out the design process more from delivery, with more structure decided at the point they started to communicate to residents.

The shortlisting event was the part of the process that officers were most concerned about in advance, but they felt that it had been an interesting and eye-opening experience to listen to residents having a really meaningful discussion about the different ideas proposed.

The ideas that came out of the shortlisting event were not the subject of a lot of discussion on social media through the voting stage, which is unusual for Frome. Officers thought this might be because all the projects shortlisted were quite similar and that a different process might have resulted in more exciting or ambitious projects. It was as a surprise that people didn't come up with lots of unexpected ideas, although they felt that some of the ideas submitted directly through Your Priorities were more interesting.

Online elements

The use of Your Priorities to support online discussion of the Town Vote proposals was one of the aspects that officers felt was a successful prototype that they would take forward in the future. Significantly, Your Priorities offers users the opportunity to make points for or against particular proposals, but not to reply directly to points made by others. This enabled people to have their say without being shut down, and so was a good interface for building discussion. People engaged with Your Priorities in a respectful way and there was understanding around projects that weren't selected in the shortlisting process. The most popular proposal in Your Priorities (a water fountain) was ruled out quickly as ineligible. Officers had been worried about backlash around this, but people seemed to understand.

A water fountain so people can refill their bottles and reduce plastic – lots of places have them now, come on Frome!

Water refill point

122 12

DEBATE (12) NEWS LOCATION PHOTOS (0)

Points for

Write point for... 0/500

VIDEO SPEECH

Simon Keyes

Tackling the iniquity of bottled water is a powerful environmental gesture. I have been checking out the possibility of providing a hygienic tap alongside the St Aldelm's Well below St John's church (opposite the Strada cafe), which might be feasible for a relatively small cost

1 0

Matthew Sims

Water fountains used to be everywhere, parks, schools, public buildings.

1 0

Points against

Write point against... 0/500

VIDEO SPEECH

Anonymous User

There were health reasons why water fountains disappeared, hello to vandalism and eventually eau non portable

0 1

Anonymous User

Vandalism I'm afraid. Surely a water point scheme in the shape of the current community toilet scheme would be a better use of resources?

0 2

The length and complexity of the overall process was reflected in the online tools used. Officers wondered if having Have Your Say, Your Priorities, and SurveyMonkey all in sequence contributed to voter fatigue. There was a feeling from officers that perhaps an online vote was given less consideration than paper voting when both were offered.

Interaction between online and in-person elements

Exact parity between online and offline processes felt like a difficult thing to achieve throughout. For example, during the idea generation step, when ideas were being commented and voted on in Your Priorities, FTC had produced a layout in the newspaper,

inviting people to 'tick your preferences' but there was no opportunity for offline comment, or to see other comments in that format.

The interaction of the two approaches is an area that can be further developed in future. Although the discussion at the shortlisting event around the ideas from Your Priorities was significant, attention wasn't drawn to the comments that had been made on the ideas in Your Priorities, which might have added further viewpoints. Officers were interested in showing people Your Priorities using tablets or phones at public events in future to experiment with trying to bring them into the People's Budget process.

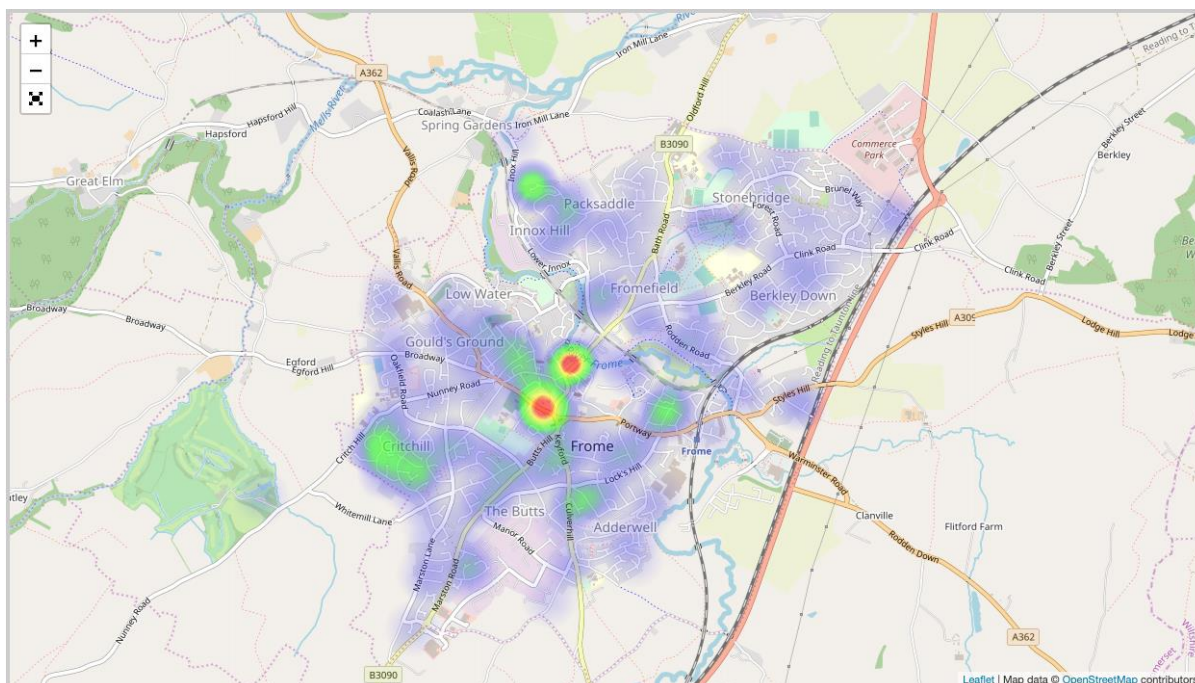
Extending the reach

Given the limited amount of data collected during the process, it's not possible to make a reliable assessment of the extent to which the process included a set of people that was representative of the population as a whole. However, the age-based demographics collected during online voting are not significantly different from previous years. The postcode data collected during the 'Have Your Say' consultation and online voting (shown in heatmap form³ below) appears to show a reasonably even distribution, with a few hotspots.

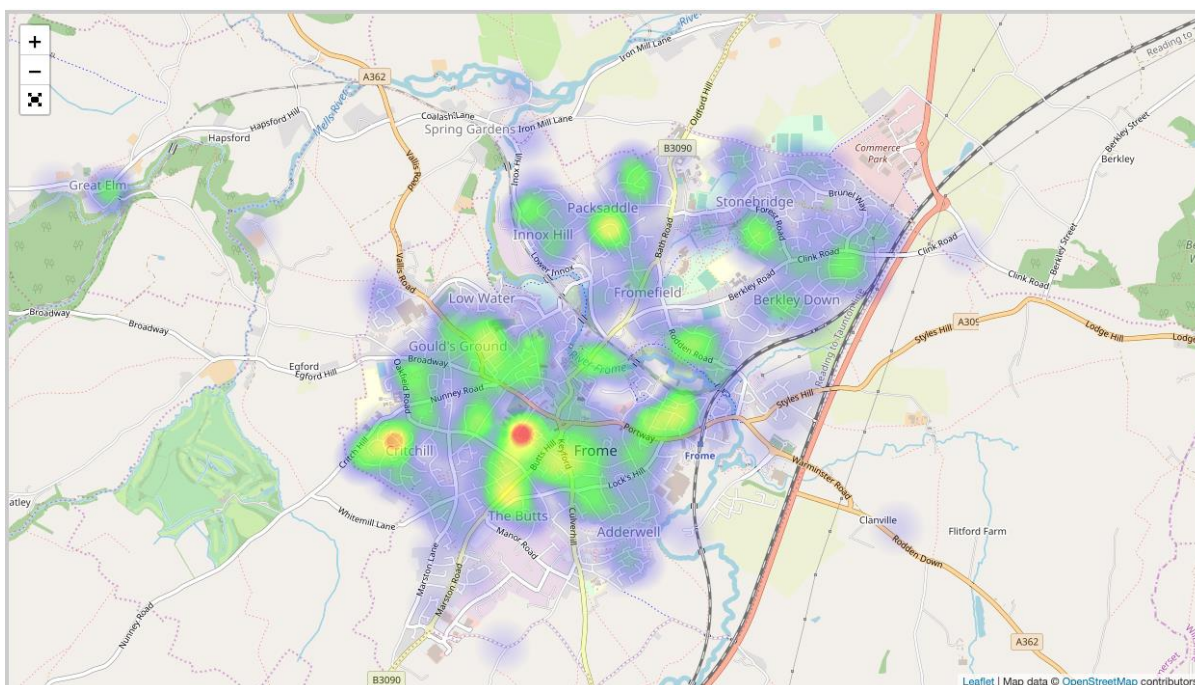
Officers thought that the initial in-person idea generation done at a number of different events, and in other in-person conversations around the town, did extend the reach of the programme. They spoke to people they hadn't spoken to before. The selection process for the shortlisting event also resulted in a set of people participating, most of whom had not previously been in contact with the council. However, there remained a concern about not reaching into those parts of the town least likely to engage. This is a key challenge for Frome and one that still needs to be met. This point came up in one of the ideas submitted, in discussions at the shortlisting event, and in feedback from that event.

Officers felt they would like to reconsider the balance struck in those initial conversations between making it really easy to participate by not asking for a lot of information, as this has meant they aren't able to follow up some of the ideas that they would like to ask questions about.

³ Created via <https://gridreferencefinder.com/postcodeBatchConverter/>



Heatmap showing postcodes entered during the 'Have Your Say' idea generation



Heatmap showing postcodes entered during the online voting process

Transparency

Transparency was a key aspiration in the Town Vote, and an aspect that the Public Square team worked with the FTC team to deliver. At the end of the process, given that the ideas shortlisted were not controversial in the same way that they have been in previous years, officers reflected that having [put up a lot of information about the process online](#), they had spent a lot of time on information that hasn't been viewed very much.

Working with Public Square

The two most valuable aspects of working with Public Square from the officers' point of view were the opportunity to experiment in a supported way with technology and with a different in-person format in the shortlisting event. The main value in each aspect was in concrete, practical support – in helping them select Your Priorities and getting it up and running, in working to get the most out of SurveyMonkey and in facilitating the shortlisting event.

However, having Public Square involved has made the delivery team less fluid – collectively, we needed to decide and then coordinate timeframes amongst the three different organisations. It also made the project a larger time commitment – being a more complex process, it required more time, in particular communications time, to deliver.

Extending this process to other councils

In terms of how the approach taken in Frome might be extended to other councils, officers noted that, for town councils, the existence of both a communications and community development team, however small, is a rarity. The practical question of having enough staff time to do this kind of work is a key one: the ability to raise and use a precept is a key enabler. Additionally, they would recommend an upfront acknowledgement that this kind of work takes time and investment.

7.3) Glasgow



Image by Peter McDermott. Licensed under: [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76658650>

Our goals

Glasgow City Council's current Scottish National Party administration was elected on a mandate which included "social justice through democratic and economic empowerment". The current administration are working to turn their vision of Glasgow as a city with people at its heart into reality.

The People's Palace opened in 1898 to provide a place of culture and entertainment for the East End that would build community spirit and provide a sense of belonging for local people. Its aim was to improve the lives of Glasgow's poorer citizens and it has remained a beacon of civic empowerment and social engagement for 120 years.

The People's Palace and Winter Gardens were closed to the public on the 31st December 2018. Following some internal reconfiguration works to adjust the fire escape routes and make provision for a relocated café, the People's Palace was opened to the public again on 5th April 2019, however, the Winter Gardens remain closed as the structural integrity of the glasshouse structure and glazing cannot be guaranteed.

The administration is committed to securing a long-term sustainable future for the People's Palace and Winter Gardens, with Glasgow's social history museum at its heart. A series of technical officer workshops have looked at areas including:

- how to ensure that the buildings remain part of the civic infrastructure
- how to co-create the space within the People's Palace museum so that it reflects multiple communities and their social history of the city
- how to create this as a space that is agile and responsive to the needs of the people living around Glasgow Green.

From these workshops a number of 'givens', which any future of the People's Palace and Winter Gardens should deliver, have been developed. These are:

- Retaining and enhancing the museum displays and content that tell the social history of Glasgow
- Retaining the existing glasshouse structure
- Access to the museum elements and public spaces will continue to be without charge

Our approach to the Public Square project in Glasgow is to embed citizen engagement at the heart of the capital programme's development of the building, using participatory approaches to involving people in all aspects of the project.

What possibilities are there?

The project in Glasgow uses the People's Palace as a physical cornerstone for this engagement. It has been mooted that the Palace could re-live its past and become a physical environment for public participation and deliberation and as a public space for conversations about Glasgow and its citizens. (The Palace is a very large public space, encompassing a museum of social history, and the Winter Gardens, a large glass-house structure). True to the nature of co-design, nothing was 'off the table' at this stage, apart from three givens, stated in the earlier section above.

Like the other Public Square projects, this envisaged a co-design process. In this case to co-design a public engagement plan for considering the future of the People's Palace; working with community and citizen groups to shape this conversation.

The conversation about the future of the People's Palace is something that's relevant across the breadth of Glasgow council, and would also require working closely with [Glasgow Life](#) (the charity that delivers cultural, sporting and learning activities on behalf of Glasgow City Council).

With the delay to the work, Public Square benefited significantly from the learning that had already been gathered from our experiences in Calderdale. In particular, by focussing our attention on the need to spend enough time early on to bring different stakeholders on board around a clearly articulated shared vision.



Working on an early co-design plan in July

Understanding Glasgow's appetite for participative democracy

The workshop we hosted in July was attended by a broad range of internal stakeholders at GCC and GL. We were able to communicate a clear set of goals for the co-design activity together. This agreed a whole-council approach, with every department having a role - throughout the authority and its delivery partners. Working with the Council and Glasgow Life. We also checked in on people's understanding of participatory democracy, and on more simple terms, checked that everyone's understanding of co-design was the same - we wanted to be sure that one department weren't saying co-design and thinking of consultation in practice.

Setting the vision was a really useful way to home in on people's understanding of what this project was fundamentally about. People began the workshops with differences of opinion of what was doable (financially and within remit) and necessary; but left with a cohesive vision of the possible.

Public Square would help realise this vision and work with Glasgow to develop a co-designed community engagement plan. Bringing community and citizen groups into the design of this plan; starting a conversation about what community engagement for the People's Palace project should be and what activities need to be involved. We'd use the same prototyping approach used in other cases – testing out this approach at the earliest opportunity and making adjustments as we go.

Understanding where Glasgow has been

One of the major bugbears of any organisation is a team of so-called 'experts' wading in and telling you how to do your job better. This was never what Public Square was ever meant to be about - Public Square is about collaborative learning journeys, working 'with' not 'for'. To that end, a member of the Public Square team spent a day in Glasgow in November 2019 as a listening exercise. Throughout the day, over 11 officers who had worked on around 11 community projects both within the City Council and Glasgow Life explored what their project had involved, how the elements of public participation worked and what was the impact and learning.

In summary, what was clear from the day of lightning talks was:

- Glasgow is a city which isn't afraid to challenge the norm and break boundaries when it comes to public participation
- What came through loud and clear was the knowledge that communities are the experts of their own lives - you could sense that officers fundamentally believed this; whatever their area of expertise
- In Glasgow there is a tangible aspiration to include communities and citizens
- The 'Artists in Residence' programme, for example, has created amazing opportunities for communities to tell their own stories about what matters to them in their lives and place - over 16,000 people engaged with the programme and citizens fed back that "the artists were kind, caring people who listen"
- The recent participation work around George Square is also an example that Glasgow aren't scared to involve the public in meaty, sometimes thorny, issues. This piece of work blended online with offline engagements - which were all well-resourced and implemented
- Participatory Budgeting in Glasgow is seen as an exemplar for how PB is done well in Scotland - and many local authorities in the country are looking at how Glasgow has been able to cede control of monies to its citizens
- Glasgow has a real opportunity here with the People's Palace and Winter Gardens programme. It's an opportunity to show the world that Glasgow listens to and values all citizens in all decisions for/in the city.

Next steps

Public Square has convened and supported the Council to start an advisory group, a 'Sounding Board', for the programme, with a workshop held on the 3rd December 2019 to support this. This brought together a few selected representatives (selected by Councillor McDonald) who have a stake or role to play in the future of the People's Palace. These included third sector organisations such as West of Scotland Regional Equality Council, Glasgow Women's Library, the Friends of The People's Palace group and artists in residence who have recently completed a programme of community engagement work in each of Glasgow's Wards.

Prototyping of the engagement plan will start in 2020, followed by a review. A fuller discovery report and prototyping report will be completed in 2020 once these next steps in Glasgow are complete.

8) Inspiring

Communications, outreach and thinking in public

Communications and thinking in public in the programme concentrated on a number of phases.

- Early on, we directed our attention towards on attracting initial interest from a wider set of civil society groups, as well as in recruiting the Advisory Group, later called the Technical Reference Group.
- Thereafter, our efforts were largely focused on ensuring that the councils we wished to attract could understand our programme.
- And after that we chose to make sure we were reflecting publicly - and frequently on our actions with the councils, through Week Notes, which were shared on our website.

Our assets and communication activities

The website and blog

Our focus on the website was to advertise the programme and share resources from our work that would be helpful to other engaged in similar work elsewhere - and in creating some transparency around our thinking. We worked on simplifying the language on the website in the second half of the programme, so that it became much easier to understand.

While our website shared information about the programme, we used our blog as a place to share learning, and to reach out to other activities. Our blogging activities were focused on week notes, which were regular updates on what we were doing on the programme. We also included posts on a variety of subjects about the programme, focusing on activities we were engaged in, or research we were interested in or exploring. This included occasional posts on other people's work and guest posts.

Since registering with Google Analytics in September 2018, the site has been visited by approximately 2,800 visitors.

Twitter

As well as the website, we used social media to a limited extent, with our Twitter account tweeting when we were either working at a council or at events. The account has a following of 650 users at this moment.

Events

We attended a variety of events, both formally and informally; with a number of Public Square team members speaking about the programme or attending stalls to support the programme. This activity concentrated on the first few months of 2019 in particular, largely because we then focused on the council engagements. At the end of the first year we

presented the progress made so far through an Innovating Local Democracy Conference described below.

Innovating Local Democracy Conference

On 27th-28th January 2020 we were able to share what we'd been doing on this project, and the learning gathered so far, during a two day conference in Manchester.

The conference brought together council officers, members, practitioners and other interested in this topic for two days of workshops and presentations. Our partner councils themselves presented what they've been doing as part of Public Square through workshop sessions.

Across the two days we used the hashtag: [#innovatinglocaldemocracy](#) for participants to discuss and share beyond the room. You can find lots of detail about what was discussed during these two days by visiting the hashtag on twitter.

This event was a collaboration between Public Square and the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government's [Innovation in Democracy Programme](#). This enabled us to achieve a higher profile by sharing learning from both programmes together, as well as exploring cross-overs between these two programmes. Organisations involved in both programmes collaborated together to put on this event. The conference was part of a week of events on reforming democracy in Manchester, also including a [Democracy R&D](#) network meeting and an [OECD Innovative Citizen Participation Network Meeting](#).

How have we done?

In a Semi-Annual Report we identified a number of things we wanted to do with our communications work:

1. To use week notes to ensure regular reflection on our work as we start to work with the four council partners.
 - We used these during our prototyping and co-designing work to post updates on progress and publicly record some of our reflections as we went.
2. To build out from councils - engaging with audiences within councils and their communities who understand the programme and who can credibly talk about it with a wider set of stakeholders.
 - We believe this process is far from complete but is underway. Now we have two councils that have been through the Public Square work - and this work is beginning, in the case of Calderdale to have fruition, there will be something really interesting to talk about.
3. To provide materials to support this - posters, short videos, leaflets.
 - While we've provided help to the councils engaged in the work, we still think there may have been more scope to do this and to help support the internal comms in the councils more proactively.

4. To create assets that addresses the different type of transaction that is at the heart of Public Square - that it's an Action Research programme and not a traditional client engagement where partners are delivering a service for a council.
 - This has been a challenge throughout the programme - and it may be learning for the programme that we perhaps feel this is less about simplifying our message, or having assets, than it is to re-think the kinds of way we engage in the next stage.

Early on in the programme we were aware that our Thinking in Public work and Communications work would be difficult, when we have been engaging local authorities, and working with them on projects that often couldn't be talked about entirely openly or immediately.

A message of 'this is ground-breaking work' is hard to develop or take to audiences if those activities are largely incomplete. Aside from the occasional guest post elsewhere, we weren't able to reach out to other blogs and forums. There is a sense now that, as the programme's first stage winds down, the best opportunities to communicate lie ahead of us. And that the learning on the programme needs to be shared elsewhere.

We have committed to a conference, in January, where learning from the programme will be shared. This 'Innovation in Local Democracy' event over two days in Manchester, will see our programme and the Innovation in Democracy programme talking to practitioners from across the UK and elsewhere about our work.

From this event, we believe there's the opportunity to think about how we can engage a larger audience - and package up what the programme has done in a variety of ways.

Playbook

Towards the end of the programme we began to explore the idea of a Playbook, which would share participatory practices that could be valuable to local democracy practitioners elsewhere. The Playbook was quickly worked up as a [working prototype](#) by mySociety. This prototype points towards a model that could be explored further in Year Two of the programme.

9) Programme management

Regular meetings

Throughout the programme, we operated a shared team to manage decision making and keep track of progress- with weekly meetings between The Democratic Society and mySociety. This allowed us to think through how we worked with the councils, but it was a less effective way of project-managing a wide variety of tasks being shared between two different organisations. This may have helped to make progress early on in the programme harder to achieve, as it was not always clear how the two organisations could effectively work together in a co-ordinated way.

In early 2019, Demsoc hired a project manager to address this issue - approved by both organisations and funded by the programme. However, during the appointee's probation Demsoc decided not to continue the position and did not seek a replacement. That meant that task management had to continue to be negotiated and shared between the partners for the remainder of the programme. The combined team attempted to address this by establishing clear working groups for the continuing work with Calderdale and Frome councils, in order to establish clear lines of responsibility for both projects.

While a plan was developed to enlist the support of individual members of the TRG, this had piecemeal success - some TRG members were approached and engaged, while others had less active roles. Sadly, attempts to develop a community reference group had to be abandoned - despite it being clear from the event in November 2018 that the programme would benefit from more community involvement.

While Demsoc led the work in Calderdale, mySociety led the work in Frome. Team members from both organisations joined the projects - where specific skills were required that weren't available from the lead organisation. Demsoc's Mat Basford, for example, played an important role in the work in Frome, led by mySociety. And Zarino Zappia was instrumental to the prototyping work carried out in Calderdale, which was led by Demsoc.

Reflection

"While there are lots of attempts to improve local democracy, they come from different approaches and places. And it's not clear how they can work together." This challenge facing participatory democracy was a starting point for Public Square. To some extent this challenge is also something that came up within the partnership between mySociety and Demsoc.

Each organisation has quite different approaches to our work, a different organisational culture, and quite distinct sets of skills. While mySociety is organised to produce technology products and is establishing itself as home for research in this expertise, Demsoc is a practice-led participatory democracy service provider. The work and aims for the organisations do look quite different - even if they share much of the same aims and interests.

This diversity was an important strength of the partnership, but it was also a challenge for collaboration. This was something we thought about during the programme and tried to navigate, but did add to the complexities of this programme. Particularly as the programme has also involved working closely with a very diverse set of council partners and with citizens in addition to setting up a new collaboration between our two organisations.

10) Themes for further enquiry

Each of the places we worked in allowed us to learn more about the conditions for successfully achieving participatory local democracy. Learning from these individual places is summarised in the 'Codesigning and Prototyping' section above.

Over the course of the first year our [weeknotes](#) also allowed us to capture some of our own reflections as we went.

In light of the position we are in at this stage, in between two years of the programme, it seems appropriate to finish our Year One report with some reflections from our first year that it would be interesting to examine further in the second year of this programme.

Imagining a new relationship

Those working within councils often frame new relationships with residents within the objectives of the Council. Managing the uncertainty and complexity of objectives that are shared or determined by residents, or even unknown, is a big shift. This challenge was something we particularly grappled with through our work in Calderdale and would be interesting to explore further.

The role of representatives in participatory democracy

Councillors were involved in the work we carried out this year but their role in growing participatory democracy is something that needs further exploration. As more councils build participation into the way they do things, and deliberative democracy processes are happening in a range of places, councillor perceptions are no doubt shifting. However, understanding what impact these changes are having on councillors and how they view their role and the role of citizens, democratic legitimacy and governance in light of these changes will be interesting to explore.

The integration of digital tools in the design process

Thinking around digital tools that can support participation is not always well integrated into wider design processes. 'Digital' can be seen as monolithic, rather than a diverse toolbox for achieving desired outcomes.

- The design process around selecting tools to support democratic participation seems prone to jump to tool selection, skipping evaluation of tools on their ability to help achieve a specific outcome. It's also heavily focused on internet-based mass communication tools, neglecting the role digital tools could play in evaluating reach, selecting representative participants, or targeting a specific audience, for example.

- There's not widespread knowledge of what digital tools exist, what they might be used for, how much they cost. There are encyclopaedic sites There are encyclopaedic sites like [Participedia](#) (for all participation tools, studies) and [participateDB](#) (focusing on digital tools), but these are too broad ranging to be used to quickly narrow down approaches and tools to those that might be feasible for a UK council to take up. Identifying and assessing appropriate tools in itself can take up a significant amount of time
- The use of the term 'engagement' in reference to the purpose of using a digital tool feels like a key indicator that there's more thinking to be done about what outcomes are desired from using the tool

To try and address this we created [high level slide decks](#) describing common kinds of digital tools for involving people in decision making, how they differ, what their strengths and features are.

Building co-production into open-ended engagements

There's a difficult balance to strike between structure and planning, and the scale of decisions that citizens contribute to in citizen-centred design / co-production. The earlier in a decision making process citizens are involved, the more significant the potential decisions they can be involved in, but the harder it is to structure and plan a process that has reasonable time commitments for officers, councillors and citizens themselves.

More open-ended topics also require more work to be communicated and allow people to feed into them.

Informality is one of the tools used successfully in Frome to open up council decision making to a wider group. It felt like, in a larger council, the challenge of fitting an open-ended informal process into council decision making was significant.

Working with councils in a time of austerity

In an era of long-term austerity, one of the most immediate attractions of Public Square for council officers was the opportunity to get extra capacity and practical help for in-person events and technical support.

It was important to focus our involvement on encouraging reflection and developing approaches that could be sustained beyond our departure. We put effort in making this clear, for example through our sign-up documents, but it was a challenge to always get right. Ultimately the demands of the project added quite a substantial workload to those we worked with in councils, who also faced many other pressures on their time.

Year Two will require continuing to navigate how we get the most from our involvement with councils, both for our learning and for supporting them through changed ways of working, amidst intense time pressures.

Working in established programmes versus building something new

In Frome and Glasgow, the Public Square team worked in the context of established programmes. In Calderdale we helped the Council develop an entirely new approach, Calderdale Conversations. The risk in working within existing programmes is that ambition gets diluted and you revert back to previous practice. The risk in working on something completely new is that it's so amorphous that people inside and outside the council aren't able to relate to it - it's hard to talk about and hard to plan around.

The Public Square work in Calderdale was neither constrained by a key method (in contrast for instance to the [Innovation in Democracy Programme](#)), nor by domain, which made it hard to talk and think about. In a sense, however, the strength of this work was in the way that it helped to challenge the Council and partners to think about the way that engagement is developed.

Exploring the meaningfulness of participation from a citizen perspective

This is something it will be important to look into further. Our co-design workshops in Calderdale gave us some scope to explore this. It was also something we looked at using before and after questionnaires book-ending the shortlisting event in Frome. However, it will be important to look much further at this. This must look further than whether participants enjoy taking part in exercises. If funding is to be secured on the basis of concrete benefits, there must be demonstrable value and public demand. In the second year of the programme, we want to involve residents and other local stakeholders in the programme more deeply, and create common agendas with councils.

Getting the 'basics' right

There are lots of 'easy wins' in enabling more meaningful participation that still require ongoing institutional attention, such as the use of simple language, informality and multiple communication channels when talking about opportunities to participate.

While these sound-like simple steps, getting these right, and embedding these standards of practice is no mean feat. Getting these 'basics' right is an essential background to the system change that Public Square is trying to achieve

A diagnostic element, designed to test readiness on some of these aspects, could be a useful part of Year Two work with councils.