

Written evidence submitted by Dr Lucy Natarajan, UCL [POD 005]

Summary

The present call for evidence seeks to evaluate the current practice of devolution. This evidence is about the value of 'inclusive devolution', where participatory processes are enhanced.

Devolution needs to be part of a strategic national agenda of change, and go beyond simple transfer of power from the centre of government to other statutory bodies. It needs to 'be inclusive', such that decision-making: extends the socio-economic benefits of development to all parts of the country; and considers all of the dimensions of inequality and all communities' concerns.

So, devolution will not *in itself* be inclusive. Instead, it will become inclusive through specific participatory processes, which can rebalance the diverse inputs or 'voices' within decision-making on development in the UK. Past experience suggests governance improves with the introduction of new voices, but only when there are trusting relationships between government and citizens, and reliable processes.

This submission of evidence draws on research for the UK2070 Commission, which is available on request. The report suggested devolution should take a 'participatory democracy' approach with locally determined mechanisms that can engage *all communities*, and communications that operate uniformly across the country so as to consider *all places*.

Achieving Inclusive Devolution

Inclusive devolution might be achieved through the involvement diverse stakeholders within decision-making processes *both locally and nationally*. There is clearly immediate value in communities' knowledge of place and community-led activities. Stakeholder input can help to articulate the local impacts of interventions and produce co-owned solutions. This type of engagement can also identify or help to initiate community-led elements of developmentⁱ. These types

of local knowledge and community-led actions might be a powerful force, when aligned in a collective effort, however feedback at this point suggest this is not happeningⁱⁱ.

In the current context, a system of collective action would need to navigate the diverse and growing range of participatory mechanismsⁱⁱⁱ, and face up to the challenges of the current system of governance. Participatory democracy might be a useful model to design that system, with its focus on learning for strategic decisions and shared programmes of action.

The established mode of democracy is facing a crisis of trust^{iv}. In Europe a wave of protest movements are seeking redress on a range of issues, most notably greater protection against imminent environmental problems^v. Radical voices, outside the system, can act as a check on established powers, and feed public debate about difficult political choices. At the same time, the search for greater public participation in planning and place-making continues^{vi}.

The principles of universal suffrage, and state action on behalf of a public through elected and accountable elected members, remain the basis of the UK's government. There has always been debate about the 'tyranny of the majority'^{vii} (where 51% of the population has the upper hand in decision-making) that this enables. The full debate is beyond the scope of this piece^{viii}, but the key concern about the representation of marginal interests, which is highly relevant here.

In short, representative democracy requires further support through inclusive devolution. Voting, ballots, and polling are not well suited to the purpose of bringing government closer to the people. Instead, stakeholders need to be more deeply in the activities of governance, so as to bring learning on diverse interests, and build trust for collective action.

Inclusive devolution can usefully draw on participatory democracy, with its the principles of informed debate, trusted communications, and accountable decisions. As set out in the *Charter on Participatory Democracy in Spatial Planning*^x, it suggests a system for inclusion and devolution based on an appreciation of the socio-cultural context of decision-making, and the practical capacities of all participants, both citizens and state. The key points are:

- Public engagement needs to be locally energised and meaningful. Different cultures of engagement exist from place to place^x. Significant energy and willingness is needed (and not reliance on voluntarism of 'usual suspects'). Citizens and decision-makers both need high levels of

- procedural and subject knowledge. People may be cautious about new processes^{xi} and need extra motivation to participate^{xii}.
- Direct exchange between the public and those with formal responsibilities is essential. Those who have formal on-going responsibilities for places need to be involved because they ultimately shoulder responsibility for decisions in complex situations where there can be no knowable answer or complete consensus. Decision-makers must make judgments^{xiii} and therefore need to personally connect to social learning processes and seek alignment with the public.
 - Statutory commitment to processes is needed to crystallize decisions. While learning with citizens needs to be 'live' and open to continually evolving development contexts, ultimately the goal is to decide on action (or not to act). No generalized consensus can be expected and conflict between different interests will continue, but debates must seek to close down at specific moments so that statutory decisions can be made^{xiv}.
 - Statutory decisions, and participation in them, must be a matter of public record. The influence of citizens should be part of institutional memory. This is particularly important since the effects of decisions inevitably take time to come into effect, and perceived lack of action can hamper willingness to engage or undermine relationships^{xv}.

In this model, citizens and civil society are at the heart of governance processes, which means that they have explicit links to formal representatives of government and a recognized role in decision-making. Rather than identifying specific groups of people who might have power over certain processes, it requires commitment from all involved in decision-making. Empowerment comes through learning and acting collectively.

Finally, I offer some 'good examples' of what might be required in an operational framework for inclusive devolution (overleaf table 1). The structure is suggested by the participatory democracy model, and the processes are current practices found effective in the UK and other democratic countries (referenced as end-notes).

Requirement	Processes
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<p>Place-based working <i>for social learning that connects to statutory decision-making</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Regional Standing Committees (RSCs) of local communities & elected representatives^{xvi} > Deliberative Working Groups <i>ad hoc</i> groups that engage with the substance of challenges and decision-making^{xvii} > Place Rooms recognized hubs and fora, that provide space for learning^{xviii}
<p>Inter-regional collaboration <i>to communicate regional priorities & concerns</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Regional Equality Debate series on policy directions, with RSCs^{xix} > Web-hosting for collaborative activities^{xx} > Inter-regional citizen assemblies to resolve instances of severe contention^{xxi}.
<p>Co-oversight of shared environmental resources <i>to account for wider impacts of decisions</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > National Equality Network regular exchanges between all RSCs, focused on achieving balanced development UK-wide^{xxii}. > National Participation Commission an arms-length NDPB, to provide advice & administer grants to support engagement^{xxiii}
<p>Open information systems <i>for trusted systems of accessible information</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 'Participatory Democracy UK' Portal with updates on policy^{xxiv} & accessible presentation of output from place-based processes^{xxv} > Information Validation to verify and secure information from devolved contributors^{xxvi}

Requirement	Processes
<p>Public Funds & Scrutiny <i>for reliable institutional memory and equitable access to processes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Planning Aid Support for civic engagement, through training and events^{xxvii} > Annual Reports of the RSCs that are public records of operations and impact^{xxviii} and enable evaluation of the effectiveness of processes by an NDPB (e.g. the National Participation Commission)^{xxix}.

Table 1: Possible processes for inclusive devolution

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ⁱ See for instance in *Built Environment* 45(2), Ciaffi (2019) on the 'New top rung of the participatory ladder', and Apsan Frediani & Cociña (2019) on 'Participation as Planning' both <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/alex/benv/2019/00000045/00000002/art00004> and <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/alex/benv/2019/00000045/00000002/art00003> respectively. And *Built Environment* 45(3) about collaborative housing <https://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/built-environment/collaborative-housing-resident-and-professional-roles>.

ⁱⁱ Focus Group work with civil society groups in England revealed, "the experience was that policy did not enable specific communities to harness opportunities, and there was no strategy that could coordinate and link in latent potential or resources" (Natarajan, Ilie & Cho, 2019, p.11).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Built Environment* 45(1) and 45 (2) provides a review of a rich collection of diverse techniques https://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/realizing_participation

^{iv} Low trust is not necessarily due to concerns processes or doubts over the integrity of individual planning officers. The outcomes of the policies and actions will also have a bearing on the levels of trust, a notable example is the continuing housing crisis (e.g. low production of housing despite support for lending to prospective home owners, as discussed in *Whose Housing Crisis?* (Gallent, 2019).

^v Currently the most notable example is Extinction Rebellion's "#where's your plan?' challenge to policy-makers globally <https://rebellion.earth/>

^{vi} Expectations and practice have changed over time: <https://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/having-a-say>

^{vii} US National Archives (nd) *From James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 24 October 1787*.

^{viii} Bouche-Florin, L. E. (2019) 'Charter of participatory democracy: A call for action towards a balanced democratic system', *Built Environment*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 112–129.

^{ix} ECTP-CEU (2016) *European Charter on Participatory Democracy in Spatial Planning Processes*, Brussels, ECTP-CEU.

^x See for instance, Hunter J and Longlands S (2017), *Civil society support in the north of England: The future of civil society in the north*, Institute for Public Policy Research North

^{xi} Often fueled by disillusionment after decisions, e.g. <https://politicalquarterly.blog/2019/11/07/could-public-attitudes-led-policy-making-fix-our-democracy/>

^{xii} As detailed by *USE-iT! Community Researchers*, this can involve awareness raising through a local association often through door knocking or word-of-mouth, and well-known / trusted individuals are typically needed to initiate these sorts of initiatives.

^{xiii} Situated ethical judgements is a useful term for this, Campbell, H. (2006), Just Planning: The Art of Situated Ethical Judgment, *Planning Education and Research*, 26(1), pp. 92–106.

^{xiv} Through synthesis of different knowledges, e.g. Campbell, H. (2012), Planning to Change the World: Between Knowledge and Action Lies Synthesis", *Planning Education and Research*, 32(2), pp. 135–146.

^{xv} Round (2019) Democratic and community engagement in the North of England: some research directions. IPPR North.

^{xvi} The Homelessness Partnership in Manchester provides an exemplar <https://mhp.org.uk/>

^{xvii} Existing statutory bodies might constitute working groups as needed, which is a process used successfully by New Zealand authorities. They use the powers in the *NZ Resources Management Act* (1991) to set up 'collaborative groups' around 'contentious issues' of place-making. These groups are relatively autonomous; determining the scope of the issue, with the initiative to seek views and resolve conflict. Representatives of those groups are a point of contact for the community, and they report to the council the points about where there is consensus and not, and

give recommendations that the council must 'give effect' to. <https://www.mfe.govt.nz/rma/rma-processes-and-how-get-involved/getting-involved-council-plans-and-plan-preparation-processes>

^{xviii} These can be online (as seen in Scotland for participatory budgeting and public competition <https://www.dundeedecides.org/>) as well as in physical spaces (along the lines of the Urban Rooms <https://urbanroomsnetwork.wordpress.com/>). They may use city models to learn about places (e.g. <https://nla.london/exhibitions/the-city-model>) but the key function is learning *with* places.

^{xix} See for instance the French CNDP <https://www.e-aarhus.org/en/members/6-national-commission-for-public-debate-cndp> or the 'Iceland in One Room' initiative where an alternative constitution is being co-constructed <https://twitter.com/DCDIceland> (although the small size of the population in that country should be noted). The National Infrastructure Commission has also successfully rolled out regional deliberative events for the purpose of understanding regional perspectives on major infrastructure development.

^{xx} The platform [Better Reykjavik](#) pioneered the processes to provide radical input to municipal decision-making and the model is being extended to the nation, at <https://www.citizens.is/>. The model from Iceland is recognised internationally as good practice see for instance <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/better-reykjavik/>.

^{xxi} See e.g. <https://citizensassembly.co.uk/> or <https://www.involve.org.uk/>

^{xxii} This could use the model of the *Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel*, that provides robust exchange on impact evaluations. It would provide support to help decision-makers, as a sounding board and independent advisor.

^{xxiii} Strong cases have been made for independent but government owned bodies that can manage participation, see for example The Institute for Government's report by Slade & Davies (2017) *How to design an infrastructure strategy for the UK* and The independent review hosted by the TCPA (2020) *Planning 2020: Raynsford Review of Planning in England*

^{xxiv} See national exchanges online e.g. <https://www.citizens.is/>, and open information systems such as environmental mapping e.g. <https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/>

^{xxv} Such as participatory 3-D fly-through technology, as used already e.g. for public space incubators

<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10079431/1/Marshall%20et%20al%202019%20TCP%20Digital%20participation%20taking%20planning%20into%20the%20third%20dimension.pdf>

^{xxvi} Potentially administered by an independent NDPB (i.e. the National Participation Commission). It might use distributed ledger technology, as used for public cultural events (e.g. <https://www.moncarnavaldedunkerque.fr/>) and sharing economy platforms (e.g. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3478870), to track the data in an archives of decisions and thereby demonstrate validation of information, and enhance transparency of changes.

^{xxvii} These can underpin the regular participation activities to make them equally available to all, and go further to boost capacities to engage. For instance, simple events in a day of 'eating + playing + making' (<https://www.facebook.com/USEITUIA/videos/2077632812251369/>) stimulated community engagement and shaped local plans in Birmingham.

^{xxviii} For instance reporting on the inclusiveness of panels and assemblies, as shown e.g. for <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-study-peoples-panel>

^{xxix} Scotland principles continual procedural improvements

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-open-government-action-plan-2018-20-detailed-commitments/pages/3/>