

**Opinion Leader Research
The Power Inquiry Citizens' Panel
Newcastle-Gateshead**

**Summary Note of the First Meeting
'Exploring Attitudes to Politics and Political Participation'**

This note summarises the findings from the first meeting of the Citizens' Panel, which was convened in Newcastle-Gateshead on 23 February 2005.

Overview

1. People care about issues that are relevant to their individual lives, families and communities. Many express fears and concerns about the direction of the society. However, current political involvement is sporadic, and tends to only occur "when things go wrong."
2. People do not think that they much control or influence over issues that affect their lives and communities. Very few people feel they have an on-going influence in policy making.
3. Reasons for limited involvement and influence include:
 - Uncertainty and personal insecurity
 - A general lack of awareness of options available
 - Alienation from existing political systems and structures
 - Previous poor experiences
 - General disinterest.
4. The idea of having more influence in areas of importance to people is met with great interest. It is also, however, new territory for most and people are sceptical about whether or not new implementations will actually deliver on what they promise.
5. The most attractive ideas for influence and involvement are those that give people direct and meaningful power. They include:
 - Effective devolution and consultation
 - Referendum
 - Recall
 - Citizens' Assemblies
6. Future sessions of the Citizens' Commission should focus on developing ideas around direct power and influence.

Current involvement and influence

1. People are interested in issues that affect their lives and communities. Participants speak of the importance of local health and education provision, and concerns around crime and law and order. Anxieties about national and global issues (environment, global security) are also cited.
2. However, people tend not to be involved, nor do they feel particularly influential, in formulating policy in the areas of social life that are important to them, and the idea of on-going influence is alien to most. With regard to the above issues, participants feel that involvement is a distant concept.

“Ordinary people never get involved”.

3. Instances where people do get involved and have influence are therefore rare and sporadic. They tend to be usually in response to an intolerable, emotive and isolated situation.

Examples of such occurrences include protesting over a new school system in the region, joining an anti-war rally, voting in the referendum on regional devolution, or speaking to a local MP about an issue.

Barriers to getting involved

1. Barriers to getting involved can be categorised into five often overlapping areas:
 - Uncertainty and personal insecurity
 - A general lack of awareness of options available
 - Alienation from existing political systems and structures
 - Previous poor experiences (and consequently a lack of trust that things will work out better in the future)
 - General disinterest and laziness.
2. It is much rarer for people to cite personal factors, such as lack of time, as being principle barriers to involvement. The lesser emphases on personal factors further confirms a willingness on the part of many to genuinely want to get involved.

Uncertainty and personal insecurity

3. This is a particular, but by no means exclusive, concern of younger women. They have an inherent belief that their opinions are not valid and that they will consequently be (at best) ignored or (at worst) ridiculed, if these opinions are expressed.

“I don't think I know enough to get more involved”

“Getting involved means having to speak out. I don't feel comfortable doing that”

A general lack of awareness of options available

4. Awareness of ways in which to get involved is rather limited amongst the panel members. People do not tend to know how they can actively get involved in shaping or directing policy, nor even where to turn if they have a complaint.

For example, whilst most people tend to think of their local MP as one of their first ports of call, not everyone knows who their local MP is, nor how to get hold of him/her, nor what sort of relationship they are entitled to have with him or her.

Panel members got excited about the prospect of having direct say in running things at the local level, as in the cases of, for example, NHS Forums, when they were prompted about them, but had never heard of them before. As such, most people only get involved (if they do at all), when the opportunity is clearly presented to them.

“The Government say they run around 400 consultations annually. Once again, you hear about certain things in the media, but we didn't know that you can generally go along, join in and have participation in them.”

5. Even when people are made aware of options for getting more involved, they are nevertheless still then uncertain about what form and nature this involvement will take.

One of the biggest uncertainties is that involvement will be drawn-out activity, either because those in power would not make things easy or because involvement would reveal the need to do so much more. People fear being trapped in a never-ending situation.

“Getting involved means going to lots of meetings”

Alienation from existing political systems and structures

6. This is a significant barrier for many people since involvement in civic systems and structures is fundamentally considered to be “political”. Panel members feel negative towards politics because:

- They do not trust people in power: for example, they argue that they are not being given the whole truth or all the information required, or that they are simply being manipulated in some way for an end ‘political goal’;
- They think that political decisions have been made prior to any involvement the public anyway, and that consequently all involvement is simply “lip service” and meaningless;
- They do not think that they are really listened to, nor are their opinions taken seriously, nor do those in power really want people to get involved;
- They feel that they do not understand the nature of politics. In addition to the insecurity mentioned above, many people think that this lack of comprehension is simply a product of very poor communication between the public and those in power. Those in power do not explain to people how they can get involved, nor where the remit of their involvement lies. People, on the other hand, do not express their needs nor fight for what they believe in;

- They feel that politics is too heavily focused on national issues which are often not relevant, and at the expense of local ones.

"It's a closed shop. You don't feel you're being told the truth"

"Because they don't want you involved. I feel as though they don't want you involved"

"I think that politicians pay lip service to the public, they don't put our suggestions into practice"

"You know, they pretend that we're involved in that, but you're not really"

"The first thing is, you've got to get somebody who'll listen and this is 90% of the problem. You've got nobody to talk to"

Previous poor experiences

7. Previous poor experiences of trying to get involved but not getting the response or outcome anticipated is a barrier for some people and serves to reinforce their sense of alienation.

Anecdotes that highlighted poor experiences were numerous. People spoke about how their local MPs did what they wanted irrespective of protest from their constituents. Other people spoke of writing to their local council and getting only a standard letter in response (which failed to deal with the specifics of their complaint). Some people spoke more specifically about the inefficacy of a local protest march against the proposed three-tier educational system.

"People, there was 3,000 people, 3,000 mothers walked through Morpeth, saying that they didn't want the three tier systems scrapped, not a soul listened to them. The decision was already taken".

General disinterest

8. Only a minority seemed to be disinterested in getting more involved and having influence.

"There are far more important things in life"

"It's not my job to get involved"

9. Voting is seen as a slightly different sort of political activity. It almost stands as a category on its own.

However, attitudes towards voting also reflect the alienation that people feel towards the political existing system. A significant minority think that voting is too difficult and intimidating an activity to do. People are sometimes unable to differentiate between candidates, particularly when policies seem similar or when there are too many policies to consider all together. More fundamentally, however, many people feel that their vote

does not empower them at all and that it will not make any difference to service delivery or policy making or politics in any case.

"When I vote I never believe that I can make a difference".

"I voted at the election, I voted at the council elections. Your words are still not heard."

"It's confusing who to vote for".

Moving forward

1. The idea of having more influence over areas of importance has a lot of appeal to many people.

However, it is also a new concept which will take people some time to intellectualise and accept as being genuinely valuable. For that purpose, effective communication and the willingness on the part of those in power to show that they mean 'business' is essential. People are so sceptical about the idea that they will almost need to be 'wooed' if measures are to have any real impact.

Many people are willing to put time and effort into getting involved, providing they feel and see that other parties are putting effort in as well. If politicians, for example, were to publicly announce their support and endorsement of a new political activity or to publicly promise something, people would accept things more. People would also be looking for media support of these activities to ensure that the people's causes are given the coverage that they deserve.

"Power for the people is a good thing".

2. The ideas which have most appeal are:
 - Effective devolution and consultation
 - Referendum
 - Recall
 - Citizens' Assemblies.
3. The ideas which have least appeal are;
 - Citizens' Cafes
 - Democs

Effective devolution

4. People like the idea of devolution although they place a number of important caveats on this, such as the desire not to have to pay extra for the privilege

Participants want to see a system which genuinely focuses on local issues but which ultimately has the power to also make good decisions and get things done. They want to see local implementations which really address their communities rather than those which seem to pay lip service to them.

With regard to the recent vote on a North East regional assembly, many people in the forum spoke about their decision to vote against it as they perceived that all that they would be doing is paying (over and above ordinary taxes) for a local body which would be influenced by Central Government anyway.

Consultation

5. Consultation on policy interests people, and there was a sense of shock when the Panel Members learned that the Government conducts 400 consultations a year.

People though feel that they do not want to make decisions that are beyond their perceived expertise/comfort zone. The idea of participatory budgeting, for example, was considered to by many to require too much expertise.

Referendum

6. The idea of referendum appeals strongly to Panel Members, because it is direct, focused on one issue and is simple to participate in it. Appeal is heightened for many if the results of the referendum are then binding on the decision made. The idea of referendum has less appeal.

People think that it is important that referendums are held over all manner of issues (including significant issues). There is a strong perception that the Government only holds them when they are pretty sure of the outcome, and it is in their favour.

“At the moment, they won’t have a referendum unless they know they’re going to win.”

Recall

7. Many people like the idea of recall because it gives on-going control rather than placing all responsibility on voting decisions at election time. Participants like the idea of direct and meaningful power, where they feel in charge.
8. Panel members keenly pointed out that recall should be implemented with a number of controls. Those in power, for example, should be judged on whether or not they are doing their job well, rather than judged on the policies that they are actually implementing. People also suggest that the ability to recall be limited to a few times a year so that there is sufficient continuity in leadership and that the activity does not become too farcical, nonsensical or onerous on public time.

“If they’re not doing a good job, then you can remove them.”

Citizens’ Assemblies

9. The Canadian case study [deliberative referendum in British Columbia] was liked, and in particular the mix of a randomly selected panel and binding referendum.

Panel Members spoke about an ideal Citizens' Assembly being voluntary to participate in and operating once a month at evening time. In return for the acceptance that they would need to read and consider options before attending, people ask for issues to be presented to them clearly and succinctly at such assemblies.

"It's good that they can't ignore the referendum."

Citizens' Cafes

10. The idea of a Citizens' Cafe generally lacked appeal because they were seen as too unstructured and informal. People struggle with the idea of how it might work in concept and as an effective means of getting things done. An ideal devolved power forum needs to be sufficiently structured to ensure efficacy, whilst also being non-threatening nor overly formal.

Game

11. This is considered to be too complex, time consuming and peripheral to the real nature of getting involved.

Next steps

There was a great interest from participants in future sessions of the Citizens' Commission. We should seek to explore in greater detail ways in which people can have more direct power.