

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Participatory Democracy and the Role of Elected Members

David Barr of the Improvement Service sits down with Dr Oliver Escobar, senior lecturer in Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh, David O'Neill, former President of COSLA, and Councillor Elena Whitham, Depute Leader of East Ayrshire Council and COSLA spokesperson for Community Wellbeing, to consider what participatory democracy looks like in practice and what it means for elected members.

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Over the last 10 years the mechanisms for how citizens can participate more fully in decision making have been strengthened. Recommendations from the Christie Commission in 2011 highlighted the need for more bottom up processes, the Community Empowerment Act introduced legislative asset transfer and participation requests. Participatory budgeting, often called Community Choices or PB, has allowed people to have their say in how money is distributed locally, with the view that PB would also become extended to having a say on how at least 1% of council budgets would be spent.

With increasing pressures on local government budgets and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, there has also been an increased focus on the term 'participatory democracy, but what is it and what does this mean for elected members?

What is participatory democracy?

For Oliver Escobar, the Academic Lead on Democratic Innovation at the Edinburgh Futures Institute, "it's about making sure that we have a democracy where people feel that they can contribute to it, that they can participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives, and that they can engage in the civic life that a lot of people in Scotland tend to value."

David O'Neill, who was an elected member for over 30 years and served as leader of North Ayrshire Council for three terms, adds: "It's important to emphasise that some people see that there is a contradiction between representative democracy and participative democracy. I don't think that there is a conflict there, I think it's two sides of the same coin. You have to have both of them, if you only have one, you will be less effective and you'll get poorer outcomes getting delivered for communities."

"A very important part of it for me is that people in government, whatever sphere of government, as national, regional, or local, they tend to talk about empowering communities. It's the other way around, it's the communities that empower government. The communities, the people, the voters, they say to us as politicians, 'We give you authority to go and do on our behalf, but you don't do it to us, you do it with us.' That's why participative and representative democracy have to work hand in hand."

Some people might argue members are elected by their communities, and if their communities don't like the decisions that the members take and the work that the council is doing then they can be kicked out after their term of office. To this argument, David O'Neill reflects that "you're only talking about democracy happening once every five years, that's fine, but democracy is not a destination, it's a journey and it's a continuous journey."

Councillor Elena Whitham, a Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing and Communities at East Ayrshire agrees. "I think for me as well it's important to recognise that democracy doesn't just exist on one day at a ballot box and then we have to wait a term to actually influence our citizens and what's happening in our local areas and the decisions that are being taken, because I think we then end up that we've always got a populist that's reactive. Being just reactive on one day every now and again is not the same as being a proactive community that has wellbeing and participation at its heart."

Examples of processes that enable participatory democracy

As the conversation turns to examples of participatory democracy in practice, David O'Neill offers a recent example from North Ayrshire. The housing strategy in North Ayrshire involved seven blocks of high flats, five of them in Irvine and two of them in Saltcoats. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, the council engaged with residents on the buildings to see how they move forward.

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“Now, when I started as a councillor, the type of engagement that you would have had was, ‘What colour do you want us to paint the doors?’ Now the engagement is, ‘What do you think the future is for these buildings?’ A considerable degree of engagement took place, people were very well informed about what the options were, and at the end of the process, they came to a conclusion, which the conclusion was that some of the flats, the Irvine ones should be replaced with modern cost-effective energy-efficient, low-rise housing, and the ones in Saltcoats, the conclusion was that they should remain and be refurbished.

“That was putting the decision-making process into the hands of the people who were actually living there. It was, again, a mixture of representative and participative democracy working hand in hand.”

Councillor Elena Whitham adds: “That was an absolutely brilliant demonstration of how to get that process right, because I think that we’ve seen decisions taken on housing across the country that haven’t had that representative and participative aspect to it. You then end up in a situation where you have a very unhappy community and that feels as if something’s been done to them, and you don’t actually get a positive outcome. That’s a fantastic example of what we’re talking about.”

Thinking about her local area, Elena gives an example from East Ayrshire, where there are over 30 community-led action plans, the result of communities themselves organising locally to create a blueprint with facilitation from the council; a partnership working approach.

Having empowered communities meant that East Ayrshire were able to pass COVID monies from Scottish Government to communities quickly, who then created their own bespoke response in partnership with council services. Volunteers were key workers.

“It meant that we’d get money out the door, which meant that we actually created community food larders and a response instantaneously, it felt like. For me, that demonstrated, if you get it right, you actually have a community that’s able and proactively reacts to situations around them.

I’m immensely proud of what we saw, people walking folks’ dogs, picking up folks’ prescriptions, using surplus food, all really quickly. That was a testament to all the work that’s gone on over the last decade or so.”

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Times of Crisis: COVID and beyond

The challenges facing councils have been growing, response and recovery from COVID-19 on top of budgetary pressures. Centralisation can take hold, and the 'nice things to have', the participatory budgeting and processes that are put in place, and some of the other methods and tools of participating democracy get put to the side while essential services are focused on. What is the panel's message to elected members who feel that pressure to go down that route in the next year or two, particularly coming up to an election in May 2022?

"We really can't shy away from the fact that all of us are going to have to be taking really difficult decisions. If we take those decisions into the centre in isolation away from the communities that we serve, nobody's going to do very well at the ballot box next time. It's actually about having communities understand the full decision-making process," answers Elena. "I think that we have to actually devolve that decision-making process to communities so they actually come with us on that journey, because if people aren't empowered to actually take decisions themselves, then it's always going to feel as if it's done to them. As an elected member, as David said, you do have that feeling sometimes that you have the responsibility to make the decision, but you're making that decision without the input from the people who you're serving."

"There's no getting away from the fact that resources are going to be shrinking, In some of our more remote and rural areas where we've had depopulation and de-industrialisation, there's going to be huge impact. We actually have to have people playing their central role in how we emerge and we recover from that. To take away their right to be involved, to me, is absolutely wrong, and as elected members, we need to recognise that."

Finding a process for participation

Oliver considers the importance of having well organised processes that allows for a cross section of the local community to come together, not just the stronger voices or the groups and demographics that already take advantage of opportunities to participate. "This is why I really understand when elected members [say], 'Well, I cannot give undue influence to a particular community group that is very forceful because I am not reassured that they really represent the diversity of perspectives in that community.' I think that that is a really good example of the key role of elected members as watchdogs of participatory democracy, as guarantors of the quality of those processes."

"As a citizen, I want that kind of check and balance there. No one is saying here that it's just about delegating decision-making power without checks and balances. Part of the checks and balances is the role of councillors in reassuring everyone else that the process has included a diversity of people who have had a chance to look at the issues in some depth and consider it carefully and then make an informed recommendation. That's really important. The type of process is just as important as developing these kinds of processes."

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In terms of potential processes, he reflects on the infrastructure being used to mobilise more people in Scotland: “Participatory budgeting has that potential. Things like citizens’ juries, which have been used up north quite a lot locally. Aberdeenshire has been leading on this and being a trailblazer. Then also some of the digital innovations that many councils are developing, all of those have the potential to create the kind of diverse spaces that councillors will feel are legitimate spaces to try and articulate a community vision, but the quality of the process really matters. That, to me, is the key. That’s what’s going to make those elected members who are a little bit cautious still to see the potential of this agenda.”

East Ayrshire does a lot of participatory budgeting and its Vibrant Communities programme, which works with, rather than for, communities, to harness the enthusiasm, talent and ‘can do’ spirit that exists across East Ayrshire for the benefit of communities. Through this work Elena understands the importance of a good process and stresses it’s not always easy. “That really is the role of the elected member, to scrutinise that policy creation and the processes, but also to be the person that actually gets into the community and helps to smooth the way with everybody.

“That could be difficult because you might get shouted at some night, you might start your PB journey and get it wrong the first few times and change the process. That’s okay because that’s what we have to do. We have to say ‘Okay, actually, that event didn’t work quite the way we wanted it to work. What can we learn from that? How can we change it?’ That’s something that I’ve made sure that we try to do and champion.

“That means not shying away from the folk that maybe didn’t get anything that night and trying to figure other ways that we can help them to secure funding, but recognising if there’s unfairness in the process anywhere and how we can change it. If we don’t do that, the participation stops at that point. We have to actually make sure that we keep changing and we keep evolving with it.

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their lives. You actually have a community that has higher levels of wellbeing, that then has less of a demand on other services. There's huge benefits from handing that power over. Sometimes it can feel a little bit like civil war in communities and that's where elected members really come to the fore as well."

Challenges around participatory democracy

While the examples highlight the benefits of processes done well, the panel is aware of significant challenges towards participatory democracy.

For one, as Oliver highlights, there are sources of inequalities in communities. Looking at examples in Scotland, but also internationally in places with digital civic infrastructures such as Taiwan, Estonia or New Zealand, communities that had experience in developing projects and engaging in participative processes tended to be far more responsive and capable of responding to urgent issues, as well have now planning for the medium and long term.

"Not all communities are at that stage, not all communities have the civic infrastructure, not all communities also have local leadership who see things in this kind of participative manner," Oliver explains. "I think there is a broader issue here of building the infrastructure for community empowerment. That's something that I think we've been trying to do in Scotland for some time."

Oliver leads onto the next challenge: participation not yet being thought of as a necessity.

"Maybe now is the moment to take it to the next level. Although, I do appreciate that there are a number of challenges and constraints, and many councillors will be thinking, 'Well, maybe all of this participative stuff is a nice thing to have, but not necessarily something that we see as essential to our institutional system. Let's wait until things are better or whatever.' I think that that will be wrong because I think we need to see this as part of how our institutions work, just because it's going to make them work better and be more responsive and have more of a mandate to act."

This resonates with David O'Neill: "I think an important add-on to what Oliver said, particularly in times of crisis, there is an inclination on the part of politicians to say, 'Let's bring this to the centre and run it, make sure that it's done right.' But then what happens is, we don't let it go again, we tend to hold on to it. I'm as guilty of that. I saw that when I was a leader in North Ayrshire Council, I found myself doing that, 'Let's bring that into the centre and make



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sure it works.' That might be appropriate in a crisis, but it's not appropriate 24/7, 52 weeks a year. Horses for courses when it needs to be done, but you also need to be willing to relinquish that power."

The skills needed for making processes successful

What skills will elected members and officer need in order to ensure that the processes being put in place are effective?

The panel agrees that empathy and listening are key. "If you cannot hear what other people are saying you'll operate in your own little bubble," David O'Neill explains. "The ability to analyse sometimes very complex information, and I do accept that elected members will not all possess all of the skills that are required. You do certainly need to listen and be able to analyse."

I think a very important one is to recognise that your role as a community leader is about building community bridges. Building relationships between the different parts of the community."

For Oliver Escobar, there's been recognition that training and teaching thinking about specific policy areas is not enough: "People need to get those skills on facilitation, mediation, process design, brokering, knowledge brokering as well, partnership building. All these skills that used to be called soft skills. To me, those are the hardest core skills."

"You can get to grips with what's the latest on housing or what's the latest on transport after reading a little bit and talking to people. That you can grasp in the real world. What is harder to sometimes develop is that relational capacity and relational skill and capital. I think we need to begin to value that much more. We need to say, yes, it's important that you understand the topics you work on, your brief, but just as important is that set of relational skills. The softer skills that eventually is what makes things happen. When things happen it's because elected members have managed to start the right combination of people, ideas and actions."



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