



27 May 2021

# How do we engage citizens in improving our public sector?

*The National Commission on the future of governance in the public sector is calling for a mindset shift in citizen engagement – but how do we make that happen?*

COVID-19 hit at a time when the public sector was still reeling from the effects of the global financial crisis and struggling to adjust to rapid advances in globalisation and global interconnectedness. Between them these factors had eroded many of the employment and community structures that previously provided a sense of belonging and agency, leaving citizens with feelings of social dislocation.

The effects of the pandemic on society will probably not be fully understood for some time but it is already clear that as we rebuild from this once-in-a-lifetime event, we cannot afford to alienate citizens any more than they already are from the societies in which they live and work.

It's vital that we emerge from the pandemic and move through the 2020s with a new focus on citizen and community voices – and a real commitment from public institutions to listen and act on what they say.

In short, we need a shift in mindset that results in more empowered and engaged citizens. But how do we make that happen?

## Citizen summit

Everyone agrees that the public sector should harness the energy of active citizens. But commitments in principle about the public playing a more active role in the future of public services are not going to be enough.

What's needed is much greater buy-in and knowledge of what works among current and future leaders. And that will require a fundamental shift in the collective mindset by everyone in leadership positions in the public sector and government.

That was one conclusion from the latest summit hosted by the National Commission, an initiative set up by GGI to stimulate discussion about the future of governance in the public sector and to make recommendations to help ensure the UK has the best possible public sector governance outcomes by 2030.



The Commission's citizen summit looked at what will create a policy and governance landscape in which the public are active, trusting and trusted, and able to be involved in what matters to them.

It concluded that there is a wealth of examples in the UK of techniques and processes showing how involvement of the public and citizens' voices in the heart of decision-making and priority setting can be made to work. These need to be better known and confidence in their value and impact strengthened, so they become central to thinking, not just an optional extra.

## Mindset shift

But knowledge is not the only limiting factor. Mindsets are also crucial. Leaders need to actually want to bring citizens closer and become better equipped at handling the consequences. This is not always easy, and doubts cannot be simply dismissed.

Creating the right conditions will need both an evidence base and a determined developmental approach that recognises and addresses these concerns with practical support.

Even this will not be enough to build public sector governance with greater ownership. In many ways, the future is something that may not lie in the hands of current leaders in the public sector to decide upon. The public themselves may well drive change. Leaders need to embrace this, not resist it, even if this makes the process more complex or messy.

The summit concluded there were many ways that trust and confidence could be developed further and connected into the heart of governance.

One practical idea that emerged was the co-production of the standards of leadership with the public themselves, directly and actively. And, as a further step, that this co-production with citizens could involve the public playing a role in determining the consequences of any breach of agreed standards. This could be a powerful combination.

The Commission will now make this approach central to its work working with others to create a space where this can be taken forward from idea to practice.

The full report on the summit, which will set out ten themes for the future, is being launched in early June.

## Illuminations

- COVID-19 is the latest in a series of factors that have damaged citizen engagement with the public sector.
- We cannot afford to rebuild, post-pandemic, without greater citizen engagement and that will require a concerted effort and a shift in mindset from leaders across the public sector.
- It's essential that the Commission engages far and wide with those who have a stake in the public sector over the coming decade – and that means everyone. Find out how you can engage on the National Commission website.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email [advice@good-governance.org.uk](mailto:advice@good-governance.org.uk).