

DEMOS

**LOCATING
AUTHORITY**
A VISION FOR
RELATIONAL LOCAL
GOVERNMENT

CIARAN CUMMINS

FEBRUARY 2022

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RELATIONAL PUBLIC SERVICES AT DEMOS

In July 2021 Demos published *The Social State: From Transactional to Relational Public Services*, kicking-off a major new research programme to reimagine public services, supported by Capita. The programme is building a credible policy agenda for 21st century public services with citizen experiences at the centre. As part of this, Demos is exploring in more depth three areas of public service: local government, employment and back to work services, and policing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report introduces the concept of 'relational local government': an approach to local governing that builds strong relationships between council service professionals and the people they are supporting, between councils and the community at large, and between local citizens themselves. We argue that relational local government has three core pillars:

- **Genuine power sharing:** people feel they have an equal and effective say over decisions that affect their lives locally.
- **Spaces for connection:** people have access to welcoming spaces where they are able to build connections with service professionals, council staff and representatives more broadly, and with other local people.
- **Consistent and open communication:** people feel informed by their council and view its actions as transparent.

We find that local government often seeks to deliver these pillars, but a range of barriers can make doing so difficult. This report sets out a number of recommendations - for both central government and councils - to overcome these barriers and unlock relational local government for all.

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PILLAR 1: GENUINE POWER SHARING

Genuine power sharing is people having an equal and effective say over decisions that affect their lives locally, from how a service is run to how a budget is spent.

This matters for relational local government because it can strengthen the bond between service professionals and those accessing services, for example through co-production. More widely, participatory democracy - a form of genuine power sharing - can strengthen the relationship between the council as a whole and the public, and between citizens themselves.

We find strong support among the public for genuine power sharing: 72% of respondents to our poll, conducted in July 2021 with 10,104 UK adults, felt it was important to be involved in decisions regarding local government policies and operations. However, less than half of respondents (48%) reported feeling listened to a fair amount or a great deal by their council. This isn't surprising when considering how low engagement rates are; our poll finds just 8% of the public have ever responded to a local government consultation.

We identify a number of barriers to genuine power sharing in local government. These include:

- Public unwillingness to engage, particularly due to a lack of support to participate and poor perceptions of its usefulness.
- A lack of understanding about how people want to engage, particularly with those most marginalised from power.
- Some councils lack the capability to share power due to a lack of resources and training.
- Council disempowerment can often mean local authorities don't have much power to share in the first place.

To overcome these barriers we recommend that:

- The upcoming Levelling Up White Paper puts devolution at its heart. This means giving local governments extensive new powers and responsibilities.
- Local governments should engage in listening exercises with residents to understand what they need to be able to participate and what they want from taking part, paying particular attention to where democratic innovation can be used to tackle inequalities in participation.
- Central government should provide a dedicated grant to local government to allow council

staff and councillors to develop relational skills, from co-production to facilitating participatory decision making.

- Senior council officials should engage in dialogue with staff and councillors to understand where constraints can be freed up that prevent the latter from developing their existing (and future) capacity to build relationships with the public.

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PILLAR 2: SPACES FOR CONNECTION

Spaces for connection are welcoming online and offline spaces that build connections between service professionals, council staff and representatives, and other local people. This matters for relational local government because creating such spaces can provide the opportunity for citizens to strengthen their bonds with one another, and between the council and the public.

We found strong support for this principle among the public. Two thirds of respondents to our poll (66%) said it was important to have a suitable physical space to meet with other local people to discuss local government policies and how they operate. The public also wants to use council services to meet others; 58% said meeting other local people while doing so was very or fairly important to them.

However, we found a number of barriers to councils creating spaces for connection. These include:

- Cuts to local government funding leading to councils having to sell spaces where people would be able to build connections.
- People feel unable to have a say over spaces that do exist, affecting their perception that they provide opportunities to connect with others.
- A need for a better understanding of how local government space can feel embedded and woven into people's lives in a way they are comfortable with.

To address these we recommend that:

- Central government funding of local government must support the creation and preservation of spaces for connection, both in terms of direct funding and through safeguarding finances for spaces from cost-saving pressures on councils.
- Councils should engage in dialogue with residents to rethink how council spaces can be made to feel more welcoming.
- Councils should work with local people to

understand their preferred spaces for interacting with staff and councillors.

- Councils should explore the use of vacant local facilities, including on the high street, for accessible and open spaces for interactions between the council and public, and the public themselves.

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PILLAR 3: CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

Consistent and open communication is about the public feeling informed by their council and viewing its actions as transparent. This matters for relational local government because open communication between council service professionals and those accessing services can help build familiarity and trust - vital for effective relationship building. So too can consistent communication, making it easier for bonds to be developed.

Through our polling we found a strong desire for council transparency: 84% of respondents agreed that it was important to them that their local council is transparent about how their policies are designed and how they operate, yet just over half (54%) feel their council is transparent with regard to its politics and operation.

There's also a strong desire for consistency: 68% of respondents to our poll said it is important to see the same person each time when accessing local government services, while only a quarter (26%) report experiencing this.

We find a number of barriers to consistent and open communication in local government. These include:

- Perceptions of poor transparency are driven by the wrong type of engagement, rather than always being about distrust. Information is available but could be more accessible and engaging.
- Connection building and communication is not often seen as a key part of councillor and council staff roles.
- The pandemic has led to rapid adaptation of new digital communications infrastructures and use of data by local authorities that can provide new, less fragmented means of contact as well as free up time for face-to-face contact. However, there is a risk of not building on this further or of doing so without public support.

To overcome these barriers we recommend that:

- Councils should share best practice on how they make information about their activities more accessible to the public, and listen to local people to understand what kind of presentation of information can bring them closer to their council.
- The aforementioned central government support for relational training, as well as removal of constraints on existing relational capacities, should take particular account of how these can contribute to supporting communications between councils and the public.
- Central government should improve its data collection of local government digital innovation and offer direct funding to support more local authorities to develop their digital communications abilities, and their digital inclusion plans.
- Councils should engage in thorough, ongoing dialogue with residents to understand whether and where they consent on the use of their data to inform services.

INTRODUCTION

We have seen many challenges emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, with the challenge of running our public services one of the most difficult and recognisable. Yet throughout the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown, we saw communities come together and relationships strengthened at a time of crisis, on a scale we haven't seen in generations – from providing food for those isolating to the new volunteers making a huge difference in the NHS.

They proved that strong relationships and community ties are not only hugely valuable for our wellbeing, but that they're vital to our resilience and strength as a society. Building on this experience of the pandemic, Demos is currently investigating how the state and public services can best foster three sets of relationships:

- Relationships between the professional and those accessing services
- Relationships between the service and the community at large
- Relationships between citizens or those accessing services

Tapping into relationships to improve services is not a new idea. Demos was writing about their centrality to public services in 1995's *The Other Invisible Hand*¹, while today organisations from *New Local*² to practitioners like Hillary Cottam³ espouse the importance of relationships. Indeed, as we see throughout this report, many pioneering councils -

from Monmouthshire to Barking and Dagenham - are leading the way too.⁴

WHY RELATIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

While the rest of this programme will consider specific services, understanding how relational principles apply to local government matters too. This is because councils provide hundreds of services and are often the primary institution in our local democratic ecosystems.⁵ Given this, they play an integral role in building relationships in a place. What's more, many councils are already leading the way in relational public services.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a range of new research, including:

- A nationally representative poll of 10,104 UK adults surveyed online in July 2021.
- A focus group of eight UK adults who have engaged with local government in some way in the past two years (e.g. through voting or consultations).
- Interviews with five members of the public, including from groups less likely to have engaged in civic participation,⁶ and five experts from across local government, civil society and academia.

1 Mulgan, G., Landry, C. *The other invisible hand: Remaking charity for the 21st century*. Demos, 1995. Available at: <https://www.demos.co.uk/files/theOtherinvisiblehand.pdf> [Accessed 15 October 2021]

2 See, for example: Lent, A., Studdert, J. *The Community Paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved*. New Local, March 2021. Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Community-Paradigm_New-Local-2.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2021]

3 See, for example: Cottam, H. Relational welfare. *Soundings*, May 2016. Pp.134-144. Available at: https://publicpurpose.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Relational-welfare-soundings48_cottam1.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2021]

4 We discuss examples of the work of these councils later in this report.

5 Local Government Association. What is local government? Local Government Association. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/what-local-government> [Accessed 13/01/2022]

6 Based on: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. *Civic Engagement and Social Action - Community Life Survey 2020/21*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021-civic-engagement-and-social-action/civic-engagement-and-social-action-community-life-survey-202021>

- A workshop including representatives from local and central government, academia and civil society.
- An evidence review of research into the public's experience of local government in the UK.

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PILLAR 1 GENUINE POWER SHARING

WHAT IS GENUINE POWER SHARING?

Our first pillar of relational local government is genuine power sharing: people having an equal and effective say over decisions that affect their lives locally, from how a service is run to how a budget is spent.

We use the term power sharing to reflect the International Association for Public Participation's Spectrum of Public Participation, in which the highest stage of public impact on a decision is empowerment.⁷ The goal of empowerment is to "place final decision making in the hands of the public", with the organisation running the participation process promising to implement the public's decisions.⁸ We believe the direction of travel for local government citizen engagement should aim towards this, above traditional consultation which typically focuses only on the collection of citizen feedback. At the same time, this aim can only be achieved through ongoing dialogue and good relations with citizens to determine where and how they want to engage, so we stop short of being prescriptive about what this must always look like.

WHY DOES GENUINE POWER SHARING MATTER FOR RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Relationships between service professionals and the people they are supporting

Genuine power sharing can take the form of co-production, which the Co-Production Network for Wales describes as:

"An asset-based approach to public services that enables people providing and people receiving services to share power and responsibility, and to work together in equal, reciprocal and caring relationships. It creates opportunities for people to access support when they need it, and to contribute to social change."⁹

Importantly, however, as Alysha Baratta describes, inclusion is not the end point in co-production since attention is still needed to how power is shared going forward: it is "an improvement over excluding people from their own decision-making processes", but there is "a danger in assuming that incorporating people" is a "panacea".¹⁰ This speaks to the long-

7 See: IAP2, *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*. Available at: https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf [Accessed 13 October 2021]

8 IAP2. *Spectrum of Public Participation*.

9 Co-production Network for Wales. Home. Co-production Network for Wales. Available at: <https://copronet.wales/> [Accessed 13/01/2022]

10 Baratta, A. *Co-design is not a panacea for inequality*. In *With Forward*, 2019. Available at: <https://inwithforward.com/2019/07/panacea-for-power/>

term nature of co-production, which allows time for public servants to strengthen their bond with those accessing services and create “ways for people to get to know each other, alongside their involvement in your work”.¹¹

In contrast, a transactional relationship is one in which those accessing services are treated as customers, there purely to receive something. Service professionals are considered interchangeable representatives of a standardised service, the success of which is measured by its application itself rather than on its outcomes for those accessing it. Power cannot be adequately shared if transactional relationships exist between service professionals and those they are supporting. This is because the latter have less of a say over the aims, processes and assessment of the service in question. A shift to co-production - an approach to power sharing - to services at all stages (i.e. commissioning, design, delivery and evaluation) means those accessing them are able to exercise more power in their relationships with service professionals.

Relationships between local government and the community at large

Genuine power sharing between local government and the community at large is essentially about more, and better quality, opportunities for citizens to engage in local government decision making. This involves reform that brings people into decision-making through democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting and citizen’s juries.¹²

This can strengthen the relationship between local government and the community at large because it builds the latter’s sense that the former’s actions are legitimate. This can apply across to all council staff, but is clearest in the case of councillors. The continued claim to being a representative is not the product of winning an election, but of the dynamic, ongoing process of making claims to speaking on behalf of constituents which the latter then choose to accept, reject or ignore; as Rebecca Willis puts it, “representation is a dialogue”.¹³

Relational local government integrates and centres this in representatives’ (and frontline staff) work; the work of acting as facilitators of dialogue between services and communities.

Relationships between citizens themselves

Genuine power sharing between citizens themselves consists in their shared participation in the co-production and decision making processes described above. This strengthens the relationship between citizens because, as with other forms of local social interaction, these processes - in addition to their service-related and democratic ends - give people an opportunity to strengthen existing bonds and get to know others.

POWER SHARING TODAY

In this section we examine to what extent power sharing is happening today in local government, drawing on our polling and qualitative research.

People want to be engaged with but often don’t feel they are

Clear majorities of the public want to be involved in local authority decision making. In our poll, 72% of respondents felt it was important to be involved in decisions regarding local government policies and operations and 65% felt it was important to be involved in the design of these policies and operations.

While there are excellent examples of local governments sharing power with citizens across the UK (including the case studies below), our polling nevertheless indicated a mixed picture in terms of how engaged the public feel. As figure 1 shows, only around a half (47%) of the public feel listened to or that they have a say in their council’s policies and how it operates. Similar proportions feel involved in the design of their council’s policies (45%) or decision making around its policies and operations (47%).

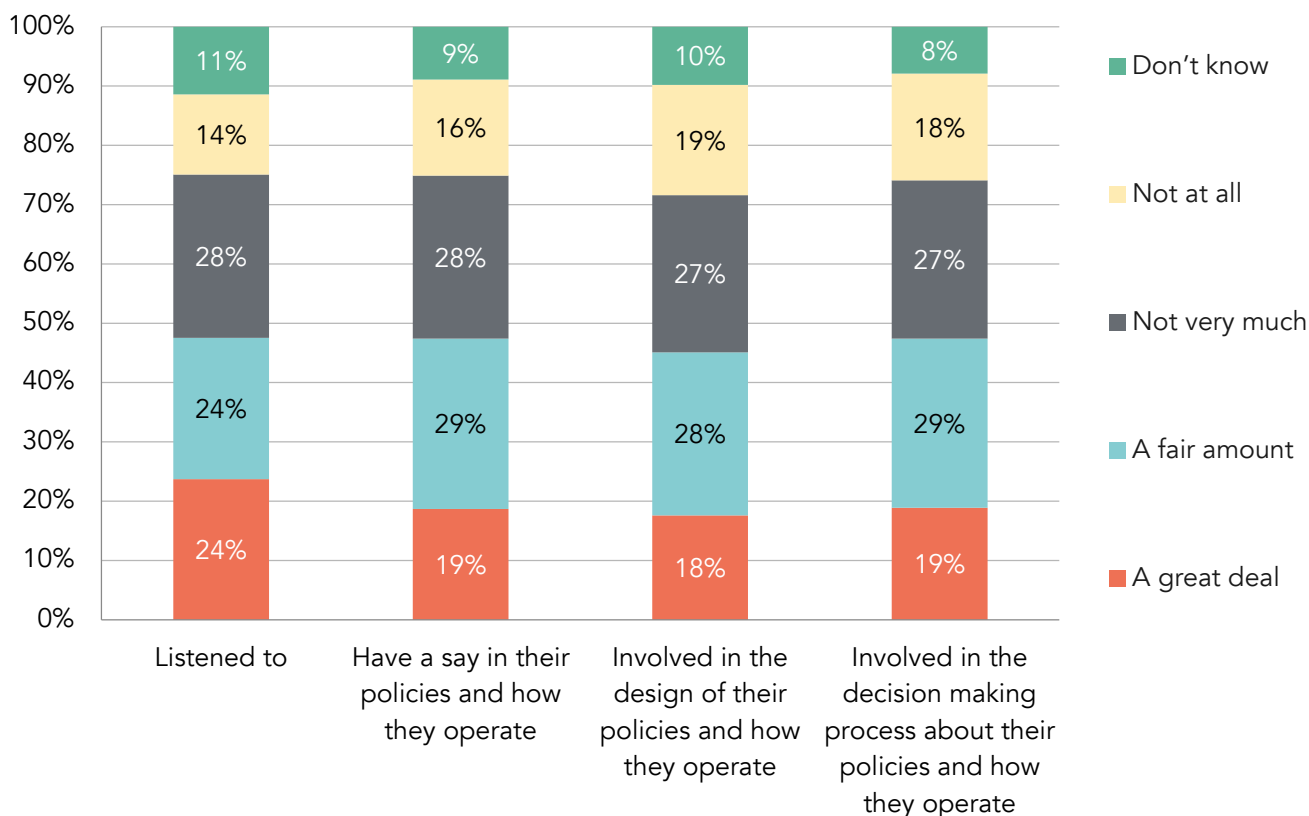
11 Woodal, J., Davison, E., Parnaby, J., Hall, A. *A meeting of minds: How co-production benefits people, professionals and organisations*. Community Fund, 2019. P.33. Available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/A-Meeting-of-Minds_How-co-production-benefits-people-professionals-and-organisations.pdf?mtime=20190919092658&focal=none

12 For an overview of such innovations, see: OECD. *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. OECD, June 2020. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm> Notably, the majority to date have been at the local level.

13 Willis, R. *Too Hot to Handle? The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change*. Bristol University Press, 2020. P.84. Willis takes this argument from the work of Michael Saward, see for example: Saward, M. The Representative Claim. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2006 (5). Palgrave Macmillan: London.

FIGURE 1

WITH REGARD TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT, TO WHAT EXTENT, IF AT ALL, DO YOU FEEL...



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

Engagement with local government is low

It's unsurprising that people do not feel engaged: self-reported engagement with councils is very low. The most common means of participation with regard to local government in our poll was voting, though just 32% report having ever voted in council elections.¹⁴ The second most popular engagement was signing a petition, reported by just 17% of the public. As shown in the table below, engagement beyond voting is generally extremely low; just 8% of the public report ever having responded to a consultation (and just 51% were fairly or very satisfied with them, the lowest satisfaction of all polled means of engagement).

This matters as consultations remain a central form of public engagement on policy in the UK. There is no centralised record of local government consultations, though certain areas of policy have local consultation as a statutory requirement.¹⁵ Our polling data here gives us a more granular understanding of engagement than existing measures, such as the Government's Community Life Survey.¹⁶

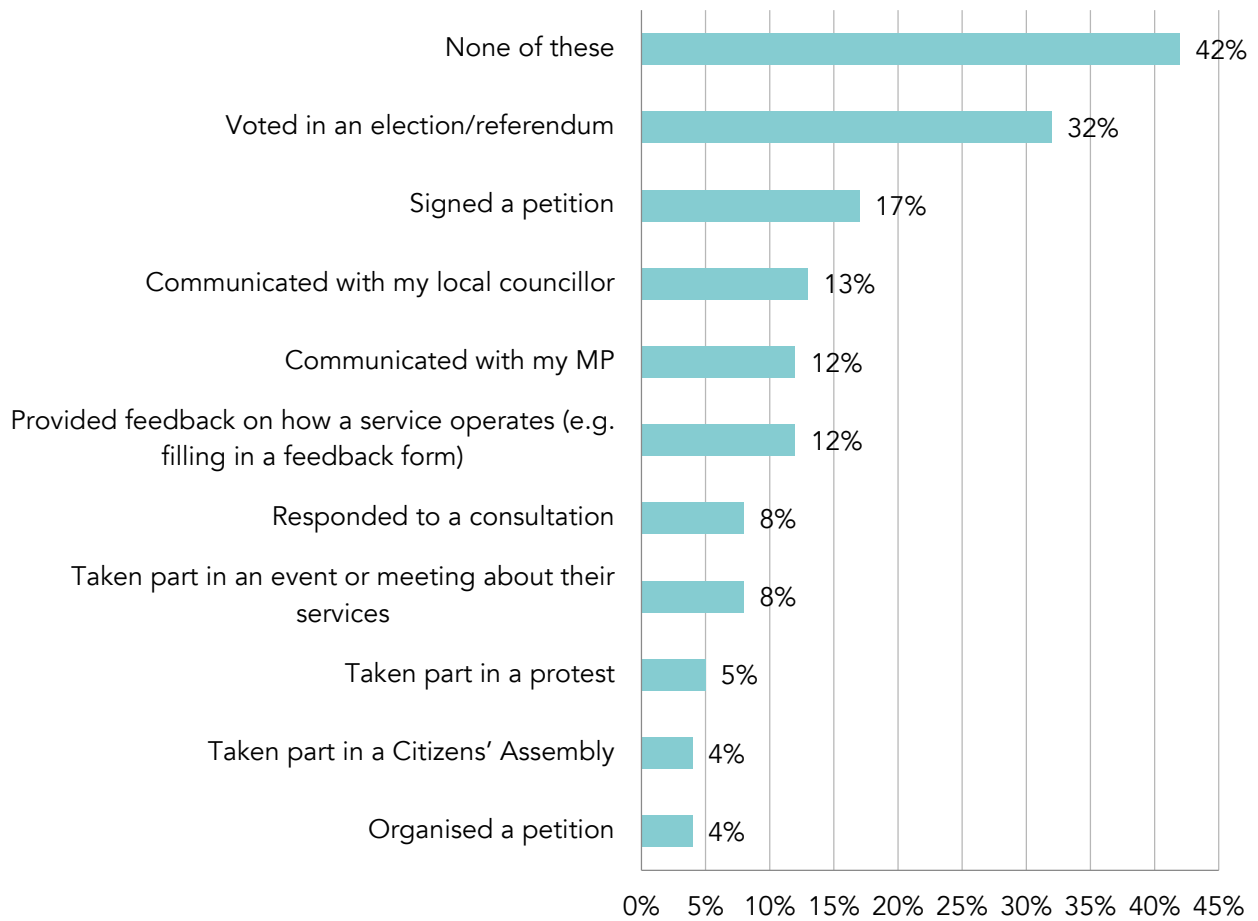
14 The means were: a Citizens' Assembly, a consultation, a protest, an event or meeting about their services, the signing of a petition, the organising of a petition, communication with a councillor, communication with your MP, feedback on a service (e.g. a feedback form), voting in an election or referendum, or none of these.

15 The Consultation Institute's MIDAS Database of public consultations is a welcome development here, however it is still collecting more data at the time of writing. See: <https://www.midasdb.com/>

16 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. *Civic Engagement and Social Action - Community Life Survey 2019/20*. July 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-201920-civic-engagement-and-social-action/civic-engagement-and-social-action-community-life-survey-201920> [Accessed 13/01/2022]

FIGURE 2

HAVE YOU PARTICIPATED IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS WITH REGARD TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT?



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

BARRIERS TO GENUINE POWER SHARING

Our research highlighted several barriers to genuine power sharing by local government. Below we examine these in turn.

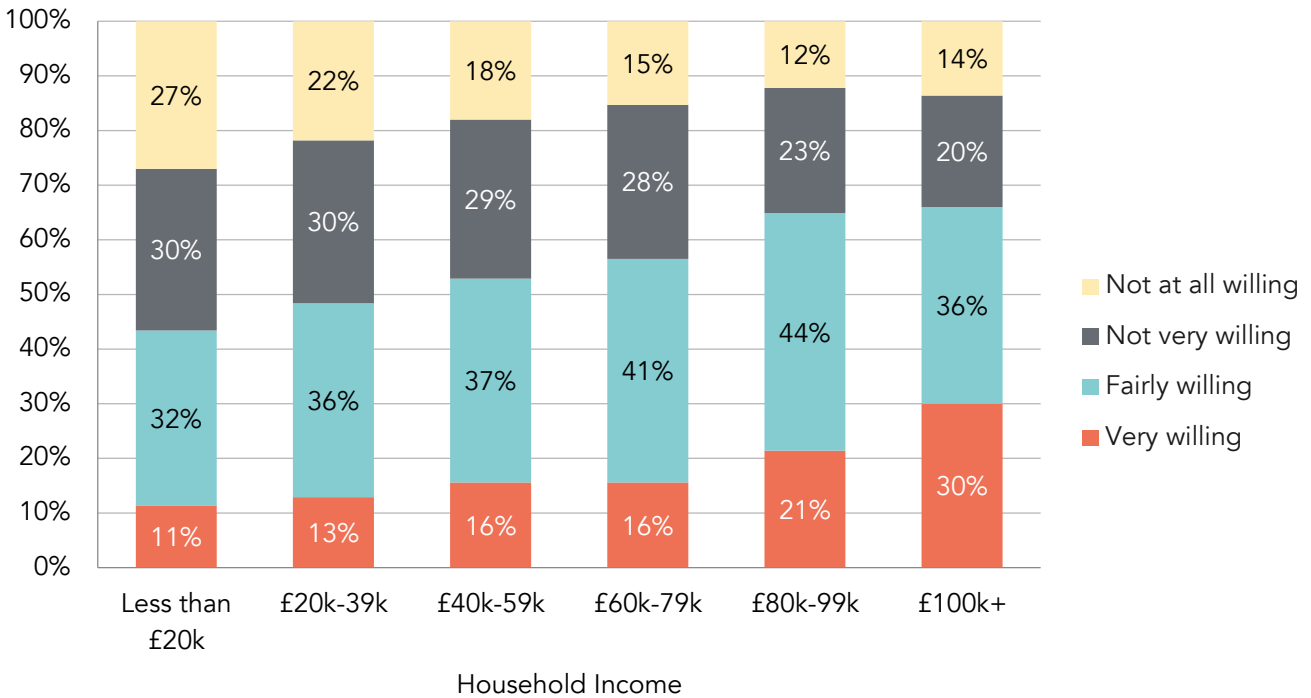
People aren't always willing to give up their time, but support to participate and perceptions of its efficacy matter

Despite people clearly wanting to be engaged and involved, our polling found only roughly half (49%) of the public would be willing to use their spare time to contribute to the design of local government policies and its operations.

It's too simplistic to conclude from this that the public are uninterested in engaging. One complicating factor is material barriers. We did not ask respondents to our poll whether financial reimbursements for their time and other support, such as childcare, would affect their willingness to engage, though those with lower incomes reported less willingness than those with higher incomes to use their spare time to design local government policies.

FIGURE 3

WOULD YOU SAY YOU WOULD OR WOULD NOT BE WILLING TO USE YOUR SPARE TIME TO DESIGN LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND HOW THEY OPERATE?



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

A second factor is perceptions of benefit. We heard through our qualitative research that people may not engage for fear their involvement won't make a difference. As one focus group participant put it, previous experience of public engagement had given them a poor impression:

"There's a difference between being heard and them actually doing something. Listening to you is one thing. I mean, fair play that people take up the project and do it, but I just find that sometimes they... Listen, as I said before, it's almost like lip service and whether anything happens is another story."¹⁷

Elsewhere people highlighted a sense of ineffectiveness in participating that results from being up against what feels like an unfair system:

"Residents across the whole city [...] were objecting to the planning applications, and they're all being approved, because they meet the Welsh Government standards. And if the council were to reject them, the companies can appeal and they will be approved anyway [...] So it just seems sometimes pretty futile

[...] it feels like they just ride roughshod over us, regardless of what residents think because certain things meet the rules."¹⁸

There is a lack of understanding about how people want to engage, particularly about those most marginalised from power

Those least likely to report that they had taken part in an event or meeting about their local government services in our poll were from D (6%) and E (4%) social grades, or with a household income of less than £20,000 (4%), or those with no qualifications (3%).

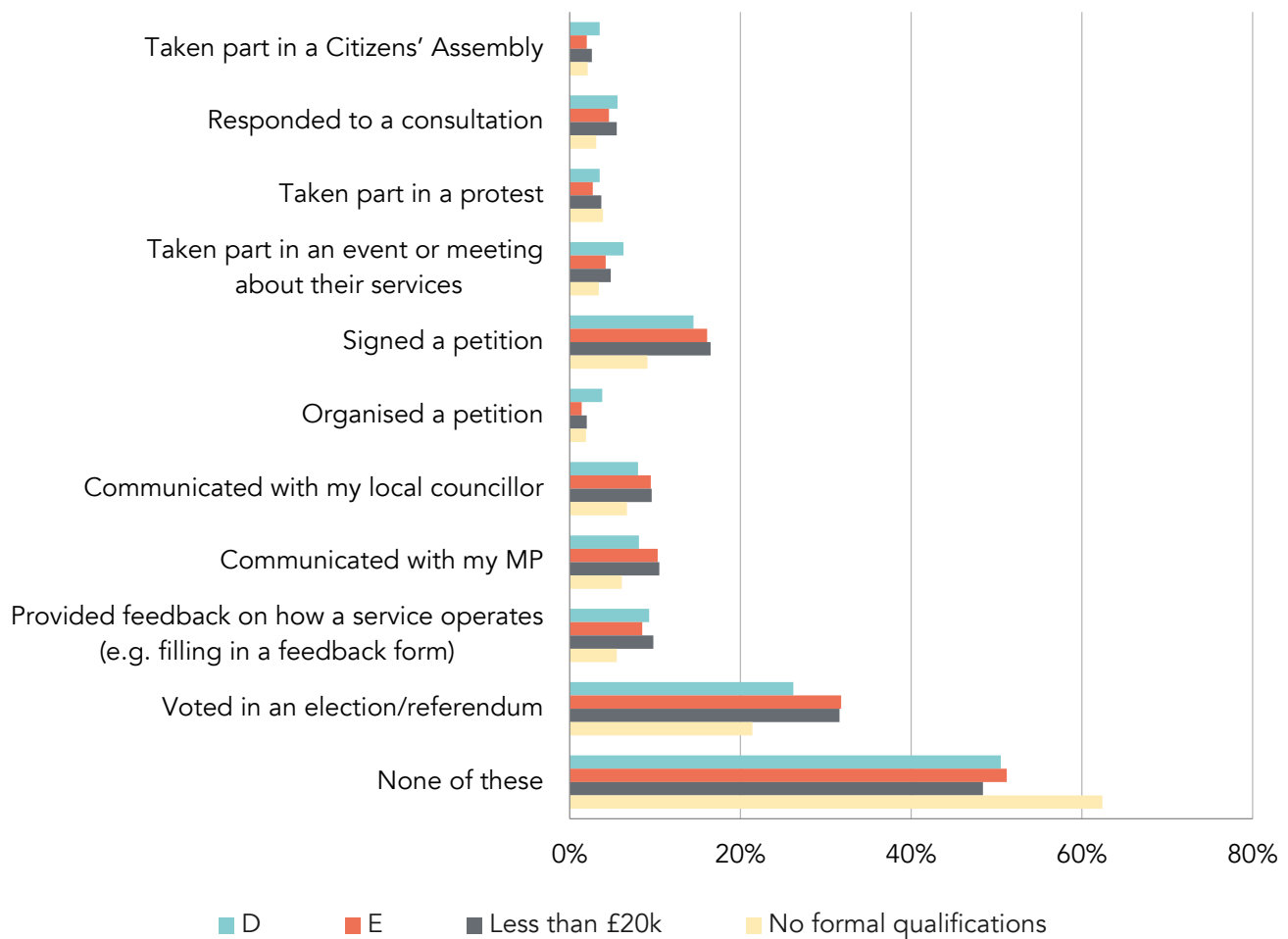
We saw above that signing petitions was, overall, the second most common form of engagement with local authorities after voting. This was true also for those less likely to be involved through other means, again including the aforementioned respondents from D and E social grades, or with a household income of less than £20,000 or with no qualifications.

17 Demos focus group, June 2021.

18 Demos focus group, July 2021.

FIGURE 4

HAVE YOU PARTICIPATED IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS WITH REGARD TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT?



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

Greater engagement in petitions is instructive because, unlike consultations, they can offer a sense of direct empowerment, as they are usually citizen-led and concerned with agenda-setting. This suggests people want agency over how they're being listened to. Part of this is about responding to inequalities in participation; if the costs (time, finances, and so on) of participation are too high for some then giving them greater agency in how they participate is going to help counteract this.¹⁹

It is also a matter of people seeing the engagement as legitimate: it is about knowing that something has been led by citizens themselves. This shows the value of exploring democratic innovations which

place greater power in citizens' hands, including elaborations on petitioning which are about foregrounding agenda-setting by the public. For example, in the US and Europe there are examples of mechanisms whereby public deliberations by a representative sample of a population are made in response to an initiative itself proposed by citizen petitioning.²⁰ A further example from the UK are 'participation requests', introduced as part of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. These "enable a community group or body to request to be part of decision-making processes that seek to make improvements to public services."²¹

19 Expert facilitators of local government engagement underlined to us the value of meeting people where they are, particularly for the supposedly 'hard to reach' who are often simply not being reached out to on their own terms. As a review of equalities in community engagement in the UK put it, the issue is often that such groups are actually seen as "easy to ignore." Lightbody and others. *Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement*. What Works Scotland, 2017. Available at: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/WWSHardToReachOrEasyToIgnoreEvidenceReview.pdf> [Accessed 13 October 2021]

20 See, for example: <https://participedia.net/method/592>

21 What Works Scotland. 'Participation requests'. Available at: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/participation-requests/> [Accessed 10 November 2021]

Wider perceptions about local government may play a role

Participants in our policymakers workshop described how a perception that the public are 'consumers' not citizens is a barrier to relational local government. This perception - shared by the public and some in central and local government - discourages the idea that people have agency to affect change through local government, presenting it merely instead as the "local delivery arm" of central government.²²

The notion of a transactional experience came through most explicitly in comparisons made to customer experiences in other settings. For example, one focus group participant suggested that:

*"[Councils should] make it easier to provide feedback for them [...] you know when you watch something on Netflix, and you can see when you rate... how much you rate it, how much you like it, something that's very easy for people to give feedback to the council."*²³

Some workshop participants also perceived councils as being unable to effect real change, discouraging citizens in turn from engaging. As one person told us, "I try to sort out things beforehand, like see if I can sort that out myself before I kind of like, you know, go [to the council] because I understand that they're, they're very busy."²⁴

People also explained how they saw both councillors and frontline staff as facing constraints:

*"I understand the councillors, they're kind of like, they're sort of the face, almost like the conduit between, you know, they're the barrier between... We've got us, the councillors, then the local council. And I'm sure a lot of things they have no power over. We can sort of say things to them. You know, but there's nothing they can do."*²⁵

"I agree completely with what both guys have just said in terms of [feeling sorry for] the staff on the ground level, from customer

*facing. But I think some of the higher ups and management are just running things into the ground..."*²⁶

Council capabilities

We heard that councils can lack the capabilities for genuine power sharing. The causes of this are varied. This sometimes stems from a lack of relevant resources, including how council space is used and how local people are communicated with (addressed in subsequent chapters). It also stems from a lack of relevant skills - such as co-production - and support for particular roles.^{27 28}

We also found a need to expand the use of digital tools for public engagement. A 2019 literature review by MySociety states that there is evidence to suggest that "local authorities may not be optimising their use of the interactional capabilities of [digital public engagement] tools, and are only increasing capacity for one-way and directed participation, rather than meaningful citizen participation and engagement".²⁹ More widely, data collection of local authorities' use of digital engagement needs improving. A Government Digital Service survey of digital innovation published in 2018 stated that information on this relating to local authorities was particularly patchy.³⁰

Underpinning all these challenges are, of course, the fact that local government finances have been significantly squeezed over the last decade. If councils are to become the genuine power sharers we envisage, this must be addressed.

Council disempowerment

Council disempowerment is another related barrier to genuine power sharing, resulting particularly from government centralisation. This plays out across a number of dimensions, and most often this is discussed in reference to finances. As IPPR North have outlined, "the UK is among the most fiscally centralised countries in the developed world [...] far more so than similar sized countries, such as

22 Demos workshop, August 2021.

23 Demos focus group, July 2021.

24 Demos focus group, July 2021.

25 Demos focus group, July 2021.

26 Demos focus group, July 2021.

27 See: Needham, C., Mangan, C. *The 21st Century Public Servant*. University of Birmingham, November 2014. Available at: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/21-century-report-281014.pdf>. Their complementary report, *The 21st Century Councillor*, draws attention to what they explicitly describe relational skills as "connective, digital and reflective skills". See: Mangan, C. et al. *The 21st Century Councillor*. University of Birmingham, July 2016. Available at: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/21st-century-councillor.pdf>. [Accessed 13 October 2021]

28 For an insightful look at the work of Scottish local authority staff engaging such a role, see Escobar and others. *Community Planning Officials Survey: Understanding the everyday work of local participatory governance in Scotland*. What Works Scotland, April 2018. Available at: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/WWSCCommunityPlanningOfficialsSurveyEverydayWorkofLocalParticipatoryGovernanceinScotland.pdf>. [Accessed 13 October 2021]

29 Rumbul, R. *The State of Digital Public Engagement*. MySociety, 2019. Available at https://research.mysociety.org/media/outputs/digital-public-engagement_5TptQqc.pdf

30 Central Digital and Data Office. *Technology innovation in government survey*. Central Digital and Data Office, August 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technology-innovation-in-government-survey/technology-innovation-in-government-survey>

France, Italy, Germany or Spain [...] only countries that are very different [in size] to the UK are more centralised".³¹ Centralised control of often short-term funding was highlighted in our workshop as a key barrier to local authorities being able to invest in relationship building, since it removed their assurance that they can actually put the time in required for this.³²

As a 2021 report by De Montfort University's Local Governance Research Centre describes, local government in England has become particularly disempowered. This is due to a complex, decades-long set of causes going beyond just fiscal centralisation.³³ These range from increased secondary legislation that re-centralises certain powers, central government's prescribed targets for local governments and accompanying reductions in funding, the stripping of councils' primary service roles outsourced instead to private and third sector organisations, the proliferation of unelected bodies that bypass councils, reductions in the number of councillors, and much else.³⁴

Together, these developments have reduced local government's ability to share power with the public, given it now holds less power in the first place. Some of this is more direct: changes to planning, for example, means a central government assessed measure of housing need can override an authorities' local plan, which can be an opportunity for local input.³⁵ A more indirect, cumulative effect of these changes has been to render local governments one actor amongst others in service delivery (such as Multi-Academy Trusts) and scrutiny (such as Regional School Commissioners), leaving them less able to "democratically 'anchor' and hold to account the fragmented service delivery terrain".³⁶ Thus, despite their unique claim to democratic legitimacy, councils are less able to share power in the form of delivering, or scrutinising the delivery of, services with the public.

CASE STUDY #1: NEWHAM DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION COMMISSION

From November 2019 to February 2020, a council-instigated, independent commission in Newham heard from "hundreds of local residents, community groups, councillors, and national experts about how to improve local democracy" in the borough.³⁷ This commission follows a number of other similar recent initiatives, including in Kirklees and Croydon.³⁸

The elements of Newham's Commission included:³⁹

- Three days of evidence hearing from local democracy experts by the Commissioners.
- A survey of Newham's councillors.
- An online platform where local people could give their perspective and interact with others.
- Two weeks of public engagement within the borough across 30+ events for different groups.
- Meetings and interviews with experts and interested parties.

The Commission was wide-ranging, taking an explicitly systematic approach. Its final report addressed the Mayor's role and the governance of the borough council; area and neighbourhood governance; developing participatory and deliberative democracy in the borough; developing co-production and community empowerment in the borough; developing digital democracy in the borough; addressing local media and political inequality, and; examining

31 Raikes, L., Giovannini, A., Getzel, B. *Divided and Connected: Regional Inequalities in the North, the UK and the developed world*. Institute for Public Policy Research, November 2019. P.23. Available at <https://www.ippr.org/files/2019-11/sotn-2019.pdf>

32 Demos workshop, August 2021.

33 Barnett, N., Giovannini, A., Griggs, S. *Local Government in England: Forty Years of Decline*. Unlock Democracy, 2021. P.4. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bd057c434c4e2d8eb0434e6/t/60796c249a89215efe3cd382/1618570303662/Local+Government+in+England+-+40+Years+of+Decline.pdf>

34 Barnett, N., Giovannini, A., Griggs, S. *Local Government in England: Forty Years of Decline*. Unlock Democracy, 2021. Pp.4-5.

35 Barnett, N., Giovannini, A., Griggs, S. *Local Government in England: Forty Years of Decline*. Unlock Democracy, 2021. P.30.

36 Barnett, N., Giovannini, A., Griggs, S. *Local Government in England: Forty Years of Decline*. Unlock Democracy, 2021. P.37.

37 Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission. 'Home'. July 2020. Available at: <https://newhamdemocracycommission.org/> [Accessed 14 October 2021]

38 See: Kirklees Council. *Growing a stronger local democracy from the ground up*. June 2017. Available at: <http://www.democracycommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Kirklees-Democracy-Commission-full-report-June-2017-WEB.pdf> [Accessed 10 November 2021]; Croydon Council. *Enhancing Democracy Increasing Participation*. March 2020. Available at: <https://www.croydon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Croydon%20Council%20Governance%20Review%20Enhancing%20Democracy%20March%202020%20main%20re...pdf> [Accessed 10 November 2021]

39 Newham Democracy Commission. *Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission: Final Report*. Newham Council, July 2020. P.5. Available at: <https://www.newhamdemocracycommission.org/wp-content/uploads/Democracy-Commission-Report.pdf> [Accessed 10 November 2021]

the role of councillors.⁴⁰

Speaking to Noel Hatch and Mohamed Hammoudan from Newham Council, they explained that the council agreed to implement all of the Commission's recommendations. This has resulted to date in: Newham establishing the UK's first permanent citizens' assembly; one of the UK's largest participatory budgeting programmes; new co-production efforts in response to the pandemic and going forward such as the Newham Social Welfare Alliance supporting the London Community Champion Coordinator programme, and; a scheme to train citizen scientists and peer researchers to carry out research in their communities as part of the UK's first longitudinal programmes of this kind.⁴¹

CASE STUDY #2: FIFE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Participatory budgeting (PB) is the direct involvement of citizens in budget deliberations and decisions. Fife Council has been a leading pioneer in the UK of this approach since 2010. Speaking to Coryn Barclay, Research Consultant at Fife Council, she explained how the costs of running PB processes have mainly been covered through staff time, and no new posts have needed to be created directly to support it.⁴²

Fife's experience of PB brings out what the Local Government Association have highlighted as essential to any Government plans for levelling up: valuing local difference.⁴³ As Coryn explained, given the varied geography and history of Fife's Areas, "there is no one size fits all" for public participation, instead there are "different capacities and different communities".⁴⁴

Public engagement around the passenger transport budget has shown the value of taking a deliberative approach to mainstream service redesign in Fife. As Coryn highlighted, PB is about beginning a dialogue with local people on "what you can do in the short, medium and long term to get to the ideal system".⁴⁵

In 2017 the Scottish Government introduced the '1% framework': an ambition that at least 1% of local government budgets be determined through PB by the end of 2021.⁴⁶ Though this may appear small, it is intended as a first step towards further scaling up of this approach and as the then-Scottish Minister for Local Government and Housing Kevin Stewart MSP described, this still "amounts to tens of millions of pounds which will be in the hands of local people".⁴⁷ With the 1% change, there is greater potential for mainstreaming PB: the idea of going beyond a community grant-making model to a more participative approach to decision-making around mainstream service areas.

40 Newham Democracy Commission. *Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission: Final Report*. Pp.2-3

41 Email correspondence.

42 Email correspondence.

43 Local Government Association. *Build Back Local: Build Back Better*. July 2021. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/build-back-local-building-back-better> [Accessed 11 January 2021]

44 Local Government Association. *Build Back Local: Build Back Better*. Local Government Association.

45 Local Government Association. *Build Back Local: Build Back Better*. Local Government Association.

46 See COSLA/Scottish Government. Community Choices 1% Framework agreement. October 2017. Available at: www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc252.pdf [Accessed 14 October 2021]

47 Budge, A., Hall, A. *Mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting: Ideas for delivering Participatory Budgeting at Scale*. Shared Future CIC, October 2016. P.2. Available at: <https://sharedfuturecic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PB-Mainstreaming.pdf>. [Accessed 3 November 2021]

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

PILLAR 2

SPACES FOR CONNECTION

WHAT ARE SPACES FOR CONNECTION?

Spaces for connection are welcoming online and offline spaces that build connections between service professionals, council staff and representatives, and other local people. Given how the three pillars of relational local government we've identified interact, creating spaces for connection is also about people feeling able to exercise shared power in these spaces.

WHY DOES CREATING SPACES FOR CONNECTION MATTER FOR RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Relationships between service professionals and the people they are supporting

Creating spaces for connection can take the form of building or repurposing spaces - in council locations or elsewhere in a local area - in which local public servants and those accessing services can build relationships through co-production. It can also be a matter of changing the mode of interaction: face-to-face, for example, or over the phone but with the same person you spoke to previously. Whether about space itself or the mode of interaction, these approaches strengthen the bonds between service professionals and the public because it allows relationships to be nurtured in environments that are more conducive to this.

Relationships between local government and the community at large

Council-run physical spaces can provide the opportunity for strengthening the bond between local government and local residents. For example, those visiting the space may build personal connections with council staff. More broadly, they may gain a deeper understanding of the council as a whole, strengthening their bond with it as an institution.

Relationships between citizens themselves

Creating spaces for connection between citizens themselves is an outcome of developing spaces and opportunities for people to build more personable connections with service professionals and their council more broadly. Both strengthen the relationship between citizens themselves because it increases their opportunities to forge connections over shared experiences (be they of services or decision making).

A paucity of opportunities to connect with others locally through involvement in the design and delivery of services, as well as the opportunity to discuss local issues more generally with others nearby, undermines relationships between citizens and between those accessing services themselves.

SPACES FOR CONNECTION TODAY

In this section we examine to what extent local government creates spaces for connection today, drawing on our polling and qualitative research.

Most people want to connect with others when accessing council services

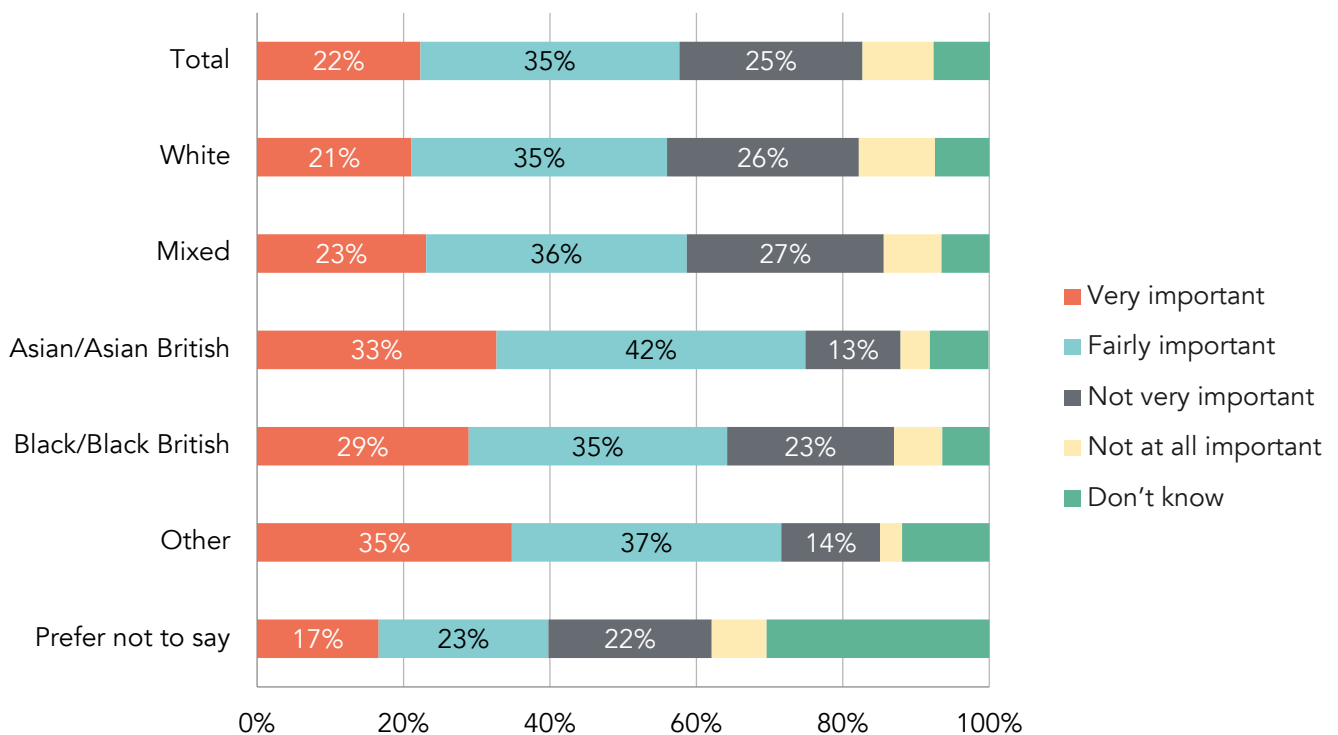
58% of respondents to our poll said meeting other local people while accessing local government services is important to them. This rose for some demographic groups, such as those with adult dependents (68%) or children (70%), those identifying as Black or Black British (64%), Asian or British Asian (75%) and those living in city centres (69%).

These processes of citizen engagement are - or can be - part of our social infrastructure too, perhaps among the most binding. This was clear in discussion of how the public are able, and want to, use their local knowledge and connections to benefit decision making:

*"There are some things that the MPs or the local government... there are some places that they may not be able to reach out to, so the plan there [is] for the community to come together and see if they can reach out to those places. And of course, when they are doing it [...] I believe they will gladly help."*⁴⁸

FIGURE 5

HOW IMPORTANT, IF AT ALL, ARE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TO YOU WITH REGARD TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT? MEETING OTHER PEOPLE WHILE ACCESSING THEIR SERVICES



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

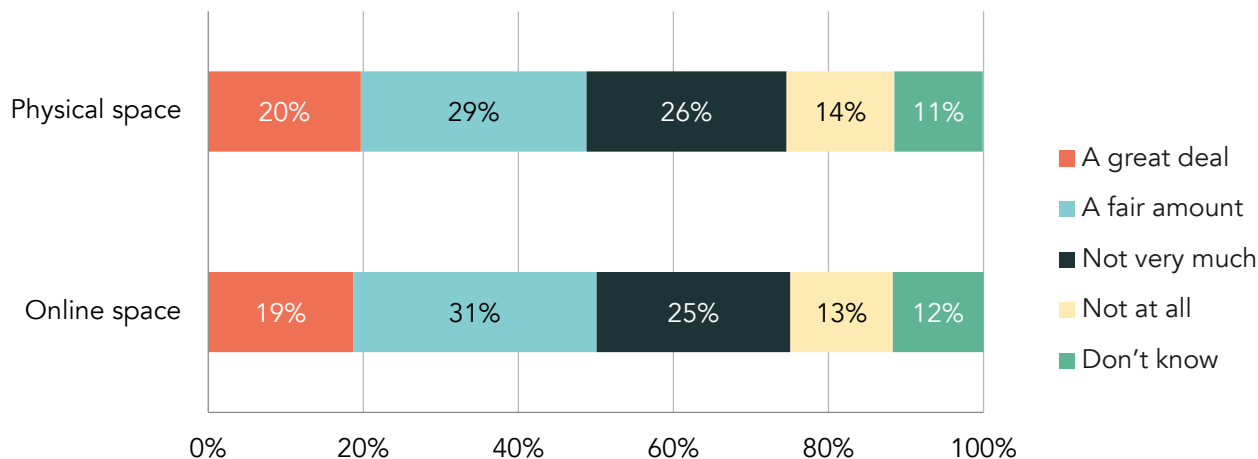
Across our discussions with the public, people were also very keen to interact with others through the forms of power-sharing citizen engagement discussed in the previous chapter. In our poll, three quarters (74%) said discussing local government policies and how they operate with other local people was important.

Many lack access to spaces

In practice, many people do not have spaces to build relationships with local government staff and others in their community: nearly two fifths of respondents reported not having a suitable physical space (40%) or online space (38%) to meet with other local people to discuss local government policies and operations.

FIGURE 6

WITH REGARD TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT, DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE A SUITABLE SPACE TO MEET WITH OTHER LOCAL PEOPLE TO DISCUSS THEIR POLICIES AND HOW THEY OPERATE?



Source: Demos poll of UK adults, June 2021, n=10,104

This has a knock-on effect on the potential to build strong relationships between the council and the public, and between different members of the public. As one interviewee highlighted to us, a lack of suitable space can undermine grassroots initiatives, as there are fewer places for people to congregate. In their own efforts to organise something locally, they had to rely on someone else involved to offer meeting space in their office, since budget cuts in the area had led to closures of council-run venues.⁴⁹

It is also notable that during our qualitative research, no one mentioned experience of using online local government spaces for connecting with others, though they did reference interacting with others from their local area on commercial social media platforms. However, in a way that resonated with our polling, there was recognition in our qualitative research that people would value online spaces to learn about the perspectives of others locally. As one focus group participant suggested:

"[It would] also be nice to see what other people are contacting the council about. [...] If you go on to like the petitions for Parliament website, you can see what sort of issues people are contacting [them] about. And in my council area, if you sort of report a pothole, you can actually see potholes that have been

reported on a map [...] So you can see what people have been planning on contacting the council about, that'd be really useful to see to gauge feeling[s] about an issue."⁵⁰

Local government spaces can feel distant

It's clear the public has a strong desire to meet others through their council. However, participants in our focus group often described the few council spaces available as feeling disconnected from local life, and lacking opportunities for connection with other members of the public and service professionals.

In particular, participants described how their council often feels distant and impersonal; as one member of the public put it, "I just see [the council] as a building with their staff over there [...] day-to-day with the people, I don't see how they marry up." Not being visible in the community, or having places of work which are visibly separate from the rest of it, had implications too for perceptions of decision making. As one interviewee described: "if the people in charge actually lived in [this area] [...] rather than just going from their house to work, they would kind of be able to understand things rather than just make a random decision."⁵¹

Connected to this is how informed people feel about whether there are council spaces nearby in the first place, let alone how distant they feel they are when

49 Demos interview, July 2021.

50 Demos interview, July 2021.

51 Demos interview, July 2021.

they are still present. As one interviewee put it:

*"I have just read in the local paper that they are [...] closing [one of our civic centres]. And I've not seen anything about it, I mean, I knew I've heard through the grapevine that it was going to be closed. But it's kind of like, in the local paper that this venue's [...] not opening again. That's it. Well, I'm not seeing anything apart from it in this local paper. And I've heard kind of like, bits and pieces, just because I'm on a Facebook page [for the area]. But from the local authority themselves, I've not seen anything."*⁵²

BARRIERS TO CREATING SPACES FOR CONNECTION

Our research drew out a number of recurring barriers to creating spaces for connection. Below we examine these in turn.

Local government financial constraints have led to fewer spaces

As touched on above, many focus group attendees and interviewees reported having few local government spaces in which to build connections with other local people and with council staff. There was a shared perception across the board that this was the consequence of local government lacking funds, with some connecting this up to the closing or selling off of property:

*"So the councils are trying to sell off whatever assets they have to these community groups so that they don't have the responsibility for maintaining them and the costs, and they can recoup some money."*⁵³

*"All these local community centres, they've closed all of them because of budget cuts. So there is nowhere, there's no like resource centres, or anything where you can go for things now, like youth clubs, around here."*⁵⁴

The perception of spaces disappearing appears to be borne out: Freedom of Information requests by Unison in 2019 found that across England, Scotland

and Wales between 2010-2019, 859 children's centres and family hubs, and 940 youth centres had been closed.⁵⁵ At the same time, this does not appear to be coupled with spaces being created. For example, a fund for 60 new youth centres, 100 mobile youth centres and 360 refurbishments announced in 2019 has yet to be rolled out as of October 2021.⁵⁶

That local government is selling assets to respond to financial constraint is also borne out. A 2019 Bureau of Investigative Journalism report revealed that £115 million of the £381 million made by property sales since 2016 was spent on redundancies, following a change in 2016 that allowed local authorities "to spend the proceeds on cost-cutting measures [...]" which have upfront costs but reduce spending in the long-term.⁵⁷ As the County Councils Network Director Simon Edwards commented: "Local politicians do not go into public service to slash and burn or make valued staff redundant, let alone sell assets to do this. But this is the financial reality of years of funding reductions and rising demand."⁵⁸

In terms of the number of spaces, in 2018 Locality made an FOI request to all English councils, 55 of which responded with reports of asset sales from each year between 2012-2018. Extrapolated, this suggested an average of 4,131 publicly-owned buildings and spaces had been sold by English councils in the same period.⁵⁹ A 2021 investigation by The Ferret found that between 2015-2019, thirty Scottish local authorities sold 2,663 land and property assets.⁶⁰ In both cases, there is recognition that sales by themselves do not mean places aren't put to good subsequent use, or that new spaces and properties are not opened in their place by local authorities. Nonetheless, as Locality highlights, almost all (95%) of councils that responded to them (233 in total) "expect the sell off of publicly owned buildings and spaces to play an increasingly important role in the next five years."⁶¹

How local government space fits into wider social infrastructure needs more attention

Understanding how local government space feels embedded and woven into people's lives in a way they are comfortable with requires understanding

52 Demos interview, July 2021.

53 Demos interview, July 2021.

54 Demos interview, July 2021.

55 Unison. *Shocking picture of austerity cuts to local services is revealed by UNISON*. December, 2019. Available at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2019/12/shocking-picture-austerity-cuts-local-services-revealed-unison/> [Accessed 13 January 2022]

56 BBC. *Youth clubs still waiting for £500m government support scheme from 2019*. October, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-59054702> [Accessed 13 January 2022]

57 Davies, G., Boutaud, C., Sheffield, H., Youle, E. Revealed: *The thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis*. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, March 2019. Available at: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-03-04/sold-from-under-you>

58 Davies, G., Boutaud, C., Sheffield, H., Youle, E. Revealed: *The thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis*.

59 Locality. *The Great British Sell Off*. June 2018. P.4. Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Great-British-Sell-Off-FINAL.pdf>

60 <https://theferret.scot/public-bodies-shed-property-worth-hundreds-millions/>

61 Locality. *The Great British Sell Off*. P.6.

how it slots into the broader 'social infrastructure' of an area. Definitions of social infrastructure are contested, with some seeing it as "the physical places, and the organisations that have a physical plant... that shape our capacity to interact with one another", whereas others believe "an overly place-centric and physical rendering of social infrastructure" overlooks how people, including public servants, "matter as well as places" to this capacity.⁶² In the former definition, the existence of local government space is enough for it to be embedded in social infrastructure. In the latter, there is recognition that how local government staff interact with the public and become a part of local social networks (which may mean working in physical spaces other than local government spaces, or moving these closer to people) matters also to building connections between them.

The crucial insight of this latter approach is that social infrastructure should not be understood in a top-down fashion. Our research shows how social infrastructure must be understood contextually, informed by the citizens and public servants in a place. As Sonika Sidhu, Principal Policy Advisor at the Local Government Association highlighted to us, from a local government perspective "[social infrastructure's] nebulosity is a product of what the term is trying to describe: how potentially hundreds of [their] services relate to an area."⁶³ A better understanding of an area that comes from being more integrated with its social networks, clarifies what from afar might seem nebulous.

People feel unable to shape spaces that do exist

A prerequisite to building spaces of connection is feeling you have a say over them in the first place, and how local people feel about the ownership and administration of available spaces can also affect their perceptions of having opportunities to connect with others. For some members of the public we spoke to, this applied even with Community Asset Transfers, a measure meant to give control to local people and which ostensibly is about close community connections. Yet as a focus group participant put it, they saw this as "a lot of just handing stuff over" by their council to community groups they did not feel part of.⁶⁴

However, where local government was seen to be supporting something more widely citizen-led (which can still include Community Asset Transfers) it was well received in our qualitative research. For example, as one member of the public put it, "if you had the council promoting [a community litter pick Facebook group] and getting people together and in touch with each other, I think that's quite a powerful way to initiate change."⁶⁵

This reflected a preference for local government taking a facilitative role in building spaces for connection, something that resonates with two ideas that can work in tandem: appreciative inquiry - taking note of 'what's strong' rather than (just) 'what's wrong' with an area - and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), which "invites us to use what's strong to address what's wrong, and to make what's strong even stronger."⁶⁶ In practice, the latter means councils working with people to identify untapped potential to nurture and develop the type of social infrastructure wanted by the community. As Mick Ward, previously Chief Officer of Transformation and Innovation in Adults and Health at Leeds City Council describes the process of ABCD in a 2020 Nesta report:

"It recognises and celebrates the uniqueness of neighbourhoods and the interdependencies of communities. Central to the approach is finding and recognising the assets of an area; anything from a patch of unused land, a neighbour who knows the local baby groups, a local business who is happy to share their office space, a fast-food restaurant where young adults meet or a retired teacher looking to meet new people."⁶⁷

While barriers to building social infrastructure include gaps in resources that should be invested in, this has to be coupled with power sharing which centres how local people themselves see their social infrastructure, what its fair administration looks like, and what it would mean to them to have spaces for connection. This cuts to the core of relational local government and public services more generally, as it defines the problems and potentials of an area through how they are understood by the public themselves, and gives them a say in solutions.

62 These definitions come from Eric Klinenberg and Stephen Aldridge, respectively, in Kelsey, T. *Levelling up after Covid: the value of social infrastructure*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, March 2021. Available at: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/levelling-after-covid-value-social-infrastructure/> [Accessed 14 October 2021]

63 Demos interview, October 2021.

64 Demos focus group, June 2021.

65 Demos focus group, June 2021.

66 Russel, C. *Asset-based community development & appreciative inquiry: what's the difference?* Nurture Development, September 2015. Available at: <https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/blog/whats-the-difference-between-asset-based-community-development-abcd-and-appreciative-inquiry-ai-abcd/> [Accessed 4 November 2021]

67 66 Lloyd, J., Reynolds, E. *Asset-Based Community Development for Local Authorities*. Nesta, September 2020. P.11. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Asset_Based_Community_Development.pdf [Accessed 14 October 2021]

CASE STUDY #3: CITIZEN-LED SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN BARKING AND DAGENHAM

Everyone Everyday is a project run by the Participatory City Foundation - a charity based in Barking and Dagenham - in partnership with the borough council.

Launched in 2017, the project aims to strip away “all the logistical, cultural and structural barriers” that often prevent people from participating regularly in neighbourhood projects.⁶⁸ Instead, it encourages regular participation on people’s own terms and with activities they choose through (at the time of writing) five multi-use, repurposed community spaces, including community kitchens, gardens, and workshops for manufacturing and arts.⁶⁹ The project also has an accompanying dedicated social media platform, created through the provider, Mighty Networks.

Barking and Dagenham council committed £1.5 million to the project across five years, making it the second largest funder for the project, alongside the Greater London Authority and philanthropic funders, with the project overall costing £8.5 million.⁷⁰

CASE STUDY #4: AGILE WORKING IN MONMOUTHSHIRE

Monmouthshire Council has been held up as an exemplar of making efforts to build relationships between its residents and itself for the benefit of the county. One early change was the switch to agile working in 2013, meaning its employees can work from any location, whether a council building, in the community, from home or any combination of these. Monmouthshire Council CEO Paul Matthews emphasised how this allowed staff to “mesh into the culture” of places, which he sees as integral because “the DNA of a relational council is in the street.”⁷¹

Faced with the option of rebuilding its 1970s county hall like-for-like at a cost of £35 million, Monmouthshire instead chose to build a complete new site for £7 million, investing a further £3 million improving and modernising a variety of existing community-based buildings to provide agile-working capability, including necessary investments in technology. As well as enabling agile-working, a resulting saving has been energy costs reduced from circa £1 million each year to £175-£200,000.⁷²

68 Participatory City. *Every One Every Day*. Participatory City. Available at: <http://www.participatorycity.org/every-one-every-day> [Accessed 14 October 2021]

69 Every One Every Day. *Projects Summary*. Available at: <https://www.weareeveryone.org/projects-summary> [Accessed 13 January 2022]

70 Britton, T. and others. *Y2 Tools to act: Building a Participatory Ecosystem in Barking and Dagenham through the Every One Every Day initiative*. Participatory City, November 2019. Pp.164-165. Available at: <http://www.participatorycity.org/tools-to-act> [Accessed 13 January 2022]

71 Demos interview, July 2021.

72 Demos interview, July 2021.

RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PILLAR 3

CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

WHAT IS CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION?

Consistent and open communication is about the public feeling informed by their council and viewing its actions as transparent.

This pillar clearly overlaps with genuine power sharing and creating spaces for connection, our other two pillars of relational local government. That's because these pillars cannot function without consistent and open communication: an important foundation for building strong relationships.

WHY DOES CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION MATTER FOR RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Relationships between service professionals and the people they are supporting

Consistent and open communication between service professionals and the people they are supporting can take the form of lines of communication that are information-preserving and transparent as opposed to fragmented and opaque. This strengthens the bonds between service professionals and the people they are supporting as it builds familiarity and trust.

In a relational model, an emphasis is placed on the value of having consistent communication on a given inquiry across mediums, ideally with the

same member of staff so as to build a connection, but at least with different staff who have access to a more reliable store of past inquiries. It also explores, with the public's consent, means of improving communication through innovations.

Relationships between local government and the community at large

Consistent and open communication between local government and the community at large is geared towards meeting people where they are, keeping them updated - about their own inquiries, the broader actions of their council, or what is going on in their local area - in a way that is easier to integrate into their lives. It also attends to the way in which feeling informed can shape perceptions of local government transparency for the better. This strengthens the relationship between local government and the community at large because it lays the foundations for familiarity and trust.

Relationships between citizens themselves

Consistent and open communication between citizens themselves means opportunities for people to interact with others locally, and for people to be informed about these opportunities, are actively explored and opportunities for these are developed by local governments alongside the public. In a transactional model of local government, these go overlooked by virtue of people being viewed as atomised, individual service recipients.

CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION TODAY

The public wants consistent communication with their council, but doesn't experience it

Our discussions with the public brought out how many see their council as the "first point of contact" with services and the state.⁷³ However, we also heard how interactions with council staff can feel fragmented, partly because of how communications are structured. For example, some reported being passed between different council departments over the same inquiry, with their interactions feeling confused:

"It's like the person that you speak to at the contact centre is, like, the go-between, and nobody calls you back! And, okay, you get a reference number, but then when you ring back with [it], they say 'What? We don't want the reference number.' So, what's the point?"⁷⁴

Fragmented approaches to communicating with the public can impact the ability of service professionals and the people they are supporting to build a sense of familiarity and inclusion. It's little surprise then that 68% of respondents to our poll said it is important to see the same person each time when accessing local government services, while only a quarter (26%) report experiencing this.

Furthermore, we found strong support for the idea of having a set person to talk to when you access or have questions about council services. Three quarters (75%) of respondents to our poll said having a set person is important, but only 31% reported having it in practice. This could have been interpreted in two senses: 'I have a set person for all my inquiries', or 'I can get through to the same person I spoke to before when I previously got in touch about this particular issue'. Based on our qualitative research, it is more likely that people interpreted this to mean the latter.

Communication of information is not sufficiently fluid

Though people want a set contact for a given inquiry, they also desire fluidity in their contact: they want to be able to communicate about the same issue across multiple mediums, and have information preserved across these. This was clear from how close preferences were in our polling around means of contact: 82% saw being able to access local government services online as important just ahead

of 77% face to face, and 78% saw being able to communicate with people who work there online as important, just ahead of 76% face to face.

Our discussions with the public brought out why these are closely ranked: people want their means of interaction to meet them where they are and to be adaptable depending on the context. As one interviewee put it:

"I think I prefer the automatic online contact when they're kind of just updating me, but when I really need to contact them, like, first time, I think I need to speak to someone over the phone or possibly go to their office."⁷⁵

This chimes with the desire for genuine power sharing: people want to feel that how they are kept informed by, and how they choose to provide information to, their council is something they have a say in. It also chimes with the value of welcoming spaces, online and off, since the degree to which we see ourselves as having options for how we communicate may change depending on how welcoming these spaces feel.

Underlying this desire for multiple points of contact is a desire for certainty that our records of previous enquiries are maintained and centralised; people want fluidity and reliability (and security) in their communications with their local government, aided by an uninterrupted storage and retrieval of information. Good communication is not a matter of determining what is 'the' best means, or indeed one of focusing on the means at all. As Phil Rumens, Digital Services Manager at West Berkshire Council and Chair of LocalGov Digital puts it, "the service is the product of what is delivered, not who or what is delivering it."⁷⁶

Connected to this is a desire that emerged from our qualitative research, of knowing where to turn to in the event that we do experience disruptions in communication. As one focus group participants described this in relation to a traffic issue:

"We've not heard any correspondence. So what do we do now? Who do we go to? I've got no number to phone, and the list is exhausted. I don't know what to do. I don't know who to contact."⁷⁷

73 Demos focus group, June 2021.

74 Demos interview, July 2021.

75 Demos interview, July 2021.

76 Rumens, P. *People are not your service, but neither are your forms*. LG/WWW, March 2020. Available at: <http://philrumens.blogspot.com/2020/03/your-people-are-not-your-service-but.html> [Accessed 14 October 2021]

77 Demos interview, July 2021.

More than anything we value transparency, but there is room for improvement

In our poll the two most important things for the public about their council were ensuring it is transparent about how their policies are designed and how they operate, and being transparent about how they collect, store and share data and information about people (joint at 84%). The importance of transparency about how local governments use algorithms and artificial intelligence was rated slightly lower, at three quarters (75%), although this may reflect less knowledge of their use.

Despite being very important, in practice people's perceptions of transparency fall short. Just over half of the public (54%) feel local government is transparent with regard to its policies and operation; a similar proportion (56%) feel it is transparent with regard to data and information collection, storage and use. A perceived lack of transparency can also be a symptom of fragmented communication, as touched on above. As one focus group participant described it: "I don't think the local authority are transparent with everything. And a lot of information... I find out about certain things from somebody, who's heard it from somebody, who's heard it from somebody..."⁷⁸

BARRIERS TO CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

The pandemic has been a game changer, but there is still untapped potential in digital innovations

The pandemic has led to rapid adoption and adaptation of digital communications infrastructures and use of data by local authorities.⁷⁹ There is a risk here of course of worsening digital divides: adopted and sustained poorly, such innovations could create barriers to better communications and opportunities for connection for many.

However, online and face to face interactions are not in tension: carried out carefully they complement each other. Moreover, a range of innovations can be time-saving - such as automating communications,

identifying at-risk individuals and predicting the need for services⁸⁰ - potentially freeing up time for more face-to-face interactions. Likewise, local government analysis of its data opens up potential new bases for building in-person relationships between a council and the public and between the public themselves, if it brings out previously unrecognised connections.

Of course, such developments are relatively new, and there are risks identified in their applications, such as the potential building-in of bias.⁸¹ As such, thorough and continuous engagement with the public to seek their informed consent on these innovations is vital, and their actual value (including for building relationships) must be monitored. Local authorities are aware of these risks but more must be done to foreground engagement. As a report on local government use of data during the pandemic by the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation found, many local authorities were "fearful of misjudging the public mood on what is an acceptable use of data", but despite this, many did not focus on greater engagement with the public as a response.⁸²

Perceptions of poor transparency are fuelled by being engaged with in the wrong way

Rather than always being a matter of distrusting councils, what our qualitative research highlighted was how a lack of transparency can arise simply from not being engaged by your council in a way that fits with your expectations about what it means to be informed. Members of the public we spoke with talked about how they were increasingly used to on-demand, digital, personalised forms of interaction from the other services in their lives, something they brought to their expectations of local government. As one person put it:

"[My council tax information] needs to be something a little bit more now, I think, in this day and age. It is the same thing that I've been receiving for the last 20 years. So they do provide information, but they need to engage us, perhaps a little bit more."⁸³

This is not to suggest that local governments should simply copy the digital, on-demand user experience

78 Demos focus group, July 2021.

79 See: Public Services Committee. *A critical juncture for public services: Lessons from Covid-19*. House of Lords, 2020. P.48. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5801/ldselect/pubserv/167/167.pdf>; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/968515/Local_government_use_of_data_during_the_pandemic.pdf; Kaye, S and M, Charlotte. *Shifting the balance: Local adaptation, innovation and collaboration during the pandemic and beyond*. New Local, 2021. Available at: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Shifting-the-Balance.pdf>; Freeguard, G., Shephard, M. Davies, O. *Digital government during the coronavirus crisis*. Institute for Government. November, 2020. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/digital-government-coronavirus.pdf>.

80 Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation: *Local Government Use of Data During the Pandemic*. February 2021. Pp.13-14. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/968515/Local_government_use_of_data_during_the_pandemic.pdf

81 Local Government Association. *Using predictive analytics in local public services*. November 2020. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/using-predictive-analytics-local-public-services#risks-and-challenges-of-predictive-analytics> [Accessed 3 November 2021]

82 Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation: *Local Government Use of Data During the Pandemic*. P. 10.

83 Demos focus group, June 2021.

models found elsewhere in many people's lives today. Both the public and experts on local government inside and out of it agreed on the risks of this, not least given that a 'customer' perception of citizens has been a contributing factor to making public-council interactions transactional. Rather, what public attitudes like that above point to is the value of making information more engaging, and the importance of listening to people to understand what this means to them. As one member of the public put it, they knew that their council had to publish expenditure data and they had looked at it before but they struggled to engage with it as it was "like a monthly Excel spreadsheet that's, you know, 10,000 rows wide."⁸⁴

Experimenting with new ways to present information and to communicate with people, including using innovations from the pandemic, was seen as a way to boost accessibility and participation with local government. As Phil Rumens, Digital Services Manager at West Berkshire Council and Chair of LocalGov Digital highlighted, the democratic potential of newly-streamed and on-demand council meetings and updates, for example, which people can fit more easily around their life than attending in-person meetings, furthered the ability of more of the public to engage with the democratic process.⁸⁵

Communication needs to be considered in roles

Staff and representative roles in local government change with a shift to a relational approach, and this has a bearing too on what it means for the public to feel closer to them. As Monmouthshire Council CEO Paul Matthews told us, breaking down perceptions of being distant and impersonal can only go so far when it comes to the council as an institution:

*"The public [also] need to see names, faces, human beings not just job titles. Again, there is a big role for elected members here, being out there in the community. Some of our learning is about the importance of intimacy and this can take time to build so councils have to create that time for their people and recognise that it's a 'long game'."*⁸⁶

This closeness requires councils to step back at times to allow people to have more of a say. This does not make staff redundant, rather it is about a shift in understanding communication and connection building as key parts of roles. As Paul noted, there is

a role for local elected representatives in particular to play here.⁸⁷ When speaking to members of the public, we found people were often approving of their relationship with their local councillors being in this mould, and were critical of those who do not make this effort. As one focus group participant put it, when you "just don't see them from one election to the other [...] do they really relate to us? Are they really representing our views?"⁸⁸

Of course, many councillors do fit this mould already, and in a further nod to the disempowerment of councils discussed above, there are constraints that prevent others from adopting it even if they want to. Amongst these is the fact that efforts to develop exactly this role have previously not been accompanied with the time and resources to support councillors in this work.⁸⁹

84 Demos focus group, June 2021.

85 Demos interview, July 2021.

86 Email correspondence.

87 Furthermore, their function in representing the views of parts of an electorate is a reminder of the fact that contestation of power is an inevitable and desirable feature of a healthy democracy.

88 Demos focus group, July 2021.

89 Barnet, N., Giovannini, A., Griggs, S. *Local Government in England: Forty Years of Decline*. P. 35.

CASE STUDY #5: ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL SERVICE PATTERNS LIBRARY

A valuable route for rethinking public-council communications comes from work on 'service patterns'. These are "sets of practical guidelines for building a service (or bits of services) that are repeated across government - something like getting a licence or exchanging the ownership of something."⁹⁰ Increasingly, there are efforts to document and refine these processes to make them more aligned to what people need when accessing a service.

Essex County Council (ECC) has been a pioneer in this work. The Director of Service Transformation at the Council, Ben Unsworth, explained that the main associated cost was designers - service designers, interaction designers, content designers - who are in short supply across government at present. Outside of this, however, the software costs were small. Though some use more specialist tools, as he highlighted, "You don't need fancy software to do the work – I have seen design patterns described in Google Docs or Powerpoint."⁹¹

Nor are service patterns an imposition. As Ben explained, their documentation forms part of ECC's ongoing service design activity: "As the team encountered different user needs through their work, they documented commonalities and developed a library of patterns."⁹² Narrow cost-savings analyses of this approach are difficult, since as Ben explained they serve a range of purposes and are not simply rolled out, tested and evaluated - they serve an array of functions. They can build consistency across resident interactions, stop teams having to 'reinvent' solutions to common problems, act as a 'starting point' when designing new solutions, build a common narrative about the components of services, allow understanding of how things work, show differences between similar types of service interactions and much else.⁹³

Nonetheless, Ben pointed to an example of how gains can clearly result from the use of service patterns: "Teams will often use the patterns as some first principles for their work.

It lets you start designing from a position of relative confidence and creates a common language for talking about the component parts of an end to end service. This can help shortcut a lot of work and help make technology decisions."⁹⁴

In July 2019 FutureGov, who worked with ECC to develop its service patterns approach, expanded to a broader LocalGov patterns library, intended to be used more widely. Though local government application is still uncommon, the Government Digital Service (GDS) has analysed the savings made through its Design System project, which also includes service design patterns. Tim Paul, Head of Interaction Design at GDS, stated in February 2020 that this has generated savings of over £17 million a year - a figure calculated as a conservative estimate. This was based on how many teams use the Design System, how often people in those teams use the tools, how much more productive teams are as a result, and what people would do if those tools didn't exist. It also took into account average salaries and churn rates of specialists in government, with the final figure representing the additional cost of delivering services of a similar quality without a Design System.⁹⁵

90 Downe, L. *Let's talk about service patterns*. Government Digital Service, February 2016. Available at: <https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2016/02/29/lets-talk-about-service-patterns/> [Accessed 2 November 2021]

91 Email correspondence.

92 Email correspondence.

93 Email correspondence.

94 Email correspondence.

95 Paul, T. Tim Paul: Measuring the value of the GOV.UK Design System / Gov Design Meetup #14. Gov Design Meetup. February 2020. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSkVtSEAE98&ab_channel=GovDesignMeetup [Accessed 3 November 2021]. With thanks to Matt Skinner and Ben Holliday for discussion of this.

TOWARDS RELATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This report has examined to what extent councils today can be said to embody the three pillars of relational local government: genuine power sharing, spaces for connection, and open and consistent communication. Throughout, we have identified barriers to delivering these three pillars. This chapter considers what can be done to overcome these barriers and to deliver on the vision of relational local government.

TOWARDS GENUINE POWER SHARING

We identified a range of barriers to genuine power sharing earlier in this report. These include:

- Public unwillingness to engage, particularly due to a lack of support to participate and poor perceptions of its usefulness.
- A lack of understanding about how people want to engage, particularly with those most marginalised from power.
- Wider, transactional perceptions about local government.
- Some councils lack the capability to share power more due to a lack of resources and training.
- Council disempowerment can often mean local authorities don't have much power to share in the first place.

In practice, these are interwoven and so responses to them will also address multiple barriers. Below we offer suggestions for how these barriers can be addressed:

Devolution and funding to support relationship building

To share power with the public - and build relationships with them in the process - councils must have power to share in the first place. Constraints - financial and otherwise - from successive central governments have, however, disempowered them. The upcoming Levelling Up White Paper is an opportunity to put this right. We therefore recommend that:

- The upcoming Levelling Up White Paper puts devolution at its heart. This means giving local governments extensive new powers and responsibilities. Particular attention should be placed on how English councils can be empowered to advance local power sharing in ways recent Welsh⁹⁶ and Scottish⁹⁷ Government policy allows.

This includes giving the latter long-term financial security and autonomy to invest in and experiment with new ways of designing and delivering services (including on areas of large current local government expense, such as social care), and moving away from risk-averse measures of accountability that stifle local

96 Welsh legislation passed in 2021 requires councils to devise and publish (with public consultation) strategies for improving public participation. See: Senedd Cymru. Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. January 2021. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2021/1/enacted> [Accessed 13 January 2022]

97 In Scotland the last decade has seen fertile ground for developing participation in local government. The current Local Governance Review is consulting the public on how to strengthen local democracy, building on the 2011 Christie Commission on the future delivery of public services which put participation at its core, intervening What Works research to understand best practice here, and the 2015 Community Empowerment Act which gave citizens and local authorities new participatory powers.

government innovation.⁹⁸

Support relational training and reducing constraints

A shift to relational local government demands a different set of skills from council staff and representatives. Of course, many already take such approaches but face constraints. We therefore recommend both that:

- Central government should provide a dedicated grant to local governments to allow council staff and councillors to develop relational skills, from co-production to facilitating participatory decision making, to utilising digital innovations and new modes of communication with the public. However, this should not be overly prescriptive: skills should be identified by staff themselves as well as those identified by the public.
- Senior local government officials should engage in dialogue with staff and councillors to understand where constraints can be freed up that prevent the latter from developing their existing (and future) capacity to build relationships with the public.

Understand how people want to be heard

A clear message from our research is that not only do people want a say over the design and delivery of local services, they also want a say over how they are engaged with. Without speaking to people about this, councils are not in a position to fully appreciate why some may be less willing or able to participate. We therefore recommend that:

- Local governments should engage in listening exercises with residents to understand what they need to be able to participate and what they want from taking part, drawing on recent examples of this from councils such as Newham (see pages 20-21).
- Through these exercises and subsequent change, attention should be paid in particular to where democratic innovation can be used to tackle inequalities in participation.

- Demos's continued work here - from trialling methods like Polis⁹⁹ to Combined Choice¹⁰⁰ to crowdsource policy - has highlighted to us that even where participation is initiated by authorities, there are methods (digital and otherwise) which can still extend a greater say to participants than conventional consultation.

TOWARDS SPACES FOR CONNECTION

We identified a set of closely connected barriers to creating spaces for connection:

- Cuts to local government funding have led to councils having to sell off spaces where people would be able to build connections.
- People feel unable to have a say over spaces that do exist, affecting their perception that they provide opportunities to connect with others.
- There needs to be more understanding of how local government space can feel embedded and woven into people's lives in a way they are comfortable with.

Below we offer suggestions for how these barriers can be addressed:

Address the shortage of spaces for connection

To create spaces for connection it is vital that spaces exist in the first place, yet our research underlined how many face a lack of communal, local government space. In response to this, we recommend that:

- Central government funding of local governments should support the creation and preservation of spaces for connection, both in terms of direct funding and through safeguarding finances for spaces from cost-saving pressures on councils. This is particularly important given that policy areas deemed higher priority may stand to gain from relational public services, making the availability of spaces for connection more widely essential.

98 Llyod, J and Randle, A. *Introducing New Operating Models for Local Government*. Upstream Collaborative, September 2020. P.44. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Introducing_New_Operating_Models.pdf [Accessed 13 January 2022]

99 Foale, E., Bennett, S. Crowdsourcing policy: how can collective intelligence improve policymaking?. Policy Lab, November 2021. Available at: <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2021/11/04/crowdsourcing-policy-how-can-collective-intelligence-improve-policymaking/>. [Accessed 12 November 2021]

100 Nash, J. *Combined Choice: A modern method of democratic decision making*. Demos, November 2020. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Combined-Choice.pdf> [Accessed 12 November 2021]

Make local government spaces feel citizen-led

It is not enough for communal local government space to exist for relationships to grow. The cultures within them must feel welcoming and their administration must feel empowering to local people. To cultivate this, we recommend:

- Local governments should engage in dialogue with residents to rethink how its spaces can be made to feel more welcoming and something the latter have a say over (something that can be addressed as part of the broader listening efforts around power sharing mentioned above).

Ensure local government spaces are integrated with communities

A key lesson to emerge from our research was that, to make relationship building work, it is important to understand how local government interactions with the public and the spaces where these occur slot into the existing social fabric. To this end, we recommend that:

- Councils should work with local people to understand their preferred spaces for interacting with staff and councillors. It may be there are existing community spaces where people already feel more comfortable to engage. Where there is opportunity to embed staff in these spaces, this should be pursued (the particular value of this to areas where parish and town councils play a greater role was highlighted to us by those working in rural councils).¹⁰¹
- Councils should explore the use of vacant local facilities, including on the high street, for accessible, open spaces for interactions between the council and public, and the public themselves. Recent Demos research found many people want their council to play a significant role in revitalising the high street, are supportive of repurposing empty shops to uses including office space, and regret the decline of the high street, seeing its revitalisation as a “catalyst for wider regeneration” and a way to “engender pride in place”.¹⁰²

TOWARDS CONSISTENT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

We identified the following barriers to building more open and consistent communication between local governments and the public:

- The pandemic has led to rapid adaptation of new digital communications infrastructures and use of data by local authorities that can provide new, less fragmented means of contact as well as free up time for face-to-face contact, but there is a risk of not building on this further or of doing so without public support.
- Perceptions of poor transparency are driven by the wrong type of engagement, rather than always being about distrust. Information is available but could be more accessible and engaging.
- Connection building and communication needs to be seen as a key part of councillor and council staff roles.

Below we offer suggestions for how these can be addressed:

Supporting digital innovation

Whether it is about using a new back office system to provide more streamlined, integrated communication with the public across their different forms of contact, opening up new means for people to access information about their council’s activities, or freeing up time for regular, face-to-face interactions by automating tasks, many councils are using new technologies to develop their communications. However, there is still tremendous opportunity to do more if they are adequately supported. To this end, we recommend that:

- Central government should improve its data collection of local government digital innovation and activity, and offer direct funding to support more local authorities to develop their digital communications abilities and their digital inclusion plans.
- Local governments should engage in thorough, ongoing dialogue with residents to understand whether and where they consent on the use of their data to inform services.

101 Demos workshop, August 2021.

102 Ussher, K., Rotik, M., Jeyabraba, M. *Everyday Places: Creating Strong Locations to Support Daily Life in Britain*. Demos, April 2021. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Everyday-Places.pdf>. P.32 [Accessed 14 October 2021]

Communication can aid transparency

To address transparency issues, communication of local government information should try to meet people where they are. We recommend therefore that:

- Councils should share best practice on how they make information about their activities more accessible to the public, and listen to local people to understand what kind of presentation of information can bring them closer to their council.

Supporting communication in roles

Both frontline staff and councillors need to be supported to build their communication skills, or have these unhindered where they already exist. To this end we recommend that:

- The aforementioned central government support for relational training, as well as removal of constraints on existing relational capacities, should take particular account of how these can contribute to supporting communications between councils and the public.

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