



THE CIVIC COMMONS

A model for social action

Emma Norris and Sam McLean
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ABOUT THE RSA

The RSA has been a source of ideas, innovation and civic enterprise for over 250 years. In the light of new challenges and opportunities for the human race our purpose is to encourage the development of a principled, prosperous society by identifying and releasing human potential. This is reflected in the organisation's recent commitment to the pursuit of what it calls 21st century enlightenment.

Through lectures, events, pamphlets and commissions, the RSA provides a flow of rich ideas and inspiration for what might be realised in a more enlightened world; essential to progress but insufficient without action. RSA Projects aim to bridge this gap between thinking and action. We put our ideas to work for the common good. By researching, designing and testing new ways of living, we hope to foster a more inventive, resourceful and fulfilled society. Through our Fellowship of 27,000 people and through the partnerships we forge, the RSA aims to be a source of capacity, commitment and innovation in communities from the global to the local. Fellows are actively encouraged to engage and to develop local and issue-based initiatives.

ABOUT CITIZEN POWER AND THE CIVIC COMMONS

In 2009 Peterborough City Council and the Arts Council approached the RSA to develop a programme of interventions to strengthen civic pride in Peterborough by looking at how participation, attachment and innovation in the city's public services and among its citizens might be enhanced. The Civic Commons, which is one of the Citizen Power projects helping to deliver those outcomes, is a hybrid model of citizen participation — part deliberative participation, part capacity-building and part social action network — designed to meet local (and national) needs.

The Civic Commons initiative builds on some of the challenges identified and lessons learned from previous experiences of engaging and empowering local people in Peterborough and beyond. The RSA is working with citizens, decision-makers and other organisations in Peterborough to develop a Peterborough Civic Commons between 2010 and 2012.

This document comprises a statement on the RSA's thinking on the Civic Commons, and draws heavily on a review of existing participation literature and the local needs of Peterborough. The challenges of changing how citizens and communities engage with and contribute to overcoming local problems are significant. Here we make the case for how those challenges might be addressed.

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THE CIVIC COMMONS

Introduction

What is the Civic Commons and why is it needed? This short paper outlines the need and principles of operation for a participation initiative that encourages and supports citizens to be more active at a local level. It is intended to provoke discussion about what forms of citizen participation are most valuable in the current social, political and economic context. It also makes the case for the Civic Commons initiative in Peterborough.

The aim of the Civic Commons is to support citizens to have greater impact on social problems in their communities. This will involve developing the capacity, knowledge and relationships necessary amongst citizens to improve their area's prospects. The aim is not to abandon the wide range of successful participation techniques that have been used and refined over the last twenty years or more, but to build on the growing trend of citizens having a more direct impact on the places they live.

Why participation needs to change

The capacity of citizens to contribute to tackling social challenges and problems is mostly untapped. Current models for encouraging citizens to participate in civic life are geared around citizens influencing decision-making or service delivery, rather than individually or collectively making change themselves. But this needs to change; participation must enable citizens to take action rather than just have conversations.

Approaching participation in this way could support social policy interventions: there is a growing evidence base that shows interventions are more likely to be successful when they actively involve local people. The need for citizens to make more active contributions — to become more 'socially productive' — is particularly acute in light of spending cuts and demand on public services.¹ Initiatives that can help tackle costly social problems are in demand.

More engaging models of participation could also inspire a higher proportion of citizens to take part. Despite the apparent willingness of citizens to get involved in their communities, only a minority of people take part in formal participation activities, suggesting that there is room for improvement on current models. It is worth noting that existing activities tend to be undertaken mainly by professional, white, middle-class people. This does not only mean that we are missing a wealth of community knowledge and skills that could be put to good use. It also means that many citizens are currently not being given the opportunity to articulate their needs.

Formal participation activities and initiatives *can* help unlock the capacity, commitment and enthusiasm of citizens, and bring social and economic benefits, if they are designed in the right way.

Barriers

However, there are a number of barriers to be overcome before citizens can begin to have greater impact on their communities. The current models of formal participation that we use in communities — such as local area forums, citizens' juries and user groups — are not designed to support citizens in taking social action or having direct impact themselves. Lack of confidence and capacity amongst citizens to play a more significant role; weak links between participation and a sense of 'doing good' in the community; and a preoccupation with short-term decisions rather than long-term change all act as barriers to citizens having the impact they are capable of.

¹ 2020 Public Services Trust, *From social security to social productivity: a vision for 2020 public services*, 2020 Public Services Trust, 2010

Ipsos MORI estimates the untapped potential — those who want to directly influence local issues but don't — to be at least 1.7 million people.³

The Civic Commons approach

Recent research supports our contention that large numbers of citizens want to use their knowledge and skills to make a difference to their communities.² Ipsos MORI estimates the untapped potential — those who want to directly influence local issues but don't — to be at least 1.7 million people.³ By designing types of participation that better support citizens to commit and make a difference, we think the 'hidden wealth' of citizens can start to be tapped.

The Civic Commons reflects this. Shaped by research into the types of participation which are most likely to empower citizens and result in social action, the Civic Commons combines deliberative participation, capacity-building and a social action network. It will:

- Provide a forum that brings together a diverse group of citizens who want to contribute their skills, knowledge and experience to addressing social challenges in the place they live. In this forum they will deliberate on topical issues with leading thinkers and decision-makers, and generate projects or plans for action.
- Build a wider network of citizens who put project ideas and action plans to work in their local communities.
- Create local capacity, with participating citizens being given regular training and learning opportunities. These might include advocacy training and seminars on how decision-making processes work.

Principles of operation

Alongside the broad design of the Civic Commons, we have identified seven principles of operation that underpin the proposed Civic Commons approach. These principles of operation are based on practical examples from a range of disciplines, a review of participation literature, analysis of data from Peterborough and the authors' own experience in the field. By working from these principles, we hope the Civic Commons initiative will — initially in Peterborough — enable citizens to take social action on local issues and overcome some of the barriers which have prevented them from doing so in the past.

- 1 Have an explicit focus on long-term impact and provide enough time for citizens to build the skills and relationships that underpin long-term success.
- 2 Give people the right of initiative, enabling them to identify the topics they want to work on and help design the structures in which they operate.
- 3 Put action at the heart of any activity, developing shared goals and pledges that citizens collectively design and to which they commit.
- 4 Make sure all citizens have the capacity to take part and problem-solve through training and confidence-building activities.
- 5 Use social network analysis to identify and target both well connected and isolated members of communities and to multiply participation through network effects.
- 6 Reach out and where possible build personal relationships to broker stronger, more diverse participation.
- 7 Hold activities and events in the kinds of community spaces that enable citizens to feel relaxed, comfortable and in control.

These principles of operation have the potential for application beyond the Civic Commons and will be of use to any initiative, project or policy that aims to empower citizens.

The RSA's work on the Civic Commons is just beginning, and the ideas we present in this paper are subject to refinement based on our fieldwork in Peterborough and the contributions of the citizens we are collaborating with. We will continue to share our findings as we move forward.

2 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Citizenship Survey 2001-2010* (2010)

3 Ipsos MORI, *Do the public want to join the government of Britain?*, (2010)

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FOUNDATIONS

The Civic Commons builds on long traditions in the RSA. The vision of people working together to develop new solutions to shared problems has been at the heart of the RSA since its formation in 1754. Today, we argue that in order to close the ‘social aspiration gap’ — the gap separating society as it is and the society we want and need — we must foster what Matthew Taylor calls ‘enhanced citizenship’ with citizens being more engaged, more resourceful and more pro-social.⁴

This commitment to ‘enhanced’ citizenship reflects a growing consensus over the last decade that people being involved in social and political decision-making is desirable and practically beneficial. This has been the conclusion of every major review of democratic and social renewal, including the Citizen Audit of Great Britain⁵, the Power Inquiry⁶ and the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland.⁷

Participation works

There is evidence that participation makes for better decisions. A recent evaluation of citizen empowerment mechanisms — including participatory budgeting, individual budgets and deliberative forums — undertaken by Ipsos MORI and Involve concluded that involving people in decision-making delivers improved public services.⁸ Having people meaningfully involved in decision-making helps to foster services that are better tailored to the needs of individuals and communities, while also providing a powerful, empowering incentive to those involved to participate in other areas of public life.⁹

Traditions of participation

The concept of citizen participation has a strong basis in theory: it draws on deliberative democratic (Habermas and Rawls), civic republican (Aristotle and Rousseau) and liberal (T.H Green and Dewey) traditions in citizenship. Broadly, these traditions contend that citizens are members of a ‘political community’ with strong rights and responsibilities to participate in governing and acting in the interests of the ‘common good.’¹⁰ Such traditions identify participation in community and political decision-making as one of the defining features of what it means to be a citizen.

The Civic Commons model builds on these traditions but also seeks to address some of their limitations. For instance it incorporates rational deliberation and problem-solving, but moves beyond the narrow consultation-driven approaches that have defined much deliberative democracy to date, instead favouring methods which give citizens control over the nature and topics of discussion. Similarly, the Civic Commons builds on the concept of a ‘common good’ that is a strong feature of civic republican thought, but places much greater emphasis on social action than has previously been the case. In the Civic Commons model, citizens not only take part in shared decision-making about the ‘common good’, but are enabled to help realise it when appropriate.

This paper also addresses the plentiful supply of empirical studies about what makes participation work. How can more people be persuaded to take part? What type of conversations are most useful? What skills do people need to take action? The Civic Commons borrows methods from a wide range of participation initiatives and models (including local governance structures, deliberative forums and empowerment experiments) that have proved successful at answering these questions. By building on academic tradition and empirical studies, the Civic Commons has roots in both theory and practice.

4 M. Taylor, *Pro-Social Behaviour: the Future — it’s up to us*, (RSA: 2009)

5 P.F. Whiteley, *Citizen Audit of Great Britain 2000-2001*, (University of Essex, 2002)

6 Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, *Power to the People* (2006)

7 *Carnegie Trust, Making good society*, (London: 2010)

8 S. Mclean and E. Andersson, *Activating Empowerment* (London: Ipsos MORI, 2009).

9 See “Citizenship in Britain” Pattie et al; Clark, H., H. Gough, et al. (2004). *It pays dividends: Direct Payments and older people*, Policy Press.; Dawson, C. (2000). *Independent successes: implementing Direct Payments*. York, JRF. Department for Communities and Local Government (2009) *Empowering communities to influence local decision making: A systematic review of the evidence*.

10 S.McLean, *Citizen Power: People are more powerful than they think* (London: RSA, Forthcoming).

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THE POLICY CONTEXT

Moving from theory to contemporary practice, this section gives some policy context to the Civic Commons initiative to show how it fits within broader policy change and public service reform.

The New Labour approach to citizen participation was driven by the need to improve basic levels of public service performance and delivery after two decades of under-investment in the public sphere.¹¹ Citizen participation in local decision-making and public service delivery was an integral part of New Labour's public service reform agenda.¹² The progress made in this area between 1997 and 2008 was significant. An EU survey — one of the most authoritative undertaken on this subject — shows citizen participation in public service decision-making to be higher in the UK than any other European country.¹³ The same survey positioned the UK only mid-table a decade earlier.

New Labour managed to 'mainstream' citizen participation and user-involvement in public services. This is evident in various policy developments, most notably the introduction of the 'Duty to Involve' in 2009, which made citizen participation in policymaking a statutory duty for public agencies for the first time in the UK. The use of deliberative research, such as citizens' juries, is another example of this mainstreaming. Today, deliberative research is common-place (although this might change as a result of spending cuts) and used by public services on a whole range of policy issues from pension reform to climate change, local priority setting to the future funding of social care.¹⁴ Yet despite such progress, citizen participation in decision-making is still most likely to take the form of satisfaction surveys and focus groups, which provide people with a voice but fail to provide opportunities for social action.

Towards the latter years of the New Labour government, we saw the beginning of a shift in government policy on citizen participation, represented in the move from public consultation exercises or 'voice-based mechanisms' to a more 'action-focused model' of citizen participation that had a greater emphasis on:

- **localism:** policy driven by locally defined needs
- **decentralisation:** shift in power from Whitehall to communities and citizens, and
- **community empowerment:** place-based and collective solutions to local problems¹⁵

The *Communities in Control* White Paper (2008) introduced a raft of policy commitments aimed at empowering citizens to play a more direct role in their communities.¹⁶ This included giving citizens direct power over local decision-making via the 'Duty to Involve', the extension of participatory budgeting and a new Empowerment Fund for the third sector to help citizens take social action.

It has been argued that the coalition Government's big idea for citizen participation — the Big Society — marks a radical break from the more centralizing, top-down instincts of the Labour tradition in this area. But in this light, rather than a rupture separating the present from the past, the Big Society idea is merely a further step towards forms of participation that enable citizens to play a greater role in tackling local problems. The Big Society was launched in April 2010 by the Conservative Party as their 'big idea' leading up to the General Election.¹⁷ In the nine months since then, the Big Society has become hugely influential in policy circles, surviving the opening months of government in a way that few had expected.¹⁸

11 B. Lucas, "The context for reform and why progressives need a new narrative on public services". In P. Diamond (ed.), *Public Matters: The renewal of the public realm* (London: Politico's, 2007).

12 G. Mulgan, *Good and Bad Power: The ideals and betrayals of government* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

13 T. Shirley and M. Horne, *Co-production in public services* (London: PMSU, 2008).

14 A. Cornwell, *Democratising Engagement: what the UK can learn from international experience* (London: Demos, 2008).

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Although detail on the Big Society has been sparse, the guiding vision of the Big Society and its principles are becoming clearer — decentralisation, localism, community empowerment and social responsibility:

‘The Big Society is a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control... these plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.’¹⁹

There is no government blue-print for what this will look like in practice, but the coalition Government has introduced a range of initiatives to launch the Big Society, which give us some idea of what it could look like on the ground. These include the creation of a ‘Neighbourhood Army’ of 5,000 community organisers (full-time professionals) with the responsibility to cultivate local civic action and a Big Society Network that will bring together and share ‘best practice’ from local civic action projects. The Localism Bill (2010-2011) takes this further, giving local communities the right to instigate referenda on any local issue and the right to bid for community assets.²⁰

The Civic Commons initiative outlined in this paper is in keeping with the trend towards decentralisation and empowerment that has been in progress since the latter years of the Labour government, and shares common ground with the Big Society idea as it is currently articulated, particularly the emphasis on local civic action projects.

15 A. Giddens, “*New Labour revisited*”, Policy Network, (2010)

16 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities in Control*, (2008)

17 Conservative Party, *Big Society, Not Big Government*. Launch document, (2010)

18 S. Richards, “But what if the Big Society doesn’t work?”, Independent, 20 July 2010.

19 Conservative Party, “*Big Society, Not Big Government*”, Launch paper, (2010)

20 HM Government, *Localism and Decentralisation Bill* (2010-2011)

Strong central government, and voice-based participation, have real value. Participation in public services, even when this only means being asked your opinion, improves public satisfaction with public services.²⁶

WHY 'PARTICIPATION' NEEDS TO CHANGE

There is a growing recognition among policymakers that government and the state alone are unable to solve some of our most complex social problems. In fact, we now know that central government interventions are more likely to succeed when citizens are actively involved. For instance, using peer-led support networks has a positive impact on social problems such as re-offending rates, mental illness and substance misuse.²¹ Further unlocking the capacity of citizens to help affect change — by beginning their own projects, actively working with authorities, or simply volunteering more regularly — could have a real impact on a range of social challenges. Being able to harness this capacity could have the added impact of saving money, making public services more efficient and helping to manage demand.²²

Formal participation activities and initiatives can help unlock that capacity if they are designed in the right way. The consultative, top-down approach of satisfaction surveys and focus groups that has dominated participation — whilst useful and important — is not going to be enough; instead, we need new forms of participation that have citizen-led activity at their heart.

Local capacity for problem-solving not being utilised

Why is it that the capacity and resources of citizens to contribute to tackling social problems — their 'hidden wealth' — are not being effectively tapped or utilised?²³ In part, this is due to the type of opportunities currently available. For much of their time in power New Labour used forms of participation that were not designed to support citizens in using their skills and knowledge to take social action, but rather to help citizens feed their opinions into government decision-making. Examples of such approaches include:

- Large-scale satisfaction surveys (Best Value Performance, Place Survey, GP Patient Survey)
- Consultative mechanisms (e.g. citizens' panels and focus groups);
- (And to a far lesser extent) deliberative mechanisms (citizens' juries and deliberative forums)²⁴

An initiative such as the GP Patient Survey — a standardised consultative survey which captures patient experiences of GP services — highlights the limitations of these approaches to citizen participation for the following reasons:

- It is initiated and led by government;
- The topics on which it engages citizens are chosen by decision-makers, not citizens;
- It provides citizens with the opportunity to influence service delivery only within a pre-given set of criteria and options; and
- It provides people with some capacity to influence upwards — to government policy — but not outwards — affecting change in their own communities.

Strong central government, and voice-based participation, have real value. Participation in public services, even when this only means being asked your opinion, improves public satisfaction with public services.²⁵ But in order to fully utilise the capacity of citizens to tackle social issues, citizens sometimes need to have the power, individually and collectively, to instigate and contribute to social change projects targeted at local needs.²⁶

21 M. Liebman, *Restorative Justice: How it works* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007).

22 L.Bunt and M.Harris, *The Human Factor*, (NESTA 2010)

23 Halpern, *Hidden Wealth of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010)

24 Power Inquiry, *Power to the People* (London: JRF, 2008).

25 Ipsos MORI, *What drives satisfaction with public services* (London: Ipsos MORI, 2005).

26 T. Horton and J. Gregory, *The Solidarity Society* (London: Fabian Society, 2009).

People are most likely to participate in decision-making processes and community matters when they have power to influence change.³⁵

Contemporary pressure

The need to unlock citizens' own capacity to take social action is greater than ever for a number of reasons. The Big Society agenda and the 'radical dispersal of power' it proposes clearly speaks to a greater role for citizens in problem-solving.²⁷ For many it reflects a conservative liberal commitment — in common with the thinking of J.S. Mill, Burke or T.H. Green — to redistributing power and responsibility to people so they can shape their own lives and the direction of their communities for the benefit of those living in them.²⁸

But the need to develop citizens' capacity to tackle social challenges is being guided as much by practical as philosophical concerns. The Big Society idea coincides with significant developments in the UK economy and public service delivery. The planned £81 billion reduction in public spending by 2014-15 will impact on public services at both national and local levels. At the national level, this will mean the overall size of the state being cut to less than 40 per cent of GDP, and on the ground, this will almost certainly mean on average 25 to 30 per cent cuts to local public services. This could mean greater levels of responsibility being redistributed from public agencies to citizens to preserve services.²⁹ In the next four years we might see examples of public services being mutualised and perhaps even taken over by groups of citizens.³⁰

The strain of demand is adding to economic pressures on public services; an ageing society, long-term health problems and socio-economic inequality mean that public spending is already at a twenty nine year high and demand is set to increase based on current projections. Initiatives such as the Civic Commons, that support people in becoming more 'socially productive'³¹ (meaning that citizens are empowered and enabled to make changes and contributions to tackling health, social and environmental problems themselves) are one potential means of reducing demand on public services and relieving pressure on public spending.

Too few and too exclusive

Enabling citizens to take social action could also have a positive impact on the number of citizens who take part. Despite the number of opportunities that have been developed for participation, the number of citizens taking part has been underwhelming and the demographic of those who do participate is too narrow. The majority of people still do not participate in any way, according to formal definitions.³² This means we are missing a wealth of community knowledge and skills that could be put to good use. It also means that many citizens are currently not being given the opportunity to articulate their needs.

But the low participation rates do not mean people do not want to get involved. In fact, most people claim they want to be involved in their local community, but only if they can do something active.³³ For example 82 per cent of respondents to a recent survey said that communities should do more to help police tackle anti-social behaviour and crime.³⁴ This gap between what people say and the way they behave suggests that citizens might not be being offered the right opportunities to participate or being empowered to take control. People are most likely to participate in decision-making processes and community matters when they have power to influence change.³⁵

27 N. Clegg, 'Don't take offence at our coalition. Its aims are liberal', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2010

28 J. Norman, *The Big Society*, (2010)

29 A. Haldenby, 'Budget 2010: George Osborne must do more than reduce public spending', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 June 2010.

30 P. Blond, *The Ownership State* (London: Respublica, 2009).

31 2020 Public Services Trust, *From social security to social productivity: a vision for 2020 public services*, 2020 Public Services Trust, 2010

32 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Citizenship Survey: 2009-10, England*, (2010)

33 Ipsos MORI, *Do the public really want to join the government of Britain?*, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute Briefing Pack, (2010)

34 ippr/ PWC, *Capable Communities: towards people-powered public services*, (2010)

35 Involve, *Why Participate?* (London: Involve, 2006).

The culture of participation is top-down, with the topics and structure of activities designed without the input of citizens.

Places like Peterborough

Peterborough aspires to be a place where individuals and organisations have the power to be agents of social change. This is demonstrated in the local leadership's aspiration for Peterborough to become the 'Environment Capital' of the UK and to be an exemplar in community-led responses to climate change. Peterborough is also innovating around local participation techniques and is currently piloting 'neighbourhood councils' — local forums that bring together councillors, public service leaders and citizens to discuss strategic issues such as transport and flood planning.

But, like many places in the UK, the city's potential and ambition is being undermined by some significant social challenges and a lack of citizen engagement. Peterborough has lower levels of civic pride and attachment between people than other places of a similar demography in the UK. Levels of volunteering and citizen participation are also lower than the national average.³⁶ An initiative such as the Civic Commons provides an opportunity to rebuild trust amongst citizens and increase their sense of agency in the community.

Compounding issues of trust and attachment, Peterborough also experiences significant social problems. Rates of substance misuse and drug-related crime in the city are comparable to some of the most socially and culturally deprived places in the UK.³⁷ There are also challenges in local schools, with 11 year olds in Peterborough underperforming in comparison to similar areas or nationally. Secondary school provision is also variable, with only four out of ten local secondary schools judged to be 'good' in Ofsted inspections. An initiative like the Civic Commons provides an opportunity for a diverse range of citizens to contribute to tackling some of the problems the city is experiencing.

Having briefly outlined the need for and benefits of a new model of participation — a model of participation that facilitates and supports citizens to have a greater and more active impact on social challenges — the next section explores what barriers stand in the way of achieving this.

WHAT IS HOLDING US BACK?

Previous policy and community efforts on citizen participation have improved public services and increased public satisfaction with them.³⁸ But these efforts have stopped short of having a transformative effect on citizen participation in public life and have seen participation sometimes dismissed (perhaps unfairly) as a 'talking shop' by citizens. There are a number of barriers to be overcome before the capacity of citizens can be harnessed and participation can become more focused on social action, both in Peterborough and the UK more generally. These barriers are explored below.

Top-down culture

The first barrier is simply one of structure. The culture of participation is top-down, with the topics and structure of activities designed without the input of citizens. This is evident even in relatively innovative spaces such as Peterborough's neighbourhood councils, in which agendas and conversation are managed by decision-makers. This turns ordinary citizens off — one recent study found that citizens find top-down participation exercises disempowering and off-putting, even in relatively open forums such as citizens' juries — and limits the depth of participation.³⁹

³⁶ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Place survey*, (CLG, 2009)

³⁷ S. McLean, *Citizen Power Peterborough: A Scoping Report* (London: RSA, 2010).

Citizens are responsive to a greater link between participation and using their time for good causes — by giving up their time, they want to feel that they are making a difference to the places they live and the problems those places face.

On this basis, we need a culture shift in participation, persuading authorities to move from expert-led or government-led to citizen-led activities. The current spending environment demands that citizens are more ‘socially productive’ and that participation is less about citizens influencing upwards (i.e. influencing government) and more about citizens influencing outwards (i.e. fostering change in their communities). To make this happen, citizens and communities must be supported in affecting change in their own lives. The top-down, managed approach of the past needs to evolve into a bottom-up, more organic civic life that encourages and enables *everyone* to participate and take social action.

Weak link between participation and a sense of ‘doing good’

Another barrier to unlocking the potential of citizens and allowing them to play a greater role in social action is the relatively weak link between participation and a sense of ‘doing good’ in the community. Participation tends to focus solely on conversation and talking, despite citizens being clear that they would like opportunities to take action and ‘make a difference.’ As two recent government reports show — one an evaluation of the ‘community contracts’ pilot that ran from 2008–2009⁴⁰, the other a literature review on the impact of pledging activities⁴¹ — participation actually increased when citizens committed to tackling a social problem. Citizens are responsive to a greater link between participation and using their time for good causes — by giving up their time, they want to feel that they are making a difference to the places they live and the problems those places face.

The wrong spaces

The location and tone of many existing initiatives can further dislocate participation from a sense of making a difference in communities. Participation exercises are often formal and professionalised, typically taking place in hotels, local government offices and town halls. Yet evidence suggests that citizens are less likely to participate in exercises that have a formal or official atmosphere because they feel uncomfortable or intimidated.⁴² Citizens would rather participate in regular community venues — cafes, pubs, museums and theatres.

By making participation too formal and too remote from making positive contributions to communities and the challenges they face, the number and diversity of citizens likely to take part is limited and participation is less likely to result in change.⁴³ To overcome this barrier, participation opportunities need to be less rigid, more informal and rooted in the community to attract widespread interest and stimulate social action.⁴⁴

Short-termism

A further barrier is the tendency of participation exercises to work in the short-term. For instance, consultation-based mechanisms such as public service surveys and focus groups are often concerned with short-term improvement and impact rather than long-term change. These consultations often do not involve citizens early enough to allow them any meaningful influence over a broader agenda. This type of participation acts as a barrier to citizens being involved in social action and change, limiting their role to that of sounding posts and preventing them from building the relationships needed to have longer-term impact.

38 G. Mulgan, “Innovation, improvement and the empowered user in public services”. In P. Diamond (ed.) *Public Matters: The renewal of the public realm* (London: Politico’s, 2007).

39 Elstub, S, *The third generation of deliberative democracy*, (2010)

40 Department for Communities and Local Government, *An evaluation of the community contracts pilot*, (London: DCLG, 2010).

41 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Can pledging increase civic activity? A literature review on developing community pledgebanks* (London: DCLG, 2010).

42 Tenants’ Services Authority, *Understanding Tenant Involvement*, (2009)

43 Pattie, C., *Civic attitudes and engagement in Modern Britain*, (2003)

44 Opinion Leader Research, *Britain Speaks*, (2005)

Approaches to participation that confer new rights and responsibilities on citizens will mean nothing if citizens are not in a position to fulfil their responsibilities or exercise their rights.

For participation to have sustainable, long-term impact, initiatives need to have a longer lead-in with citizens — providing them with the time to build relationships with each other and decision-makers, and build the necessary skills and confidence to act. The *Community Resilience* project in St Austell and recent research by NESTA both conclude that by providing this much-needed lead-in time, efforts to empower and enable citizens to take social action are significantly more likely to succeed.⁴⁵

Lack of confidence and capacity

Low levels of confidence and capacity amongst citizens are significant barriers to people getting involved in their community and in participation activities more broadly.⁴⁶ In particular, a lack of confidence or capacity is what allows people who consider themselves as ‘insiders’ to dominate participation exercises and ensure their opinions and needs are heard.⁴⁷ Indeed, a lack of capacity or confidence to participate in society is an indicator of social exclusion and poverty.⁴⁸ This has been underlined in the RSA’s own fieldwork in Peterborough, during which numerous citizens have reported that they can not see what they have to offer when asked why they are not more involved in their community.⁴⁹

In order to overcome this barrier and give people the skills and confidence to take part and take action, participation exercises should seek to actively develop capacity and confidence amongst *all* citizens, helping to level the playing field and ensure everyone feels able to take part. As the regeneration and community action in Balsall Heath has demonstrated, having skilled individuals in deprived areas is a crucial element of helping them make changes in their community.⁵⁰ Approaches to participation that confer new rights and responsibilities on citizens will mean nothing if citizens are not in a position to fulfil their responsibilities or exercise their rights.

Danger of widening participation gap

Greater equality in participation is needed, but unless managed carefully, the drive to strengthen civic society has the potential to deepen the inequalities that already hamper participation.⁵¹ Those in managerial and professional employment are currently almost twice as likely to be involved in civic activity as those in routine employment or the unemployed and only 1 per cent of BME people and only 3 per cent of people without formal qualifications can be defined as ‘activists.’ This compares to 26 per cent of people with postgraduate degrees.⁵²

The connection between socio-economic inequality and low civic capacity is reinforced by recent Third Sector Research Centre analysis of voluntary participation rates in the UK, which found that more than two thirds of volunteering and civic action is undertaken by just 7 per cent of the population and dominated by well-educated middle aged professionals.⁵³ Time-poor, under-confident, vulnerable or excluded groups will find it hard to make their voices heard in a Big Society that relies too heavily on people being ‘self-starters’.⁵⁴ It is therefore crucial to ensure new forms of participation involve, attract and build the capacity of marginalised groups.

45 Eden Forum (2009) *Community Resilience — Lessons from the South West St Austell: The Eden Project*. Also, NESTA *Galvanising Community led Responses to Climate Change* (London: NESTA, 2010).

46 Tenants’ Services Authority, *Understanding Tenant Involvement*, (2009)

47 Wind-Cowie, M., *Civic Streets: the big society in action*, (Demos: 2010)

48 S. Sodha and W. Bradley, *3D Poverty*, (Demos: 2010)

49 RSA focus group with Civic Commons members, 28th September 2010

50 See: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7144680.ece>

51 New Economics Foundation, *Cutting it: The Big Society and the new austerity* (London: NEF, 2010).

52 Social Exclusion and political engagement, Electoral Commission, (2005)

53 Third Sector Research Centre, *Individual voluntary participation in the United Kingdom: An overview of survey information*, Briefing and Working paper: series 6, (2009)

54 Coote, A, *Ten Big Questions about the Big Society*, new economics foundation, (2010)

This paper argues that projects like the Civic Commons are part of the solution: locally generated, citizen-led initiatives which support people to play a greater role and participate in social action in their communities.

TOWARDS THE CIVIC COMMONS APPROACH

How do we overcome these barriers and unlock the potential of citizens to affect change? This paper argues that projects like the Civic Commons are part of the solution: locally generated, citizen-led initiatives which support people to play a greater role and participate in social action in their communities.

This section of the paper will begin by outlining some of the practical examples of formal and less formal participation spaces and initiatives which have influenced the design of the Civic Commons, and will conclude by outlining the operation of the Civic Commons in more detail. The Civic Commons model and the principles of operation that guide it can be used by policymakers and other organisations in Peterborough and elsewhere to tap into the potential of their citizens.

Community participation initiatives

There has been an increasing tendency to devolve power to communities over the past ten years or more. Examples of this in practice include local area forums, neighbourhood forums and the relatively new ‘neighbourhood council’ model that is being trialled in Peterborough. All forums aim to give citizens more opportunity to have a voice on local issues. The Civic Commons builds on these existing models of community participation.

Local area forums, in particular, have become part of the orthodoxy of local participation — 90 per cent of local authorities have some variation of them.⁵⁵ While different in some respects, local area forums, neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood councils have at least one common characteristic — they aim to unlock the capacity of citizens in their communities. They involve practical deliberation on local issues, recommending courses of action for statutory organisations and elected representatives. As the IDEa has noted, these initiatives have also proved useful in garnering the opinions and ‘voice’ of citizens.⁵⁶ For instance, local area forums have an ‘open forum’ section allowing citizens to raise issues/questions; Peterborough’s neighbourhood councils have a similar ‘open session’.

Local area forums

Local area forums are an opportunity for citizens to hold to account councillors and representatives of statutory bodies, who have the power to make decisions on issues of local importance. The role of citizens varies according to area, but there is usually time set aside at every meeting for citizens to make suggestions, ask questions of the attending decision-makers and monitor progress.

For an example of a local area forum see: Nottingham City Council Local Area Forum, <http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/home/youandyourcommunity/communitylocalcontacts/contactslaf.htm>

⁵⁵ Association for Public Service Excellence, *Governance, neighbourhoods and service delivery*, (2008)

⁵⁶ *ibid*

While existing community participation initiatives go some way towards unlocking the capacity of citizens, they are designed for governance rather than social action.

Neighbourhood forums

Neighbourhood forums are similar to local area forums but are chaired by an elected local resident, and agenda items are chosen by a committee which has resident representation.

For an example of a neighbourhood forum see: Cumbria County Council Neighbourhood Forum, <http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/neighbourhoodforums/default.asp>

Neighbourhood councils

Neighbourhood councils are a new forum based on an American innovation, which brings together elected and appointed council representatives with citizens. In Peterborough, neighbourhood councils are made up of elected city council members as well as representatives from parish councils, the police authority, fire authority and members of local community groups, plus ordinary members of the public. These forums function in a similar way to town hall meetings — giving citizens the opportunity to make suggestions about local issues and ask questions of decision-makers — but are based at a neighbourhood level.

For an example of a neighbourhood council see: Peterborough City Council Neighbourhood Councils, http://www.peterborough.gov.uk/community_information/neighbourhood_councils/south.aspx

The Civic Commons initiative shares characteristics with these models and has been influenced by them. But it moves beyond them in important ways. While existing community participation initiatives go some way towards unlocking the capacity of citizens, they are designed for governance rather than social action. Local area forums, neighbourhood forums, and neighbourhood councils all fall prey to a focus on consultation rather than actively using the skills and knowledge of citizens to affect social change.

For example, Peterborough's neighbourhood councils are being used to consult citizens on the 'Local Transport Plan'. Whilst it is important to garner citizen opinion on local service strategy, there is a place for participation spaces that go one step further and support citizens in taking social action to tackle the challenges their communities face. Local community workers in Peterborough have confirmed that there is an opportunity and need for a participation initiative in the city that enables social action amongst citizens.

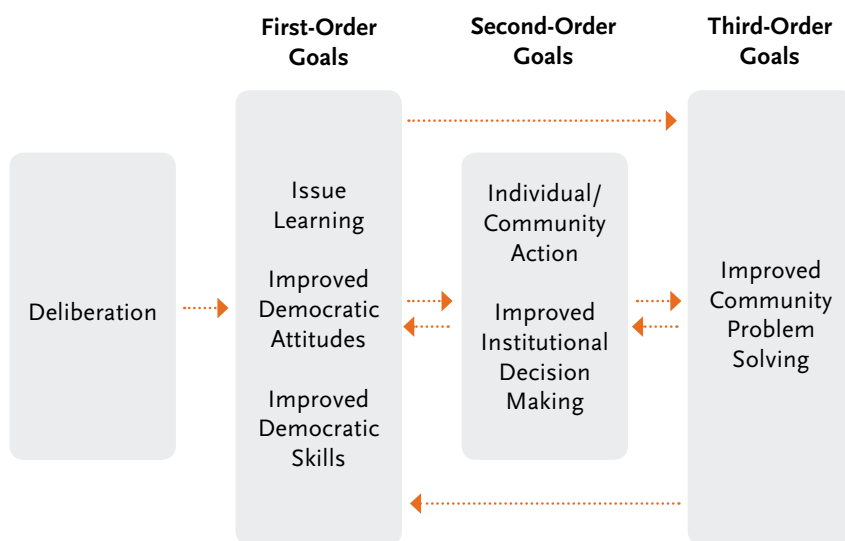
Capacity-building initiatives

The Civic Commons aims to be part of the next step in this trend towards social action. Building on existing UK forums such as local area forums and Peterborough's neighbourhood councils, it is rooted in local spaces, focused on addressing local social issues and invites citizens and decision-makers into a shared space to co-produce solutions.

...combining deliberation and capacity-building improves citizens' and communities' ability to problem-solve and make meaningful contributions to decision-making.

But the Civic Commons also moves beyond consultation spaces, taking further inspiration from innovative work — like the Harlem Children’s Zone programme — being undertaken in America to generate civic renewal and increase problem-solving in public life (examples of which are documented in new work produced by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government).⁵⁷ The development of the Civic Commons has been particularly influenced by the work being undertaken at the Centre for Public Deliberation (CPD) at Colorado State University. Its model of social change which links public participation and civic action, has been particularly informative (see Figure 1 below), showing how traditional participation techniques such as deliberation can effect change in communities when combined with capacity-building activities.

Figure 1: The Colorado State University Centre for Public Deliberation’s model of social change



As the CPD model outlines, combining deliberation and capacity-building improves citizens’ and communities’ ability to problem-solve and make meaningful contributions to decision-making.

The Civic Commons initiative

What does the Civic Commons comprise? The design of the Civic Commons has its roots both in local participation spaces and capacity-building and social action models of participation. It constitutes a hybrid model of participation, combining a forum approach with capacity-building activities and a network for social action. The Civic Commons is organised in the following way:

1. Forum

The Civic Commons will be a forum that brings together a diverse group of citizens who want to contribute their skills, knowledge and experience to addressing social challenges in the place they live. In this forum they will discuss and deliberate on topical issues with leading thinkers and decision-makers.

⁵⁷ S. Goldsmith, *The Power of Social Innovation: How Civic Entrepreneurs Ignite Community Networks for Good* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Strong policy interventions are designed from the outset with citizens, to deliver long-term social benefits.

2. Action network

Taking a step beyond existing forums, the Civic Commons forum will include a focus on generating project ideas and plans for social action that help citizens tackle local issues and monitor progress made. The Civic Commons will also be a network that functions outside forums and training sessions. This will be run by citizens who put their social action project ideas and plans to work in their local communities. The network will be the means by which they put their plans into action and continue work between forums. The social action projects and activities of the Civic Commons network will be recorded through a city-wide time-banking scheme, which the Citizen Power Peterborough programme is helping to establish.

3. Capacity-building

Alongside a regular forum, the Civic Commons will also be used for capacity-building, as advocated by the CPD social change model. Participating citizens will be given regular training and learning opportunities that will enhance their capacity to contribute to the forum and take action as part of the network. These might include advocacy training and seminars on how decision-making processes work.

Principles of operation

The Civic Commons is based on the seven principles of operation outlined below. They are derived from our analysis of existing community participation models, models of participation adopted by campaigning organisations and arts-based community groups, and a review of relevant participation literature. In particular, these principles of operation aim to organise the Civic Commons in a way that will help it overcome the barriers previously outlined.

1 Make it sustainable

Have an explicit focus on long-term impact from the beginning and provide enough time for citizens to build the skills and relationships that underpin long-term success.

Strong policy interventions are designed from the outset with citizens, to deliver long-term social benefits. Yet, as outlined in the barriers section of the paper, existing participation exercises — particularly consultation-based mechanisms — are too focused on short-term improvement or impact, and do not involve citizens early enough to have any meaningful influence.

Social action models of participation (like the Civic Commons) can overcome these problems in two ways. First, they explicitly focus on tackling concrete social issues likely to deliver sustainable, long-term social impact (e.g. a reduction in youth re-offending rates or anti-social behaviour). Second, they build the capacity of citizens to help deliver these outcomes. The importance of this way of working is highlighted in many reviews of public service delivery,⁵⁸ and is supported by recent research by the RSA, which shows the guiding principle for social action is a focus on longevity from the beginning.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Cabinet Office, *State of the Nation: poverty, worklessness and welfare* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010).

⁵⁹ K. McCarthy, *Ecology of Innovation* (London: RSA, 2010).

*Put citizens in control — participation rates increase dramatically when citizens are able to tackle issues that are most important to them.*⁶⁰

2 Hand over control

Give citizens the right of initiative, enabling them to identify the topics they want to work on and help design the structures in which they operate.

Put citizens in control — participation rates increase dramatically when citizens are able to tackle issues that are most important to them.⁶⁰ As previously noted, existing participation forums are often top-down and designed without the input of citizens. Following the ‘local right of initiative’ suggested by Demos, forums which help citizens take action should be directed by citizens.⁶¹ This means citizens controlling the topics discussed, the level of involvement of decision-makers and the distribution of roles and responsibilities. The more control and responsibility citizens have (for instance, citizens having the power to set the agenda), the more they enjoy the experience, and the more likely they are to take discussions from a participation exercise forward by setting up a related project in the community.⁶²

3 Action at the centre

Put action at the heart of any activity, developing shared goals and pledges that citizens collectively design and commit to.

Most previous and existing participation exercises, for instance citizens’ juries, have been dismissed as ‘talking shops’ by media and citizens alike.⁶³ Citizens are clear — they prefer participation to be action-focused, delivering tangible impact.⁶⁴ The best way to ensure social action is at the heart of participation is by asking citizens to commit to particular tasks. Such methods (i.e. getting people to commit in public to a course of action) are already used by many political campaigns. For instance, the 10:10 campaign to reduce the environmental impact of organisations and individuals asks participants to publicly commit to targets.⁶⁵ This learning can be used to good effect in participation exercises by asking citizens to sign up to goals as a group or encouraging individuals to take on explicit responsibilities.⁶⁶

4 Build capacity

Make sure all citizens have the capacity to take part and problem-solve through training and confidence-building activities.

As identified in the barriers section, not everyone has the capacity to participate in or set-up social action projects. One of the most critical elements of participation that is geared around social action is making sure citizens have the capacity to take part in the first place. Building the capacity of harder-to-reach groups in particular will be crucial in providing everyone with an equal opportunity to take part. With this in mind, the Civic Commons will seek to actively develop knowledge and confidence amongst citizens by combining participation exercises with capacity-building.

60 C. Leadbeater and A.Wong, *Learning from extremes* (London: Cisco, 2010).

61 P. Skidmore, K. Bound, K and H. Lownsborough, *Do policies to promote community participation build social capital?* (London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006).

62 See: Margo, J., and Dixon, M., *Freedom’s Orphan’s: Raising youth in a changed world*, (Institute for Public Policy Research: 2006); and forthcoming study from University of Exeter: <http://psychology.exeter.ac.uk/latestnews/researchnews/title,99499,en.html>.

63 Transforming Suffolk, *Degree of Engagement*, (2010)

64 Ipsos MORI, *Do the public really want to join the government of Britain?*, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute Briefing Pack, (2010)

65 See: www.1010global.org.

66 D. Halpern, *Hidden Wealth of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); P. John et al, *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think* (London: Merlow Press, Forthcoming).

In the move towards participation mechanisms that are led by citizens and focused on social action, rooted in the community and for the community rather than solely influencing government, it is even more important that the people involved in these initiatives somehow mirror and reflect the communities that they are intending to serve.

5 Make it contagious

Use social network analysis to identify and target both well connected and isolated members of communities and to multiply participation through network effects.

Diversity is important. In the move towards participation mechanisms that are led by citizens and focused on social action, rooted in the community and for the community rather than solely influencing government, it is even more important that the people involved in these initiatives somehow mirror and reflect the communities that they are intending to serve. Moving beyond a consultative model of participation, and towards a more action and delivery oriented model of participation means that citizens need to be accountable to and to some extent representative of the people around them. This will require methods which promote diversity in participation rather than solely engage an eager and visible demographic often referred to as the ‘usual suspects’.

Social network analysis is one route for making participation more representative and diverse. It can show up the relational networks between people and places, identifying the most included and excluded people in communities, and thus provide an opportunity to identify and reach out to excluded people and groups. By mapping these networks, social network analysis can also identify the ‘hubs’ or organisers within a community. By identifying and working with these individuals — making them the core membership of the Civic Commons, significant impacts on a much wider group of people could be felt through network effects.⁶⁷ Through their extensive social networks, these individuals can help engagement and participation become more widespread.

6 Reach out

Reach out and where possible build personal relationships to broker diverse citizen participation.

A recent survey reports that most people have never been asked to get involved in participation activities.⁶⁸ This is important — the CLEAR model of participation developed by Stoker et al has shown that being invited to take part is one of the key drivers of participation.⁶⁹ In order to extend the diversity and number of people participating in their communities, it is worth reaching out to them: identifying particular people and groups, and actively encouraging them to attend exercises taking place. Indeed, research on participation and social exclusion shows that identifying and targeting invitations to participation events increases diversity in participation, particularly if contact is made on the basis of a personal connection.⁷⁰ By actively identifying and inviting people to participate, they are significantly more likely to take part. Without this type of intervention, participation can be dominated by small groups of insiders who tend to take part in multiple participation initiatives.⁷¹

7 Use the right spaces

Hold activities and events in community spaces so that citizens feel relaxed, comfortable and in control.

By making participation too formal, the number and diversity of citizens likely to take part is limited.⁷² Spaces for participation should instead be more informal and tap into of the fabric of everyday life (e.g. a community book club, coffee morning or pub) and participation opportunities need to be less rigid, more informal and controlled by citizens to attract more widespread and diverse interest.⁷³ For instance, rather than holding participation events in corporate or government settings, events should take place in community spaces that make citizens feel comfortable and confident. If possible, citizens should select venues themselves.

67 Rowson, J., Broome, S., and Jones, A., *Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society* (London: RSA, 2010).

68 ippr/ PWC, *Capable Communities: towards people-powered public services*, November 2010

69 Lowndes, V., and Pratchett, L., *CLEAR: Understanding Citizen Participation in Local Government — and How to Make it Work Better*, (Leicester: 2003)

70 Social Care Institute for Excellence, *Seldom Heard*, (2008)

71 Skidmore, P., Bound, K., and Lownsborough, H., *Do policies to promote community participation build social capital?*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2006)

72 Pattie, C., *Civic attitudes and engagement in Modern Britain*, (2003)

73 Opinion Leader Research, *Britain Speaks*, (2005)

The citizens who make up the Civic Commons membership have varied backgrounds and are of varied ages. Some are significantly more experienced and confident than others in making themselves heard and understood in group spaces.

TRIALLING THE CIVIC COMMONS

RSA Projects aims to close the gap between thinking and action. To this end, the Civic Commons initiative that this paper describes is currently being developed and trialled in Peterborough, in collaboration with Peterborough City Council and thirty local citizens. The project has three main components: regular forums that bring together citizens, decision-makers and leading thinkers to discuss and plan action on a topical local issue; supplementary capacity-building and relationship-building activities including advocacy and campaigning training; and a network of members that work together outside forums to further their plans for local action. This hybrid model has been developed on the basis of the research and principles outlined in earlier sections of this paper.

While still in the developmental stages, data collected from a series of induction and co-production workshops with the thirty citizens is already showing clear signs of progress and momentum. The following section will briefly outline some of the activities that have taken place since the Civic Commons inception in August 2010.

Membership

The first stage of developing the Civic Commons in Peterborough involved identifying a core membership base to attend forums, holding capacity-building activities and forming the network. In partnership with Peterborough City Council, community development workers identified a long-list of citizens who were active in their communities but unlikely to take part in existing formal participation activities. Each potential member was then approached by a community development worker individually, to discuss what the Civic Commons is and why they had been invited to take part. Of forty invitations issued to members of the community, there was a 75 per cent positive response rate. This is significantly higher than most participation exercises and particularly noteworthy in Peterborough, which has low levels of participation when compared with national averages.⁷⁴

Inductions

Citizens who responded positively were invited to attend one of a number of induction sessions based in a central community venue in Peterborough. At these inductions, citizens were given the opportunity to shape the agenda after hearing a brief presentation outlining the aims of the initiative. Citizens signed a collective pledge of commitment to the Civic Commons to underline their willingness to work together on social challenges facing the city. The willingness of Civic Commons participants to work together and commit to collective goals is positive when considered alongside the low levels of trust that Place Survey data suggests Peterborough's citizens experience.⁷⁵

Parliamentary outreach training

The citizens who make up the Civic Commons membership have varied backgrounds and are of varied ages. Some are significantly more experienced and confident than others in making themselves heard and understood in group spaces. In light of this, the first stage of capacity-building activities took place a month after the inductions. This was in the form of advocacy training provided by the House of Commons outreach team.

74 ippr/ PWC, *Capable Communities: towards people-powered public services*, (2010) and S. McLean, *Citizen Power Peterborough: A Scoping Report* (London: RSA)

75 S. McLean, *Citizen Power Peterborough: A Scoping Report* (London: RSA, 2010)



Figure 2: A selection of Civic Commons members at the House of Commons

The aim of the capacity-building session was to build knowledge and confidence amongst all members of the group and build group relationships. The training was extremely successful, with one citizen who was previously under-confident in participating in community activity reporting that: *'I didn't think I would fit in here... but this is real empowerment'* (female, 30s).

House of Commons visit

Civic Commons members spent a day in London together a few weeks after advocacy training, visiting the House of Commons. This was on the invitation of the House of Commons outreach team who ran the Civic Commons advocacy workshop. Although this was an unplanned activity, it was useful for building relationships between Civic Commons members and providing members with recognition for their commitment. The high turnout for the day (70 per cent of Civic Commons members attended, without the use of financial incentives) is testament to the commitment the Civic Commons has garnered and is in contrast to most organised participation activities (e.g. focus groups and citizens' juries) that require a significant time commitment.

Co-design workshop

Subsequent to the House of Commons visit, Civic Commons members participated in a co-design workshop in London that was held to explore four questions:

- What is the design of the Civic Common forums?
- What topics should Civic Commons focus on?
- How will social action projects get underway?
- What core pledges/ values should members agree to?

In keeping with the ethos of the Civic Commons, the workshop was citizen-led, with participants leading on all four questions. Outcomes from the workshop included:

- The successful design of the first Civic Commons forum (held in January 2011). The forum involved introductions from speakers on a chosen topic, carousel-style deliberation, feedback and action-planning.
- The first forum topic was anti-social behaviour, and will be followed by housing, community cohesion and community education at subsequent sessions.
- Participants further agreed that they would develop an online mechanism for staying in touch with each other between forum and capacity-building activities. Participants will be taking this forward, but it is likely to be in the form of a social network or online time-bank.
- Finally, participants suggested and agreed upon ten pledges they would all sign up to as members, regarding time commitment, behaviour within the forum and social action.

The RSA's work on the Civic Commons is just beginning in Peterborough, and the Civic Commons is subject to refinement and change. We will continue to share our findings as we move forward.

Citizens can make positive contributions to their communities when given the right opportunities and support

AFTERWORD

This paper has outlined the need and principles of operation for the Civic Commons — a participation initiative that encourages and supports citizens to take social action at a local level.

Participation became a mainstream policy issue under the New Labour government and the involvement of citizens in decision-making became a legal duty. But the approach to participation was often about giving citizens a ‘voice’ rather than helping them to take action on social problems. Towards the latter end of the Labour Government this did begin to change; the *Communities in Control* White Paper (2008) made it clear that it aimed to empower citizens and help them get involved in change. This trend is set to continue under the new Coalition Government; the Big Society idea clearly wants people to play a more active role in their communities.

The move to forms of participation — such as the Civic Commons — that encourage and support citizens to make better use of their own skills and knowledge in tackling social problems is driven as much by practical necessity as it is by ideology. We now know that central government interventions are more likely to succeed when combined with citizen-led support networks, for example, to reduce re-offending rates and mental illness. And the austerity agenda, introducing on average 25 to 30 per cent cuts to local public services, could mean greater levels of responsibility being redistributed from public agencies to citizens to preserve services.

The Civic Commons has been designed to help cities like Peterborough — which will be affected by the cuts, and experience a range of social challenges — build opportunities and capacity amongst its citizens to respond to social problems. The design of the Civic Commons has its roots both in local participation spaces and capacity-building and social action models of participation. This new, hybrid model of participation combines a deliberative forum, capacity-building activities and a network for social action. Based on the evidence reviewed, we think this approach could unlock the potential of citizens to tackle and help overcome the challenges facing their communities.

The Civic Commons is currently being trialled with a group of citizens in Peterborough. We expect the initiative to change and develop on the basis of our fieldwork and the contributions of the citizens we are collaborating with. However, we hope that the positive experiences of the citizens and the wider community that we are working with will help move forward the participation agenda and demonstrate the positive contributions citizens can make to their communities when given the right opportunities and support.

For more information about the Civic Commons initiative or the RSA's other public participation work please email emma.norris@rsa.org.uk or visit the RSA Projects website at www.thersa.org/projects.