

How councils can strengthen civic engagement

Robin Hambleton

Given the widespread rise in societal tensions local councils can do more to promote effective participation in civic affairs, writes the emeritus professor of city leadership, University of the West of England, Bristol.

Just before Christmas, I attended a rather startling Bristol City Council meeting. On 12 December 2023, the lord mayor had to suspend proceedings not once, but twice.

Social tensions in the chamber were so high that he had to ask city council security staff to move into the public gallery to help calm the febrile atmosphere. Why were tensions so high in Bristol?

The two issues that caused such strife related to, firstly, a call from a group of Bristol citizens, many of whom clearly knew people living in Gaza City, who asked the city council to advocate a ceasefire in the Israeli/Palestine conflict, and, secondly, statements from citizens living in the Barton Hill high-rise flats, who were forced to evacuate in November because of alarming concerns about the structural safety of their homes, who asked if they would be able to return home for Christmas.

These two enormously important public issues clearly transcended party politics. I was able to see from my vantage point in the public gallery above the council chamber that councillors from all parties sympathised to a very great extent with the views expressed by the many animated citizens sitting, and at times standing and shouting, next to me.

Participatory and representative democracy

Local authorities across the country should be praised for developing, over the years, many new ways of blending participatory democracy with representative democracy.

Innovations with, for example, citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and co-production of public services have expanded. Organisations like the Local Government Association (Link: <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/public-service-reform-tools/engaging-citizens-devolution-2>) and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (Link: <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/>) have played a helpful role in facilitating the sharing of practical advice about these experiences.

In some cases, local authorities have attempted to revitalise their full council meetings by creating space for citizen voices to contribute. Thus, in 2000 Bristol City Council introduced a public forum space at the beginning of each council meeting during which individual citizens can submit public statements and/or ask public questions:

<https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/documents/s81915/CPublicInfoSheetFullCouncil.pdf>

This approach - and similar practices have been developed by other local authorities - has the benefit of enabling citizens to contribute directly to local civic discourse. Innovations of this kind can certainly enliven local democracy, but they also create challenges.

The rituals and ceremonies of council meetings have their basis in history. The mayor, or lord mayor, usually enters with the mace, a symbol of the mayor's authority as the 'first citizen' of the locality. Council meetings express, then, a reassuring continuity.

Enhancing citizen participation

Given the rising societal tensions now facing British society, I offer here three suggestions on how councillors could enhance citizen participation in civic affairs.

New settings for civic dialogue.

First, local authorities can become much more active in co-creating new civic spaces in which citizens and, indeed, young people who may not yet be recognised as formal citizens, can express their views on policy priorities. Looking ahead, the 'democratic offer' that an elected local authority presents to citizens needs to break new ground.

In Bristol, under the leadership of Mayor Marvin Rees, the city council has, in the period since 2016, developed a prize-winning approach to inclusive city governance, known as the Bristol One City approach:

<https://www.bristolonecity.com>

This strategy has been successful in bringing a very wide range of civic voices (public, private, trade union, non-profit and community) into the problem-solving capacity of our city.

The city gatherings, which are held twice a year and attract over 300 participants, enable diverse voices, including the voices of young people, to participate directly in the governance of Bristol. They not only revise and update the 30-year One City Plan and decide on top priorities for civic action in the forthcoming year, but they also initiate numerous citizen-led initiatives to tackle specific policy concerns.

Experiment with existing council meetings.

Second, local authorities should revisit the way they construct and conduct meetings, including their full council meetings. Is it worth asking if the council meetings in your authority are readily perceived by citizens as truly welcoming spaces?

For example, who decides on the agendas for council meetings? Do citizens have a voice in this process? Do agendas focus on the needs of the locality across the board, or the narrow business of the council? Does your council have a public forum space within each council

meeting enabling citizens to stand up and ask a question that the council is committed to answering in writing?

Strengthen the power of elected local authorities.

The civic vibrancy of a locality, as well as the potential for successful local economic development, is shaped to a very significant degree by the amount of political and fiscal power exercised by the elected council.

Countries where local government has solid constitutional protection and significant fiscal power are far more successful than the UK, not just in achieving public policy objectives, but also in fostering active participation in local affairs.

In Sweden, for example, the voter turnout in local elections has been running at around 80% for many years, which compares with an average figure for the UK of around 32%. (Link: <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/robin-hambleton-economic-growth-swedish-style-30-09-2022/>)

The evidence from international research shows that countries that value local democracy and encourage citizen participation in civic affairs, also deliver far better economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

In 2024, given a General Election is looming, UK citizens should be encouraged to ask candidates for political office in Westminster: 'What are your specific proposals for boosting the power of local councils and enlivening civic democracy in our country?'

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<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19>