

New Directions in Democracy – a think piece

The 2016-17 Democratic Services Committee expressed a desire to reinvigorate their agenda through understanding new perspectives and ideas in democratic development. At the last meeting of the Committee, colleagues from the Community Engagement team delivered a presentation on a concept named Collective Impact – which was focussed around how we engage more meaningfully with communities to unlock their creative rather than reactive component. Discussion emerged about the power of collective problem sharing and solving approaches and interest was sparked in how we might take forward experiential learning in these areas. The debate alighted on how we might better help people and communities think more purposefully about the power they can exercise. How we might bring some of the characteristics associated with small-group face to face democracy and new structures of representation which traditionally, has tended to focus on larger scale collective movements. There was a keenness to get beyond merely talking good practice and good governance to understanding what it means now and in the future to our citizens.

This paper aims to help stimulate future discussions and provide some information and insight to the debate around new directions in democracy and potential ‘best fits’ for the county and our council. With a new statutory requirement to look ahead and apply foresight with the introduction of the Wellbeing of Future Generations and indeed, the publication of our own Wellbeing Objectives – there are opportunities to explore and develop. We have clear potential to better connect and reinforce the twin aims of service improvement and citizen engagement – both of which underpin the entirety of our purpose to deliver sustainable and resilient communities. The need to be more relevant, efficient and responsive is inescapable, but we must also focus equally on improving how citizens engage in governance. ***In essence the question is how do we improve the democratic character of our organisation and the quality of public dialogue?***

Practice from elsewhere

Plenty of information, evidence and case studies exist on the efficiency and effectiveness with which the democratic services function is exercised – but beyond administrative processes and governmental approaches – it is harder to find examples of democratic re-purposing.

Interesting larger scale examples exist in the form of organisations such as the UK Open Government Network. The Network exists to support and encourage groups, organisations and individuals who are committed to government work better for people through increased transparency, participation and accountability. The Network collaborates with and challenges governments to develop and implement ambitious governance reforms. Their agenda is structured around:

- Residents needing to be able to find out some basic things from their councils – how to get issues dealt with; easily accessible information and how to navigate the LG system
- Changing role of councillors – with more information being made available and new ways of engaging – there are opportunities for Councillors to look at alternative ways of engaging with the public to look at the systemic problems that often create issues. This means Councillors looking to engage more with residents to seek their ideas, solutions to problems and views on how change might be enacted and the new roles residents might play in this relationship
- Training and capacity building for councillors to support changing context – this could involve a focus on new kinds of capacity building and wider imperatives around whole organisation culture change in order for councils to embrace a keenness for openness

- Empowering councillors to seek out new forms of engagement. Some examples exist of pre-council meetings; councillors engaging with communities and groups to seek and obtain views of specific issues of local relevance prior to decision making. This promotes a sense of councillors and communities making decisions together.
- Open government and open data - promoting data audits, making data available and understanding why people need data to help solve complex social problems
- Scrutiny as a mechanism for increasing transparency – significant untapped potential to involve citizens and improve accountability
- Open local government needs to have more impact – how we might hold a conversation with communities about changing expectations of local government and what they expect today and in the future

Different approaches work in different areas. More conventional-style ‘Citizen Panels’ continue to work effectively in some areas, whilst other councils have more ambitiously developed local problem sharing fora where local social challenges are put to groups of residents wherein detailed explorations take place involving expert witnesses. Other places have focussed on developing effective processes and approaches to support social action through organised volunteering, developing rewards and incentives schemes and increasing cases exist – as they do in Monmouthshire – where residents take part in and/ or run services themselves.

Work led by NESTA on the subject shows how more personally tailored services can empower service users to become more engaged and involved in shaping development and delivery. The key principle is that local problems are best solved through local social public action or so-called ‘double loop democracy’. Democratic innovation in this way is seen as having two main dimensions: renewal of the mandate of the elected and revival of civic virtue and public action amongst citizens generally.

The work Monmouthshire has undertaken in this area to date also merits consideration as a fairly strong base on which to build. Our digital MadeOpen Platform is about facilitating collaboration and demonstrating the impact of ‘together’. The process of developing ‘Our Monmouthshire’ with over 1700 postcard responses received to inform our wellbeing objective and priorities – represented a practice which met with public approval. Town Teams, place-based approaches, community co-ordination and community enterprise development have all contributed to promoting our proximity to residents and improving understandings of ‘what matters’. In addition, the creation of the app, MyMonmouthshire, with over 6,000 users has provided a new and more instantaneous and digital way of sharing and solving problems.

The Local Government White Paper (Wales) 2017

The Paper sets out the key areas pertinent to this discussion:

- How Local Government might re-think its relationship with Town and Community Councils and more to more place-based partnerships
- The potential for more participation in budget making and setting
- The potential for more processes to be digitised, improving efficiency and reach
- Duty placed on Councils to produce a public engagement strategy with specific reference to engagement in local democratic processes
- Remote attendance of meetings
- Councillor correspondence, surgeries and annual reports – with councillors making clear how constituents can access and communicate with them
- Area committees – reviewing flexibility and powers vested in them

- Revisions to electoral arrangements including: reviewing postal voting, electronic voting and counting, voting outside of polling stations and development of a single electronic register for Wales.

Collective Impact

As the county's biggest public service provider however, it is clear we are grappling with and face ever more significant challenges. The funds we get from WG have been falling in real terms and we're confronted by a lot of pressures including an ageing population, declining numbers of young people and new legislation as well as wider strategic challenges such as Brexit, climate change and the opportunities of new technology.

Our current ways of doing things have served us well and delivered some really good outcomes. In Monmouthshire we've managed to find savings of £17m over the past four years without our communities experiencing significant decline in front-line services. However, we know that even though the 2017/18 budget settlement was as good as we could have expected we don't think our current way of doing things is sustainable for much longer. People are working incredibly hard and we can't squeeze much more out of the current system. We need to think differently. The Minister for Finance and Local Government has now removed the shadow of local government reorganization so our destiny is once again in our own hands - it's important that we grasp that opportunity.

There is an opportunity to empower and mobilise both people and organisations that care about Monmouthshire's social, economic and environmental fabric; so that together we can tackle deeply entrenched problems that inhibit our otherwise remarkable county. We envisage approaching this in two ways. Firstly, by developing innovative partner collaborations to help counter more difficult times ahead. Secondly, by harnessing available resources, skills and initiatives within Monmouthshire that rewards actionable change. Our end goal, our legacy, will be to endow the collaborations that create the most impact. The potential for the Public Service Board to be key in driving this forward is clear; offering opportunities to fix problems in a connected and collaborative way.

For Collective Impact to succeed, people and organisations in Monmouthshire must fulfil their individual responsibilities as well as those that require collaboration with others. The core message is that together, we can make a difference.

Challenge-driven communities

Monmouthshire Council is a resource of some 4,000 employees. The County of Monmouthshire has a resource of over 90,000 people. So, how might we best connect to and unlock all the talent and ideas out there and promote community-powered problem solving? How do communities connect with us and each other, do this in order to constantly generate new ways of creating value. The answers to such questions could spell a radical departure from approaches that saw procurement of solutions and products from vendors and a 'we have the answers' or 'we can solve your problems' stance. In some circles this concept of working more closely together to create new solutions and opportunities is called 'co-creation'. Whilst questions are posed around which sections of the community to connect with to exploit opportunities; through which platform or with what data and how to expand the network - the opportunity is to make it possible to tackle problems of increasing scope. The organisations that make it possible to tackle problems of increasing scope are the ones which build the most vibrant webs of human interaction. Our Community Hubs and platforms such as MyMonmouthshire offer opportunities to trial challenge-driven working.

Community Governance Review

Our first phase Community Governance Review, commissioned by the previous Cabinet has now concluded and reported. The scope of the review was to examine the viability and relevance of community governance structures such as Area Committees and area panels and the plethora of fora, in the light of newer developments in participatory democracy such as Town Teams. The review concluded that each place and area needed to structure the arrangements which best suited it and optimally serviced its needs. It's reduced the number of groups and structures and sought to move areas towards more integrated and connected structures, supporting peer learning and greater interaction. Whilst this initial work has created more clarity at the local level and created more synergistic benefits – community governance goes beyond re-arrangement of area committees and so it is anticipated that as this agenda is developed and strategic set down by the new Council, a second phase of work to establish not just the 'will' but the 'way' will be necessary.

In conclusion, the appetite to explore new directions in democracy sets out a wide-ranging scope. Should the new Democratic Services committee continue interest in this area, it is suggested that key areas of focus are established and agreed in order that actions and progress can be demonstrated and measured. Democracy goes wider than political advocacy, voting and enjoying and protecting our civil liberties. Democracy is fundamentally about creating the capacity to do things and to choose the important problems we want to work on and then work on them together in just and productive ways. For the growing variety of challenging issues facing communities and its public service organisations – it appears essential to create and put in place the capacity to share and solve problems at a community and placed based level. Fundamentally the problem this paper seeks to pose – is how we might get more people engaged and involved in how to make a difference.
