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3

We must put the
democracy back into
localism

SOLACE Summit

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SOLACE Gold Partners



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Localism without democracy is the empowering of sectional interests with no accountability. Public services ration scarce public resources and democracy is the best way to make the trade-offs between competing interests. The SOLACE Summit considered the challenges and opportunities of localism and focused on how we can enhance participative and representative democracy in the new model of local governance.

Representative versus participative democracy - Is representative democracy still the primary focus at the local level as we push towards participative democracy. Citizens' belief in local democracy seems not to be shaped by the amount of power devolved to them but on how they perceive and are received by the local institutions and services they engage with. There is, however, a risk of greater dissatisfaction if people are more engaged and cannot achieve the results they want.

Localist localism - Local authorities should have the freedom to develop the democracy that suits a particular area utilising the plurality of democratic mechanisms available. Localism needs to be locally defined and should be allowed to bloom without constant reference to central government. Chief Executives should be more active in defining localism for their areas. The essence of localism cannot be that one size fits all.

Holding a conversation - Councils need to trust their communities more, by handing over assets to the community, trusting that citizens can make really difficult decisions, and not jumping in when conversations take unexpected turns. The role of councils could be to stand back and not interfere, leaving independent community organisations to moderate. The brand of local government needs improving when it comes to consultation and involvement. Perhaps there is a need to create a conversational brand that is well thought of and trusted.

Different strokes for different folks - Some residents want to make themselves heard but they do not want a conversation. Many citizens see services as utilities. They want quality, they want value for money – but they don't want engagement. Should our aim be to ensure there are conversations taking place that people can join in with if they want to? If local authorities have already started a conversation, then they will be in a better place when difficult decisions need to be made, not on the back foot.

Democracy when outsourcing - Personalisation, localism, decentralisation, outsourcing are in fashion. Big service departments are not. But in this decentralised world, where does democratic accountability rest? Who is accountable when things go wrong, and who will be there to pick up the pieces?

Members must visualise their outcomes and build them into the procurement process. Officers need to ensure that the selection process brings these out for discussion. There is also a need to build in feedback loops to ensure contracts deliver citizen satisfaction. Democracy is enacted as customers feedback, complain, and demand something different.

A new democratic infrastructure - The challenge for councils is to understand the lived experiences of communities on a deeper and more personal level to ascertain what the next good democratic structures should look like. Councils need to ensure that democratic control is fitted to the right services, that the quieter voices in society are heard. Consideration should be given to whether a new structure will change or even threaten the role of.

We need a mix of participative, deliberative and representative democratic structures. Councils should also seek to build 'civic understanding' so that citizens have a shared understanding of what the democratic framework could be in their area.