By Terry Dixon
Head of Growth, Sparck

Citizen as a verb: the exciting opportunities of a shift from citizens as consumers of services to citizens as active participants

How often do you have a say in how the country is run? Most of us only participate in gov decisions during elections. We pick up a pencil in a little booth at our local community centre and place an 'X' in the box. That little X carries a lot of weight and is fundamental to democracy.

But in between elections, people want more say in how policy is shaped, strategies formed, and services designed - in how the country works for and with us. Can we be actors, not just consumers, of government services?

The Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP's **'test and learn' initiative**, launched at the end of 2024, places people and communities at the centre of public sector reform. Central to the approach is the notion that you don't have to have it all worked out before you involve people.

Under the principles of the Government Digital Service (GDS) standards, departments have made significant strides in providing digital services that address real needs, improve accessibility and deliver efficiency. This has been achieved by placing the 'user' at the heart of the service, to understand needs.

There is a push to take this further to emulate the success of the private sector and deliver seamless, hyper-personalised experiences. On the surface the benefits seem compelling. Who wouldn't want all public services to be simple and easy to use?

However, in the push for frictionless, automated experiences that reduce manual intervention and enhance efficiency, do we risk distancing citizens from decision making and relegating them to passive 'consumers' of government services?

We might be increasing 'transactional satisfaction' but risk decreasing engagement on critical societal challenges such as health, personal finances, the environment and community cohesion.

There's growing evidence of the unintended consequences of technology, an atomised society, lived through a screen, with reduced human contact, **especially in young people**. These consequences include an increase in loneliness, lower tolerance to difference, a reduced feeling of belonging and environmental damage.

The appeal of making services so good they are almost invisible also has an inherent danger of reducing our feeling of engagement, participation and agency.

While creating good digital experiences is important, there is an opportunity to involve citizens in the shaping of services, policies and public digital infrastructure.

Why is it important for citizens to participate in national and local government and how might we do this?

Part of the 'why' lies in prevention. There is obvious benefit in tackling issues further upstream before a person needs critical government support. Engaging with people and providing them with access to information enables choices, creates agency and informs government decisions in shaping services. Going further, citizen-led services can be more contextually relevant and therefore likely to deliver more effective outcomes.

Organisations such as '**Changing Futures Northumbria**' are piloting the 'Liberated Method' of building relationships rather than services, understanding people rather than assessing them. This enables peer-to-peer support networks and community-led initiatives to form, reducing the need for government support and generating second order outcomes such as increases in wellbeing through community spirit. For example, during the Covid pandemic, despite the hardships the country suffered, **this government survey** found that community spirit was high.

Jon Alexander's book 'Citizens, Why the key to fixing everything is all of us' highlights examples and models where citizens are participating in government, shaping policy and designing contextually relevant services. Many of these are springing up in the UK, led by ordinary people, providing 'demonstrators' of alternative models for everything from education to health, to work and play, with outstanding outcomes, often with little government intervention.

These examples represent a cultural shift from people 'dependent' on the state to people empowered to shape their future, one with dignity and agency.

Further afield there are examples of city and county governments adopting the principles of citizen-led decision making and participation. This includes the 'l'Assemblée citoyenne de Paris' (the Citizen's Assembly of Paris), launched in 2021 bringing together 100 residents of Paris, drawn by lot, for a one-year appointment. The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) describe the assembly:

"While several initiatives already allow citizens to give their opinions (participatory budget, advisory councils, citizen panels and conferences, etc.), the ambition of the Citizens' Assembly is unprecedented. It provides its members with tools to learn, discover and decipher municipal issues, better understand how the City of Paris and public services work, breathe new life into ideas and influence public decision making."
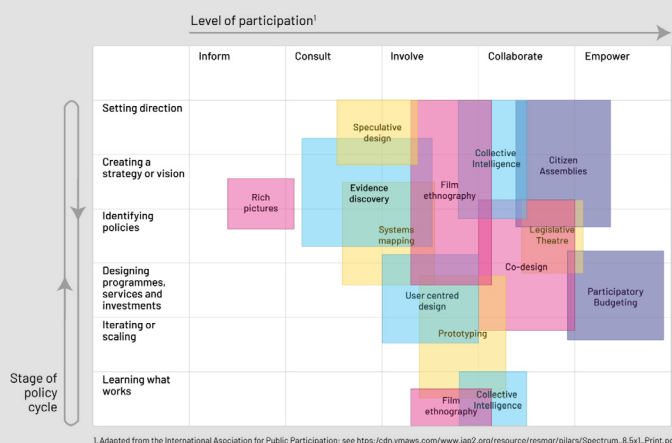
In Taiwan, a citizen-led initiative, under the leadership of Audrey Tang, created online tools and services for citizens which became so popular that the government adopted them. Audrey's book 'Plurality, the Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy' tells the story. Spoiler alert, Audrey became Minister for Digital Affairs and went from protesting activist to a seat at the cabinet table, in the space of two years.

The UK Government Policy Lab have been experimenting with the use of **pol.is** open participatory policymaking platform (which underpinned the citizen-led action in Taiwan) for '**collective intelligence**' in policy design.

Closer to home, there are signals in the mainstream media that citizen assemblies might be a way to augment traditional government decision making. This **Guardian article** references Ireland's creation in 2016 of an **official citizens' assembly**, causing a shift on abortion: **"It only took 99 ordinary citizens to help break years of political deadlock and reach a consensus on this highly polarising issue."**

Assemblies are not the only example of citizen-led decision making and participation, but they do seem to complement traditional government working, not representing too much of a paradigm shift and therefore seen as adjacent and easier to adopt.

A number of other techniques, illustrated below, can play a **key role in engaging and increasing the level of citizen participation** beyond traditional subjects or user research. These new ways of organising come at a time of rapid technological advancement, especially in the field of AI, presenting the opportunity to increase citizen engagement and take it to the next level in terms of participation.

1. Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation: see https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pilars/Spectrum_8.5x1_Print.pdf

The role of technology in citizen participation

Technology has a role to play in enabling citizens to connect, gather and have a voice in how a country, city or town is run. Technology will enable platforms for citizens to participate and tools to turn data into insight for decision making.

In light of the government's recent announcement to fully adopt the **AI Opportunities Action Plan** to 'turbo-charge' the Plan for Change, AI will undoubtedly play a role, adding a whole set of extra questions around explainability, ethics and bias. The big questions are: who designs these tools, who 'owns' the data and how are they governed?

Part of the answer lies in involving people in the design and ensuring they are transparent. Citizens need to understand how the system of decisions works and, if they so wish, dig into the detail. This also means providing access to the data for integration via API layers into other systems, enabling local government, charities, community groups and even individual citizens to build services using the data.

The UK Government has open standards for use inside and outside government, embedded into the Government Digital Service (GDS) standards, but this pertains more to reusable technology components than data. Organisations like the Open Data Institute (ODI, a non-profit) are working to promote trust in data, open data, and the adoption of a broader range of data sharing models. This points to an emergent need to evolve government design and technology principles, in collaboration with external organisations and citizens, to build a new generation of platforms and data access principles to enable the technology for citizen participation.

Richard Pope, in an online conversation with Emer Coleman (both ex-GDS), talks about the dangers of replicating the hyper smooth, frictionless, 'it just works' digital experiences that have emerged from Silicon Valley. Instead of making technology invisible, we need to make it visible to inspire people to get involved in how it works.

"Rather than aspire to minimalism, we should create beautiful scenes, where the workings of the system are revealed."
- From 'Platformland: Richard Pope & Emer Coleman in conversation' (ODI webinar)

This requires an evolution of the principles and mission of digitisation, adding citizen-led to efficiency. This will however require a longer-term perspective on the return on technology investment over the immediate cost savings of digitisation.

We must also explore the unintended consequences of digitisation, which can lead to social isolation and exclude vulnerable groups without access to broadband or a smartphone – **1.5m don't have a digital device, 8.5m lack basic digital skills, 0.6m young people lack home internet or a suitable device.**

So, what of AI? AI has the potential to personalise services to citizen needs, deliver back-office efficiency through automation and potentially scale support for people pertaining to their health, education and finances, reducing downstream pressure.

AI can also support in the analysis of data, enabling faster time to insight. We know the dangers with the potential bias built into the models and lack of observability or explainability.

The risks are especially prevalent in services that impact people's lives, such as health, law and order, and benefits.

What does this mean for the use of AI to enable citizen participation?

Recent studies have shown that AI deployed responsibly has the potential to enhance collective deliberation and help find common ground among the participants with diverse viewpoints. In **this study**, the AI results were preferable compared to a human mediator. Therefore, AI could scale methods such as citizens assemblies and policy design, making the process fairer and inclusive of seldom heard voices.

However, responsible frameworks and a principle of openness and transparency are key. Involving people in how it is deployed may mean slowing down the roll out of emerging technology, like GenAI, while we understand the implications. This goes against the rising tide of influential voices evangelising the benefits of AI to deal with government inefficiency and drive economic growth.

At the Tony Blair Institute (TBI) for **Global Change 'Future of Britain 2024' conference**, statistics were omnipresent but there was less attention on the role of citizens or where the economic benefit will flow to. (Still from conference below)
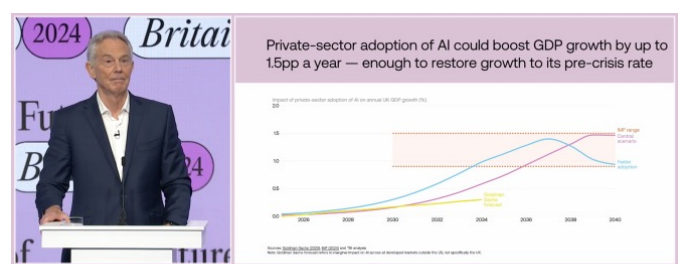
The British Academy **critiqued** the TBI's stance on the adoption of AI by the UK Government: **"The British Academy has been exploring ideas for what makes for a "good digital society". This helps us ask how we might use technology to create a more relational set of public services, with a stronger voice for users and a focus on strengthening social and democratic outcomes. At this pivotal moment, civil society needs to be brought to the table to provide a wider range of perspectives and help safeguard the public good. Technology has the power to create a better society, but it's unlikely to happen if AI is unleashed upon us. Taking the time to do things right isn't anti-innovation – it is what is required to get deep-rooted change in social systems."**

The Government's AI Opportunities Plan aims to improve people's lives, which requires placing people, including frontline workers, at the centre of the design and development of these tools to increase adoption and trust.

Richard Pope and Emer Coleman discussed the need to create Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and joining up services based on cross-government missions. The opportunity exists now to build citizen participation into the design of these platforms, putting the 'P' into DPI. Alongside this, community-driven technology has the potential to release contextually relevant innovation that economically benefits the many.

In their essay **'What good is innovation if it doesn't work for everyone?'**, Rachel Codicutt OBE and Dr Matt Dowse state that innovation supported and funded at the community level (the scale being everything from a local organisation to a city) will cultivate skills, create resilience, generate economic opportunities, and improve the quality of lives for everyone, everywhere.

It needs to be supported, which means a distribution of funding and the creation of infrastructure to foster long-term, vision-led investments. This is a shift to viable technology investment that prioritises long-term social returns.

Developing open digital public infrastructure, while cultivating the conditions for community-driven technology, has the potential to improve public services and increase participation in the design of services. And as community-led initiatives are proven to deliver better people outcomes (e.g. reducing dependency on centralised services such as the NHS), community-led technology has the potential to make these services efficient and personalised, while delivering second order benefits such as new economic opportunities and distributed wealth creation.

From user-centred design to citizen-centric design

All of this points to a shift from user-centred design to citizen-centric design. A shift from designing centralised services around the needs of large numbers of users to enabling citizens to participate in how services are designed, delivered and deployed.

This also represents a shift in mindset from driving efficiency by increasing levels of centralisation and standardisation, to distributed models that create constellations of locally relevant services, connected but different. The former is easier to measure, at least in the short term, while the latter requires trust and a longer-term vision.

We could ask where we start in making this shift, but that would do a disserve to the work already going on at the grassroots in communities, towns and cities. The pandemic was likely an accelerator for citizen-driven action, initiatives and technology. Some of these have flourished post-pandemic, others struggled to survive, and many have disappeared as we return to business as usual.

The good news is that this work is starting to be recognised, because of the results achieved, and there are people working to connect and create networks of change. The UK Government is backing this change through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding, systems thinking via the Government Policy Lab (with their work on Collective Intelligence) and with the promise of a more community-led approach to healthcare from the current Minister for Health.

At the end of 2024, Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP launched the government's **'test and learn' strategy**. This represented a shift in public sector reform from a 'top-down, Whitehall only' approach to designing with people and frontline workers, testing/learning/growing at a small level to develop more contextually relevant services for and with people.

On a broader scale, the **Wellbeing and Futures Generations Act** of Wales enshrines into law the needs of future citizens. This has already influenced decisions on matters such as new infrastructure and lower speed limits in built up areas. Other countries and policy makers are taking inspiration from Wales and introducing acts, policies and decision-making processes that consider the needs of future generations. A combination of mindset shifting policy, initiatives such as local and national citizens assemblies and funding to support community-driven initiatives will add energy to the citizen-led services flywheel.

The creation of new digital public platforms and infrastructure to enable community-driven technology will further enable the ecosystem. Government must take a role in democratising technology and take a multi-layered approach - combining the best of big-tech with the original promise of Web 2.0 to connect and mobilise people, fostering deeper community connections and networks of change.

Government is also an enabler and funder of citizen-driven technology, in addition to developing national level infrastructure. There are early signals that emerging technology such as generative AI may offer a route to democratising the development of digital products and services, reducing the reliance on large-scale centralised services which might not meet local need.

The citizen-centric way helps us think differently about the role of technology in public services. It helps us think beyond digitisation for efficiency e.g. to speed up transactional processes, to helping tackle root causes through deeper engagement and participation. We might be bolder and not just focus on saving money, but also on how we create more human services, especially where empathy and social connection at a local level are essential.

In conclusion, how to citizen

Baratunde Thurston is the host of the **'How to citizen' podcast**, which reimagines the word 'citizen' as a verb, reminding us of our collective power. This new verb as a call to action reframes what it means to be a citizen and reimagines how people participate in the creation of public services and technology. This is bottom-up meeting top-down and forming a relationship.

How might we do this? It starts by explore these questions:

What does it mean to broaden the scope of user-centred design to encompass citizen-led participation in the development of public services?

How might we use technology to not just drive efficiency through digitisation, but enable two-way engagement and participation to uncover the deeper causes of complex societal issues?

How does a shift from citizen experience to citizen participation (citizening) provide an opportunity to involve people who don't currently have a voice, including seldom heard voices, to take part in decision making?

The role of government as a catalyst for building better relationships with each other and our communities by supporting the growing network of groups already working on this change. How do we help citizens to citizen?

How might citizen-led decision making drive preventative and more future focused policies? How do we measure the real time and downstream benefits of this? What are the new measures we should be adopting?

Citizen-led, place-based innovation is a compelling vision. This an exciting opportunity to take those learnings to co-evolve a strategy for citizen/community-driven technology, enabled by a new set of design principles and the latest thinking on 'government-as-a-platform' and digital public infrastructure.

Transitioning from top-down designs to participatory, citizen-led ecosystems, leveraging technology and collaborative frameworks could foster inclusivity, and address root causes of societal challenges. The desired result: sustainable, human-centred innovation that democratises public services and transforms communities.

A new collaborative mindset is needed to engage this challenge, one that fosters connection between citizens, industry, the third sector, local and national government.

We must put aside competitive interests and join forces to evolve our institutions and organisations, tapping into the collective energy and wisdom of citizens. As many great people have said: 'All of us are smarter than any of us'.

You can find out more about BJSS on our website, or get in touch here.