Citizen Hubs

The Opportunity for Hyperlocal Democracy & Problem Solving in Light of Local Area Committees

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Contents

With Thanks to Contributors:

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Executive Summary

This paper, provided voluntarily by Opus Independents, is written in response to the development of Local Area Committees in Sheffield. Its intention is to provoke a shift in thinking towards deeper, collaborative and more authentic participatory and deliberative democratic engagement with citizens *where they are* in Sheffield. This is with a view to augmenting existing representative democracy structures and further unlocking the latent problem-solving capacity and expertise which lies within communities in Sheffield.

The paper proposes a collaborative governance model called Citizen Hubs which has the flexibility to be led by citizens as well as to house a variety of participatory and/or deliberative methodologies of their choosing. The model seeks to recognise that different communities will want to engage in different areas of concern in different ways, and therefore a structure which can be *inhabited* and changed to suit different needs and interests is critical.

The topics that Citizen Hubs engage with should be led by citizens at the neighbourhood and ward level,with support from resourced ambassador functions recruited from within communities. The Citizen Hubs themselves could be facilitated by independent voluntary, community or faith organisations who have trust in their communities, and who have undergone the necessary training to facilitate multiple methods of engagement in an open and inclusive way. It should be acknowledged at all points that different parts of Sheffield will require different assets and levels of investment and resources to support these emerging structures.

Currently each Local Area Committee is responsible for engaging with 80,000 people in Sheffield. This paper is premised on the assumption that truly authentic engagement with citizens via Local Area Committees is not possible at this population size. Furthermore at this size, we fail as a city to recognise and benefit from the latent skills and expertise within communities. This paper therefore proposes how a layer of processes and engagement could sit beneath Local Area Committees, grounded in neighbourhoods or at ward level, to enable genuine and flexible engagement, information and input by, with and from people who live in the city.

In the final section of this paper we also suggest that an investment in collaborative governance at neighbourhood or even ward level would create the conditions for improved responses to racial equity, community cohesion, health inequalities and consequently wellbeing outcomes. Over time these outcomes would diminish the cost of services and improve the city's problem-solving capabilities and resilience.

Summary

Sheffield City Council and citizens in Sheffield have demonstrated a desire and an interest in adopting methods and processes which build on representative democracy processes and empower communities to have more influence over decisions which affect them.

This paper considers what that system might be, how it might complement existing structures, the benefits of a co-produced, collaborative delivery model with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), civil society partners and wider statutory and public services, and how by developing this system we might also impact on a wider set of 'upstream' issues relating to health and wellbeing, social cohesion and serving marginalised voices.

Citizen Hubs are community-based, community-led spaces which host and facilitate a wide system of deliberative democracy and engagement practices which are defined by citizens, through which their views are brought together and reported to Local Area Committees, and other key decision makers, including the health services, police, educational bodies and boards. In a virtuous feedback loop it is then incumbent on those decision makers to feed back to Citizen Hubs how that information has influenced decision making.

With the potential to introduce a Citizen Hub per ward (approx. population 20,000) or even per neighbourhood (approx. population 5,000) in Sheffield, this innovative structure could enable a new participatory and deliberative information and resource flow from communities and citizens to Local Area Committees. We envisage that decisions made and resources distributed by LACs are then amplified and fed back to citizens via the Hubs and civil society partners. A transparent and accountable information flow between LACs and Citizen Hubs could improve decision making while increasing capacity and trust within communities.

Initial funding to resource the partnership, staffing and equipment costs could come from a range of core public funders, with ongoing costs met in part through a range of social enterprise models, interaction with social prescribing and primary care networks, and potentially consultation services with statutory partners. We also suggest that over time the Citizen Hubs model could have positive impacts on other services (those impacted by health inequalities) in the city, reducing the cost of overall service provision.

Citizen Hubs could inspire a new and collaborative ecology of communities, civil society organisations, statutory bodies and elected representatives. They are structures which citizens, ideas and projects can *inhabit* and change in time to suit their purposes and lived experiences. They are places where people can encounter different views from their own and therefore they actively contribute to increased community cohesion. They could equip citizens with information and agency, through which they can better engage with the problems we face individually, collectively and as a city.

Context

Trust in political institutions is at an all-time low. The UK is one of the most centralised democracies in Europe, arguably the world.

Only 18% of those surveyed for the national 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer said that they trust political parties in general to "do what is right". Almost 60% of people feel that their views are not represented in British politics today. The University of Sheffield found recently that citizens acknowledge political parties have to balance competing pressures, but think parties should be more responsive. In the 2019 General Election, almost a third (32%) of the electorate didn't vote at all.

Sheffield is a divided city, with huge disparities of wealth and health between the North and East of the City, and the South and the West. In 2013 the Fairness Commission highlighted a gap in life expectancy of up to 10 years between sides of the city, a journey that could be made by bus in just 45 minutes. Compounding these structural inequalities are a geographic disparity of physical assets, the continuing cuts to local authority budgets and consequently services, and the challenges of council budgets operating in deficit. Yorkshire is now considered the poorest region in England and one of the poorest in Europe.

And yet we have recently seen unparalleled levels of active citizenship. It's clear that the coronavirus pandemic has revealed the capacity for neighbourliness and civic action lying latent in the population. While the crisis arguably put democracy on hold at local and national levels, it has demonstrated that a sense of urgency and some practical necessities enabled people to make connections, offer support to neighbours, organise local actions, and create new processes for power and decision making. This happened in many places despite a lack of pre-existing structures at a neighbourhood level, but it's clear that where those structures did pre-exist citizens found it easier to debate, decide and act.

In 2019 the ongoing dispute over street tree felling led to the largest ever petition calling for a change in local authority governance. The subsequent It's Our City campaign drew on the Localism Act 2011 to challenge the cabinet model of governance at Sheffield City Council. Beneath this campaign was a claim for more democratic local governance, including a desire for the council to engage communities more actively in the decision-making processes which affect their lives.

In 2021 Sheffield City Council voted through proposals to establish seven Local Area Committees, each covering four electoral wards with populations of around 80,000, with an aspiration to "put decision making at the heart of local areas". The LACs exist to "engage, empower [and] enable" local people and are supported by the 12 elected

representatives whose wards are covered by each committee. At the time of writing, the spending remit, decision making power and governing structures of LACs are being defined by the City Council's Labour-Green 'cooperative executive', partners and citizens.

Serious structural inequalities have been further exposed by the pandemic and will deepen as government support ends. We must recognise that enabling citizens to participate more in the decisions which affect their neighbourhoods and communities - ultimately contributing towards increased social participation, wellbeing and less inequality within the population - could play a critical role in restoring faith in the democratic process.

We could point to the mass emergence of 'mutual aid' groups across Sheffield in March 2020 as an indication of citizens' desire for more control and participation in their communities and neighbourhoods - and their ability to 'step up to the plate'.

Considering the successes and learning generated from 'participatory' and 'deliberative' models of local democracy in Barnsley and Wigan in particular, we have an opportunity in Sheffield to do something different, to put communities front and centre, to adopt a neighbourhood or community-level approach which augments representative democratic structures and processes locally.

This approach should be led and co-designed by citizens and the voluntary and community sector, in close partnership with wider civil society organisations and key city institutions.

What are Citizen Hubs?

Citizen Hubs are community-based, community-led focal points for participatory and deliberative democracy and engagement practices, through which the views and decisions of citizens are brought together, using the methodologies that they have chosen, and passed to Local Area Committees, the City Council and decision makers of all kinds. This may include local boards, police, health services (at primary and community care levels), schools, colleges, universities, hospital trusts, tenants and residents associations and more. Information regarding decisions made should then flow back to Citizen Hubs, creating a virtuous feedback loop between decision makers and citizens.

Considering learning from the Dearne Model (see *'The Ecology of Citizen Hubs: Learning from the Dearne Approach'*), we believe Citizen Hubs would be most effective with as large a variety of localised stakeholders as possible participating, from neighbourhood or ward-based statutory and health system representatives to private landlords, education and community organisations, all of whom could take an active, equitable role in contributing to facilitated engagement on topics that affect people's lives at a Citizen Hub.

It is through creating common spaces between all stakeholders and citizens in a neighbourhood or ward, where different views can be encountered and where 'reasonable people are encouraged to reasonably disagree', that we make inroads into better decision making, problem solving, sense making and community cohesion.

In Essence:

⇨ Citizen Hubs are a range of evolving physical and digital deliberative democracy methodologies, located within communities and led by citizens, and facilitated by trusted community organisations of interest and geography across the city.

⇨ They enable a new information flow between communities and citizens, Local Area Committees, service providers and civil society stakeholders, which inputs tangibly into decision making processes and benefits from the latent expertise and experience within communities.

⇨ They are an innovative and open structure for existing consultation processes, which offers direct access to the views of communities and citizens.

⇨ They are spaces that promote the values of open and collaborative listening, speaking and acting towards building resilient, cohesive and confident communities.

⇨ As noted below (*'What would Citizen Hubs do?'*), they offer a combination of engagement activities.

⇨ They are common spaces through which we can encounter and celebrate our differences, and from which other kinds of activities and projects can spring (see *'How else could Citizen Hubs be used in the future?'*).

The remit of Citizen Hubs

Citizen Hubs could be a connecting force across city stakeholders of all kinds. Some of the roles the Hubs infrastructure could play include:

⇨ **Collating data on views** from all Hubs and feeding that data into a centralised data team which analyses and presents it to key institutions and Local Area Committees.

⇨ **Bringing in expertise and lived experience** as related to specific topic areas, e.g. through external speakers at in-person and virtual events.

⇨ **Engaging statutory services, elected representatives and decision making stakeholders** to attend and take part in citizen engagement sessions.

⇨ **Producing reports and amplifying campaigns** from citizens to institutions and other Citizen Hubs.

⇨ **Connecting citizens with each other**, and with differing viewpoints, to inspire healthy discussion, critical thinking and community cohesion.

⇨ **Supporting citizen development and self-esteem** with roles such as facilitating, mediating, gathering and presenting evidence, community advocacy and representation.

⇨ **Connecting citizens with the VCS and public services** to enable volunteering, understanding and communication with peers.

⇨ **Connecting Citizen Hubs together** to share views from across the city.

⇨ **Connecting local media** with citizen views.

⇨ **Facilitating consultation requests** from key institutions.

⇨ **Feeding back the impact of citizen views** on decision making to citizens.

What could Citizen Hubs do?

The particular activities which provide routes into Citizen Hubs could vary greatly in different areas of the city and should be informed by the topics which citizens want to engage with. Community-based organisations would receive training on a variety of participatory and deliberative methodologies in order to facilitate the conversations citizens want to have in the way they want to have them.

Each Hub would be led by the on-the-ground knowledge of Hub Ambassadors (see *'How do Citizen Hubs harness existing networks of trust within communities?'*) as to which engagement activities are most suitable.

Approaches could include:

Wider community events & on-the-ground presence	→ Citizen Hub representation on the agenda at existing community meetings, events and drop-in sessions. → Door knocking, leafleting and stalls at community fairs. → Participatory budgeting or deliberative discussion facilitated at places of worship, sports events, pubs etc.
Polling & surveying	→ Regular surveys and polling, in person and online, with due consideration for deliberative polling techniques as well as opinion polls. → Ballot boxes in GP surgeries, community centres, etc. → Active and open social media presence which invites participation and comment.
Citizen Hub events	→ Physical and digital engagement events, creating open and deliberative spaces. Could include weekly, monthly or annual happenings. → Regular 'multi Hub' meetings, where citizens from Hubs across the city can meet. → Topics could be crowdsourced, initiated by the VCS and public sector, or contribute to an ongoing "community vision", with external speakers and experts agreed on collaboratively. → Format could adopt, or borrow from, existing 'citizen assembly' or other 'mini public' models.
Creative workshops	→ 'Making and doing' sessions which encourage imagination around community improvement for both adults and children. → Hosted at bespoke and existing events via schools, colleges, existing community groups, etc.
Media campaigns	→ Working with local and regional media on campaigns which encourage citizens to share their views.

	→ Advocacy from Citizens Hubs that engage and use media to articulate community needs or visions.
Mentoring & shadowing	→ Guiding citizens, particularly young people, towards a better understanding of how decisions are made and how to contribute. → Enabling citizens to develop facilitation, mediation, organisation, advocacy and leadership skills. → Open Q&A meetings with decision makers. → Enterprise Hubs where business and entrepreneurial support could be delivered.
Mailing list	→ Weekly mailshots on topics, opportunities and learning.
Consultation support	→ Supporting citizens to understand and respond to formal consultation processes. → Working with Sheffield Healthwatch to amplify consultation on health and care services.

How many Citizen Hubs could there be - and why?

For Citizen Hubs to be effective in reflecting the diverse views of citizens and holding meaningful participatory and deliberative democracy spaces, they must engage at the lowest possible level with the smallest number of population size. This is probably a neighbourhood level at around 5,400 people. Sheffield City Council reports 100 neighbourhoods in Sheffield, while other sources indicate there are 142.

Conversely, in order for Citizen Hubs to engage and complement the input of statutory services, as well as add to representative democracy structures, they must also engage at a ward level (approx. 20,000 population). Roughly speaking, we might say that a ward has between 3 and 5 neighbourhoods in it, which might help us to define and draw out the unique make-up of a ward-based Citizen Hub model or indicate how neighbourhood based Hubs might come together for wider conversations.

While there must be a focal point for collating evidence and coordinating ward-level deliberation or advocacy, there must also be deliberative democracy structures delivered in neighbourhoods and smaller community groups. This neighbourhood consultation might be delivered through neighbourhood level Citizen Hubs or through

other mechanisms facilitated by ward-level Hubs. The level at which Citizen Hubs are established should depend on scoping discussions with local stakeholders and the resources available to support a Hub, both external and within the community.

To add another layer of engagement, Citizen Hubs must also connect with communities of protected characteristics and specific lived experience, as well as those of geography (neighbourhood and ward). We would advocate for a mapping exercise for each Citizen Hub, upon its inception, to understand the differing communities of lived experience and interest within its area, and to develop partnerships which co-create methods of engaging those communities in processes of deliberative democracy.

However, we must recognise that some communities are geographically dispersed and therefore there will need to be Citizen Hubs that respond to communities beyond those of geography. Considering this more widely, it could necessitate an additional set of Citizen Hubs which speak directly to often-marginalised or under-valued lived experiences, or further connectivity with and development of the existing Equality Hub Network, whilst still enabling geographically-based Hubs to work on the marginalisation evident in their respective areas.

Some detail:

- ⇨ The population of Sheffield in 2019 was 585,638.

- ⇨ There are 100-142 neighbourhoods in Sheffield, with a rough breakdown of 5,000-6,000 people per neighbourhood.

- ⇨ There are 28 electoral wards in Sheffield, which translates to around 20,000 people per ward.

- ⇨ There are 84 city councillors spread across 28 wards (3 per ward).

- ⇨ The 2013 Local Assembly Partnership (LAP) system has an average population size of 80,000 per partnership group.

- ⇨ Likewise, the City Council's seven Local Area Committees represent populations of around 80,000 people (4 wards of ~20,000) each.

'Heading Upstream: Barnsley's Innovations for Social Justice' (*Dr Simon Duffy, p.54*)

The Ecology of Citizen Hubs: Learning from the Dearne Approach

In his independent review of Barnsley's democratic structures, Dr Simon Duffy identified the Dearne Approach as an example of good practice. We believe this report offers invaluable instructions for the culture and values we would wish to inspire in Citizen Hubs.

Two key components exemplify this approach:

⇨ Firstly, that **the tone of participants is collaborative** and one of shared purpose and active listening.

⇨ Secondly, the group in Dearne reflected **a wide range of stakeholders**, from statutory services and elected representatives to hyperlocal community organisations, tenants and residents associations, private landlords and civil society partners. It is this diverse ecology across common ground that Citizen Hubs must seek to facilitate.

Applying this learning to Citizen Hubs, we return to the idea of a structure which communities can *inhabit*.

Implied in this phrase is flexibility; that by 'inhabiting' a structure you can change it, bring new and relevant stakeholders into it, and adopt methodologies which speak directly to what works in your neighbourhood or community. Deliberative and participatory democracy spaces must therefore include a diverse range of lived experience and expertise.

What's interesting about the Dearne Approach is that when these spaces are facilitated by communities, and all participant views are treated equitably, community capacity is often then engaged in actively contributing to problem solving.

The Dearne model therefore, when applied through Citizen Hubs, offers the potential for raising the city-wide participation floor in problem solving. Through enhancing agency and equity in communities and by bringing together diverse local stakeholders, we increase the capacity, experience and expertise we have to address issues of collective concern.

Hub Ambassadors: How could Citizen Hubs harness existing networks of trust within communities?

A lack of diversity and lived experience within existing decision making structures causes disconnection and alienation in many communities. Too often people don't see themselves in decisions or decision makers.

Citizen Hub Ambassadors would be multiple, resourced volunteers steering, contributing to, and advocating in each Citizens Hub. They would need to be recruited through an open process, but with this recruitment facilitated and supported by community organisations and stakeholders to encourage diverse representation. Citizen Hubs Ambassadors must not only be offered training and resources, including expenses, but also reflect the diversity of experience and expertise within the neighbourhoods they are serving.

Any approach to increasing participation and engagement must look closely at what relationships and networks of trust already exist at community and neighbourhood level, as well as what has worked and what hasn't worked in the past. This mapping can help avoid duplication, improve understanding of delivery costs and identify groups and institutions who can support Citizen Hubs. With these groups and institutions identified, proactive engagement and support towards volunteering for the role would enable Hub Ambassadors to reflect the diversity of the community they serve.

In the first instance, Hub Ambassadors who are part of well-networked and trusted groups could facilitate information sharing within the right communities and spaces, raising awareness of Hub activities and feeding topics for discussion and debate into the Hubs' chosen deliberative and participatory activities. Hub Ambassadors should be supported and trained to ensure that a wide range of input is received via the Hubs' infrastructure.

Citizen Hubs could initially consist of an Administrator and Ambassadors. The Administrator role would be to provide a level of administrative support alongside managing any other paid staff within the Citizens Hub. The Ambassador role would be both strategic - steering the Citizens Hub and holding stakeholders, including each other, to account - and active - performing community leadership, networking and advocacy roles. It should be recognised that a respectful and constructive working relationship between paid staff and volunteers is critical to the success of the Citizen Hub, with clarity about roles and responsibilities helping this process.

Ambassadors could:

⇨ Help their nearby Hub to identify the best methods of working with their communities (see *'What would Citizen Hubs do?'*).

⇨ Identify specific barriers to engagement which can be factored into working, e.g. the most popular method of digital communication, or physical locations which are best suited to face-to-face meetings.

⇨ Identify or collate 'hot topics' within their community and rally citizens to pursue these topics through the Hubs' infrastructure.

⇨ Act as a point of communication between communities and public services and VCS.

⇨ Act as advocates for the outcomes of deliberation, presenting and articulating these outcomes to public services, Local Area Committees and VCS.

⇨ Support the activity of the Hub in bringing together VCS, public services and local citizens to explore place-based solutions.

⇨ Alongside the Administrator and other community stakeholders, build up a steering group for their Hub which can make strategic decisions about the direction of the Hub. For example, which communities need representation within a geographical remit, by faith, protected characteristics, ethnicity etc.

Hub Ambassadors would likely have an embedded geographical remit, with due consideration paid to the multitude of intersectional communities within that area. It may be that an additional group of Hub Ambassadors could have an issue-based remit, for example around ethnicity or gender, and would be located in a city-wide Hub, or be part of cross-Hub networks that highlighted issues of diversity and inclusion within geographic Hubs.

Hub Ambassadors may occupy the role for a 12-month period, after which time a steering group (made up of Hub Ambassadors, the administrator and wider community stakeholders) might nominate someone else to lead this aspect of the work. A mentoring programme, particularly aimed at engaging younger people should also be considered, while training support groups and community leadership programmes should be made available to all participants in ambassador roles.

How would data flow through Citizen Hub structures?

Citizen Hubs have the potential to be places that coordinate and facilitate the gathering of data from communities. 'Data' in this case might mean evidence about people's viewpoints, lived experience, wellbeing, economic circumstances, hopes for the future, and so on. It might range from quantitative survey data to qualitative storytelling. The purpose of gathering data might be for the community to advocate for itself, or to connect with a data-gathering process of a public sector body, or inform scholarship.
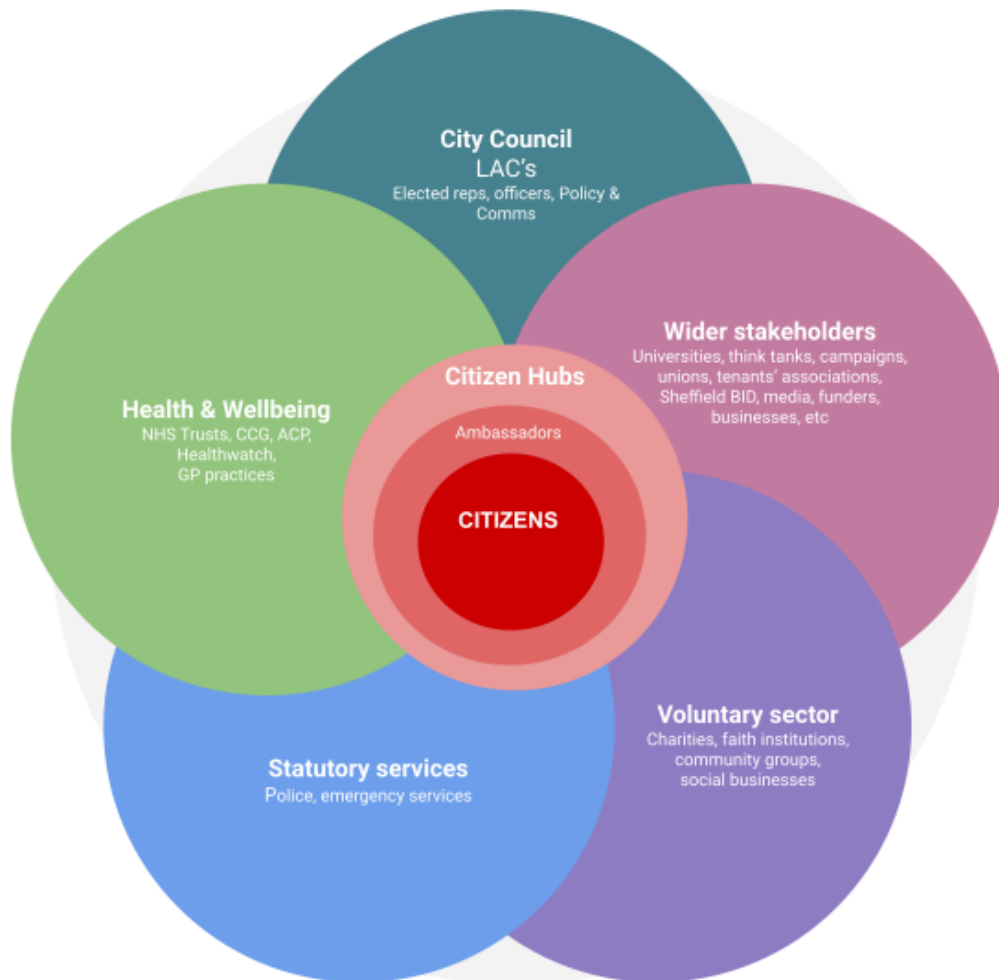
Citizen Hubs stakeholder diagram, showing 'wraparound' support for individual citizens.

Below is a set of assumptions about how data could flow through Citizen Hubs structures, but none of it is considered 'sacred' and further investigation and expertise is required here. There is significant complexity brought by the myriad needs of citizens, public services and institutions. Flexibility in how different data types are collated and presented to different stakeholders needs to be baked into this system - the above diagram illustrates a very structured approach which is not the only way information could flow between citizens and decision making bodies. Two principles are central to the design and practice of this data flow:

⇨ The interests of citizens who are providing the data should be the primary consideration, and these citizens should, as far as possible, be engaged in decisions around the design and practice of data collation and presentation.

⇨ Whenever a community contributes their views or knowledge to decision making structures, there must be feedback on the impact or effect of that data. Otherwise there is a risk of further alienation or disillusionment.

As noted above, the capacity of local Citizen Hubs will vary considerably, as will the information and viewpoints they gather. To support the process of gathering and advocating for the views of local communities within the Citizen Hub area, an organisational layer - Citizen Hubs Central - should be embedded within the Citizen Hubs' infrastructure. This layer could be a role for civically-minded organisations like Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield, and could also be supported by one or more VCS infrastructures. The role of Citizens Hub Central would be:

⇨ To support or undertake the collection, collation and analysis of data.

⇨ To ensure the anonymisation and confidentiality of data, where appropriate, with particular regard to areas of community tension or individual vulnerability.

⇨ To support or undertake the presentation of quantitative and qualitative data that would be accessible to, and engage, stakeholders from elected representatives to civil servants to VCF organisations to media.

⇨ To support the data being directed towards the most appropriate body.

⇨ To work with Citizens Hub Ambassadors and administrators in upskilling around data gathering, data handling and data presentation.

⇨ To work with Citizen Hub Ambassadors and administrators in ensuring that data presented continued to reflect the views and priorities of their community.

⇨ To ensure the communication of impact from stakeholders back to Citizen Hubs.

⇨ To engage with community media organisations to amplify the findings of Citizen Hubs and decision making taken by statutory bodies.

⇨ To explore gaining funding from research councils and work with stakeholders, including Citizen Hubs, where evidence could contribute to wider research around society or health, for example.

The capacity and wish of Citizen Hubs to gather, collate, analyse, and present data will vary, meaning that the extent to which these roles were taken on by Citizens Hubs Central will vary.

Citizen Hubs will likely sometimes deliberate over different questions, and therefore data outputs may vary. Communities are also likely to be different in the kinds of data

they feel best represents their viewpoint and may wish to focus upon presenting this data in different ways. However, higher bodies may also have needs with regard to comparable and digestible data that would inform decisions or support scholarship. Discussions on the data collation process should be held openly between stakeholders and Citizen Hubs, with Citizens Hubs Central potentially playing a facilitating role.

The Citizen Hubs could have a specific role with regard to Local Area Committees:

⇨ Data could flow regularly - weekly or monthly - from Citizen Hubs into ongoing monitoring and decision making processes at Local Area Committee level. This data flow could be informed directly by targets or deadlines for specific upcoming decisions.

⇨ Citizen Hubs could form a key part of the consultation process around yearly Community Plans, enabling deep and wide engagement on defining issues and priority setting.

⇨ An agreed process could set up standardised data collection enabling a LAC to form a Community Plan with comparable data gathered from across different Citizen Hubs, but those Hubs also providing data that richly articulated their voice.

⇨ Any use of the data should be reflected at meetings of Local Area Committees and in reports made available to citizens, Citizen Hubs and wider civil society organisations.

⇨ Ambassadors could present collated citizen data at Local Area Committee meetings, and support the dissemination of decisions and viewpoints back into communities.

By engaging citizens in deliberative and participatory exercises, Citizen Hubs could facilitate the gathering of data and communication of impact in a continual conversation. Perhaps most importantly, through conversations and community media, Citizen Hubs could present the views, priorities and lived experience of a community back to itself, enabling each community to understand the diversity and breadth of experience beyond individuals and families.
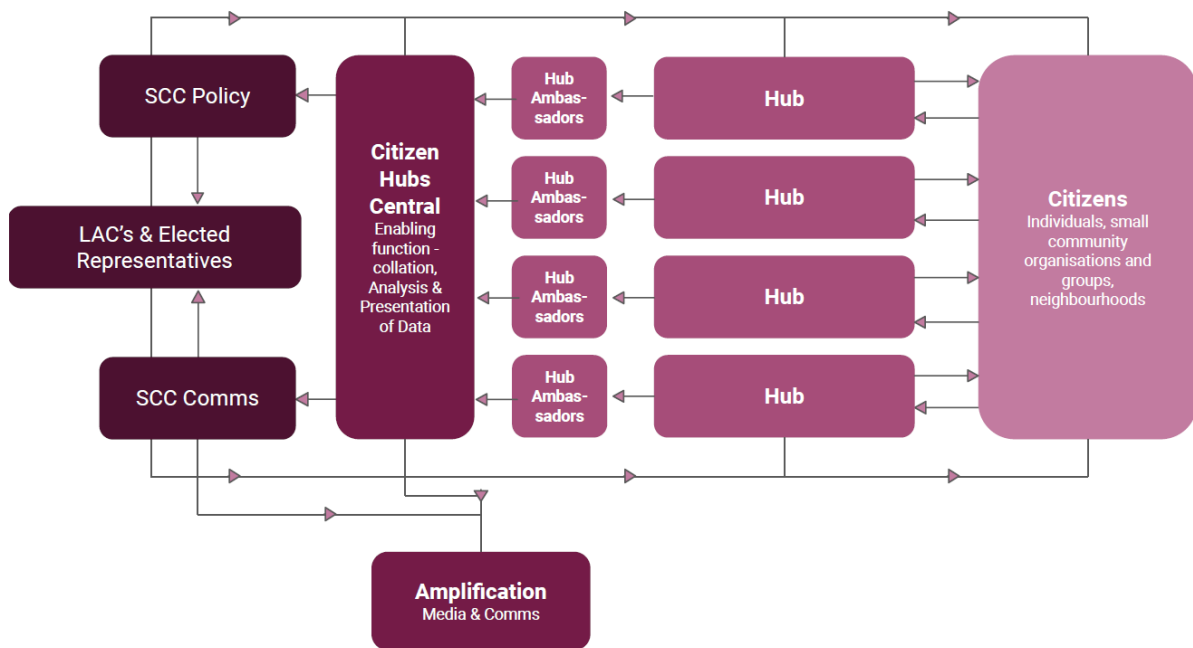
Example Data flow between citizens and institutions via Hubs - in this example, LACs & Sheffield City Council.

What are the benefits of Citizen Hubs?

⇨ Citizen Hubs provide a layer of engagement beneath LACs which meaningfully support the ambition of Sheffield City Council to "engage, empower [and] enable" local people.

⇨ They enable community and neighbourhood voices to have agency in local decision making processes.

⇨ They improve consultation processes with communities.

⇨ They inspire community organisations to broaden their relationship and services with communities and engage more widely in the problems we face collectively as a city.

⇨ By including lived experience and expertise in deliberative democracy spaces, Citizen Hubs equip communities with a source of information about the world they live in, beyond traditional media publishers and social media bubbles.

⇨ Citizen Hubs are a necessary first step to proving that citizens can - and should - have more participation in the decision making processes that affect their lives.

⇨ Through connecting citizens, developing their confidence and knowledge, and improving services, they contribute to improved health and wellbeing outcomes through addressing health inequalities for citizens who currently feel disconnected, disempowered and ignored.

⇨ They contribute to improved service provision from public sector services, with the potential to increase collaboration and co-delivery by public services, VCS and citizens.

⇨ They provide much needed common spaces (physical, digital or hybrid) for people with different views and experiences to encounter each other and better understand the diversity of lived experience within their community.

How could Citizen Hubs be resourced?

It would be remiss to not acknowledge the severe cuts of the last ten years, the consequent precarious state of local authority finances and the requirement for greater levels of investment in certain parts of the city over others. It might also be said that a great deal of latent capacity within the voluntary sector and within communities may lower the cost of resourcing a citizen hubs model, which may mean that the cost of delivery also varies across the city.

However, with a wider set of partners, who themselves have different routes to finance, and an ambitious, innovative mindset to raising revenue from non-traditional sources, we believe it is possible to sustain citizen hubs across the city. We also believe that the value, as well as the cost saving, created by augmenting representative democracy processes with authentic citizen-led participatory and deliberative processes will pay dividends, outweighing the upfront costs associated with this model.

Initial funding to resource the partnership, staffing and equipment costs could come from a range of core funders. This paper does not go into great depth on this issue, but with additional time and investment we believe it is possible to source a range of different funding options to resource a Citizen Hubs model.

As a priority, this could be an initial National Lottery Partnership or Power To Change grant bid. Other potential funders include the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, Local Government Association, Carnegie Trust, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Lankelly Chase and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Research bodies such as the ESRC may see the value of funding a study or pilot. Ideally, a partnership of funders would help resource the set up of this work and share learning with other cities across the UK.

Ongoing costs could be met through a variety of social enterprise models and a relationship with Sheffield City Council, Sheffield City Region, ICS and Primary Care networks to use this new structure as a vehicle through which public consultations, wellbeing and health services - including social prescribing - are delivered. There is the opportunity to broaden access to a consultation service with other civil society and statutory organisations, such as universities, police and emergency services.

There are also options to gain funding via additional local taxation: to levy around an additional 1% on Council Tax, with the commitment that monies raised are spent in local areas; to leverage in VCS and citizen resources for the co-delivery of council services, and so sustain Citizens Hubs through a top-slicing of Council Tax (as done in [Barnsley](#)); to carry out a community governance review and institute community councils to fulfil the role of Citizen Hubs and charge a ward-level precept (see [Queen's Park Community Council](#)). We could also explore how local businesses could sponsor the project, or a pilot of the project.

Any approach to the raising and distribution of funds would need to be carefully considered in light of existing inequalities of income, access and current citizen capacity across the city.

What values could inform Citizen Hubs?

In the first instance we might look to be guided by [Nolan's 7 Principles of Public Life](#): selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Other frames which could inform this work include:

⇨ 'If it's *about* us, *without* us, then it's *not for* us'

⇨ Collaboration and co-creation

- ⇨ Equity, inclusivity of expertise and lived experience

- ⇨ Anti-racist, anti-genderist and anti-ableist

- ⇨ Curiosity and learning about the world we live in

- ⇨ Empathy and understanding of 'the other'

- ⇨ Critical thinking and collective problem solving

- ⇨ Active listening

- ⇨ Mutuality, responsibility and agency

- ⇨ DIT (Do It Together)

These values and principles would be discussed with citizens entering deliberative spaces and roles such as Hub Ambassadors to ensure that the values are understood, owned and enacted. We could also consider each Hub defining its own set of values, characteristics and ways of working as part of situating each Hub in service of specific communities and neighbourhoods.

How else could Citizen Hubs be used in future?

We should think of Citizen Hubs as *structures which citizens and ideas can inhabit*.

Implicit within this is that citizens, in inhabiting these structures, will change and improve them over time, ensuring that they are flexible and can be reactive to external events and the specific needs of neighbourhoods and communities. With that in mind, we might also consider how these structures could deliver specific project work. For example:

- ⇨ A Constitution for Sheffield - developing a constitution for the city which reflects the relationship between statutory services and the local authority, and the people who live here.

- ⇨ Citizenship classes, ecological sense making and workshops.

- ⇨ Classes on how local systems work and how to engage with them.

⇨ Enterprise Hubs to encourage social entrepreneurship and small business development.

⇨ Tackling racism, systemic bias and discrimination in our institutions and organisations.

⇨ Trustee mentoring for city-wide leadership and governance boards.

⇨ Working with the police, public services and VCS to address crime through preventative and innovative measures (see Empowered Participation by Archon Fung).

⇨ Community-led creative responses and exhibitions.

⇨ Participatory budgeting (for example, Frome People's Budget and PB Network UK).

⇨ Neighbourhood plans and visioning projects, setting out strategies and hopes for the future of communities and the citizens within them (see for example Edlington Neighbourhood Plan, Re-imagining Rotherham, Shape My Town and Locality).

⇨ Neighbourhood-based community organising projects (see Positively Local by John Gillespie).

⇨ For trialing innovative experiments in democratic processes and engagement - such as the Pol.is and VTaiwan digital proposition methodologies.

⇨ Peer support project; people who may use mental health or social care services coming together to provide mutual support and lead local community development activities (see Peer Power by Simon Duffy).

⇨ Food Hubs, which "offer a sharing scheme for donated food; provide a marketplace for local producers; deliver food boxes for local households in need; and their kitchens could be used to support local people with cooking skills and nutritional advice" (Hubbub Greenprint). Citizen Hubs could connect Food Hubs and the issue of food with wider community concerns, and in some cases Citizen and Food Hubs might be able to coexist in one space, physically or virtually. A food marketplace might also function as a way of providing income support to Citizen Hubs via a social enterprise model.

Looking Upstream: Resolving Four Problems

The Citizen Hubs model offers a provocation for how Local Area Committees could more meaningfully "engage, empower [and] enable" local people in the decisions that affect their lives by facilitating flexible democratic engagement practices with smaller population groups.

In this section we offer a wider provocation for how Citizen Hubs as a structure could contribute to resolving endemic upstream system problems such as social exclusion, polarisation, marginalisation, racism and the negative social determinants of health.

In the following pages we have outlined four problems and illustrated how the Citizen Hubs model could contribute to resolving aspects of them.

At a foundational level the Citizen Hubs model creates the conditions for better problem solving. It improves our efficiency frontier in solving problems by including the expertise, latent capacity and lived experience of a larger number of participants.

The below quote illustrates the value of getting a diverse range of perspectives, skills and experience together to problem solve.

"When selecting a problem solving team from a diverse population of intelligent agents, a team of randomly selected agents outperforms a team comprised of the best-performing agents"
- Hong & Page, 2004

Problem #1: Challenges to health outcomes, social cohesion and citizen agency

At a time when wellbeing and, more broadly, social cohesion are being threatened by a range of factors - political division, social isolation, structural inequalities and the ongoing climate crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, for example - it's critical that citizens in Sheffield have access to clear communications and consultations from their Local Authority and other public services. As the NHS acknowledges, health services are improved through deep and sustained consultation with citizens.

But citizens must also be equipped with the agency to contribute meaningfully to decision making processes and possible solutions directly within their own communities. This makes best use of local knowledge and experience, works with community enthusiasm and resources, and enables innovation. It will also, critically, restore trust, both within communities as new common spaces for meeting others and discovering differences emerge; as well as at an institutional level, whereby local government, by showing trust in its citizens to be involved in decisions, sees that trust reflected.

Furthermore, a community's sense of control or influence over their own lives and neighbourhoods can be a significant factor in improving cohesion, health inequalities and wellbeing outcomes. This is especially true if citizens are connected to their community and are enabled to have an active and participatory role within it.

Problem #2: Barriers to elected representatives and the local authority engaging meaningfully with citizens and communities

Many local authorities including SCC have had to respond to deep public spending cuts from central government by radically reorganising or cutting services. This upheaval, combined with diminishing access to resources, has often made it difficult for council services to maintain relationships and trust with the diverse communities they are elected to serve.

It has also restricted the freedom to innovate or offer genuine choices in service delivery. It has therefore hampered the effectiveness of existing consultation methods with citizens, which are critical to the City Council (and other statutory and public services) acting with confidence and a mandate at community, neighbourhood and city level.

Problem #3: Disconnection and alienation from existing decision making processes

Many residents of our city are disconnected from existing representative democratic processes. [Voter turnouts for the local election](#) in Sheffield in 2019 ranged from 49% in Ecclesall to only 14% in City ward.

It is worth observing that [Ecclesall ward](#) has a BME population of 15%, while [City ward](#) has a BME population of 40%. Ecclesall ward has the least barriers to housing and services in the city, while City ward has the most. While we should be careful not to draw too many conclusions from these statistics, when viewed alongside the wider context, this problem cannot be attributed simply to apathy or a lack of understanding about the electoral system.

For many residents, this is an issue of diversity, lived experience and a lack of representation in governance. Many cannot 'see themselves' or their communities within decision making bodies of all kinds, and this erodes their faith in institutions to make the right decisions on their behalf.

Problem #4: Service-based relationships and a lack of genuine collaboration and co-creation between Civil Society and the Local Authority

Since public spending cuts began in 2010, public sector service provision has been rolled back. Civil society and perhaps more specifically the voluntary and community sector has in many cases stepped into this gulf.

One of the unintended consequences of this is that the VCS has sometimes adopted a 'service-based' relationship with the Local Authority, which is commercial, hierarchical and at odds with the shared values of the sector and the Local Authority itself. It could be argued that this shift has been taking place since the 1980s.

While this relationship between the LA and civil society organisations has changed to some extent during the pandemic, becoming more strategic and collaborative, the

implication that the sector's value is derived from its service delivery, not its grounding and trust in communities, puts many organisations on the back foot when seeking to serve those communities effectively.

At its root this kind of relationship can put up barriers to co-production and collaboration between the civil society and the LA, while the LA finds itself trying to quantify value using purely commercial measures which do not recognise the entirety of the contribution that civil society and in particular the VCS make.

Local authorities have often responded to cuts by using 'business-like' models for income generation to sustain service delivery, which is increasingly untenable. An alternative model is a 'collaborative-enabling' model for service delivery, valuing the potential for local authorities, VCS and local communities to work together to deliver services and make key decisions.

Citizen Hubs: Creating the conditions to respond to upstream problems

Addressing Problem #1: Challenges to health outcomes, social cohesion and citizen agency

Our first problem speaks to concerns about social cohesion and health inequalities related to engaging citizen capacity and agency. It is addressed by the Citizen Hubs structure by creating deliberative democracy structures based in communities, which enable citizens to express their views and hear from a diversity of lived experience and expertise.

This process of speaking and listening can help build social cohesion and create what Jon Yates, Strategy Director at social integration charity The Challenge, calls 'the Common Life', where people encounter their differences and step out of their own echo chambers.

Beyond this, Citizen Hubs can equip people with the insight and discussion required to not only better understand the processes, systems and decisions taking place around them, but to meaningfully feed their own views into those processes.

In considering how the Local Area Committees might be able to receive and feedback through Citizen Hubs we begin to imagine a more trusting and virtuous cycle of inputs and feedback loops which enhance citizen agency and the latent capacity within communities to be active participants in solving problems.

Citizens Hubs will enable citizens to connect with public services, VCS and others in their community in a meaningful and impactful way. The sum of this new experience of agency within communities could tangibly improve the quality of service provision and the sense of control and responsibility that citizens have over their own lives, which in turn could lead to an increase in responses to health inequalities, wellbeing, social participation and better health outcomes for citizens.

To do this effectively requires a visible and amplified 'feedback loop' between views expressed, views received and decisions made - something which strengthens our response as a city to problems #2, #3 and #4, let alone the range of external shocks we are likely to encounter as a city as we face post-pandemic economic uncertainty, the legacy effects of our exit from the European Union and ongoing ecological degradation.

The key to the success of this structure is partnership and co-production. This is not only a question of how the VCS as a sector works with the City Council and other public services to ensure that views are heard and fed into decision making processes. It's also how the VCS ensures equity of access to these deliberative democracy spaces through partnership with a range of community organisations and civil society organisations of different geographies and lived experience.

We must also look to wider civil society for the expertise around data analysis and specific democratic engagement processes like citizens' assemblies.

At its core this idea offers a place for a broad range of civil society organisations to form a city-wide partnership, and as such it becomes a real opportunity for the city to galvanise itself around a project which directly benefits citizens, while forming an innovative ecosystem of relationships between cross-sector organisations and statutory bodies for the common good.

Addressing Problem #2: Barriers to elected representatives and the local authority engaging meaningfully with citizens and communities

It's important to recognise that we already have a system of representative democracy in Sheffield. We should therefore see deliberative democracy structures such as Citizen Hubs as a method by which these existing systems can be augmented.

But this ongoing deliberative process of engagement with communities could also be flipped; Citizen Hubs could provide a new and innovative mechanism for consultation with citizens and communities. This consultation could be per neighbourhood, per ward or multi-ward, or city-wide, depending on the nature of the issue.

Citizen Hubs could interact and deepen relationships with elected representatives and communities, offering a unique opportunity to both speak and listen to a breadth of different voices across any given area.

Citizen Hubs could therefore act to further engage the role of representative democracy in the city, giving the City Council better access to citizen views, and thus a mandate for action and policy development.

These spaces could regularly produce data on citizens' views on a range of topics, from 'hyperlocal' concerns such as fly-tipping and potholes, to systemic ones like climate change and racial equity.

This data could be collated, segmented and presented in a way that makes it easy for the City Council and other statutory bodies to learn more about citizens' and communities' views, which in turn enables them to make more informed decisions and to act confidently, with a mandate.

Addressing Problem #3: Disconnection and alienation from existing decision making processes

In light of the ongoing international Black Lives Matter movement, institutions and organisations of all sizes are recognising that to not act is to be complicit in continuing the historic inequalities which are baked into our many human systems.

Ensuring real diversity and representation at all levels of decision making is vital. It should also be acknowledged that in Sheffield deprivation and inequity are not spread equally across the city, and that some geographic areas and communities of lived experience will require additional investment, support and flexibility in order to realise the best possible outcomes from a Citizen Hubs model.

However, if we accept that this will be an ongoing, potentially decades-long process - which might never be complete - then we must also work to elevate, invest in and empower those who feel disconnected and under-represented at neighbourhood, community and city level.

Citizens in roles such as Hub Ambassador could articulate and advocate for the interests of people who are too often relegated to the margins, whilst providing a route for communication back to those communities through trusted individuals. Supporting citizens to gain skills and confidence in engaging with the VCS and public services will aid the next generation of civic and political leadership.

If approached correctly - with a clear acknowledgement of the importance of community leaders and community anchor organisations in this space - Citizen Hubs could act to turn the tide of disconnection and alienation in Sheffield by offering meaningful opportunities to influence decision making bodies.

Addressing Problem #4: Service-based relationships and a lack of genuine collaboration and co-creation between Civil Society and the Local Authority

One of the many strengths of the VCS in particular is its direct relationship with communities and citizens from all walks of life and lived experiences. Like no other sector, it has the ability to reach and engage citizens directly and, crucially, to be genuinely trusted by them.

There are a whole range of methods of engagement which should be applied to improving deliberative and participatory democratic engagement - interactive digital spaces, citizen assemblies, ballot boxes, engagement in everyday community spaces and more. But within all those methodologies, a relationship of trust within communities is a core component of meaningful, regular and diverse deliberative democracy.

VCS and in many communities wider civil society organisations are well placed to deliver a democratic function in collating citizen views via multiple deliberative democracy spaces across community organisations and communities of interest and of geography in Sheffield. This fundamentally broadens and enhances the VCS's relationship with the Council, as well as its relationship with communities and citizens themselves. Citizen Hubs could move this relationship from a contractual setting to a collaborative one, which is informed by a shared responsibility to enhance and reflect the perspectives of citizens in decision making that affects their lives.

Consider a long-term vision where 28 voluntary and community sector organisations (one per Sheffield ward) act as focal points for communities of interest and geography to express their views through a breadth of different deliberative democracy mechanisms. Imagine the wider ecology of this; that these mechanisms provide points of engagement for councillors, council officers, other elected representatives, NHS, social care, housing associations and a range of other civil society participants. This engagement could range from collated reports presented to decision makers through to the joint participation of citizens, public services and VCS in local deliberative spaces to enable place-based solutions through the connection of multiple stakeholders and the different resources they bring.

These deliberative democracy spaces could engage citizens from a range of different lived experiences and enable not only 'active listening', but expertise and learning to be brought in to develop and engage the capacity of citizens within communities. Citizens themselves would be supported to take roles of leadership and advocacy in expressing the diverse needs of their community.

Photo by Felicia Buitenwerf on Unsplash

Key Challenges & Ongoing Considerations

This paper is a provocation illustrating one of many ways in which citizens in Sheffield could be more meaningfully involved in the decisions which affect their lives. In recognition of the pace of change at Sheffield City Council in developing Local Area Committees, and with a desire to contribute with a solutions focus alongside an interest in participatory and deliberative democracy, we wanted to put our efforts into proposing the Citizen Hubs model.

The paper has been voluntarily written and co-created, with many people across Sheffield over the last 12 months contributing ideas and feedback. While this effort is far from a representative piece of work, we believe it's a useful contribution to the ongoing question of how Local Area Committees could genuinely "engage, empower [and] enable" local people in Sheffield.

Quite rightly, many in this space are calling for a 'process' rather than a 'model'. We wholeheartedly support this. Imagine a city-wide democracy commission, reaching down into neighbourhoods and through civil society organisations, from which a model born in and from Sheffield is developed - a model reaffirming a citizen's relationship with the city and its institutions.

Below are a series of questions challenges and considerations which we felt, within the limited scope of this paper, we have yet not adequately addressed:

⇨ How does the Citizen Hubs model engage with communities that are dispersed through the city, and where a geography or neighbourhood approach may not be sufficient?

⇨ Are there enough VCS organisations who would want to take on an engagement or deliberative democracy function?

⇨ How do we ensure that Citizen Hubs avoid being partisan and/or party political?

⇨ How do we ensure that Citizen Hubs develop peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing, rather than relying solely on 'experts'?

⇨ How do we ensure that learning and experience is shared between Hubs effectively in order to engage and act on issues of systemic and collective concern?

⇨ How can Citizen Hubs better integrate with existing health systems and approaches, such as the Primary Care Network and social prescribing?

⇨ Can the Citizen Hubs model be more 'Sheffield specific' in structure, character and tone? What does this look like?

⇨ How do we understand the different levels of investment required in different neighbourhoods across Sheffield - recognising the implications of the Fairness Commission and the likely need for additional investment in some areas of the city?

⇨ Can VCS organisations reach all citizens in Sheffield? Are there gaps in its reach?

⇨ Do the Local Authority and other statutory bodies have a consultation budget which they would deploy through these structures and what is the value of that?

⇨ Are there gaps in representative democracy structures which could be resolved through deliberative democracy structures?

⇨ Do citizens want greater agency and input over the decisions that affect their lives, and the responsibility which comes with that?

⇨ Will a breadth of engagement strategies from each Citizen Hub reach and engage a majority of people? How do we ensure any new system of deliberative or participatory democracy does not become the domain of louder and more privileged voices?

⇨ What expertise and functions are required to manage and analyse data flows and how is that data best presented?

⇨ Are large funders likely to be interested in supporting a project of this cost and at this scale?

⇨ Is it possible to form an effective, collaborative and equal partnership across civil society and the public sector to this end, and how can decision making power be shared?

⇨ At what scale (and in which wards and neighbourhoods) could a pilot of this project be developed in order to test its effectiveness?

⇨ What does real, tangible influence over decision making look like in Sheffield and how can we learn from past models, e.g. TARAs?

⇨ How can we avoid 'reinventing the wheel' and learn from others - for example, Council cabinet papers produced in 2009 with examples of good participatory and deliberative practice and their positive impacts on mental health.

Appendix: Why Citizen Hubs Matter: Collaborative governance, community empowerment and health

Citizens Hubs are underpinned by the idea that *collaboration* at a local level between private, public and voluntary sectors can enhance the evidence base, drive improvements in public services and ultimately *empower communities*. This idea is supported by a range of academic evidence on *collaborative governance*.

Citizens Hubs are a type of collaborative governance, because the idea is to bring together data, evidence and engagement from a diversity of organisations across Sheffield, to share with council committees to improve decision making in Sheffield.

Collaborative governance: What is it? How does it work?

Collaborative governance is a way of organising public decision making to tackle particularly tricky or 'wicked' policy problems by empowering communities to tackle them. Given our current process of recovering from Covid-19, collaborative governance is a particularly apt idea.

Collaborative governance has been defined formally as 'processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished'.[1]

The idea is that communities recognise a policy problem can't be solved independently by one or two decision makers, and establish a process for sharing resources and working together. In practice, collaborative governance works in a variety of ways, ranging from collaboration to deliver global vaccine supplies to collaborative university research projects.

Evidence shows collaborative governance enables community empowerment, which in turn combat health inequalities. A study in *Health Promotion International* found that successful collaborative governance initiatives can be developed in the space of ten months.[2]

The benefits of collaborative governance

Collaborative governance works best for addressing long-term policy issues, linked to deeply ingrained public health problems and health inequalities.[3] Often, these challenges are linked to evolving environmental threats, for example air pollution, flooding, drought and food security.[4]

Collaborative governance has been developed as a successful approach to sustainable waste initiatives in Nepal and China,[5] and in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic in South Korea, Taiwan and Germany.[6] In a broader context of public sector austerity, collaborative governance has been shown to offer effective place-based policy making in Australian cities like Melbourne.[7] Collaboration was an important element of the global response to the Ebola outbreak in Western African countries in 2014,[8] and research also shows outside of crises that central and local government collaboration is crucial to manage public health threats.[9]

A key benefit of collaborative governance is how it allows for managing complex and delicate relationships.[10] Research also shows collaborative governance can stimulate product innovation, data production and sharing, as in the case of Covid-19 vaccine production.[11]

Successful leadership

Focal institutions with a clear structure like Citizen Hubs are key leaders for bringing together partners who are usually loosely aligned to focus on the health challenge.[12] Leadership includes providing clear mission statements, transparency aimed at instilling trustworthiness, and establishing clear responsibilities.[13] Leadership also involves making use of social media and other ICTs to communicate aims, goals and risks in collaboration.[14]

This is particularly important because gender, class and racial inequalities, and other inequalities, do not disappear because of collaboration, and require constant monitoring.[15] While collaboration may enable the inclusion of marginalised groups, as well as reconciling strong disagreement between groups,[16] effective leadership is a crucial determinant of success. Lead organisations can communicate across cultural barriers, identify strategic opportunities, and work with partners at a regional and national level to capitalise on these.[17]

Context is also vital for success. Who sits at the table in successful collaborations depends on the central issue of concern.[18] Collaboration is also more germane in urban settings closer to the centre of Sheffield, but may require careful thought in more rural settings, which research shows tend to work with more 'top down'

approaches to governance.[19] Citizen hubs work with local communities to adapt to their context.

What we lose without collaboration

Where deliberation and participation are lacking, research shows that risks of negative health outcomes are heightened due to health or environmental threats.[20] Without collaborative action, crucial public health information may fail to be communicated between the right stakeholders.[21]

Citizen Hubs are dedicated to bringing together key information and data and connecting stakeholders in Sheffield who have the data to fight health inequalities.

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