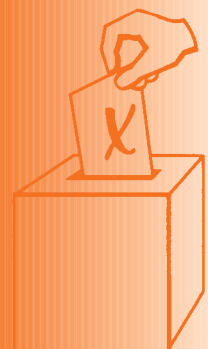




Service Quality



Participation



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OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT  
RESEARCH PROGRAMME

# Research Summary

## Public participation in local government – a survey of local authorities

### Introduction

#### Background to the research

As the 2001 local government White Paper<sup>1</sup>: *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services* emphasises, ongoing public participation – at local elections and between – is vital to enhancing the democratic legitimacy of local government, the development of community leadership and in improving service delivery.

Local authorities have long had statutory responsibilities to consult and involve the public in relation to certain issues, such as land-use planning, through public meetings and consultation documents. Research published by the Department in 1998 revealed that not only have local authorities been using these traditional methods to engage with the public, so called ‘consumerist’ approaches (service satisfactions surveys, complaints/suggestions schemes) have also become well-established in local government. Also, there were signs of local government looking to new and innovative ways of involving the public.

#### Objectives of the research

Underlying local government consultation and participation activity may be the expectation of certain related outcomes:

- a better relationship with the public;
- better quality services;
- changes in decision-making reflected in shifts in policy, budgets or new commitments.

The Department is keen to understand how local government is seeking to involve citizens in achieving such outcomes and in 1997 commissioned research<sup>2</sup> to obtain information on the nature and extent of public participation exercises in local government. This research provided baseline data – before the full implementation of the 1998 White Paper policies – and was used to inform the document ‘Guidance on Enhancing Public Participation’.

In 2002, the Department decided to conduct another survey of local authorities to establish how things have changed since the 1998 baseline research. Where possible, the report draws comparisons between this baseline information and the 2002 survey

1 Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services, TSO, 2001, <http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/sll/index.htm>.

2 Enhancing Public Participation in Local Government – a research report, DETR, 1998

to give an indication of how things have changed in the last few years. (Unlike the 1998 research, no qualitative research has been conducted within this study.)

### Research methodology

A postal survey of all local authorities in England was conducted between March and July 2002. The survey process was managed by McCallum Layton, with questionnaire design and reporting conducted by the Department's Local and Regional Government Research Unit.

The survey questionnaire sought information on the following:

- the range and extent of public participation initiatives being used by local authorities;
- who and how often authorities consult;
- the issues they consult on; and
- the perceived benefits and obstacles to participation approaches.

216 local authorities responded to the survey – that is a response rate of 55%. The profile of respondents was broadly representative of English local government in terms of local authority type.

## Use of different participation methods

### Participation initiatives used during 2001

Local government continues to push forward the agenda on public participation – authorities are increasingly trying to involve people in local decisions and developing service delivery. It is clear from the survey results that traditional approaches to public participation and those with a 'consumerist' nature are well established across local government. In fact, service satisfaction surveys and complaints/suggestions schemes are almost universally used by local authorities: 92% and 86% of authorities respectively have used these approaches in 2001. Their popularity may stem from the fact that they are relatively less resource intensive, can be used for a variety of service areas and provide accepted and generally understandable findings.

There is, however, some evidence that these methods have reached their peak. Trend data show that the take-up of consultation documents, public meetings, co-option/committee involvement and complaints/suggestions schemes have slowed significantly in the last few years. For example, only seven authorities have introduced the use

of complaints/suggestions schemes between 1999 and 2001. In contrast, the survey reveals a marked increase in the take-up of some innovative and deliberative approaches since 1997, particularly interactive websites, citizens' panels and focus groups. For example, 91 authorities have introduced the use of interactive websites between 1999 and 2001. The recent levels of usage are in sharp contrast to the very low take-up previously: until 1996, only 1 or 2 authorities were introducing the use of interactive websites or citizens' panels each year.

The use of referendums and citizens' juries is still very unusual in local authorities – only 10% of authorities used referendums and 6% of them used citizens' juries to engage the public in 2001.

### Number of times used

The participation initiative used most regularly by local authorities appears to be area/neighbourhood forums, which seem to be used on average 15 times a year. Traditional approaches – public meetings, question and answer sessions and co-option to committees – are also used frequently (around once a month) by authorities to engage the public. As one would expect, referendums are used on a one-off basis, most likely to engage the public on a key issue or decision.

### Target group for participation

For most participation initiatives, local authorities tend to involve the **whole population** rather than targeting particular groups or neighbourhoods. In particular, complaints/suggestion schemes, other opinion polls, interactive websites and citizens' panels are most predominantly used to consult whole populations (or representative samples) as opposed to being used to engage particular citizen groups or neighbourhoods.

The approaches that tend to be used by local authorities to involve a **particular citizen group** are: co-option/committee work; focus groups; service user forums; issue forums; shared interest forums and to the greatest extent, user management of services.

Area/neighbourhood forums, visioning exercises, public meetings and referendums are most predominantly used to consult **particular neighbourhoods**.

### Number of people involved by local government

The survey provides some indication of the increasing scale of public involvement in local decision-making: a total of around 8 million people were involved by all 216 responding authorities in

participation exercises during the whole of 2001. Roughly speaking, this implies that local government as a whole engaged approximately 14million people via participation and consultation initiatives during 2001. The survey also indicates that the highest numbers of people are involved by local authorities via consultation documents.

### **Policy focus of participation**

Local authorities most often seek to engage the public on issues relating to service delivery/best value and to the environment/local community. Also, but to a lesser extent, housing and crime/safety. Initiatives tend to be used to seek the people's views on a variety of issues. Although, complaints/suggestions schemes (and, inevitably, service satisfaction surveys) are most often used to engage the public in relation to service delivery and best value issues, and referendums tend to be used to seek citizens' views on political management arrangements.

### **Capacity to conduct participation exercises**

Given that a majority of authorities are concerned about resource and time demands of participation initiatives, it is perhaps surprising that local authorities more often manage them in-house. That said, the more resource-intensive and/or innovative approaches, such as citizens' juries, focus groups and opinion polls are likely to be contracted-out to some extent.

It could be that, rather than contracting-out exercises, authorities are seeking to collaborate with other authorities or agencies as a way of accessing additional skills and resources. Almost all authorities (97%) work with other organisations on schemes to enhance public participation – in most cases (89%) authorities work with the police, but also health authorities, voluntary/community organisations and other authorities. This also suggests that, when it comes to seeking views on inter-agency or cross-cutting issues, authorities are keen to avoid duplicating other organisation's efforts.

## **Factors influencing public participation approaches**

Whilst there are few significant relationships between participation approaches and type of authority or political control, some broad patterns emerge. District and rural councils seem the least active across the participation initiatives addressed in this survey, especially the more innovative and resource-intensive approaches. London boroughs and authorities controlled by Labour and Liberal-Democrat parties have used the most initiatives during 2001. These findings are discussed in more

detail below, but overall the results suggest that authorities have a core set of approaches that they use each year and others which they use on ad hoc or trial basis to address a specific need or issue.

### **Type of authority**

Overall, the average number of initiatives used by a local authority is 10.5 – up from 9.1 in 1997. London boroughs have used the most initiatives (provided in the questionnaire) during 2001 and districts the least – the difference is particularly noticeable for the more innovative approaches.

Traditional and consumerist approaches are well established across all types of authority – this is particularly true of consultation documents, public meetings, service satisfaction surveys and complaints suggestions schemes. However, the use of co-option to committees and other opinion polls varies more widely. Opinion polls are the most popular with county councils (used by 78% in 2001) and unitary authorities seem keener than a lot of other authorities to use co-option to committee as a way of engaging the public.

The use of the more innovative participation initiatives – particularly those with a deliberative element – varies much more by type of authority than the traditional and customer-oriented methods. Focus groups (70%+) are the most popular across all types of authority, and referendums (less than 30%) and citizens' juries (less than 14%) are the least. Interestingly, London boroughs are much more likely than all other types of authority to use referendums, as 29% of them did so in 2001.

### **Rural vs. urban**

Urban authorities have been the more active in using all the participation initiatives in the questionnaire – the one exception being consultation documents, which were used by 84% of rural and 84% of urban authorities. The difference between urban and rural authorities is particularly marked in relation to visioning exercises, user management of services, service user forums, co-option/committee involvement and shared interest forums.

### **Analysis by political control**

There is less distinction between authorities with differing political control, although those controlled by Labour and Liberal-Democrat parties have used the most participation initiatives (around 11 on average) during 2001. The 1998 research suggested that the absence of a majority political party reduced the average number of initiatives. However, the 2002 survey reveals that this gap has since narrowed, as both Conservative authorities and those with no overall control having used around 10 initiatives per year.

As with type of authority, councils with different political control differ the least in relation to the use of well-established traditional and 'consumerist' methods.

In terms of innovative approaches the use of focus groups (78%+) was the highest across all authorities – particularly so with Liberal-Democrat (90%) and Labour (87%) authorities. Referendums and citizens' juries showed the lowest level of usage in that same year – less than 20% and 11% respectively. Labour authorities would seem to favour referendums slightly more than authorities of other political control, as 19% of Labour authorities used this approach in 2001, compared to less than 6% across all other authorities.

## Issues in public participation

### Benefits of public participation initiatives

There are mixed views on the extent to which the results of participation exercises impact on the decision-making process – a majority of authorities (70%) think that participation initiatives are often or fairly influential on final decision-making, but a significant minority (27%) think that they are only occasionally or not at all influential.

Despite this, local authorities see improved service delivery and decision-making as the main benefits of enhanced participation. When provided with five different alternatives, the greatest number of authorities (56 authorities or 26%) indicated that 'improvements in services' is the most important benefit of consulting the public – closely followed by allowing 'better decision-making on specific points', which was selected by 51 authorities (24%) as the most important benefit.

### Challenges

Whilst local authorities are clear about the benefits that engaging the public can bring – demonstrated by the widespread use of participation initiatives across local government – the survey suggests authorities still have some concerns. 88% of authorities ranked a 'lack of resources' as the most important problem in implementing participation – this probably influences the types of initiatives authorities use. A 'lack of time' was ranked the most important problem by almost as many authorities (82%).

Local authorities seem concerned that the effectiveness of participation activities may be affected by low levels of public interest in participation initiatives. Two-thirds of authorities (64%) are concerned about overloading the public with research/consultation exercises and 53% are worried about raising public expectations that the authority cannot meet. In addition, a significant

proportion of authorities are concerned about the representativeness of consultation results – 56% of authorities worry that participation exercises may simply capture the views of dominant, but unrepresentative, groups. Furthermore, 44% acknowledged that they have experienced difficulties engaging particular social groups – most often citizens from ethnic minorities and young people (under 24 years). However, it would appear that local authorities are seeking to address this issue by aiming certain participation exercises at specific citizen groups or neighbourhoods.

## Further information

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This summary and full report are also available on the ODPM website:  
<http://www.local.dtlr.gov.uk/research/index.htm>

For further information on the research contact:

Demelza Birch  
Local and Regional Government Research Unit  
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU  
Tel: 020 7890 4123  
Fax: 020 7890 5183

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Published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.  
Printed in the UK, December 2002 on material containing 75% post-consumer waste and 25% ECF pulp.  
Product code 02LG00884