

## National Policy Forum : Roundtable Discussion 15 June 2021 on:-

### “Increasing community control over public ownership”.

An Overview of the proceedings and some further thoughts by Jane Darling, Policy Officer

Steve Reed MP: Shadow Secretary for Communities and Local Government gave a brief introduction to this discussion topic, before we were divided into groups to go into break-out rooms. He asked the question -

Why would we want to increase public control?

The answer to this was that governance at every level can be top down and unresponsive to need and is, therefore, disempowering.

Collaboration and co-production are seen as the way forward, inviting people to talk about their views, leading towards the establishment of co-operative councils to equalise power.

Public ownership does not necessarily equal government control, for example:-

- Residents on housing estates can work together to form residents associations
- Residents in towns and villages can democratise their own energy supply, setting up co-operatives to sell energy produced back to residents at low-cost.
- Initiatives like 'Build It'- training up young people in converting empty homes back into use as housing for homeless people
- Social Services departments working collaboratively with families and their existing support systems to work out a plan together and decide who is needed to help the family to achieve the goals set.

Adopting ideas like these can make local government more responsive, more accountable, more inclusive.

Break-out room discussion topics:

1. Which public services need greater community oversight or control?
2. What are the barriers for increasing community control over public ownership and services?
3. What examples are there where increased community control over public ownership and services has helped to make that local area the best place to grow up and grow old in?
4. How do we increase participation in local community engagement projects or community programmes amongst groups which are typically underrepresented or less likely to engage?
5. How can we use technology to help increase community engagement in public life?

Summary of points raised:-

Young people don't do Facebook.

Young people should be able to learn about democracy and government at all levels at school, and to have regular discussions, maybe in form time (this from the 14 year old in my group)

Young people should be involved in local democracy

Youth Councils could be set up.

Councillors don't listen .

Council meetings should be more accessible to the public

There should be more communication with the public and greater transparency.

A multi-media approach to engagement with our constituents is required – not everyone has access to technology, which can be a very useful tool. Such as-

Cafes/surgeries

Door-knocking/listening to people all year round

Leafletting

Newsletters/magazines on a regular basis

Facebook pages for different campaign issues

Co-operation with other parties to change the way councils work and improve their engagement and accessibility to the population.

Ideas and sources mentioned during the feedback from break-out groups:-

1. On-line Youth forums
2. Democracy Café's – for further info look up Democracy Café- Camden and Transition Network.org. 2 exciting projects)
3. Doncaster Council (Labour run) works with other agencies and professionals to run Local Solutions Groups across Doncaster, "providing local solutions for local people for everyday issues." (see Doncaster Local solutions website)
4. Community Interest Groups/ Community Interest Companies/ co-operatives/ social enterprise groups.
5. Flat-pack Democracy- the story of the town council in Frome, Somerset, taken over by a group of independent candidates with the following aim "Taking political power at a local level, then using it to enable people to have a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives". See John Harris article "Guardian" 22 May 2015, or the books by Peter Macfadyen "Flatpack Democracy" and "Flatpack Democracy 2.0")
6. Paint Your Town Red – "how Preston took back control and your town can too." By Matthew Brown and Rhian E. Jones.

A few extracts from my reading around this topic before the Round Table:-

Barriers to increasing community control over public ownership and services:-

- Lack of belief in the possibility of change
- Lack of education and awareness of the benefits of change
- Lack of confidence, trust, opportunity, energy /the effort needed to try to manage day to day needs leaves nothing left for anything else.
- Lack of political will/investment in maintaining the status-quo.
- The importance of the individual over the collective/I'm alright Jack approach,
- It is almost impossible to be optimistic if you are living in a community pervaded by pessimism.

From: Who should Own our Communities? The case for social and public ownership of the UK by Robin Jervis-May 2017 London School of Economics.

"the people who live in areas should own and control their local environment through the formation of interlinked community co-operatives"

Each person should have a nominal stake in the collective ownership of public land, libraries, care facilities, community centres. This would become a right associated with residency in an area, and, with this right would come the right to participate in open, democratic forums about how these resources would be managed- similar to the idea of workers co-operatives- give people a sense of control and ownership. This is not a new idea. Scottish land reform laws allow communities to buy and manage land for the benefit of the community and environmental sustainability.

In England, some communities have collectively purchased and managed local shops, post offices and pubs.

Communities in England can also write "Neighbourhood Plans" which give control over planning and infrastructure.

From Diversifying Public Ownership; Constructing Institutions for participation, social empowerment and democratic control" by Andrew Cumbers

" the main aim of the proposal outlined here is to enhance democratic participation and collective knowledge formation in relation to the economy.....increased ownership of land and use of land should be subject to more public regulation and control"

This brings to mind the current Bill on Planning which the government is hoping to put into law in this Parliament. However, a Labour motion this week, backed by some Tories, has put a spoke in the wheel, at least for the time being , forcing more time for debate on this.

In Folkestone and Hythe we now have the Town Plan, developed by a consultancy company called "We Made That". The plan has gone out to some public consultation and there have been online sessions which the public could view and submit questions to. However, it would be interesting to know what the proportion of the population of our district are aware of these proposals and/or feel that they could possibly have any influence over the proposals. Other questions wait to be answered. For example- will any gentrification of the district be to the benefit of those already struggling to pay their rents, the young of the town to afford to continue to live in the town and enhance the lives of the whole population, including the elderly or those with disabilities? We will have to "watch this space"!

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