Public Square.

Discovery Report

Public Square | Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

October 2019

Public Square.

Background

Many people are working to improve local decision making and citizen participation, but this innovative work is often dispersed in different projects, authorities and disciplines. It therefore can't realise its full potential to bring about system change.

Public Square is a two-year action research programme that responds to this by investigating what is needed to improve participation as a system. In its first year, Public Square is working with a small number of councils to understand the challenges and opportunities around meaningful citizen participation in decision making and develop, pilot and share innovative approaches.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was one of those councils, although our work with them did not extend beyond early discovery.

Context in Kensington and Chelsea

A concern for the Public Square project is finding conclusions and practices that can reasonably be generalised beyond the pilot councils. Although the first cohort of pilot councils will be too small to draw solid conclusions from that will scale across contexts, we note here some potentially relevant background information and discuss briefly at the end of this document places where that context appears particularly significant, and where lessons learned may be more broadly applicable.

Grenfell Tower fire

A key piece of the context in Kensington and Chelsea is the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, a devastating fire in a tower block in the north of the borough that killed 72 people and [continues](#) to cause environmental health problems. An [ongoing inquiry](#) is investigating the factors that lead to the fire and the response.

Following the fire, the Centre for Public Scrutiny [developed twelve recommendations for RBKC](#) and the Head of Governance accepted all of them. A programme of public consultation was started, which has established a number of mechanisms for getting input from residents, but residents, in many cases, still feel that what they say doesn't translate into action. When we first visited the council in January 2018, a key question was what would happen when the public consultation programme ended in April - would it be back to 'business as usual'?

The fire occurred in the context of the local divisions we discuss in the next section - the north of the borough is disconnected socially and politically from the south of the borough and the administration in the local authority. However, the Grenfell fire also reflects more general issues. Issues with fire safety have found to be more systematic through the country, and it is likely not uncommon in having minority communities disconnected from the local authority. When RBKC's problems are local, they are also not isolated examples.

Structure and politics

The borough overlaps with the Greater London Authority and shares some [combined services](#) with Westminster City Council.

The Conservative Party current holds control of the council - and has run the council uninterrupted since its formation in 1964. The gender makeup of the council is typical of local authorities (majority male). Labour representatives tend to represent the wards in the north of the borough.
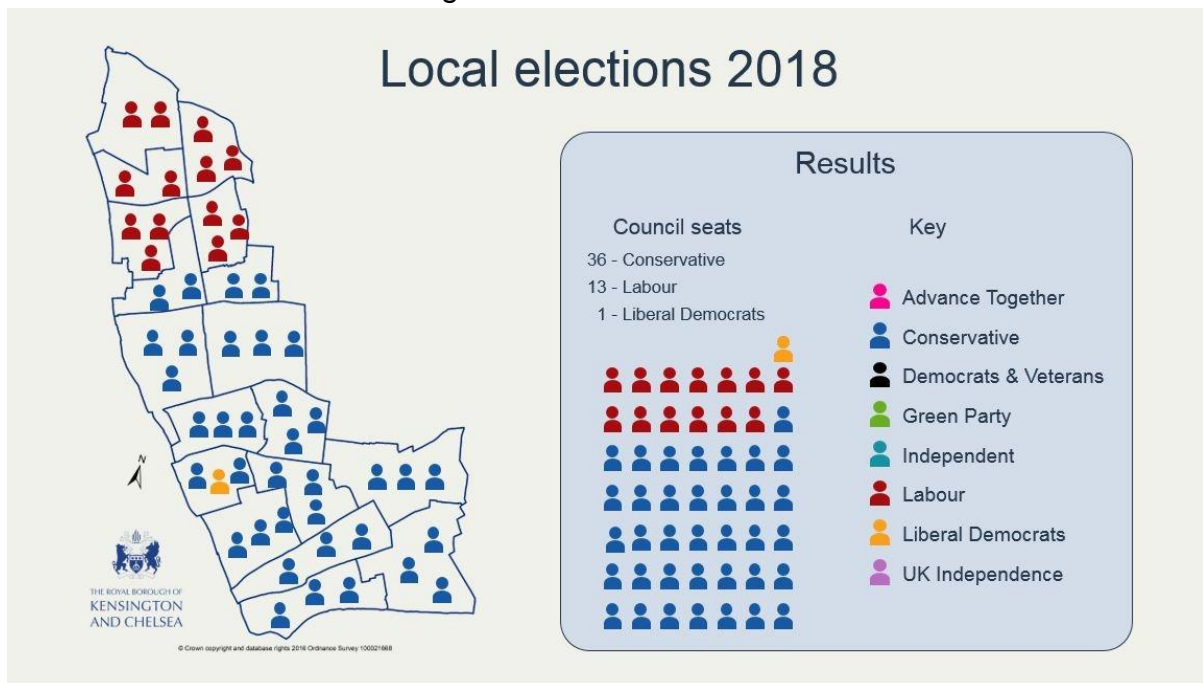
Political divisions clearly seen in the ward geography

In the 2018 local elections, turnout in the borough was around the average for London at 39.9%. The ward with the lowest turnout had 35%, and the highest 51%.

In this election, almost half of previous Conservative councillors did not run ([including the former council leader and deputy](#)). The council has [an official petition site](#) with a small number of petitions (nine over three years) - there is a larger

number of petitions of the council [through change.org](#) - many of these relate to the Grenfell fire.

Budget

[Compared to other local authorities in England](#), RBKC spends a smaller proportion of its budget on Education and Adult Social Care and more on all other areas. [Compared to London Boroughs](#), it spends proportionally less on education but more on all other areas. In absolute terms - its budget in 2018-19 was the 103rd largest out of 354 in England and Wales, and 26th largest out of 32 among London Boroughs.

Demographics

The population has [slightly declined over the last decade](#). Compared to [all other local authorities](#), RBKC has higher numbers of residents in the age brackets 20-49, with less than average for all other age groups.
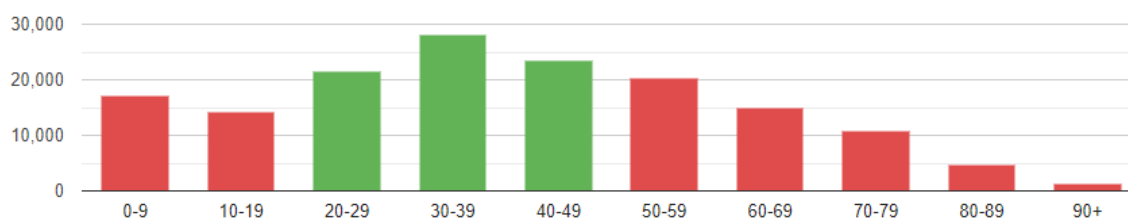
 Compared to [all other London Boroughs](#), it has more people aged 40 and up and fewer of younger ages.
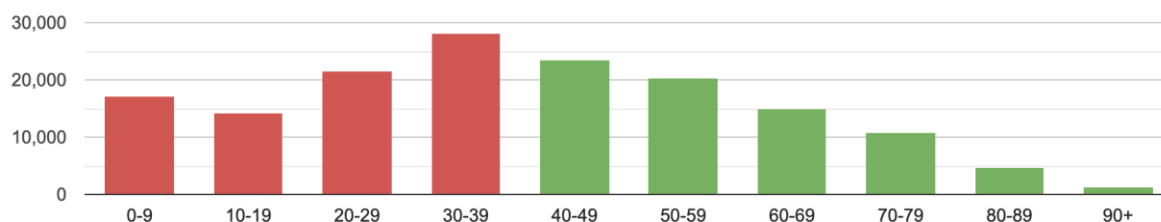
[Compared to the country as a whole](#), the borough contains fewer people identifying as White British and more of most other ethnicities - with the exception of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents - of which it has proportionally fewer of than the nation as a whole. The most notable feature is a large number of 'Other White' residents as a result of the large French community in the area. [Compared to the rest of London](#), it has a higher number of 'Other White' (reflecting the sizeable number of French residents).

Public Square.

Deprivation

In terms of multiple deprivation, RBKC is a mostly typical mixed local authority with LSOAs showing a wide-spread of deprivation. More deprived LSOAs are clustered in the north and along the west of the borough:
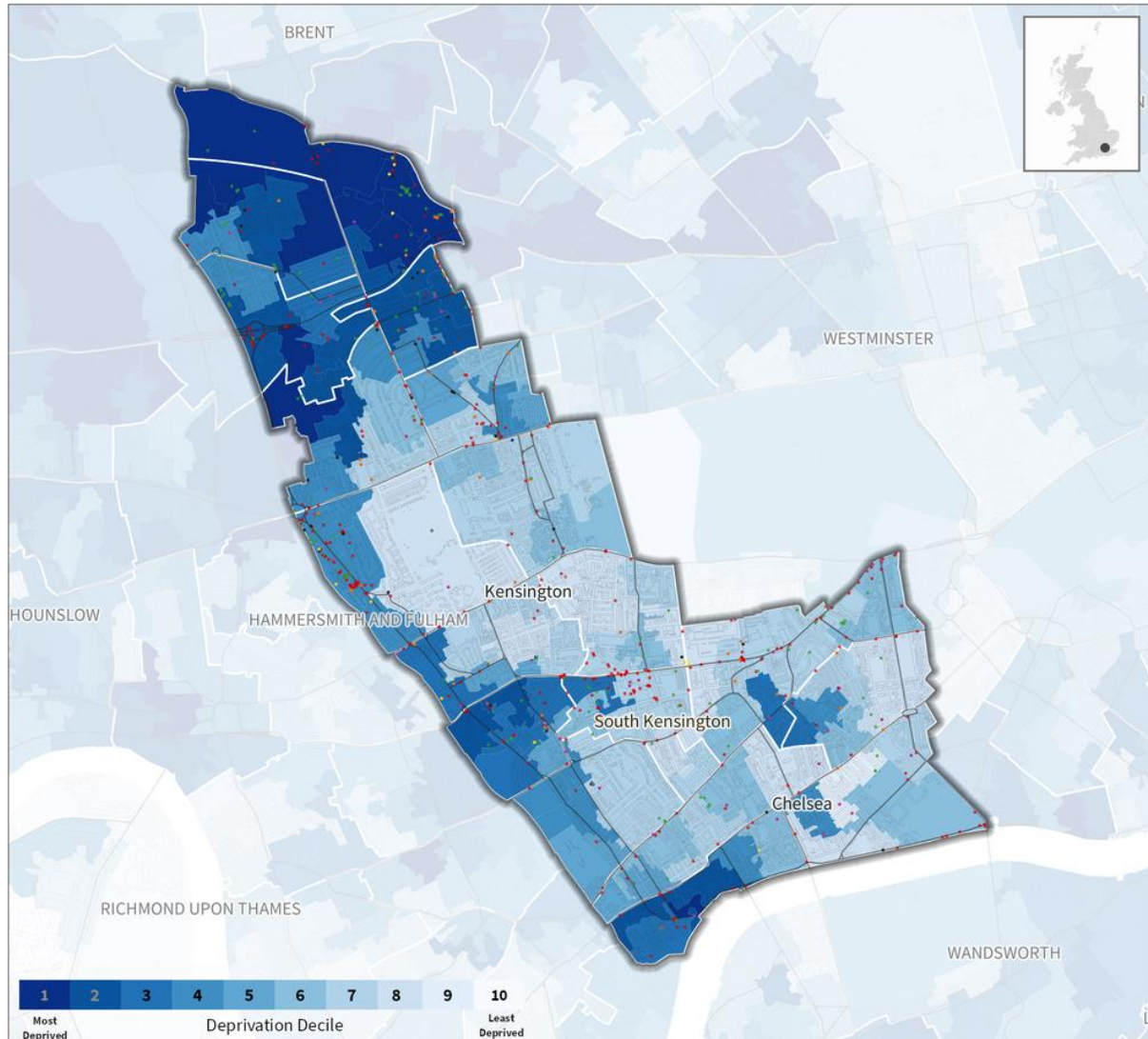
Deprivation mapped on to the RBKC ward geography

Migration

Net migration to the borough in 2017 was negative. RBKC lost 2,830 residents, the majority of those to neighbouring councils in West London.

Technology use

7% of the local population are not online and would have to access digital services using libraries or community centres.

The council is in the process of rolling out an upgrade to MyRBKC, a personal but transaction-focused online service where people can pay taxes etc, and has been signing people up using iPads in the customer service centres.

Officers interact with residents on Twitter and Nextdoor, a private neighbourhood-focused social media site, but one described the tone of some of the public interactions on Twitter around the Grenfell fire as 'vitriolic'. The perception was that the same people are engaging online and through in-person feedback meetings.

There is a digital board within the council, which was meeting twice a year and was perceived as having no power. It is now meeting once a month with some growing influence. However, there's no global digital strategy for the council, with the IT team largely editing content on third party systems. The IT team doesn't include software developers, and they are described as spending time 'holding current infrastructure together'.

There has been a recent review of the content on the council's website, going through and rewriting it in plain English. The council has also commissioned an external audit of their website analytics, but access to analytics data internally is limited.

Public Square in Kensington and Chelsea

RBKC is in the process of discussing the evolution of its City Living, Local Life (CLLL) initiative. CLLL is a councillor-led initiative which distributes funding to local projects in each of the ward areas of RBKC Council.

One way the project could evolve is to make the process more transparent and give residents an opportunity to share their views about potential projects. There has been discussion around using the open source civic tech software CONSUL as a way of achieving that. The CLLL mini site currently has a 'Share Ideas, Start Something Good' system, but this isn't used well by communities in its current format.

City Living Local Life microsite homepage

Public Square afforded an opportunity to provoke thinking within RBKC around how CLLL can become more participative in terms of idea generation, encourage councillors to engage more within their local ward areas and, potentially, encourage citizen deliberation/involvement in the allocation of funds to projects.

There are 18 wards in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. 14 of these wards have three councillors and four wards have two councillors. Wards with three councillors have up to £20,000 through CLLL to allocate per year and for those with two councillors, it is up to £14,000.

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Each area of Kensington and Chelsea is different, and so are the approaches taken by different wards and the projects supported. The aims of City Living, Local Life remain the same across wards, these are to:

- enhance understanding of local areas (including history, geography, demography, local assets and community resources);
- build stronger connections and relationships within communities (networking within and beyond ward boundaries);
- help to identify, assess and prioritise improvements in local areas;
- devise practical solutions that engage and involve local people and;
- work with local people and organisations to deliver those solutions.

Our Goals

The primary purpose of this project was to explore ways to improve citizen participation in decision making at the local level in Kensington and Chelsea, using the City Living Local Life programme as a focus. As an action research project, our approach was to work with the council in the following ways:

- **Research:** Use a variety of research approaches to understand the context in which participation is happening in RBKC.
- **Prototype:** Prototype, and support the council in prototyping ways that Kensington and Chelsea residents can more actively participate in the City Living Local Life programme, focusing on quick wins and signposting longer term solutions.
- **Evaluate:** Evaluate those prototype approaches from the point of view of residents and council stakeholders, with a few simple and specific target outcomes.
- **Share our approach:** Document and share our user research work, findings, prototypes and other outputs openly in order to gather wider input and feedback, and so others can learn from this work.

We've defined six research questions driving our work in Year One of Public Square. With reference to RBKC, these were:

Q1: From the participants' perspective, what defines meaningful and worthwhile participation in the context of City Living Local Life?

Q2: What are the barriers they face to meaningful participation?

Q3: What's the current workflow for the City Living Local Life programme?

Q4: What are the barriers and enabling factors within the council to meaningful citizen participation?

Q5: What are the organisational requirements around any new process?

Q6: How can the stakeholders' views and experiences inform people who wish to implement meaningful and worthwhile participatory processes in this or similar contexts?

What We've Done

We approached the discovery phase of this work from several different angles:

1. **Desk research.** Developing an understanding of the context in Kensington and Chelsea, particularly around City Living Local Life, by reviewing existing documentation and resources, particularly around the history and ambition of the programme. Getting a wider perspective on similar work and the way in which it is framed by reviewing academic and grey literature from the field of democratic participation.
2. **Remote and in person interviews.** Learning about the way engagement is done in Kensington and Chelsea by speaking with the council team about past projects, the current state of City Living Local Life, its online and offline elements, and in particular the discussions around improving it.
3. **Technical discovery.** Reviewing the technical context and the tools used previously in the programme.

However, our work with RBKC did not extend beyond early discovery. We agreed a plan of work, but our initial lead contact subsequently left the council and although we started work with a new lead contact, they were unable to commit time to the programme within timeframe of our work in the first year of the programme.

What We've Learned

From the participants' perspective, what defines meaningful and worthwhile participation in the context of City Living Local Life? What are the barriers they face to meaningful participation?

Summary   Structurally, City Living Local Life isn't currently designed for participation by citizens, except for in the role of a representative of an organisation applying for funding.

Participation in the programme has been low in some wards, despite the size of funding available, and the intent on the part of the council to make this a simple and flexible process.

We didn't learn about the perspective of participants in CLLL directly - we didn't get the opportunity to speak to residents as our work with RBKC didn't proceed past early discovery. However, we learned from officers that members of the public can only participate in the programme at the moment is as applicants for the grants as part of a community organisation.

Structurally, the barriers around participation in the programme are fairly high - funding is available only to organisations, not individuals. The first step, talking to a councillor (often by email) about the proposed project, is intended to reduce the chances that people don't make applications that won't be funded by having councillors, officers and residents shape the proposal together. However, it could also be quite intimidating to people who aren't used to communicating with the council.

There's no real opportunity for other residents to discuss projects at the proposal stage, although there is some opportunity for residents to scrutinise the projects that have been funded as this information is available on the website. However, there's no obvious route to start a conversation about that information, either with the council or with other residents.

![Public Square logo]

The existence of significant barriers to participation is reflected in the low participation in some wards, with no applications being made in several wards in the previous year, and a total spend of around £37,500 out of a budget of £336,000.

What's the current workflow for the City Living Local Life programme?

Summary
The workflow for the programme has an annual tempo, driven by the financial year. Officers go out to events during quiet periods to encourage applications.

The first step in applying is to talk to a ward councillor, usually by email.

All the councillors in a ward need to formally sign off applications, a process which is usually negotiated by email too, with councillors, officers and applicants all involved.

The City Living Local Life programme has been in place since 2011/12. It developed out of a ward-based programme driven by the tri-borough service sharing agreement and a perceived need to have a local focus to balance that. The programme is open to organisations to apply for funding, rather than individuals. As a first step, applicants are encouraged to contact a ward councillor in order to talk about their application. Councillors and officers appraise the applications together and may have further dialogue with the applicant (this is usually done by officers due to the time constraints on councillors). Mostly this happens over email.

The process is different in each ward - in some wards all three councillors discuss the applications, in others one councillor is effectively nominated to handle them, although all councillors formally sign off the applications in all wards. Again, this process happens by email. The programme was designed to be simple, flexible and low bureaucracy, 'more about engagement than about the money per se'. However, that engagement is seen as being between councillors and community organisations, and, at least in the application process, it all happens in private.

CLLL approval process flow diagram

Receive an CLLL application
— via CLLL officer →
— via ward councillor →

Initial assessment of application
- Ward(s) (liaise with other SOs involved)
- What is the project?
- Costs and evidence
- Aims of CLLL
- Numbers of locals to benefit
- Addressing local needs
- Timescales
- Sustainability

Cluster Officer will send post approval letter to applicant once payment has been processed.

Notify your Cluster Officer when completed form is on Sharepoint, send a link and confirm the relevant bank details with them, so they can process payment.

Councillors may have already seen application or are aware of project

Contact applicant with further questions to clarify missing or unclear information by email or phone.

Gather application, supporting documents and all councillor approvals (include all email correspondence) and scan together. Ensure you have filled out a ward budget cover sheet and included at the top of PDF document

Application is ready to be shared with councillors for approval

Email all councillors in relevant ward with your assessment and recommendations, seeking or confirming their views. Include any additional info about project you have gained since submission in the body of your email. Remind councillors of their remaining ward spend.

Questions: Councillors may wish to seek further information from applicant

Approval: All councillors in ward confirm their written support by email or signature. Inform applicant of this and any specific terms to be agreed upon. Confirm relevant bank details with applicant. Confirm with councillors the approval and set about gathering form.

Rejection: Inform applicant of councillor decision and offer feedback or alternative measures to secure funding.

Workflow for approval of City Living Local Life funding

The programme is open all year round, but its tempo is driven somewhat by the financial year, with a busy period in November-March, as officers encourage councillors to spend their budget. There are also peaks of applications for events around the summer and in the pre-Christmas period. During the quieter periods in the year, officers attend events and promote the programme - 'pitch up with a stall or something, or a gazebo or a sofa or whatever', but they had been doing little of this work in the past year as they had a vacant position in the team, limiting their capacity.

The programme doesn't currently get funded to a total that would support all the wards spending the total allocated to them - i.e. if all the wards were to award the maximum budget available, the pot of money available council-wide would not be sufficient. There's variation in how active the individual wards are in the programme, with some not spending their budget each year. The variation has meant in past years that officers have needed to find money internally each year to make up the programme total.

The City Living Local Life website

Experiments with digital engagement around the programme have been limited. The mini-site for City Living Local Life includes a submission form for adding items to a community noticeboard site. This was the source of a trickle of general suggestions from residents pre-Grenfell (2-3 a month). There has also been an electronic newsletter, which had around 2000 subscribers. Online communications around the project stopped completely after the fire and were resuming in early 2019. The website also has information on all the projects funded to date in a ward spending section, but in a high level and static form.

The community engagement team who run the CLLL programme don't have direct access to the CLLL sub site - they provide content to the IT department who upload it.

As part of our early prototyping work, we set up a test instance of CONSUL, with some example projects from CLLL in order to give officers and councillors a realistic sense of what using a different digital approach to the programme might entail and how it would work from the point of view of a resident.
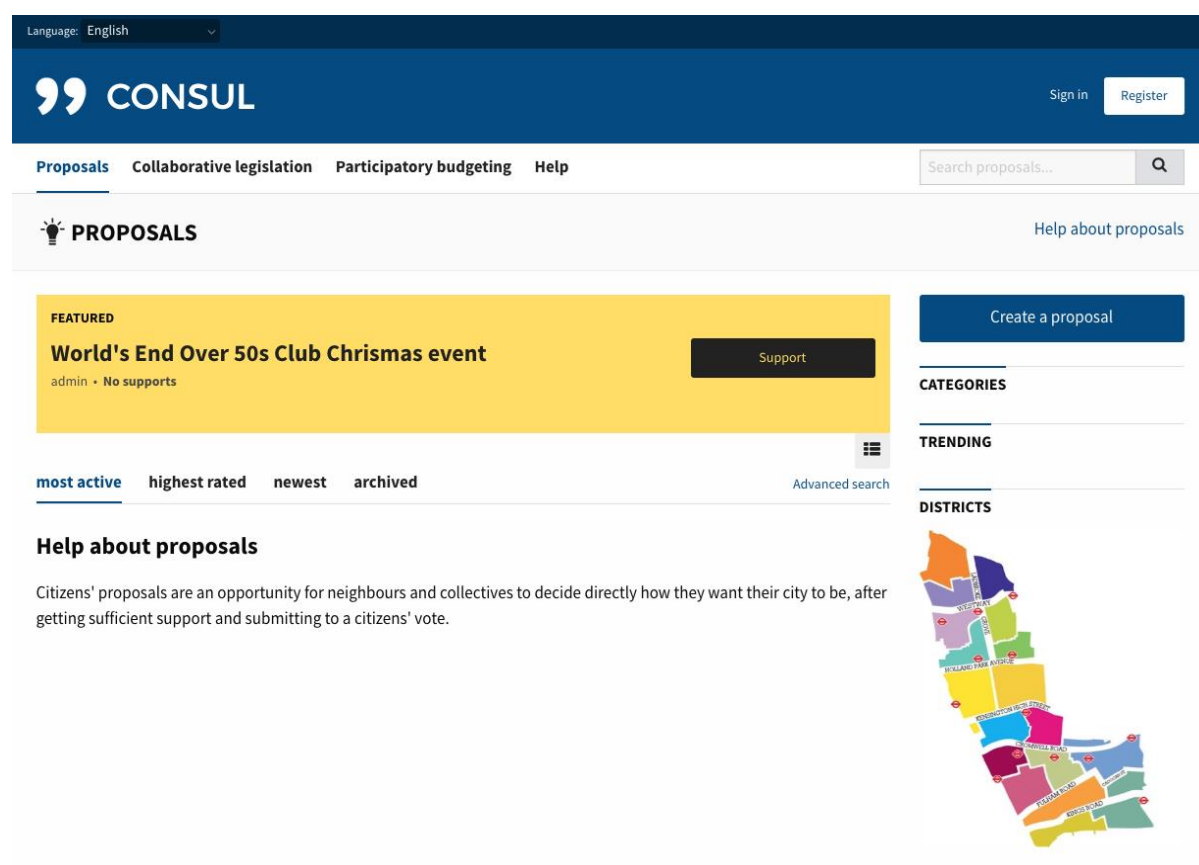
CONSUL prototype site, showing RBKC data

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What are the barriers and enabling factors within the council to meaningful citizen participation?

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<td>Summary</td>
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Enabling factors:
- A new post-Grenfell mandate to involve citizens in decision making, committed to by senior leadership.
- Action on the basics - letting people know about opportunities to participate in decision making, using plain English on website.

Barriers:
- Staff roles in a state of flux, merging and splitting of departments.
- Recent history of complete withdrawal from communication around the programme.
- Politicised environment - between councillors of different parties, and between officers and councillors - likelihood of change being seen as a 'power grab'.
- Sensitivity around displacing role of councillors - particularly backbench councillors in a cabinet and executive model.
- Environment of risk avoidance when stakes perceived by officers to be high.
- Wards (important to councillors and to the programme) don't map to people's understanding of where they live.
- Officers wary of the impact of new civic technologies on their workload after prior experiences.
- Limited time on the part of officers, particularly with long term vacancy on the team.

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Enabling factors

Following RBKC's governance review, recommendations and the commitment from the leadership of the council to accept those recommendations, there is a mandate for the council to involve residents in decision making. The new ward councillors elected in 2018 also have expressed an appetite for more involvement from residents.

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One of the first steps that concrete action has been taken on is trying to increase awareness of the opportunities to participate. There is shared interest in this across the governance and engagement teams. The starting point has been fairly basic, for example the creation of a webpage listing council surgeries.

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Be part of Council decision-making

Listening Forum

We want to hear what matters to you in your local area. At these monthly events you will be able to share ideas and raise local issues and concerns directly with members of the Leadership Team.

Borough-wide conversations about priorities

We will be holding events in different areas of the Borough until Jan 2019 to hear your thoughts about what the Council should focus on to make our area a better place to live. What you tell us will be used to help write the Council Plan that will be published in March 2019.

Governance Review

The Council is reviewing how it makes decisions and involves people in those decisions at both a borough and local area level. Share your views with us at one of the public meetings running until May 2019.

Participate in the Licensing process

You can search for an application and make a submission of objection or support through the 'Submit Representations' form.

Citizens' Panel

An independent research organization is helping us set up a representative pool of local residents who we will ask to give us their views.

Get involved in consultations

The Council holds consultations about a wide range of issues that are important to the community and the services the council provides.

Your Home, Your Voice consultation

We are holding a series of engagement events in November and December to get the views of those in council properties about how they want their homes managed and how they want to be involved in decision-making. They can also give their views online.

Attend a public Leadership Team meeting

The Council's Leadership Team make the most significant and sensitive policy, financial and service decisions. You can find dates and agendas of Leadership Team meetings on our website.

Review the Forward plan of Key Decisions online

The most significant and sensitive policy, financial and service decisions are available 28 days in advance on our website.

Sign-up for e-alerts on key decisions

Receive e-alerts when key decisions are added to the Forward Plan via MyRBKC. You can view or register for a MyRBKC account here: **www.rbkc.gov.uk/myrbkc**

Register to speak at Full Council

Ten public speaking slots are reserved at the beginning of each Full Council meeting for people who live, work or go to school in the borough, to address the Council. You can register for one of these spots on the RBKC website.

Get involved in planning decisions

Through the RBKC website you can search for and make comments in support of or against an application, register to speak at a Planning Applications Committee meeting, receive e-alerts for applications in your area via MyRBKC and learn more about our planning consultations.

Speak to your local Councillor

Attend your local Councillors' surgery sessions or speak to them via email or telephone.

Create or sign a petition

The Council welcomes all submissions both traditional paper form and now, via our e-petitions facility, electronically. Petitions can be presented to either a Scrutiny Committee or Full Council if they have enough signatures (750 and 1,500 signatures respectively).

Get involved in Scrutiny

Scrutiny Committees hold decision-makers to account on behalf of borough residents and make recommendations to the Leadership Team and senior officers. Please consider attending a Scrutiny committee meeting to speak on an agenda items that matters to you. Agenda items are publicised five working days before each meeting.

For more details on all of these ways to interact with the Council's decision making, please visit **www.rbkc.gov.uk/change-at-the-council** which includes dates and agendas of meetings, as well as related links. You can email **governance@rbkc.gov.uk** for more information.

Your Council

THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF
**KENSINGTON
AND CHELSEA**

Multiple opportunities for participation – which to choose?

Barriers

When we started to talk to officers about participation in Public Square, a little less than two years on from Grenfell, there was a strong feeling of uncertainty at the council. All departments were under review, and staff turnover was high, with significant numbers of contracts ending in Spring 2019. A commitment to Public Square was seen by our initial officer contact as a way to keep meaningful engagement work going after the end of her contract.

Departments relevant to participation - Communications, Web Services, Community Engagement - were being merged and split. The wide programme of consultation that had been put into place was spread across different units in different departments and not well coordinated, with internal knowledge sharing lacking around the basics, like what consultations were happening when.

In the context of the City Living Local Life programme, the response to the Grenfell fire was a total withdrawal from communications around the programme. This was in part contributed to by the loss of a staff member, resulting in a vacancy on the team that was open for a year.

Much of the discussion with the officer running CLLL focused on the role of councillors in the programme. The focus and history of the programme is that it has been councillor-led. The power to allocate CLLL grants is seen as the only power that backbench councillors have under the Leader and Cabinet executive model, and one of the perceived functions of the programme is to allow councillors to do engagement work with their constituents. There's a risk around CLLL that councillors will view changes to the programme as a power grab on the part of officers. In the context of a borough with deeply felt political divisions, anything involving the ward councillors was felt to be political.

Councillors in turn were described as overwhelmed with change, having too much on their plates. They were perceived by officers as not reacting well to vagueness and needing certainty and specifics. In a climate where the risks of failure are seen to be high, it's hard to support experimentation - there was an emphasis from the main officer stakeholder on 'designing out' challenging areas for a pilot, such as wards where no grants were given.

The broad approach taken in the first year of Public Square - wide experimentation in more meaningful citizen participation not constrained by a specific technique or a specific domain - was challenging in all the councils we worked with, but felt particularly challenging in this context, where the appetite for change was tempered by a large degree of caution around the risks.

In addition to the barriers specific to the context in RBKC, there was some evidence of challenges common to councils. One, common to many London boroughs, but also councils like Calderdale, is that the administrative boundaries considered meaningful from the organisation's point of view don't map to residents' own sense of place - people don't identify with the ward names if asked where they live.

Another is previous negative experiences with the increased workload for officers resulting from the use of a new piece of software. A previous experiment with SpaceHive, the local crowdfunding service, was paused because of the amount of work it took on the part of council officers to support the process.

What are the organisational requirements around any new process?

| Summary | Start with a small scale pilot that's likely to be successful and bring in all councillors with an opportunity to learn more at an early stage. |

The organisational requirements that we learned about directly related to the risks described in the previous section; to keep testing small scale, and to try to cherry-pick experiments that would have a high chance of success in order to encourage wider support for building citizen participation in the CLLL programme.

Raising awareness amongst councillors of any new proposals at an early stage was seen as key, and doing so in a way that offered all councillors an equal opportunity to participate, in order to reduce the risk of being seen to try to take over a councillor-led programme.

How can the stakeholders' views and experiences inform people who wish to implement meaningful and worthwhile participatory processes in this or similar contexts?

| Summary | **Broadly applicable challenges:**
● Organisational stability and morale.
● The effect of a politicised environment on risk taking. |

- Sensitivity around the role of councillors being displaced.
- Understanding the process and workload implications of changing technology.
- Political geography doesn't map to common understanding of place.
- Multiple ways to 'have a say' hard to understand for people outside the organisation.

Specific challenge:
- Culture of risk avoidance - particularly acute in the wake of institutional crisis.

As noted in the 'What We've Done' section, our work with RBKC didn't proceed beyond early Discovery. In terms of the challenges we found in our early work with RBKC, most were ones that seemed broadly applicable to other council contexts, although perhaps appearing in RBKC in a particularly acute way.

There is a collection of factors in RBKC around risk taking that seem particularly significant - for a local authority as an organisation, allowing greater citizen participation in decision making is a significant risk, allowing some power to move outside the organisation itself. Low organisational stability and morale, and a politicised environment in which change may be interpreted as a 'power grab' both make risk taking less appetising for officers. Similarly, a structure where councillors may see themselves as having little decision making power may not encourage the sharing of that power.

Setting aside the appetite for taking a risk on bringing citizens into decisions, other practical challenges to be overcome in RBKC exist across many local government contexts: how to present opportunities to participate in a way that's comprehensible to people outside the institution so that they can judge what will be a good use of their time, creating a shared sense of community when administrative boundaries don't map to the common understanding of communities, and how to predict and manage the changes in workload brought about by changing the processes around participation, whether online or in person.

Next Steps

Although we did not work with RBKC in the prototyping phase of the first year of Public Square, we will take what we've learned in Discovery and consider it together with what we've learned in working with other councils. Our Year 1 report will

consider the common patterns across councils, and what that suggests for the future of the programme.