Involve – written evidence (CCE0187)

Who we are

Involve is a charity and think tank. We want to build a democracy that works for everyone – that gives people real power to effect change in their lives, communities and beyond.

We believe our political system is lacking three essential qualities of democracy:

- Openness – The public should be able to understand, influence and hold decisions-makers to account for the actions and inactions of their governments;
- Participation – People should have the freedom, support and opportunity to shape their communities and influence the decisions that affect their lives;
- Deliberation – A key role of democracy is exchanging and acknowledging different perspectives, understanding conflict and finding common ground, and building a shared vision for society.

We believe that these qualities of democracy are essential for solving 21st century challenges - including extreme inequality, the impacts of globalisation, climate change, rapid technological development and the pressures of an aging society - and for achieving a more equal distribution of political power.

Evidence

1. What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

1.1. Active citizenship and civic engagement are essential qualities of any healthy and functioning society and democracy. The literature and research on active citizenship suggests a wide range of benefits for individuals, the state and society:

- Creates a vibrant civil society, an important counter-check to the state and the market
- Fosters social capital (i.e. the ties and shared norms between people)
- Develops people’s confidence and sense of self-determination
- Contributes to well-being
- Strengthens the legitimacy and accountability of democratic institutions
- Empowers local communities
- Builds social cohesion
- Improves the effectiveness and efficiency of public services
- Increases political efficacy and self-esteem

1.2. Involve’s Pathways through Participation research, with NCVO and the Institute for Volunteering Research, found that active citizenship can be grouped into three main categories (although there are clearly many overlaps between them):
• Social participation: the collective activities that individuals are involved in, including being involved in formal voluntary organisations (e.g. volunteering for a charity shop or being a trustee), informal or grassroots community groups (e.g. a tenants’ and residents’ association or a sports club), and formal and informal mutual aid and self help (e.g. a peer-support group or a community gardening group).

• Public participation: the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy, including voting, contacting a political representative, campaigning and lobbying, and taking part in consultations and demonstrations.

• Individual participation: people’s individual actions and choices that reflect the kind of society they want to live in, including buying fair trade or green products, boycotting products from particular countries, recycling, signing petitions, giving to charity and informal helpful gestures (such as visiting an elderly neighbour).

Citizenship, civic engagement and identity

1.3. Our Pathways through Participation research found that how and why people participate is closely linked to their sense of identity. This extract from the research summarises the findings on the links between active citizenship and identity:

1.3.1. Participation is about individual motivations and personal preferences. People got involved in activities that had personal meaning and value and that connected with the people, interests and issues that they held dear. We identified six categories of meanings that motivated interviewees to participate:

• helping others
• developing relationships
• exercising values and beliefs
• having influence
• for personal benefit
• being part of something.

1.3.2. People often have multiple motivations for participating – some linked to a belief system or moral code, for example the ‘greater good’ – and others more self-interested. We found that people gain as well as give when they participate. This is not to suggest that participation lacks altruism, but rather that if there is not some mutual benefit then people’s involvement may falter. Interviewees often spoke about gaining from participating (in terms of friendship, satisfaction, influence, support, confidence, skills and recognition) as much as they gave (in terms of time, money, compassion, care and energy).

1.3.3. Individuals often participated in activities and groups because of the people they knew, liked, enjoyed being around and cared about. A desire to make and/or embed social connections, meet new people and combat isolation or loneliness led many people to get involved in a collective activity. The human desire to be with others in a joint endeavour, and the strength and quality of the relationships between fellow participants that grow through belonging to a group, came through vividly in our research.
1.3.4. We found that people’s values, beliefs and worldviews are closely linked to their experiences, social connections, cultural and social norms, and perceptions of community (of place and interest), as well as life spheres (the different elements that make up an individual’s life – for example, family and work). All these elements are integral to people’s identity and self-image and are crucial to understanding their motivations for participation.

2. Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

2.1. Membership and belonging are formed through active engagement with community and social life. A more effective way of strengthening people’s identity as citizens than ceremonial events would be to demonstrate people’s stake and efficacy within their community and wider society. The Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement shows that only 23% of people perceive that they have an influence over decision-making locally, falling to 16% for decision-making nationally.

2.2. Research has shown that the involvement of people in local decision making can have a range of benefits both for them and public bodies. This includes making people feel more connected to their local community, increasing their sense of self efficacy, and encouraging other forms of civic engagement. Attempts to promote citizenship must, therefore, extend beyond the symbolic to involving people in shaping their lives, communities and beyond.

3. Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

3.1. Citizens should have the right to have their voices heard by the state on the issues that affect their lives. One model that could be explored is the Tuscany Regional Participation Policy.

3.2. The Tuscany Regional Participation Policy (TTPR) institutionalises participatory, deliberative processes as a regular part of administration and governance throughout Tuscany. Introduced into Tuscan regional law in 2007, and strengthened in 2013, the central purpose of the TPRP is, as declared in Article 1 No 46/2013, “contributing to renew democracy and its institutions by integrating them with practices, processes and tools of participatory democracy”, and, through this, to develop "greater social cohesion, through the diffusion of a culture of participation, and valuing all forms of civic engagement, knowledge and skills disseminated in society".

3.3. The law goes on to establish an obligation on local and regional governments to develop varied participatory processes for engaging citizens in the construction of public policies and projects. These obligations are based on the principle that participation is a basic human right and that it is the responsibility of public institutions to provide opportunities for this, and ensure the right tools are in place to enable effective participation.
3.4. The law also provided for the creation of an independent institution in charge of the promotion of participatory processes: "the Authority for participation". This body has the role of monitoring the development of a more participatory culture across the region and distributing funding to support innovative methodological approaches to participation (including the use of new information and communication technologies) to enable new forms of exchange to develop between institutions and citizens.

4. Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

4.1. At the heart of the electoral reform debate are questions of fairness and values. Any electoral system will include biases that impact who votes, how they vote and who benefits. These are important constitutional decisions that must be made through an open and fair process. Politicians and political parties naturally have a self-interest in promoting a system that increases their chances of being (re)elected, and therefore are not best placed to make decisions that reflect the wider public interest. We believe, therefore, that these are decisions citizens themselves should have a role in making.

4.2. There are already a number of international examples of Citizens’ Assemblies being held on such issues. Citizens’ Assemblies bring together a randomly selected group of the public to deliberate and reach recommendations on an issue, which are often then either reviewed by Parliament or go to a public referendum. Ireland, for example, is midway through its second citizens’ assembly on constitutional reform. The first covered issues including presidential terms, voting age, the electoral system, and voting rights for expats, while the current assembly’s remit includes considering fixed term parliaments and referenda.

4.3. While voting is an important expression of citizenship and civic engagement, it is not the only one. There are a wide variety of other mechanisms through which citizens can be engaged in informing and taking decisions in local and national policy making. As well as the benefits to people’s sense of belonging, efficacy, citizenship, etc., outlined above, these forms of engagement give a more detailed and accurate picture of people’s policy preferences than voting. Therefore, in addition to electoral reform, attention should be paid to these wider opportunities to promote political engagement.

5. What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

5.1. Through our work with young people, they have told us that there should be more of an emphasis on citizenship education within the school curriculum. Unless you do politics at A-level or have politically engaged parents it is unlikely that you will leave school understanding the political system and how decisions get made.
5.2. Beyond the classroom, though, we believe that the most effective way to form young people into active citizens is to give them the experience of making a difference on an issues that matters to them. No classroom lesson can replicate the feeling of actually exercising political power.

5.3. An example of such an approach from Involve’s own work is our MH:2K project on youth mental health. Mental health conditions affect about 1 in 10 young people in the UK, with vulnerable groups particularly at risk. MH:2K was developed by Involve and Leaders Unlocked to engage young people in conversations about mental health in their local area. It empowers 14-25 year olds to identify the mental health issues that they see as most important; engage their peers in discussing and exploring these topics; and work with key local decision-makers to make recommendations for change.

5.4. The MH:2K model consists of six key components:

1. Recruitment of a core team of young people as ‘Citizen Researchers’, including those with direct experience of mental health issues and individuals from at risk groups.

2. Design Days to allow this team to explore key national and local information about youth mental health, alongside their own views and experiences. The Researchers determine which mental health issues are most significant for their area. They receive training in research, facilitation and public speaking.

3. Roadshow: The Citizen Researchers co-design and co-deliver workshops to engage at least 500 other young people in the topics they have identified to be the most significant for their area. The workshops stimulate informal learning and gather young people’s views on the issues and potential solutions.

4. Results Day: The Citizen Researchers help analyse and extract key findings. They work with local decision-makers to develop strong, practical recommendations for change.

5. Big Showcase: The Citizen Researchers present their findings and recommendations to key stakeholders at a showcase event, involving facilitated conversations about next steps.

6. An Expert Panel of key local decision-makers and stakeholders informs the project’s work throughout its lifetime.

5.5. The process was piloted in Oldham between September 2016 and May 2017. Twenty young adults from diverse backgrounds were recruited to become the first MH:2K Citizen Researchers. Armed with the right knowledge and support, the Citizen Researchers selected five key priorities to address through the pilot: Self-harm; Stigma; Professional Practice; Family and Relationships; The Environment; and Culture of Education. The recommendations of the Citizen Researchers were heard by representatives of Oldham Council, CCG and youth sector organisations, many of which are in the process of being implemented.
6. Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

7. How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

7.1. There are a range of ways in which the state can encourage civic engagement, but it must be recognised that people’s motivations for participating in political and social life are often deeply rooted in their sense of identity.

7.2. This extract from our Pathways through Participation research summarises our findings and recommendations on supporting civic engagement:

1. Participation is personal and must be viewed first and foremost from the perspective of the individual taking part

7.2.1. Policy-makers and practitioners who wish to promote and encourage participation must view participation holistically, because trying to channel individuals into narrowly defined areas of participation is unlikely to result in more active citizens. If an individual does not identify with a particular cause or activity, reducing the barriers to them becoming involved is unlikely to make a difference. Any attempt to encourage participation must take into account the differing and multiple motivations people have for becoming and staying involved.

7.2.2. Participation is inherently about a free choice to take part without coercion. Our interviewees defined their own participation and made their own decisions about how and why they participated according to their upbringing, life stages, personality traits, beliefs and values, interests and personal circumstances. In contrast, government policy was never described as a motivating factor by the interviewees, and any influence was reported negatively: imposition of government agendas and intentions on people’s existing activities, for example, was viewed as politicising their participation and was almost unanimously rejected.

7.2.3. People’s negative reaction to the imposition of agendas that are not theirs has potentially been exacerbated by government’s encouragement of comparatively narrow, highly formalised and structured forms of participation (e.g. public consultations, regeneration boards, health consultative bodies, formal volunteering). This does not fit easily with the variety of participation activities we identified. It can also be counter-productive: it can dissuade some people from participating and limit the diversity of people involved, or kill-off local groups through, for example, processes and demands that are too formalised, and generally inhibit less structured forms of participation.

2. Participation can be encouraged, supported and made more attractive
7.2.4. Our research identified a range of factors that fostered people’s participation. There are many basic practical reasons why people do and do not participate that can be addressed. Our research challenges assumptions that non-participation is about apathy, laziness or selfishness. Participation opportunities need to complement people’s lives and respond to people’s needs, aspirations and expectations. The ‘build it and they will come’ approach does not work in isolation.

7.2.5. People juggle many competing demands for their time and attention and their priorities will vary according to personal circumstances and life stage. This has implications for the role that participation can play in local communities and wider society. Current policy agendas that look to citizens to take control and manage community assets or deliver public services, for example, are unlikely to be attractive forms of involvement for people who want to engage in a more episodic, light-touch way.

7.2.6. While participation is already widespread, there is significant potential for more opportunities to participate to be made available to a wider range of people. We found that few people had a full picture of the range of opportunities available to them locally. Decisions about what to do and how to get involved tended to be almost entirely the result of personal contact (e.g., being asked by a friend) or finding information of direct personal relevance (e.g., an advert to join the parent-teachers’ association of their child’s school). Support bodies and other public and voluntary and community organisations also often had only a partial picture of local activities, groups and events, which limited the extent to which they could help provide access to relevant and appropriate opportunities for individuals wanting to participate.

7.2.7. These findings complement previous research which has, for example, found that smaller, grassroots organisations rarely engaged with Volunteer Centres and often existed independently of such structures. However, we observed that well-run and welcoming groups, the right physical locations in which to meet and sufficient funds can create the right growing conditions for people to participate and provide a positive experience that will encourage them to continue participating.

7.2.8. Many interviewees highlighted how their parents and wider family had played an influential role in instilling a culture of participation and/or the values and beliefs that later framed their participation. But not all interviewees had been socialised into participation through their family; schools and youth groups (such as Scouts and Guides) also played an important role in providing opportunities for participatory activities during people’s formative years.

7.2.9. Institutions, organisations and groups enable participation by providing resources and support, and in some cases, bridging communities through their everyday contacts with people. Places of worship and community centres provided a range of opportunities to participate, some within their own walls and some beyond. The importance of physical spaces where diverse groups can meet, and bonds and networks are formed and maintained, was found throughout the research: without access to a hall or a room many collective activities would simply not happen. The spaces that provide access to a range of activities and people allow pathways and connections to be established that support sustained participation.
7.2.10. Individuals who are bridge-builders within communities were also an important enabling factor. They brought people together and facilitated access to opportunities and routes into participation. However, sometimes key individuals were seen as a mixed blessing if they acted as barriers to the involvement of others, perhaps protecting their own positions at the expense of others, or preventing new people from taking up leadership roles.

3. Significant barriers to participation are entrenched

7.2.11. At present much policy remains focused on initiatives to address the symptoms (e.g. technology to promote volunteering and giving opportunities) without addressing the underlying causes (e.g. lack of confidence or resources).

7.2.12. We found that deeper and more entrenched issues in society are reflected in disparities in the practice of participation. Issues of power and inequality in society are critical to understanding how and why people get involved and stay involved. The uneven distribution of power, social capital and other resources means that not everyone has access to the same opportunities for participation nor do they benefit from the impacts of participation in the same way. Such persistent and structural socio-economic inequalities are clearly challenging to address and cannot be removed without profound political and societal changes.

7.2.13. Our recommendations are clustered around three themes:

1. Develop realistic expectations of participation

7.2.14. An over-optimistic view of participation can portray participation as the answer to all society’s ills but it is important that we acknowledge its limitations and develop realistic expectations of what can be achieved. This requires policymakers to be clear about the purpose of the participation they want to see happening, and to recognise that almost everyone already participates in one way or another. It also requires institutions, organisations and groups to recognise that participation is dynamic and that opportunities need to be flexible; that participation should be mutually beneficial – participants need to gain something from the experience; and that people have limited time and sometimes just want participation that is sociable and enjoyable.

2. Understand what policy and practice interventions can and cannot achieve

7.2.15. Policy and practice interventions can influence participation, but there are many other factors that shape how and why an individual participates, and that affect the desired impact of policy and practice decisions. Participation is more bottom-up than top-down, and does not always happen in the ways policymakers and practitioners want or expect. Some factors that shape and encourage participation are easier and quicker to influence and shape than others.

7.2.16. We suggest that:

- An individual’s motivations are difficult to shape in any predictable way but policy-makers and practitioners should acknowledge their importance and aim to understand them.
● An individual’s resources cannot be wholly shaped by policy-makers and practitioners, but can be influenced by policy and practice decisions and initiatives.
● An individual’s opportunities to participate can be shaped collectively by policy-makers and practitioners.

3. Improve participation opportunities

7.2.17. The first step in improving participation opportunities is to establish strong foundations by starting at an early age, providing appropriate formal and informal places and spaces for people to meet and join in activities, and creating links and pathways between individuals and organisations through networks and hubs.

7.2.18. Improving participation opportunities requires starting where people are and taking account of their concerns and interests, providing a range of opportunities and levels of involvement so people can feel comfortable with taking part, and using the personal approach to invite and welcome people in. Support is needed to enable institutions, organisations and groups to learn how to operate more effectively and therefore sustain people’s interest and involvement. It is vital to value people’s experience and what they do, at whatever level of intensity. Language referring to the ‘usual suspects’, ‘NIMBYs’ and ‘do-gooders’ is pejorative and creates a negative mood around active participation and should be avoided. The design and management of public consultations should be improved, so that participants feel it is worth taking part and that their contribution can make a difference.

7.2.20. Finally, organisations and government at all levels need to be aware of the benefits of participation, and use these to promote involvement. Similarly, those already involved can tell positive stories about their experience, and encourage others they know to participate. The recruitment of new participants is almost always more effective through word of mouth.

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