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**Paper title: Citizen Participation in English Local
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## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT: IS LONDON LEADING THE WAY?

### Introduction

The task of devising a system of government for London has had to balance two conflicting objectives. First, providing the capital with a system of government that recognises, and can direct, the unique political, economic, social and spatial power that the city has in England and Britain as a whole. Secondly, limiting and constraining the political power of London and its governing arrangements, to ensure neither could undermine the power of the national government, based as it is in London. Added to this dynamic has been the need to recognise that London is extremely difficult to contain within geographical boundaries drawn for political and administrative convenience, as the city's economic and political power will spill over any artificially drawn boarders (Travers, 2004).[1] Moreover, there remains the vexed question of balancing the needs of governing London as a whole and governing the communities within in it. The power and responsibilities of London-wide government has to be shared with smaller units of political authority grouped in such a way as to represent some common communities and interests – in this case the London Boroughs (Barlow, 1991).[2]

The current governing arrangements for London were introduced by the Greater London Authority Act 1999, which established a directly elected mayor for London and a Greater London Assembly of 25 elected members, which together constitute the Greater London Authority. These new representative institution – mayor and assembly – re-introduced city-wide government to London after the abolition of the for-runner Greater London Council in 1986 by the then Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher. Yet, as we shall see latter, the 14 year absence of a democratically elected city-wide government was not the first period in London's history when it had been without city-wide democratic government. The absence of London-wide government from 1986 to 2000 also saw the borough councils increase in political strength and legitimacy as they were the only democratically elected bodies engaged in governance within London – a position they did not wish to see undermined by the reintroduction of city-wide government.

The current structure of London wide-government owes very little to the past structures and political processes by which London has been governed; it is a set of governing arrangements unique in English local government. Despite this unique set of arrangements, London government remains dominated by party politics and party considerations – albeit in a different shape and with a different dynamic to the rest of the country – and as a consequence citizen participation must take its place below party consideration and interests. Whilst London has its own problems and a powerful political, economic and social dynamic, which is unique to itself, it remains to be seen whether the mechanisms and processes of public participation in London are equally unique when compared to the rest of English local government.

The next section of this paper sets out a short history of the development of London government, bringing those changes up-to-date with the introduction in 1999 of the Greater London Authority. The section explores the complex network of arrangements that constitutes London government and considers whether the system of London government provides more effective opportunities for citizen participation when compared to the rest of England.

The third section sets out the broad structure of local government in England, outside of London. It does this to set London government in its own unique context but also to highlight that the political considerations governing how local politicians approach citizen participation are similar whether located in London, or elsewhere in England. The section explores the attitudes of English councillors towards various aspects of citizen participation in local government, including councillors on London borough councils. It does this to show that the way local politicians perceive aspects of democracy and representation is a powerful factor in the effectiveness of public engagement and the willingness of citizens to participate in local political issues.

The final section draws out the similarities and distinctions between the government of London and the processes of citizen participation within it, with the rest of English local government. It considers whether the current London arrangements represent a new and more imaginative way for citizens to engage with the political processes, or whether any public participation in a representative democracy will face political problems.

**The Government of London: Representative democracy in city-wide government**

There is an old English song with the following words:

*Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner, that I love London so.*
*Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I think of her wherever I go. I get a*
*funny feeling inside of me just walking up and down.*
*Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I love London Town.*

Note the use of the word town as opposed to city – something, of course, to do with the need to rhyme, but how many citizens of cities across the globe would take a song to their hearts that downgraded their beloved home - the nation's capital - to a mere provincial outpost. Yet, these words are not really about any sense of a community that is London and certainly not about how that city is governed. Rather, the words are the reflection of an individualistic and highly romantic attachment to one's home and importantly, it is about what the individual may think London is, or what it means to him or her (see, Willmott and Young, 1960).[3] London has always had the problem of defining what it was, what it meant, where and what its communities were and, more importantly for the political *elite* – how it should be governed. The search for a governing institution for large metropolitan area such as London is less a search for a way of representing

the interests of discernable communities, and more a way of packaging notions of a perceived community within a set geographical boundaries and an overarching governing arrangement (Warren, 1966).[4]

By 1855 the population of London was three times that of New York and Berlin but, there was no formal democratic governing structure for London, beyond that for the square mile of the City of London and its corporation (Pimlott and Rao 2002).[5] Political representation for London, outside of Members of Parliament, was offered by a number of vestries or parish assemblies, covering geographical communities within London; some were open vestries were all male ratepayers were entitled to attend; other were select vestries where small numbers of the 'principle inhabitants' of the area were nominated to the vestry (often by Acts of Parliament) and who filled vacancies by nominating whomsoever they pleased (see, Owen, 1982).[6]

The Metropolitan Board of Works formed in 1855 was not a democratically elected layer of metropolitan government for London; it was an indirectly appointed body by the City of London Corporation and the London vestries. Yet, it did have a London-wide remit to engage in construction and improvement works within the capital. But, at the same time it had to work alongside more locally based political institutions – the London vestries. When democratic government finally came to London in 1889 it was with the arrival of the London County Council (LCC), a body which for 10 years governed London-wide unhindered by any lower tiers of democratically elected London bodies (Davis, 1988).[7] Indeed, the LCC fiercely opposed the formation, by the Conservative government in 1899, of 28 elected borough councils across London to provide democratic local government to the areas that formed the metropolis (Pimlott and Rao, 2002).

From its outset the LCC was an intensely party political body and whilst the national political parties often disguised themselves on the LCC, adopting the name *Progressive*s in the case of the Liberal Party; and, *Moderates* in the case of the Conservatives, who later became known, for LCC purposes, as the London Municipal Society (Young, 1975).[8] Indeed, LCC elections were as much about national political issues and about national party politics and government as they were about the government of London (Young and Garside, 1982, Saint, 1989).[9] The Liberals, in the guise of the Progressive Party, won six successive LCC elections from 1989, but were finally replaced by the Conservatives in 1907; it was not until some 27 years later that the Labour Party finally achieved a majority on the LCC and continued to control it until its abolition almost 30 years later.

The continual growth of London and the complexity of the political, social, economic and community dynamics that play themselves out within what constitutes its boundaries at any stage, mean that London and its effect, is always reaching outwards beyond the boundaries of its governing institution. The Conservative governments of the 1950s had explored local government reform and London, because of its tendency

towards continual expansion, could no longer be excluded from this process (Young and Rao, 1997).[10]

In 1957 the Herbert commission began work on devising a new system of Government for London and by 1960 had produced a new set of arrangements for governing London, which would see an expansion of the political boundaries of the city and the abolition of 100 existing councils – including the LCC. The Herbert commission proposed the formation of a Council for Greater London and 52 London boroughs. A lengthy and politically charged debate ensued about the structure of London government based on these proposals. But, it was a debate conducted largely amongst the political *elite* and by those councils affected by the proposals; it was not a debate with which, by-and-large, those citizens that were to be governed by the new arrangements, had much input (Rhodes, 1970).[11]

On 1 April 1965 the new Greater London Council (GLC), and what had become 32 new London Boroughs, took up their responsibilities as a result of the London Government Act 1963. The GLC was the London-wide strategic body with a planning function and responsibility for what were seen as London-wide services such as the fire brigade and ambulance services; it had all-most no personal service functions, save a housing responsibility shared with the borough councils (Rhodes, 1972).[12] The Greater London Council which took over from the LCC in 1965 was based on an extended geographical boundary compared to that of its predecessor. A boundary, which, whilst taking in the more conservative orientated London suburbs, also recognised the difficulties of confining London satisfactorily within any sort of spatial arrangements. The GLC struggled with its role, particularly set again the London Boroughs which jealously guarded their position and power. Indeed, whilst the GLC was the London-wide elected strategic authority, albeit a limited one, it was the Boroughs that had the most powers (See Travers, 2004, pp28-35).

Not only did the GLC reflect the party political battles that raged nationally and locally throughout the rest of England, it also structured itself very much as a traditional English council – with a committee system overseeing its range of functions. Yet, as Pimlott and Rao have noted (2002. p29.) the failure of the GLC to become anything other than a traditional local authority was only partially its own fault; the Herbert Commission and the Government of the time, also failed to think of the GLC as a new form of sub-national government; one that could be far more rooted in notions of public engagement and consultation than had hitherto been the case for London-wide arrangements.

As with the LCC, from its outset the GLC was an intensely party political body; its geographical boundaries were so drawn as to give the Conservative Party more than a fighting chance of winning control – something they had been unable to do with the LCC since the Labour Party took power from them in 1934. Yet, the voters in the GLC area, which covered a greatly enlarged territory, compared to the LCC and encompassed many outer London suburban areas, showed themselves much more desirous

of change in political control of the GLC than the voters of the old LCC area. Of the six elections held for the GLC, three were won by the Labour Party and three by the Conservative Party; the last election in 1981 saw Ken Livingstone become Labour leader and consequently, as a result of the narrow Labour victory, the leader of the GLC.

Livingstone's ascendancy to the leadership of the GLC and the new left, radical rainbow coalition politics his administration pursued, put the GLC on a direct collision course with the then Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher. Livingstone's administration was confrontational, politically driven and set out to use the governing body of the capital city as a political platform from which to attack the government. County Hall, which was the home of the GLC just across the river Thames from the Houses of Parliament, displayed across its frontage, on a huge banner, the up-to-date unemployment figures, as a way of highlighting the economic failure of the government and to antagonise its political opponents across the river. It was a political stance that was bound, indeed intended, to draw fire from the Government and when that fire came, it was partly aimed at the needs of the government of London and partly at removing a political opponent from a position of authority and power. As a member of the Conservative government, Norman, now Lord Tebbit, commented (taken from Pimlott and Rao 2002, p.43):

> *The Labour Party is the party of division. In its present form it represents a threat to the democratic values and institutions on which our parliamentary system is based. The Greater London council is typical of this new, modern, divisive version of socialism. It must be defeated. So, we shall abolish the GLC (1984)*[13]

The Conservative Government, published a consultation paper entitled: *Streamlining the Cities* which set out the case in more restrained terms, for the abolition of the GLC and the six metropolitan counties across England. Together, these metropolitan counties were seen in Government eyes as expensive, wasteful, and lacking in purpose. The latter, resulted in the metropolitan counties often coming into conflict with the lower-tier borough councils, as the metropolitan counties sought a role and influence for themselves. The GLC, under Livingstone's leadership did not go quietly; it fought a high-profile, political campaign to save itself from abolition. It failed in that aim, but succeeded in creating the appearance at least, that London was speaking with one voice against abolition (which, politically it was not, although many Conservatives did come out against abolition). Moreover, there was a coalescence of the view that London was somehow under threat and the community needed to protect itself. Livingstone and the GLC did manage to galvanise a campaign against abolition that bound, at least on the surface., Londoners together as a community – ironically, this was something that throughout its life the GLC as a governing body had singularly failed to do, as had its predecessor LCC.

As in any unitary state with a supreme parliament and no written constitution or constitutional court – the Government was bound to get its way. The GLC and six

metropolitan counties outside London were abolished in 1986. The abolition resulted in the transference of the GLC responsibilities to the London Borough councils and to an array of other bodies created for the purpose of taking over specific functions and roles from the GLC. But, London was left without a strategic layer of governance something it had not lacked, in one form or another, since 1855 with the Metropolitan Board of Works. London also lacked a city-wide democratically elected government and was left with a complex mass of agencies - elected boroughs, unelected quangos and private organisations - competing, conflicting and co-operating, in order to provide the capital with some semblance of governance, albeit one that lacked a co-ordinated London-wide perspective. Whilst London had so far demonstrated little that was unique about the way in which either the London-wide governing bodies, or sub-London representative bodies, had encouraged or facilitated citizen participation compared to the rest of the country, from 1986 Londoners could not even participate in choosing who would govern their city.

It is perhaps no surprise that doing something about London was higher on the Blair Government's modernisation agenda than the rest of local government. But, there are parallels in the reform of London government and the rest of the country by the government, namely: the separation of executive functions into a distinct political entity to be held to account by those councillors outside the executive. In London, unlike the rest of the country, mayoral accountability was to be assured by a separate organisation altogether: the London Assembly; the mayor and assembly together forming the Greater London Authority. The authority was then to work in partnership with a range of external agencies to provide the capital with good governance; a visible political leadership; a political decision-making arrangement that was transparent, inclusive and responsive; and, clear lines of political accountability.

The Government showcased its proposal for London Government in the green paper: *New Leadership for London* and the White paper: *A Mayor and Assembly for London* (detr, 1998c and d).[14] Whilst the themes of the wider modernisation agenda are reflected in these documents, and in the Greater London Authority Act 1999 which emerged from them, London was deemed by government to be a special case that required a different type of elected mayor to that which would become available to the rest of the country. Moreover, the reform of London governance was not an 'exercise in bringing back the Greater London Council or tinkering with existing local government structures'. Rather it was about the creation of a 'new model of government, appropriate to a great capital city in the new millennium' (detr, 1998 (c) para 1.09).

Thus, the new governance of London would look radically different to the rest of English local government, and, have a fundamentally different configuration of political relationships to those existing anywhere else. The GLA was not to be a traditional service providing local authority. Rather, it was to sit within a network of overlapping responsibilities and influence shared with a number of other statutory and non-statutory bodies, with GLA members making up part of the membership of, and sometimes taking the chairs of, a range of organisations concerned with the governance of London.

The GLA's relationships with the voluntary sector, central government, or the London Borough councils, vary according to the task and partner in hand (see, Travers 2004). But, before the mayoralty and assembly could become a reality – a referendum was required.

Londoners gave consent to the new mayoralty on 7 May 1998 when a majority 'Yes' vote was received in the referendum on a turnout of only 34 per cent. Yet, with 1,230,715 'yes' votes recorded (72%) and 478,413 'No' (28%) and with every London Borough providing a majority 'yes' vote, the government had received its first public endorsement for executive directly elected mayoral government.

The first election for the mayor of London took place in May 2000, under the supplementary vote system, where voters mark with a cross their first and second preference candidates. Ken Livingstone, the last Labour leader of the GLC, was elected as mayor having stood as an Independent candidate. Livingstone had failed to be selected as the official Labour candidate and subsequently on announcing his intention to stand as an Independent, he was expelled from the Labour Party. Livingstone received a total (after counting second preferences) of 776, 427; his nearest rival, the Conservative candidate Steven Norris, polled a total of 564,137 votes; the official Labour Party candidate came third in the first round of vote counting and was consequently eliminated from the run-off second count. Livingstone was elected for a second term of office as London mayor in May 2004 and this time was the official Labour candidate. He received a total of 828,380 votes, against Norris' 667,178 votes.

Alongside the elected mayor of London, is the new London Assembly which has 25 members, elected by the additional member system. There are 14 members representing geographical constituency areas and an additional 11 members, drawn from the results of a London-wide list system of voting; these 11 members are elected to seats allocated to ensure that the overall distribution of seats reflects the proportion of votes each party, and Independent list, receives. A new type of representative assembly in England clearly required a new type of voting system; rather than providing a government, albeit a local one, the system was required to produce a representative chamber, and this it did. The first elections to the London Assembly held in 2000 produced the following seat distribution: Conservative nine; Labour nine, Liberal Democrats four; and, the Green Party three.

The second set of Assembly elections held in 2004 produced an even more intriguing and politically representative set of seat distribution: Conservative Party nine; Labour seven; Liberal Democrats five; Greens two; and, the UK Independence Party, two.

The GLA - mayor and assembly - is a central part of a still complex and disintegrated approach to the government of the capital. It has a directly elected mayoral system that whilst strong in relation to the London Assembly, is weak in relation to the outside world and of course, weak in relation to central government. The London mayor is

an elected figure head for London who, outside of the GLA, wields influence not power; a subtly not lost on those in central government who designed the model.

A key power of the London mayor is that of *appointment* to a range of other offices and bodies, a power which reflects the intention that the GLA would not be a service provider in the traditional local authority sense. Rather, the activities for which it was responsible and oversees, would be provided by a range of bodies headed by *boards* which would be wholly or partly appointed by the mayor (detr, 1997). Travers has summarised the appointment powers of the mayor of London and shows that the membership of, and the chair's of Transport for London and the London Development Agency are mayoral patronage as too are the appointment of 12 members of the 23 member Metropolitan Police Authority, which then goes on to appoint its own chair; the mayor also appoints 17 members of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority and its chair, with a further 8 nominations made by the London Boroughs (Travers, 2004).[15]

The prime role of the London Assembly is to scrutinise the mayor, but Travers has identified that some members found this too restrictive and instead see themselves as working on policy development and as a democratic forum for debating London-wide issues (Travers, 2004, p.113). Indeed, the Assembly has the potential to be a major conduit for public engagement and participation in the governance of the city and it would be fair to say that it has worked hard in this direction. The assembly has run a number of investigations and scrutiny commission into issues affecting London and through this deliberative and investigative process has taken evidence form a wide range of participant – including the ordinary London citizen. Indeed, very recently the assembly has formed a special committee to review and report with recommendations on lessons to be learned from the response by London wide agencies to the terrorist atrocity in London on 7 July 2005. The committee focusing on the following:

- How information, advice and support was communicated to Londoners;
- How business continuity arrangements worked in practice;
- The role of broadcasting services in communication; and,
- The use of information and communication technology to aid the response process.

Senior representatives of the following organisations were invited to attend to give evidence:

- Transport for London
- Metropolitan Police Service
- British Transport Police
- City of London Police
- London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority
- London Ambulance Service

In addition, the assembly conducts a wide range of consultative activities designed to ascertain the views of Londoners; citizens are able, on a regular basis, to attendance assembly meetings and to ask questions of not only Assembly members but also the mayor. The Mayor of London also conducts his own consultative activities designed to solicit Londoners' views and the views of business, voluntary and community groups and a range of interest and other groups. Together the mayor and assembly provide Londoners with a direct channel into the governance of the city, but, as with all politicians, they are not bound to respond positively, or at all, to the messages they receive and will filter out views and opinions they find politically unacceptable; here the Greater London Authority is just like any other politically representative institution.

The Greater London Authority oversees the activities of a range of bodies, including the London Boroughs and together the mayor and assembly speak to and for London with an authoritative and electorally legitimised voice. As a result of being freed from much of the direct service provision responsibilities that clutter the politics of other English councils; the GLA is able to concentrate on its politically representative role and act in such a way as to be a force for political engagement amongst London citizens. Yet, what we find when we look at the GLA is certainly a plethora of consultative activities and events designed to stimulate and involve Londoners in the governance of their city and an enthusiasm amongst the mayor and assembly members for such a process. But, we also find little, if anything, that is truly unique when set against the public consultation and engagement undertaken by other English councils; we just find more of it.

All of English local government has before it a wide range of mechanisms available to stimulate public participation and engagement in political discourse and for finding out what citizens may be thinking. Central government has been enthusiastic in encouraging all English local government to engage more closely with local citizens and to employ participative techniques such as:

- citizens juries
- focus groups
- citizens panel
- deliberative opinion polls
- community forums
- neighbourhood committees
- visioning exercises
- electronic governance
- referendum
- public meetings
- use group forums

Indeed the government see a 'modern' English council as one which '*involves and responds to local people and local interests*' and has a *'clear and effective political leadership to catch and retain local people's interests*' Indeed, in a modern council '*public participation in debate and decision-making is valued with strategies in place to inform*

*and engage local opinion*'(detr, 1998).[16] Moreover, the GLA is expected by Government to '*consult widely and work closely with London organisations…in a new inclusive style of politics*'. Further, that '*there will be open hearings where evidence will be taken, question times in which the GLA can respond to views put to them and where strategies and policies can be debated*' (deter, 1998c, para 1.18).[17] The GLA, as a new, modern form of governance for London, has taken this challenge seriously. Yet, there is little in these government expectations of this new modern form of London governance that is any different from what other English local authorities are doing to engage with their citizens. It is to these council we now turn.

## Public Participation: Local Government Outside of London

Local Government in England, out side of London is mainly a creation of the Local Government At 1972 which set out a two-tier structure consisting of county councils as the upper tier and district councils as the lower tier. Six metropolitan counties were also created, but these were abolished in 1986 at the same time as the GLC; the metropolitan borough councils remained in existence. The Local Government Act 1992 crated a Local Government Commission to examine the possibilities of replacing the existing two-tier structure with a single-tier, all purpose, unitary system. The Commission's deliberations resulted in only 46 unitary councils being formed in April 1998. Currently, outside of London, English local government consists of: 34 county councils and 238 second tier district councils.

The Local Government Act 2000 did not change the structure of local government; rather, it changed the shape of the political-decision making process and introduced executive local government into England. Under the act all councils had to consult their citizens on three executive arrangements contained within the Act:

- A directly elected mayor an cabinet of up to 9 other members
- An indirectly elected leader and cabinet of up to 9 other members
- A directly elected mayor an council manager option

Councils with populations below 85,000 could also consult on whether or not to introduce a slimed-down committee system, as a non-executive political decision-making arrangement.

Under the Act, citizens could petition to introduce a directly elected mayor to their authority, which would be subject to a referendum before the mayoral system was adopted; so far only 11 referendum have produced a 'yes' result.

The government's modernising agenda for local government has be set out in a number of publications: *Local Democracy and Community Leadership*, (Detr, 1998), *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (Detr, 1998), *Local Leadership: Local Choice*, (Detr, 1999), the Local Government Act 2000, '*Strong Local Leadership:*

*Quality Public Services*' (dtlr, 2001), and the recent discussion document: *Vibrant Local Leadership* (ODPM, 2005) display the Government's agenda for modernising local political decision-making and enhancing citizen engagement.[18] The agenda aims, among other things, to address the crisis of legitimacy experienced by local government as a consequence of declining electoral turnout (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997).[19] Modernisation, as well as introducing executive local government, also aims to enhance the citizen's ability to engage with the councils and councillors. Indeed, those councillors outside the executive are expected to focus on the needs of the local communities they represent and councillors will:

> *spend less time in council meetings and more time in the local community, at residents meetings or surgeries. They will be accountable, strong, local representatives for their area. They will bring their constituents' views, concerns and grievances to the council through their council's structures. Their role will be to represent the people to the council rather than to defend the council to the people* (Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People, para 3.42)

What this fails to recognise altogether, or simply ignores, is that most councillors see their role as representing and defending the political party and their political party group of councillors to the people, rather than the council (Copus, 1999 and 1998).[20]

Gyford (1986) notes that a diverse and fragmented society exerts pressure on representative democracy to take on a greater participatory form.[21] The modernising agenda seeks to respond to such pressures, not by replacing representative democracy with a participative variant, but by using the consultative tools of citizens' juries, panels and conferences, focus groups, opinion polls, referenda and other mechanisms, to inform councillors in their political activities. The modernising agenda rests more on the *consultative* than the *participative,* with local citizens having enhanced opportunities in local government to inform the political decision-making processes, rather than seeing power transferred from representatives, to communities. Final decision-making power continues to rest with elected representatives and as a consequence with political parties and party groups, which are to remain the 'aggregator' of local interests (Mabileau, Moyser, Parry, Quantin, 1989).[22] But, the government continues to attempt to inject local representative democracy with hefty doses of public participation and involvement, without damaging the representative nature of local government (ODPM, 2005).[23] Any form of public political engagement however, ultimately undermines political representation; political modernisation at the local level in England offers more liberal democracy, rather than a fundamental shift in the representative nature of local government (see Phillips, 1993 and 1994).[24]

Yet, despite all this, local government represents fertile ground for citizen political participation. Indeed: 'direct involvement of the ordinary citizen is largely limited to the local sphere' (Parry *et al* 1992). Local government is widely recognised as having far greater potential for citizen involvement than its central counterpart; the strength of local democracy often rests on this assumption. It is an assumption however, which itself

rests on citizen willingness to become involved and on citizens' belief in the efficacy of their involvement to influence local affairs (Almond and Verba, 1963, Marsh, 1977, Parry, 1992, HMSO 1967, HMSO, 1986).[25]

A number of surveys have considered community assertiveness when faced with unpopular decisions. These studies noted: a decline in political passivity; growing confidence amongst the electorate in the ability to affect the political process; and, the increasing importance of the local arena for enhanced citizen protest (Young, 1984 and 1985, Heath and Topf, 1987, Bloch and John, 1991, Young and Rao, 1995).[26] Indeed, councillors were seen as an *effective* focus for protest activity. Yet, Young and Rao (p.109) also report that the majority of citizens 'appear to have a wary cynicism about their councillors, saying that they can be trusted only some of the time'. More recently, Lowndes *et al* (2001, pp. 450-451) indicate the existence of very negative views held by citizens about councillors, who were often seen as 'inaccessible and unlikely to be interested' in citizens' concerns.[27] Indeed, amongst those that had contacted a councillor, 'the dominant experience was one of disappointment'.

Yet, much local participation occurs when communities are mobilised around matters in which they have an immediate interest, these local issues can rouse an otherwise quiescent citizenry into action (Batley, 1972, Lambert *et al*, 1978, Glassberg, 1981, Parkinson, 1985, Parry, et al, 1992).[28] Moreover, local participation acts as a motivational trigger to further and more sustained citizen participation (Boaden, *et al,* 1982).[29] Local campaigns, or protest on issues of common concern, are an important part of democratic activity and popular involvement in local government (Cochrane, 1986).[30] But, the effectiveness of popular involvement depends on whether councillors are willing to respond positively, or not, to that involvement. What we find here is that councillors across England - including the London boroughs - respond in very similar ways to notions of public participation and engagement and not always positively.

The extent to which councillors are willing to respond to citizen participation has been tested elsewhere (Copus, 2003).[31] Such willingness was found to be influenced by councillors' interpretation of the appropriate role of that public participation has within the representative processes. Moreover, it is also influenced by how councillors balance the input of unelected citizens into political decision-making, compared with their own input as elected representatives. In a survey conducted in 2003 councillors were presented with six statements designed to test attitudes towards certain aspects of local representation. Those statements were:

- *Ordinary citizens should have more say in the decisions made by local government;*
- *More should be done to interest people in local government;*
- *More should be done to involve ordinary people in local decision-making*
- *It is for councillors rather than the public to make decisions on local issues and priorities; and,*
- *People only become interested in local government when an issue directly affects them.*

The statements were designed to test councillors' attitudes towards discrete but linked aspects of citizen participation in local affairs: citizen *say, interest* and *involvement*. These were presented to respondents with the following definitions: *say* being the opportunities provided for citizens to articulate and express opinions and views on local issues and concerns, or on policy proposals made by the council; *interest* being the general levels of attention and salience given by citizens and communities to the activities of councils and councillors; and, *involvement* being the provision of opportunities for citizens and communities to explore issues and consider alternative courses of action, to work closely with political representatives on developing policy responses.

Such distinctions were necessary in the research because councillors can and in practice do, discriminate between citizen '*say*', '*interest*' and '*involvement*'. Such discrimination is necessary for councillors to determine what they believe is the proper balance of influence in local decision-making between citizen and councillor. Moreover, distinguishing between aspects of citizen participation enables careful consideration of what it is about citizen input that councillors support or reject and allows us to consider in detail, whether the councillor's political affiliation is a likely predictor of responses to citizen participation.

Table 1 sets out the responses from councillors to the statements regarding citizen participation; the strength of agreement with the statements is shown as the results are heavily skewed towards 'agreement'.

Table 1. displays a clear Labour and Liberal Democrat support for enhanced citizen *'say'* in local political decision-making, with Conservatives lagging some distance behind in that regard. These findings underpin the conclusion from the research for the Widdicombe committee (1986), that the councillor's party affiliation is 'a uniquely powerful discriminator' towards the issue of citizen *say* in local government.[32] The findings also indicate the existence of a clear centre-left affinity on this issue, rather than a simple single party distinction. There is however, general support amongst councillors for the idea that citizens should have a '*say*' in local government and - more of it.

Councillors across all parties overwhelmingly share the view that the community should take a greater *interest* in the activities of local government, although Conservative councillors again lag behind their Labour and Liberal Democrat counterparts. The high levels of agreement to this proposition - across the parties - indicate the underlying acceptance amongst councillors of the need for a more interested electorate. Citizen *interest* in local government need not conflict with councillors' decision-making role and is thus safe to encourage and indulge. When it comes to *involving* people in local decision-making, the centre-left agreement is again evident but with Liberal Democrats recording the greatest enthusiasm. Yet again, party affiliation is shown to be an important discriminator of councillor attitudes towards this aspect of democracy, with less Conservative enthusiasm apparent. Whilst support exists, across the parties, for enhanced citizen participation a different pattern emerges when it comes to making decisions.

**Table 1.  Councillors attitudes towards aspects of citizen participation**

| Statement | Party | Agree Strongly | Agree | Neither Nor | Disagree | Disagree Strongly | base |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Say | Lab | 33 | 50 | 13 | 2 | * | 224 |
|  | Lib Dem | 68 | 24 | 6 | 2 | – | 99 |
|  | Con | 14 | 42 | 26 | 15 | 2 | 225 |
| Interest | Lab | 25 | 54 | 7 | 12 | 2 | (224) |
|  | Lib Dem | 29 | 58 | 4 | 8 | 1 | (99) |
|  | Con | 35 | 50 | 6 | 7 | 2 | (224) |
| Involvement | Lab | 24 | 57 | 15 | 3 | * | (223) |
|  | Lib Dem | 51 | 43 | 4 | 2 | – | (95) |
|  | Con | 10 | 42 | 25 | 21 | 2 | (219) |
| Cllrs decide | Lab | 14 | 43 | 18 | 21 | 4 | (222) |
|  | Lib Dem | 9 | 44 | 15 | 29 | 3 | (98) |
|  | Con | 29 | 51 | 7 | 12 | 1 | (224) |
| Interested when issues affect them | Lab | 25 | 54 | 7 | 12 | 2 | (224) |
|  | Lib Dem | 29 | 58 | 4 | 8 | 1 | (99) |
|  | Con | 35 | 50 | 6 | 7 | 2 | (224) |

Source: Copus, 2003.

A majority of councillors across all political parties, including Liberal Democrats, took the position that it is for councillors, rather than the public, to make the decisions on local issues and priorities. Yet again, the results show a divergence in responses between the centre-left and Conservative councillors. The latter expresses more and stronger support for an unhindered role for the councillor as the arbitrator of local affairs, expressing an attitude toward representation peculiar to the Conservative. Councillors, across party, are ever more certain that the legitimacy they acquire as a result of the public vote means ultimate decision-making power and responsibility, resting in their hands.

Councillors of all parties clearly draw a boundary between citizen input to local government, and their own position as the final decision-makers regarding local issues. Indeed, qualitative research indicates that the views councillors hold about decision-making is constant, irrespective of whether the councillor's group is in a solid and permanent majority; a tenuous and fragile majority; hoping to gain / regain power at the next opportunity; or, confined to permanent opposition. Part of the reason councillors guard their decision-making role rests on formal legal restrictions and legislative requirements placed on them. A further part however, is revealed in the response councillors provide to what they feel motivates citizens to participate in local affairs.

Councillors display a firm view that people only become interested in local government when an issue directly affects them, with some 83 per cent of respondents agreeing with that proposition. Liberal Democrat agreement with the statement, the highest response amongst the three parties, is intriguing, as this appears at first sight to sit uneasily with Liberal Democrat approaches to community politics and engagement with local citizens. In fact, the responses reflect Liberal Democrat experience of organising local campaigns and motivating the community around particular issues, whilst recognising the electorate do not share the same level of general interest in politics. Councillors specialising in community politics may be the more acutely aware that the community will only be interested in issues of direct relevance to it. At the same time, community politics, as becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging local communities to fix on very local issues affecting their own interests. Tocqueville argues that participation follows naturally from self-interest and so can act as a trigger for broader and more sustained community and political involvement. Rather than accusing local campaigners of NIMBYISM, councillors can use citizens' understandable desire to focus on the very local, as an opportunity to encourage broader political involvement and concern amongst citizens and communities*.

The clear and conclusive majority of councillors display a deep feeling that the citizenry are primarily motivated by self-interest and despite such self-interest being an understandable motivator, which may lead into less self-interested and broader participation, councillors do not view the motivations of citizens in such a light. Far from it, councillors hold negative views about self-interest as a motivator. Moreover, a councillor's definition of self-interest is filtered through political affiliation, enabling the rejection, as unrepresentative and self-interested, of messages received from sections of the community perceived to be politically hostile, or messages with which councillors simply disagree. It is not self-interest that is the problem but councillors' definitions, understanding and usage of the term.

Negative attitudes towards the electorate, when displayed by councillors seriously call into question, some of the assumptions of representative democracy and of enhancing citizen participation within it. Indeed, Lowndes *et al* (1998) survey identified a series of negative views about the effects on political decision-making arising from public participation, with respondents concerned about: the raising of unrealistic expectations; a slowing down of decision-making; the 'unrepresentativeness' of citizens participating; and, a fear amongst councillors that their decision-making role would be usurped by participators. Moreover, when attempting to influence, or to become in-

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* NIMBY is an acronym: Not In My Back Yard, which councillors use in a pejorative sense to criticise local campaigners concerned with very local issues. The councillor often believes that their role is to enact policy for the benefit of the whole – however they describe that whole. Consequently, small local communities may be adversely affected by the policies designed to improve life for the amorphous 'whole'. A new motorway for example may (or may not) have some positive affects, but not if you live along the route it will take – those protesting such a plan would, no doubt, be accused of NIMBYISM – only interested in their own well-being. But, such campaigns to protect the quality of life of small communities are understandable and also undermine the notion that government must steamroller polices through because it knows best.

volved in local political decision-making, citizens are confronted by councillors holding very specific interpretations of what representation and participation mean and what the role of the citizen within the political processes should be.

*The Effectiveness of Public Consultation*

There are five possible categories of citizen participation: first, *protest activity*, second, *direct contact*, between citizen and councillor; third, *indirect contact*, that is citizen using bodies outside the council to apply pressure to it on their behalf; fourth, *electoral pressure*; and, fifth *council sponsored engagement*. The table below sets out what activity the citizen might be involved in for each of these categories

Councillors clearly distinguish between these types of citizen activity and moreover, they distinguish between what they see as being the more effective tool for political engagement.

Attempts to assess the efficacy of public participation and political protest have taken into account whether those conducting action, of one sort or another, believe their actions to be effective in influencing political decisions (Almond and Verba, 1963). Indeed, Young (1985) describes political efficacy as 'people's expectations of being able to wield effective political influence'. Approaching efficacy from the perspective of the powerless, or rather those less powerful than holders of political office, has the potential to distort our understanding of the political processes. Such distortion occurs because those attempting to influence representatives may view the effectiveness of political action very differently to the representatives themselves. Moreover, councillors, as holders of political office, have views about participative and protest activities and the participatory techniques, available to citizens, which concern issues of legitimacy. As a consequence, councillors will respond differently to those activities seen to be more, or less legitimate. Councillors are more likely to respond to public participation conducted in ways seen as congruent with the principles of representative democracy, as they experience and understand it, and congruent with the role of political parties within representative democracy.

Political affiliation is a powerful indicator of perceptions about the effectiveness of public participation and various participatory tools in the political processes (Copus, 2003). But, Lowndes *et al* (2001, p. 209) found political control made very little difference to the amount of participative initiatives undertaken by councils. Whilst a council may have a corporate policy to pursue public participation, individual councillors will make their own assessments of the value and effectiveness of participation. Even if a council is corporately committed to public participation, individual councillors may hold contrary views. Moreover, central government policy towards local public engagement, may drive councils to undertake participatory activity, irrespective of whether councillors on the receiving end of that participation, consider it to be effective or not, or appropriate in a representative democracy. More importantly, public participation undertaken by councils because of government pressure does not mean that councils and councillors are prepared to respond positively to the results of such participation.

## Table 2.  Methods of public participation

| Political pressure | Direct contact | Indirect contact | Electoral pressure | Council sponsored |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Form a campaign group | group contact with own local councillor | contact the ombudsman | campaign for a sitting councillor during an election | citizens juries |
| Submit a petition | individual contact with own local councillor | contact local MP | join ruling political party | focus groups |
| leaflet campaigns | Group contact with council leader | contact district auditor | join opposition political party | citizens panel |
| letter writing campaign | Individual contact with council leader | take the council to court | vote against the council ruling group at election time | deliberative opinion polls |
| organise / attend public meetings | group contact with committee chair/ executive member | Contact a govt department | stand candidates at election | community forums |
| Local press, TV and radio for publicity | Individual contact with committee chair/ executive member | contact a minister | referendums | neighbourhood committees |
| Delegation to ruling party group meeting | group contact with council officer | | | |
| delegation to full council | Individual contact with council officer | | | |
| attend a protest demonstration or march | use informal social links with a councillor | | | |
| disrupt council meeting | | | | |
| occupy council buildings | | | | |

What we do see is that when councillors are faced with public engagement, of one sort or another, they have different views about the effectiveness or appropriateness, of the method employed by the citizen, both in terms of the categories of activity and the methods of engagement as set out in table 2. What is striking about the way in which councillors respond to the effectiveness of various forms of public engagement, is that, whilst differences occur between councillors of different political affiliations, there are also considerable similarities in their beliefs about the effectiveness, or otherwise, of public engagement in politics and about the appropriate way in which the citizen should take part – political affiliation makes less difference than might be expected.

Simply put, councillors across the political spectrum, accept the effectiveness of, and are open to, what could be called acceptable and legitimate forms of political protest; they reject demonstrations and occupations of council buildings as being an effective method of political protest. Councillors see that the most effective way in which citizen can participate is, individually or collectively, to contact councillors, either their own local councillors or leading members of the council. Councillors do not see citizens using outside pressure from MPs, the courts or other government agencies, as an effective way of engaging with the council. Neither, and perhaps unsurprisingly, do they see the citizenry using the electoral system as an effective method of pressure on councils and councillors – elections are for parties and politicians, not for citizens to stand their own candidates to signal discontent with the political *elite*. When it comes to the council sponsored methods of engagement, Labour and Liberal Democrats see these methods as far more effective in influencing the council than do Conservative councillors.

It appears, in English local politics that despite government encouragement to engage the citizenry more closely, many councillors are not convinced that such engagement is the appropriate way forward in a representative democracy. Much participation is undertake by councils because it is expected, or required by legislation, and even those councillors with a strong belief in the virtue of participation would admit to one thing – that if the party wish to respond negatively or even to ignore the outcomes of citizen involvement, then the councillor will back the party above those he or she represents (See, Copus 2003 and 2004).[33] Moreover, the intensity of the politics of London means that the layer of London government closest to the public and the councillors that sit on those councils – the boroughs – are just as inclined as councillors elsewhere, to ignore or override the views of the public, should they prove inconvenient.

## Conclusions

English local government has a number of specific legal requirements placed upon it to consult with its citizens. Examples of such legal requirements can be found in the Local Government Act 1999, which introduced the concept of best value as a tool for continual service improvement. Under this Act councils are required to consult representatives of council tax payers, service users or those appearing to the authority to

have an interest in any of its functions (HMSO, 1999, S.3).[34] Also, section 25 of the Local Government Act 2000, requires councils to consult citizens on the nature of the executive arrangements that the council will introduce.

In the case of London, the Greater London Authority Act caries the provision that the Authority (Mayor and Assembly) will consult broadly with:

- London borough councils
- The Common Council of the City of London
- voluntary bodies
- bodies which represent the interests of different racial, ethnic or national groups
- bodies which represent the interests of different religious groups
- bodies which represent the interests of persons carrying on business [35]

Whilst there are certain legislative requirements on councils and the new London authority to consult with its citizen and a range of organisations, political participation is a process, not confined to the managerial tools of consultation available to local authorities. Nor is political participation something completely within the hands of the political *elite*; as we have seen, citizens have a wide range of methods available to them to participate in the political processes, only some of which councillors in England feel are 'acceptable methods' that is, those that respect the right of the elected representative to make the final decision about an issue in some decision-making forum legitimised by the public vote.

Yet, when forms of participative democracy meet the constraints of political decision-making in a representative democracy, the citizen can end up ultimately frustrated, left only with the blunt instrument of the election with which to signal disapproval or discontent. Moreover, politicians are resistant to those messages they find politically unacceptable, despite how much consultation takes place. In addition, party loyalty and discipline will often see the English councillor – whatever authority he or she is a member of – abiding by the decisions of the party taken in private meetings, than responding to the articulated wishes of those he or she represents (Copus, 2004).

Yet, The Greater London Authority – the elected Mayor and separately elected Assembly – was created as a unique system of sub-national democracy and representation within England. It did not have the same direct service provision responsibilities as all other English local government. As a consequence, it could focus on its role as a politically representative institution to a far greater degree than other English councils, distracted from politics, democracy and representation as they and their councillors often are, but he need to manage, often in some considerable detail, the running of public services. The GLA is freed from much of that responsibility, but the mayor and assembly members do operate through a number of *boards* which run the services London requires. As such, they can become just as bound to the detail, of these services (unless very careful) as opposed to the policy and strategy London requires, as councillors on other English authorities can with the services for which their councils are responsible.

The London mayor and assembly, having been first elected in 2000, have had a short while so far, to clarify their new political roles and to develop a strategy for public engagement that meets, not only legislative requirements, but also the demands of the citizens of London to participate in the governance of their city. But, citizen engagement is a process that the mayor and assembly members have taken on enthusiastically and have worked to recognise the unique political institution they inhabit and its unique position and responsibilities in English local government. Yet, it would be fair to conclude that London governance still has a way to go to fully engage the citizens of London and to recognise that London, like most large cities, speaks with many voices, all articulating many diverse and conflicting interests. Moreover, it would be fair to say that whilst London is unique in England, both in terms of the nature and magnitude of its power, position, problems and impact, the GLA has yet to display any unique methods of citizen engagement to that conducted by other English councils. The GLA offers more of the same, even set as it is within a very different politically representative structure to the rest of England.

Finally, the GLA must share the governance of London, with not only a wide range of appointed boards, government bodies and non-governmental agencies, but also with an often competing layer of elected institutions – the 32 London boroughs. It is the borough councils that are closer to what might be called the communities of London – but even they cover large areas of the city and have a wide range of communities existing within their own boundaries. Moreover, the nature of the engagement between citizens and these councils, based on a more localised conception of issues, can, of course, produce different results to that between the GLA and the notion of a London-wide citizenry. The GLA provides Londoners with an opportunity to have an input to London-wide issues and governance; it is still developing the methods and mechanism by which it can facilitate that citizen engagement – but whatever it devises, citizens can and will carve out their own ways of engaging with those that govern and represent them locally; this too is a lesson the GLA is learning.

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