1 February 2010

Using technology to improve local accountability

SUMMARY

This is a note following a roundtable discussion hosted by Localis and Votivation looking into how the internet and technology can be utilised to improve local accountability and to involve citizens in decision making. David Hunter, Chairman of Votivation, introduced and concluded the session, with a wide ranging discussion in between. The participants were:

Participant	Organisation
David Hunter	Votivation
James Morris	Localis
Havard Hughes	Electoral Reform Society
Shane McCracken	Gallomanor
Ian Appleby	Gavurin
Thea Shahrokh	Involve
Kevin O'Malley	Bristol City Council
Madeline Russell	East of England Development Agency
Barret Stanboulian	PublicSquare
Mike Morgan-Giles	Localis
Tom Shakespeare	Localis
Susana Forjan	Localis

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Accessibility

- Two commented that transparency is key – but this only exists if there is accessibility. Another agreed, saying the way information is put together is vital. Simplicity in information provision is important.

- Internet can enhance transparency, through interactive outlets such as blogs and wikis.

Local power and accountability

- A number said that central government dictat and control makes transparency very difficult. Information is not enough, without the power behind it to make change.

- One said that people were keen for grassroots representation and that taxation allocation and decision making should become more transparent.

- Another mentioned the importance of stronger local accountability.

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLES PRIORITIES AND INFORMATION NEEDS

Right to information

- People need to understand their rights over information and what they can have. Attendee cited example of Sweden FoI model as a way forward to enhancing engagement.

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Extent of involvement

- Are people looking for change? Community ownership? Improved services stemming from feedback?

- Most people don't care - unless something goes badly wrong. Another said it was rational for people not to get involved.

- Another said people basically wanted good services, but that certain issues may also anger them (e.g. bins, potholes etc.).

- One attendee said that they wanted to have a say on anything and everything affecting them. More democracy breaks down barriers. Brings with it big questions over sovereignty etc.

- It's not always about what most people want – often it's about those who need help most (e.g. with learning difficulties).

OUTLETS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Hansard

- Hansard is an example of something which exists, but people don't use. Need something more appealing to the public. Couple of others agreed with this point.

Newspapers

- One attendee commented that some issues are very complex, and outlets such as local newspapers are not enough alone to disseminate these to the public.

- So you need other methods. Another agreed – saying that you need more than one outlet, preferably competing outlets.

Forums

- New outlets such as MumsNet – these people are not experts – but it is a good way of targeting people.

Blogging

- A couple of attendees believed bloggers can actually hinder the process of openness within councils. Others questioned whether blogs offer truth, and another questioned their legitimacy.

- However, another attendee was unequivocal that they had legitimacy, and another said that any lies would be identified and therefore nullified.

Open Source

- With Open Source – sensible approach engage – is to provide people with a buy in. Making the information 'crowd sourced', whereby they offer ratings. Entrepreneurs are important to this.

- Many agreed this was a good approach, although one attendee mentioned difficulties over the process for developing this further.

- What are examples of this – crime mapping, flood map (Environment Agency), recession map (Gavurin), Local authority engagement (Involve are currently developing).

Active citizenship and direct democracy

- Enabling people to become involved in the process. Attendee cited example of elected Mayors as a way to achieving this. Another questioned this approach, saying there was an issue of expertise when people are making the 'appointment'.

- Another questioned the worthiness of direct democracy

Incentives

- Incentives could help engage and involve people. Although people should want to be involved in lieu of cash benefits.

- Alternatives to cash could include 'pledge bank'.

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- Online citizen engagement tools

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MEASURES OF ENGAGEMENT

- Potential ones could include the following activities by councils – surveys, consultations, feedback, impact assessments, evaluations, number of citizen engagement activities etc. Therefore no one measure of engagement.
- Another contributor mentioned that using measures can be dangerous, as often it won't tell the entire story and might get misrepresented – leading to dissatisfaction or pressure to change something which works fine.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Political malaise
- One commented on the issues associated with the age and demographic of councillors.
- Another said that 'one party boroughs' had led to a decline in political participation.

Expertise
- Lots of people don't have expertise – this is the problem even with providing transparency and statistics – and therefore this leads to limitations.

Fairness
- Ability to choose important – issue if people unable to move or use different services (Hirschman).
- Issue of fairness if things are only online – exclusion. Therefore extensive costs have to be met to provide equal offline provision.

Privacy of data
- Issues with total information provision – confidential information held by councils about other people (e.g. salaries, children etc.).

- How do you gain everyone's approval for data sharing? Not possible – so will result in data at times not being provided – which looks bad for councils.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Localis is an independent think tank dedicated to issues relating to local government and localism. We carry out innovative research, hold a calendar of events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK.

For more information about Localis, please visit the Localis website at www.localis.org.uk or phone 0207 340 2660. For more information on this work please contact Tom Shakespeare on tom@localis.org.uk.

Votivation provides free online citizen engagement tools that help turn community opinions into collective influence. For more information on Votivation, please visit www.votivation.com or phone 0845 0564448.

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