Dr Joanie Willett – written evidence (CCE0256)

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1. The questions asked in this consultation relate to legal and cultural means of encouraging civic engagement; incorporating reflection about the relationship of citizens with citizen engagement.

2. All of the literature points to the importance of citizen engagement for political communities, for a range of reasons extending from the relationship of the individual to the State, health and wellbeing outcomes, personal efficacy and self-fulfilment, and for thriving communities. What I argue below is that some of the existing spaces through which citizens can engage with the community are actually relatively inaccessible on account of their particular structures. This means that although people would like to become much better involved, there are a number of barriers within the communities with which they chose to engage. In these instances, the problem was not about lack of motivation or apathy, (which might be fixed by improved education), but was a collective issue. Neither is this a collective issue that can be fixed by legal means. Instead, it points to a changing use of technology and communication, which shifts the relationship between individuals and the state to one of participatory reciprocity, rather than one of hierarchy. We believe that new technologies such as social media and mobile phone applications are an important means of fostering multi-way communications. Using innovative communicative technologies also helps to incorporate a younger demographic into civic engagement, who are either not reached, or are ‘put off’ by older methods such as community newsletters, or minutes on local noticeboards.

3. In 2016 we conducted research with Cornwall Council aimed at helping engagement in town and parish council’s. Our study took part in two phases. Firstly we conducted 30 face to face interviews with randomly selected members of the public at the Royal Cornwall Show (which attracts a wide demographic from throughout Cornwall), asking what people thought about parish councils. In the second phase, we interviewed 6 people on a much deeper basis, in order to understand why these individuals did not want to be stand for election for the Parish Council.

4. The findings take four key and interlinked themes: Perception, conflict, structure and communication. The question of demography threads each of these. These themes are very important for understanding better the phenomenological meanings which underpin common phrases or received wisdom.

5. In terms of a more quantitative analysis, the reason for not becoming more involved with the Council was most frequently articulated as a problem of time. However in many instances, participant’s willingness to give their time was based heavily on perceptions about Parish Councils that they had gleaned from their own experiences, or from anecdotal sources. Some people who felt they had no available time were currently already volunteering with many local organisations, validating their claims. However on further questioning, this could also mean that they did not perceive further involvement with the Parish Council as a productive use of their time. This might have been because of any one – or a combination - of the following themes. Finally, the following themes can lead to a sense of alienation between the councils and the community, which is not insurmountable, but needs to be addressed.
Perception

6. Parish Councils have a very strong brand recognition in so far as people generally know that they exist. However this brand recognition does not extend to knowing what it is that Parish Councils do. Indeed, on occasions people muddled Parish and Local Authority Councillors with MP’s or even MEP’s. This was particularly clear in the RCS interviews, where it was common for the research team to have to describe the role and function of the Parishes. Such a lack of prior knowledge creates the space for stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions. In some cases these perceptions were drawn from media series such as BBC Radios 4’s The Archers; in others, gleaned from neighbours and peer groups. The younger people interviewed were less likely to have a clear prior understanding of the activities of the Parish Council, and many felt a marked disconnect with local council activities.

7. Most often, people told us that they thought councils were dominated by older people, typically retired older men, which impacts on the gendered imagining of local government (see Farrel and Titcombe, 2016). This perception was often supported by follow up statements likening them to old boys clubs, dominated by older men. Some felt that the council was ‘too old’ and lacked full representative abilities because of the missing age and social groups which were elsewhere visible in the community. In both research settings, calls were made for younger people to get involved in the council as a means of making them both more representative, but also more accessible. Indeed, when people feel that a diverse range of community voices are heard within local governance, it enhances the legitimacy of decision making (Michels and De Graaf, 2010; McIntyre and Halsall, 2012; Johnson, 2014).

8. Interestingly, one participant, a young man (aged approximately 20-30) raised a challenge to this narrative. He had spent much time being active in his community and had friends that were Councillors. This respondent was keen to present an alternative perspective, and drew two individuals, one male, and one female, both also young. Generally however, even when people were being positive about the Council, participants tended to use words such as ‘old fashioned’ and associated with the activities of older people, and resistant to change. Conversely, one participant was very positive about the older demographic perceived to dominate Councils, as they had more longevity as opposed to younger councillors who tended to come and go.

9. Finally, although some participants believe that Councillors love their jobs, are friendly towards the community and involved in shaping positive change, other people had had bad experiences (particularly with regard to planning issues). This in turn led to participants reaching the conclusion that many Councils are dominated by councillors who are primarily there for their own interests. This lack of trust is an aspect that needs to be explored much further and is deeply connected to Putnam’s (2000) work on social capital. Problems associated with lack of trust may, at least in part, be linked to national political discourses (i.e. the expenses scandal, and the contemporary debates on the EU Referendum) which lead to questions about the integrity of political representatives and their motivations for action. This perception may also be symptomatic of a general feeling of dissatisfaction or frustration at not being able to make their own voice heard, for many reasons, and which ‘others’ or blames political leaders. Ironically, one way of reversing this problem with lack of trust might be to improve the level and quality of civic participation (Lee et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000; Atterton, 2007; Johnson, 2014).

Conflict

10. This was an unexpected theme, and was partially linked to the perceptions of age and the councillor demographics outlined above. Conflict represents the extent to which individuals felt that participation in the council could affect their relationships with neighbours in the community. This was raised on a number of occasions, usually by females, and which may go some way to exploring the under-representation of women in public life (see Farrel and Titcombe, 2016). The problem is
best related through the story of one woman in her late 30’s with a young family who was elected onto the Parish Council for a period of time. This person felt that the policies and aims that she held as important had been at odds with the values and interests of the other councillors who were older and male (and more middle class). In practical terms, it meant that she had clashed severely over competing and opposing priorities, which challenged existing hierarchies (Moir and Leyshon, 2013). The families and children who she felt that she represented had less resonance with those that saw problems in terms of supporting the level of summer visitors and the businesses that were dependent on them. The social and community costs for this participant were so large that it generated a feeling of negativity about the community as a whole, and subsequently contributed to her decision to move the family out of the village in which they had lived in for years.

11. When the demographic split on the council is so polarised, and it is up to one or at best two individuals to voice alternative perspectives, a critical councillor finds little or no support for their points of view. This risks leading to feelings of hostility and animosity, which is not conducive to harmonious community relations. Part of the problem (and this links too with perception), is that some participants felt that unless you fitted with the general ‘look’ or ‘age-bracket’ of the council then your voice would not be listened to. In one instance, the participant had been a very active member of several civil society organisations within her community. However, despite knowing and understanding the locality intimately, she had not engaged with the Town Council because she did not feel that she would not be taken seriously. The perception that this participant held was primarily due to the demographic differences between her and the Councillors. This is despite the fact that some of the organisations that she worked with had been trying, in a similar vein to the example related by Guertz and Van De Wijdeven (2010), to bridge the divide between civil society organisations and representative democracy. Further, and similar to the hierarchical difficulties (Moir and Leyshon, 2013) mentioned by other participants above, she felt that any challenges that she made to current orthodoxy would be unpopular with the Council itself. Taken together, this suggests that conflict may be linked to the perception that Parish Councils are resistant to change. If new ideas about the strategic direction of the community are seen as too different to those held by existing civic leaders, this may unsettle individuals with a more conservative outlook. This may especially be the case if the claim that Councils tend to be too old fashioned is justified. Here, we might see a tension between older ways of doing things and the requirements of current times.

12. In the parlance of social capital (Putnam, 2000) and echoing some of the findings of Atterton (2007), it may be possible to make the claim that in these instances there is excessive bonding capital between the councillors, which has created closed networks. In turn, this means that they are resistant to change, path dependant and struggle to follow ideas which come from outside their closely bonded network. The answer to which, following social capital theory again, is to develop ‘bridges’ outside of the closed networks, cumulatively enabling an opening of previously insular networks and Councils (see, e.g. Evans and Synett, 2007; Shortall, 2004).

Structures

13. The formalised structures of representative democracy are necessary as a means of ensuring openness, inclusivity, and transparency. It also means that people who are familiar with the process find it easier to navigate the complex systems of local government. However, these formalised structures can be (and are) interpreted as obstructive, with dominating rules and regulations (see, e.g. Moir and Leyshon, 2013). In both research settings, interviewees and focus group members had a perception that the structure of this level of government was oppressive, with many people choosing instead to spend their efforts working with community action groups which they felt were less dominated by procedure. This raises a tension between the fluidity of informal participatory local politics, where individuals can contribute to the ongoing emergence of rules and ideas, and the more rigid sphere of Parish and Town Councils. This also signals why other studies have focused on
increasing participatory, rather than representative governance (Guertz and Van De Wijdeven, 2010), encouraging better links between the two strands rather than improving participation in representative local government.

14. Often claims to not have enough time to participate in Parish Council activities were articulated in terms of structures of some form or another. For example, one contributor related that her husband had been a Parish Councillor, and enjoyed the work that he was doing in this role. However, a complex period of work that involved much travelling meant that he had unavoidably missed three consecutive meetings, leading to him having to stand down from his position on the Council. This was something that she believed to be stipulated in Council rules, and in this example at least, was strictly applied. At issue here is the perceived or real inflexibility of the structures of councils. Time would be less of a problem if council structures were more flexible and reflective of how contemporary society operates. While there were many calls for younger people, particularly younger professionals, or for people who had young families to get involved in parish electoral politics, these people all cited time constraints and inflexibility as the biggest impeding factor.

15. The inflexibility and rigidity of existing structures seems to work against people ‘dipping in and out’ of volunteering for the Parish Council. Whereas people perceive that, outside of the formal sphere, working within a different participatory project or organisation they may be able to adjust their time commitment flexibly as time permits. Some also stated that they felt that their avenue of choice to make effective change in their localities was through community organisations. Indeed, this appears to support the claims by McIntyre and Halsall (2011) that people prefer to get involved in community work over specific issues that matter to them. Nevertheless, when questioned on this, many people who had previously not been very positive about the work or the structure of the council, described good personal experiences of working together on projects. However, representative democracy and standing for election involves effectively signing up for a four year period, based on minimal information as to what the role entails on a day to day basis, the issues that they will be working on, and how this might affect a person’s life. Indeed, people’s views on the time commitments and roles necessary to be a councillor varied vastly, ranging between a few hours a week and twenty or more hours a week.

16. It is important also to bear in mind that the structures and languages used within Council processes, although existing for solid and defendable reasons, are outside of many people’s frame of reference. This means that many people will find Council communications such as meetings and the presentation of minutes and notes – unfamiliar, alien, and very possibly a barrier to participation.

**Communication**

17. Communication emerged as a very strong theme and impacts on the perceptions underpinning the other themes. Many research participants felt that the communication they received from their Parish Councils was inadequate. Indeed, many of the issues raised above might be considered to be, at root, problems of mis-communication. We recognise that most Councils have existing means of disseminating information to the wider public, and that for the most part Councils are extremely keen to let the whole community know about all of the hard work that they are doing. However, participants still articulated many experiences of not picking up the methods that Councils are using to communicate, which indicates that changes have to be made in some places. When participants did pick up Council messages, they often experienced communication as only being one-way, effectively meaning that they register their Councillors as telling the public what they were doing and what was going to happen rather than inviting feedback or asking what the Community wanted to happen (see e.g. Moir and Leyshon, 2013).

18. This notion of the two-way nature of communication came up on a number of occasions, particularly with regards to when members of the community have tried to put new ideas before the
council, or campaign for a particular policy or agenda. On several occasions, participants or people that they knew had approached their council over a single issue, most frequently the development of public play areas for children. The experiences that they related were that often their council had been slow, ineffective or obstructive, rather than open to suggestions for positive change. Many of the respondents relating these stories had developed very strong opinions regarding the subject, especially the effort it had on their children, for whom for most it was their first taste of what politics means. This is a very important point to be made. Sometimes, when an individual begins a local campaign, this is their first first-hand experience of political processes in general, and local councils in particular. People who launch a local campaign are also already politically motivated in some way, and may have the potential to become an asset to their communities. If they have a good experience (even if actually the council cannot help them), this will help them to have positive perceptions of local councils, and will increase their likelihood of getting involved in some way in the future. Further, they are more likely to talk about Councils in a positive way, with the snowball effect that this engenders as people feel more listened to, they are more invested in community decisions and feel more responsible for local services (Michels and De Graaf, 2010).

19. This is especially the case when children try to get involved in a local campaign. One participant who had only recently left full-time education, pointed out that children are one of the few groups in a community who live out most of their lives in that community. However through age and voting restrictions, they are often excluded from local decision-making processes. But pre-voting age young people are also a potential community asset and sensitive communication – especially with those who show an interest with local politics – is deemed to be highly important.

20. Moreover, less effective use of communication can misfire, leading to very positive things that the Council does becoming interpreted in very negative ways. For example, one Council in a coastal area developed some kayak racks. This potentially was a huge positive and something which was of great utility for the community. However, this was also interpreted as an area of unease, because residents expressed that they hadn’t known about the new facility until all of the available spaces were taken. This was further perceived as indicative that members of the council benefited from the racks more than other residents. It is unlikely in this instance that the Council consciously intended to work to its own advantage at the expense of the rest of the community. But this example does illustrate how easily positive actions can be misconstrued, creating negative narratives which undermine the relationship between communication and trust (McIntyre and Halsall, 2012).

21. Finally, elections are not only important for enhanced democracy, but also they are a crucial way for the potential new Council and the community to have a conversation. People appreciate talking to campaigning candidates about their ideas, and the act of voting means that individuals feel that they have a stake in the Council itself. Although managing to co-opt Councillors in order to avoid elections is a cost-effective act, it was not experienced positively by any of the individuals that we spoke to as part of this research. Instead, people considered co-option and the lack of elections as fundamentally undemocratic and an inhibitor to diversity which contributes to the negative perceptions that many people carried (see also Johnson, 2014).

Going Forward

22. Communication runs at the heart of trying to improve participation in Parish Councils. Good communication would encourage more effective participation in Council decision making, and might go a long way to reducing some of the obvious dissatisfaction that we heard. It also might assist people to feel more welcome in unfamiliar structures, and certainly would help to ameliorate some of the conflict situations discussed above. It would also help to ensure more accurate and positive perceptions of local Councils, which would help to attract a broader demographic. This might go some way to ensuring that Councils and their communities mediate changing society, policy, expectations and environments in pro-active, positive ways.
23. In some regards, this feels a bit like a ‘chicken and egg’ problem. A broader demographic is needed in order to help to modernise the Council’s, but different types of people are reluctant to get involved because they perceive Councils to be old-fashioned and as such difficult to get involved in. Moreover, some issues mentioned above are easier to change than others. For example, Council structures might be extremely difficult to alter, set as they are within legislation and issues of due process and transparency. However, it may be possible to interpret or adapt the rules in line with a more contemporary understanding of the world, and good Parish Clerks may be able to assist significantly with this.

24. One of the key factors that emerged from this research, is that people do want to be involved in their communities, and they do want to help to make positive change. But they also need to feel that this is an effective and productive use of their time. Some people are satisfying their need to participate in local democracy through informal governance organisations. This is an energy and dynamism that Councils need to be able to harness.

25. Clearly, enhancing participation in Parish Councils, and encouraging people to both stand for election and to vote when elections are able to happen; covers both short-term and long-term changes. One suggestion would be to involve non-voting stakeholders (including those under-18) to be involved in the improving communication. Low tech solutions might involve developing accurate and easily accessible descriptions of the roles performed by individual council members, advertising who councillors are and what they are doing. These could form part of the Council online presence or local newsletter. It is also really important that Council successes (and indeed challenges) are communicated in an interesting and engaging way. Here, younger people might work with councillors, to help them to communicate better across generational divides. The additional benefit of this might be to help people to understand better the kinds of work that individual councillors do, supporting future involvement. This may embed young people and their families into council communicative networks, while also ensuring that the language used is accessible.

26. While the changes suggested above are low tech, the dissemination of the information does not need to be so. In an effort to modernise the structures and systems of the Council, Social Media can play an important role in updating the perception of Town and Parish Councils, while improving its communication, engagement and in turn, participation. Indeed, some Councils are doing this to great effect. Social Media offers the opportunities for users to be constantly connected, both accessing and creating content which is instantaneously disseminated to anyone in the network (Ellison and Hardey, 2014). As a community tool for a Parish Council a ‘fan page’ on Facebook would allow multiple pathways of communication, which was one of the most sought for areas of improvements in our findings. Indeed, there are already cases where e-democracy has been a success as highlighted by Whyte et al (2006) who found that in Scottish community councils, ‘web based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say in local democracy than has previously been the case through community councils’, public meetings and communications’. Technology is ever advancing and to benefit from this Councils need to situate themselves within these contemporary spheres to both ensure resonance with all demographics, but also to take advantage of the numerous opportunities Social Media presents. Further to the use of social media, mobile applications, downloaded onto Smart Phones also provide opportunities to improve civic engagement and participation. A rural Parish Council in Leicestershire is at the forefront of this development, by creating its own ‘App’ – which mirrors the function of local government apps at a regional level (East Goscote Parish Council, 2016). Applications such as this provide handheld access to features such as a local calendar of events, notifications and instantaneous bulletins of news, online community forums, and spaces to upload and share photos of issues and events. The cost
effectiveness of such technologies is also important to bear in mind when local government is still feeling the pressures of austerity measures. New technologies can undoubtedly allow new and diversified pathways for communication, however more research needs to be done to examine the effect of these kinds of instruments to improve community engagement and subsequently participation.

References


