

11 thoughts about citizen dialogue in local government

Participation

A systematic approach

Clarify the roles

Citizen dialogue

Meaningful dialogue

Gains

Important factors

Listen to everyone

Questions for dialogue

Distinguish between perspectives

Risks

11 thoughts about citizens dialogue in local government

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from the Citizen Dialogue project*

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Introduction

In 2006, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) initiated the Citizen Dialogue project.

The starting point was SALAR's congress decision in 2003 that SALAR should support its members in their efforts to strengthen citizen support for local government decisions and activities. The background to this decision is the development that we have recently seen in our democracy, with uneven election turnouts showing wide differences between different regions, a declining interest in political party membership and a diminishing trust in politicians and political institutions. At the same time, Swedes declare an interest in discussing societal and political matters; they want to engage in issues based on their own interest, and they want to influence decisions that affect their everyday life.

The Citizen Dialogue project focuses on supporting local authorities in their efforts to develop systems and methods for citizen dialogue as part of the local governance process and in the development of local public services. Citizen dialogue is seen as part of the governance process; as part of the information on which elected representatives base their decisions. Through citizen dialogue, the values embraced by the citizens are combined with the factual information that the administration officers prepare.

This pamphlet covers a number of areas that may be important to consider before citizen dialogue is introduced to local government. The aim is to provide you and your colleagues with a basis for interesting discussions, as well as with assistance in the development of citizen dialogue in order to strengthen democracy and improve public service efficiency.

I would like to thank Martin Sande, Preera Management Consultancy, for his contributions.

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Background

All Swedish local authorities have carried out citizen dialogue in one form or another.

What has been missing, however, is a systematic approach, where the dialogue is recurring and tied into the decisions made by the elected representatives. Citizen dialogue is generally carried out in places where politicians and officers feel safe, and it has been asked why so few people participate. Are Swedes really as disinterested as that? When local authorities have held public meetings, the people who turn up are generally those who are already well informed. Critics of citizen dialogue have thus received support for their opinion that these types of dialogue mainly provide an arena for already vociferous people to influence decisions.

Do we need new forms of dialogue?

During the 2007 SALAR conference, the organisation's task to support the development of citizen dialogue was strengthened and SALAR was given the following assignment:

» SALAR should support its members' efforts to create new forms of citizens' engagement and choice, and to integrate citizen dialogue into governing processes and public service developments. «

So what lies behind the need for a renewed and improved citizen dialogue? A number of factors make the need for a more systematic approach to citizen dialogue more and more evident. The purpose is to strengthen democracy, but also to improve local government efficiency.

Some relevant factors:

- › In international comparisons, Sweden has high levels of voter turnout, but numbers have declined since the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly worrying are the great differences between municipalities, regions and constituencies. In the 2006 election, Lomma, in the south of Sweden, had the highest turnout rate at 89.4 %, and Haparanda, in the north, had the

lowest at 59.5 %. Even greater differences may be seen between different boroughs and neighbourhoods. It is above all socio-economic factors that determine whether people go to the ballot-boxes or not.

- › Fewer and fewer people join political parties. Just above 5 % of all Swedes are members of a political party, and barely 2 % are active members. The average age of members is high, and the parties struggle to entice young people and immigrants to become members or stand for election.
- › The politician's task is becoming ever more difficult and professionalised. The areas of responsibility covered by local authorities are growing bigger and more complex, which creates a need for well-informed and knowledgeable elected representatives. At the same time, there are fewer elected representatives today, which means that their contact area with their constituents needs to widen. In the fifties, there were five citizens per elected representative. Today, there are 43,654 elected representatives for a population that in 2007 was 9,182,977 people. That means an average of 210 citizens per representative.
- › In local authorities, more and more local parties and single-issue-parties are born. Coalitions of several parties are the rule rather than the exception. Large coalitions can mean that party politics becomes more unclear to the citizens.
- › There is a growing support for anti-democratic movements that advocate values that contradict the conventions that Sweden has signed.

So – what are we Swedes like?

- › According to the World Value Survey, Sweden is a country that deviates. The World Value Survey is a world-wide study of people's values in different countries. Swedes are distinguished by being the most secularised; they appreciate values of freedom and believe in their own ability to make decisions over their own lives. They are independent individuals with individual requirements of their local public services.
- › Swedes like to discuss social issues. In surveys, three out of four say that they want to discuss social issues, and 50 % that they want to discuss political issues.
- › On average, the Swede spends 6 hours per day listening to the radio, watching TV, surfing the internet and reading newspapers. The media's influence over citizens' views and values is becoming more and more important.

- › Swedes tend to be “protesting citizens”. We are satisfied with our elected representatives running the local council – up until the day when they make a decision that affects us in a negative way: our children’s school is about to be closed down, the local hospital will be shut down, a mobile phone mast or a wind turbine will be erected close to our homes. Then we get involved in protest actions.

These factors are becoming more and more prominent and now form the background to the growing need to further develop citizen dialogue. We see problems in the development of the local democracy and we have citizens who want to participate in discussions and the development of the local community – but on their own terms.

Everyone probably agrees that the dialogue that is carried out with citizens must be meaningful and based on a real interest on the part of the politicians to know what people think about a particular issue. The citizen should become an active participant in the development of the local community. It could either be considered a right for citizens to participate in decisions that affect the community they live in, or a way of making personal choices about public services, or a challenge to take responsibility for the running of a service that one needs.

Regardless of the perspective, citizen dialogue needs to be improved and become more systematic in order to provide a better basis for the decisions made in local authorities. The need to make citizen dialogue an integral part of the governance processes is based on the following factors:

- › Elected representatives need a broader basis for their decisions, so that the factual knowledge provided by the administration officers is complemented with insights about the citizens’ views on the matter
- › The democratic system needs to become more predictable and consistent. A systematic approach to citizen dialogue can help this aim.
- › People do want to engage, and in particular in matters that are close to them. But if we want more than just “protest citizens,” the citizen dialogue needs to be meaningful and involve real potential to influence decisions. It is also important to show evidence of how it has made a difference.
- › There is a need to increase trust and confidence in the democratic system which to such a large extent affects people’s daily lives.

Introducing citizen dialogue activities in the governing processes does not mean that it replaces the representative system. The aim is rather to support representative democracy by creating transparency, improving people's understanding of the system and developing a collaboration between those who govern and those who are governed.

What then do we mean by a systematic approach to citizen dialogue? To us, citizen dialogue is a broader concept than a dialogue between two people. It is about seeing the knowledge of the citizens as an asset in the shaping of the local authorities of the future. It is about using many different methods to gain insights into the citizens' values, and in turn giving them a better understanding of the local authorities' responsibilities, structure and activities. It is about strengthening democracy and increasing efficiency through systematic, well conducted citizen dialogue.

In this pamphlet we point to a number of areas that may be important to discuss before you build citizen dialogue into a local authority's governance process.

Citizen dialogue as part of the governance process

Citizen dialogue as part of the governance process is seen by many as an important area for development in the local authority. A question that then needs to be posed is: What do you want to achieve? What do you expect to gain by introducing citizen dialogue?

In evaluations of citizen dialogue, participants are often sceptical about whether anyone has taken their views into account and whether there is a hidden agenda. Was there honest intent, or was the purpose of the dialogue just to get support for already made decisions or manipulate the participants to arrive at a desired answer? A genuine dialogue must include the potential to influence decisions. If the politicians have already made up their minds on a particular issue, it is better to refrain from citizen dialogue and instead hold a public information meeting.

The experience of local authorities that have introduced citizen dialogue is that in-house preparation is necessary before the citizens are approached. Dialogue is an interactive tool that requires preparation before, during and after its realisation. A first step might be to have a dialogue about the dialogue. You could pose a number of questions about why citizen dialogue should be introduced, and what it means to the organisation.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › What does a citizen dialogue mean to us?
- › What do we do today?
- › What do we hope to gain by improving our dialogue with the citizens?
- › What do we believe that the politicians, officers and citizens may gain by a systematic approach to citizen dialogue?

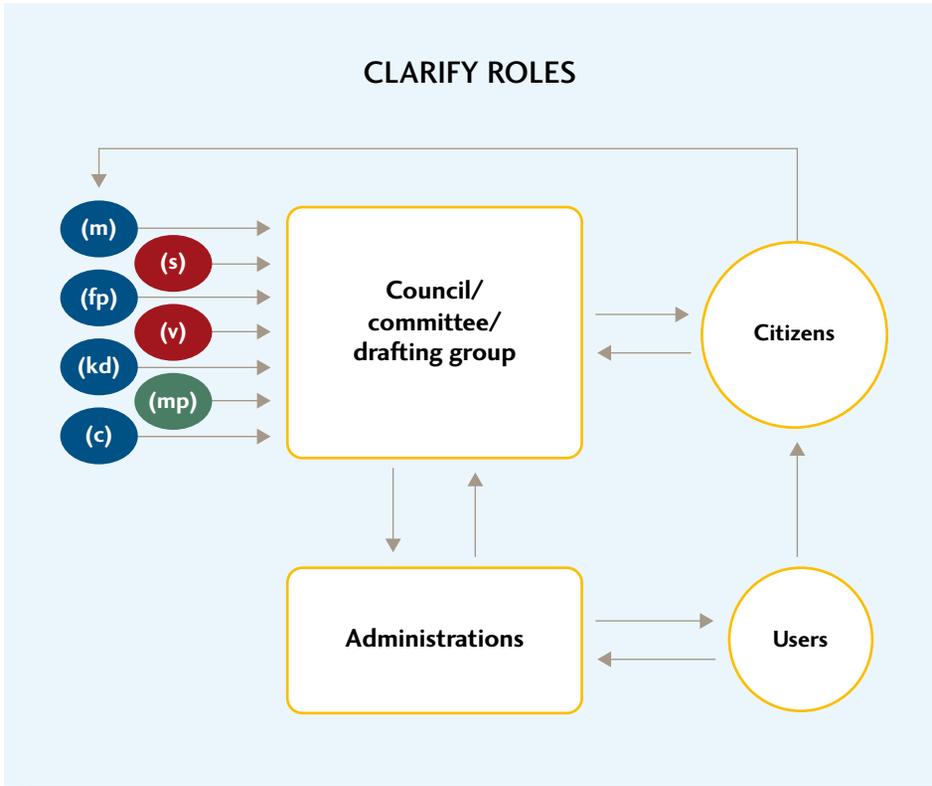
Clarify the roles

Experience shows that when local authorities have decided to carry out citizen dialogue, it is not always obvious who should be responsible for planning, realisation and taking the results forward. For the results of the dialogue to become a useful basis for the politicians' decisions, the roles must be clarified before the dialogue starts. There might be a need to discuss and clarify a number of intersections, such as:

- › The allocation of responsibilities for the dialogue between the role as a party politician and the role as a politician in the council, board, committee or drafting group.
- › The division of responsibilities for dialogue between politicians and officers.
- › The allocation of responsibilities for citizen dialogue as distinguished from service-user dialogue.

It is important to remember that dialogue between citizens and politicians is always going on, when the individual politician meets citizens in her or his daily life, and when conversations arise around topics of concern to the individual. Many meetings and discussions also take place between party members based around party ideology and the party's analyses of social changes. The question that the elected committee in a local authority should address is whether these dialogues are enough as a basis for good decisions.

A clear international and national trend is that dialogue is needed to enable politicians to gain broader knowledge about citizens' values, to be used as a basis for decisions on important matters. An elected representative is responsible for all local residents, and it is a challenge to gain insights into how different groups in the community view a particular issue. The key question, however, is to decide on what issue-areas we in our local authority should conduct citizen dialogue.



The illustration can be a starting point for discussions on who should be responsible for different parts of the dialogue.

The second step in clarifying the roles is establishing the relationship between officers and elected representatives with regard to citizen dialogue. It is not unusual that citizen dialogue is delegated to officers, who thereby become experts on both users' and citizens' opinions on a particular issue. This increases the gap between citizens and politicians. However, there are signs that elected representatives are looking to reclaim control over citizen dialogue and increasingly see it as their arena. But the matter is not as simple as that. To achieve a functioning dialogue that can constitute the basis for political decisions, the dialogue needs to be carried out in a three-part collaboration between politicians, citizens and officers. The politicians get the chance to be the listeners. In order to understand and gain a deeper understanding of citizens' views on a particular issue; they do not need to reply or defend. The officers' role is to be processleaders: to produce the information materials, lead the process based on the method chosen and to be responsible for documenting the results. The role of the citizens is to give their views

on an issue and to, together with others, argue and listen to different viewpoints.

The third issue to discuss with regard to roles is who is responsible for user dialogue, and who is responsible for citizen dialogue. Both dialogues are needed, and one can never replace the other.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › Who in this organisation are responsible for citizen dialogue?
- › How do we see the different roles for politicians, officers and citizens? Who should do what?

Distinguish between perspectives

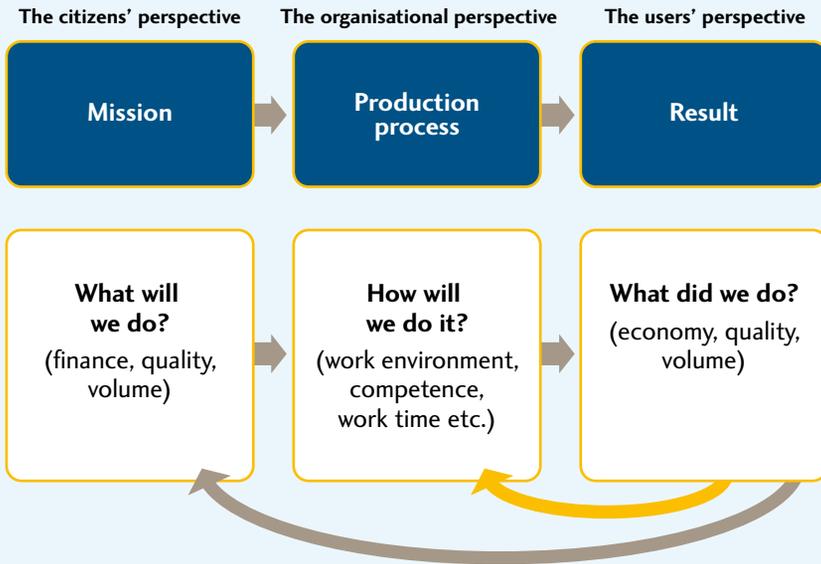
In a local authority, several kinds of information are needed to make decisions. There are three key perspectives:

The organisational perspective is something that local authorities often know well. This can include knowledge about the financial situation, work environment, need for training and laws and regulations. Knowledge about these types of issues is necessary for the running of a functioning and efficient local authority that fulfils its employer's responsibilities.

The user perspective means knowing how the users view the services that they receive from the local authority. This knowledge is essential to understanding the authority's ability to offer quality public services to its citizens.

The citizens' perspective is the citizens' views on whether the local authority does the right things, at the right costs and with the right quality, seen from the perspective of tax-paying citizens. It tends to be the citizens' perspective that local authorities know the least about, and where systematic analysis is most lacking. Without a systematic approach to finding out how different groups view the authority's performance, there is a risk that those who shout the loudest are most influential.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES



Three perspectives that matter to the organisation's development.

Each of the three perspectives is as important as the others; you cannot exclude any of them or replace one with another. Conscious working methods and processes are needed for all three perspectives, but the need to develop systems becomes most obvious in the citizens' perspective.

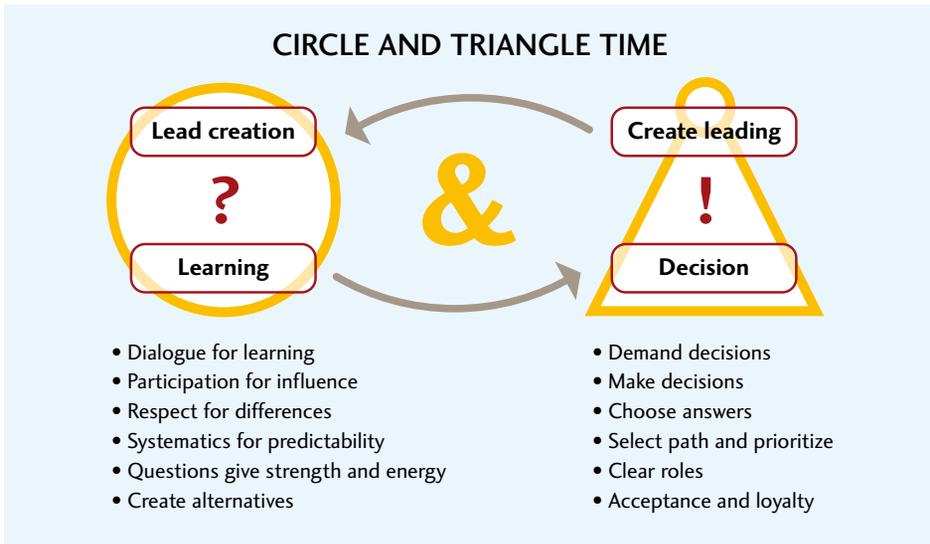
QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › What are we currently doing to gain knowledge of the way the organisation works?
- › What are we currently doing to gain knowledge of the users' opinions?
- › What are we currently doing to gain knowledge of the citizens' opinions?
- › What do we need to improve?

Distinguish between dialogue time and decision time

In Sweden, there is a strong tradition of representative democracy at the local level. Representative democracy is the basis for decision making and accountability in local authorities. Citizen dialogue may strengthen and support representative democracy when decisions are to be made. Before making a decision, politicians need both the factual background provided by the administration officers and an understanding of the citizens' views and values. In order to build citizen dialogue into the decision making process, the difference between decision time and dialogue time must be made clear. These two perspectives should not be seen as contradictory; in fact, they complement each other. Depending on the situation, the ability to choose the right type of dialogue is essential.

In the illustration on page 15, we distinguish between dialogue time and decision time. Preera Management Consultancy, who produced this illustration,



The circle and triangle time concepts were developed by Preera Management Consultancy.

calls dialogue time circle time and decision time triangle time. The idea is that the circular shape should provide a picture of what is required from the dialogue. Everyone is given the opportunity to listen to others and argue one's sake; no one opinion is valued more than another. Preera calls the decision time triangle time; this, too, is intended to give an image of what happens, with the triangle visualising the levels of decision making in the organisation.

Dialogue time means that before the decision is taken, the citizens are given the opportunity to give their views on the issue to be decided. The most essential factor in the dialogue time/circle time is that there is a real potential to influence, and that the aim of the dialogue is to create a range of "choosable options". In other words, it must be a creative process where several and perhaps opposing viewpoints have to share the dialogue space. The crucial rule for interaction in the dialogue is to agree that you don't have to agree. Different groups are given the opportunity to engage in dialogue with each other and argue their respective views and values. The politicians participate in the dialogue with the intent to listen in order to understand; not to reply or explain.

When the dialogue is completed, it is the responsibility of the politicians to make decisions, and the matter then passes over to decision time/triangle time. Decision time means that the matter is handled by the institutions set up to make local authority decisions, where the citizens can hold the elected representatives accountable.

Being clear about the difference between dialogue time and decision time to citizens, politicians and officers provides the basis for increased trust and confidence. Experience shows that all too often in public meetings, politicians end up having to defend themselves, sometimes because the dialogue occurs too late in the process, or because the boundaries of the issue at hand are not clearly defined. Experience from many dialogue activities show that the participants often believe that the result of the dialogue will constitute the final decision. The reason for this misunderstanding could be that the meeting's purpose and role in the decision-making process have not been made clear. It is vital that these things are absolutely clear when citizen dialogue is introduced into governance processes.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › How do we handle dialogue time and decision time in a systematic way?
- › How do we make the purpose and role of the dialogue clear to the participants?

Discuss what topics the dialogue should address

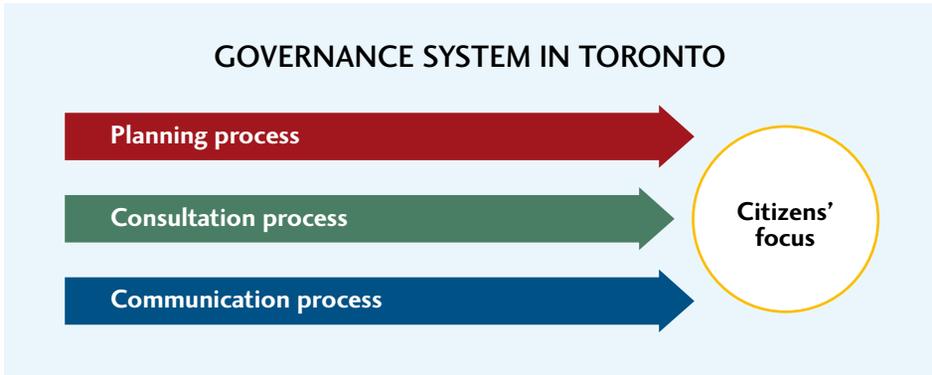
If the politicians have already made up their minds on a particular issue, they should not initiate a citizen dialogue. Running a dialogue where people discover that they cannot influence anything only increases the public's mistrust of the organisation and its representatives. Instead, you could in these cases create a basis for future involvement by informing about the background to the decision and its reasons and consequences. Clear information and transparency about decisions already made makes it possible for citizens to be well informed and is the first step to involvement.

A local authority makes a lot of decisions during a year, and it is not possible to run a dialogue on all of them. Two questions can help identify which issues require dialogue:

- › Do we, as elected representatives, need more knowledge about the citizens' values, priorities and opinions on this matter in order to make the best possible decision?
- › Could a citizen dialogue on this matter give people better knowledge about the local authority's responsibilities and need for prioritisations?

There are really no topics on which people could not have an opinion, with the exception of decisions that concern private individuals.

In Toronto in the early 2000s, the municipality introduced a system of governance where citizen dialogue is an integral part. Before decisions are made, three processes are carried out in order to produce the best possible basis for decision making.



Phase 1. The decision process – aims to provide a clear structure for the administrative process before a decision. Before every decision, the politicians consider whether to carry out a citizen dialogue to obtain better knowledge of people’s values and views on the matter in question.

Phase 2. The consultation process – if it is decided that a dialogue is needed, the next step is to determine the structure for when, how and where the dialogue should happen, and within what boundaries.

Phase 3. The communication process – the local authority realises that they will not be able to reach everyone through citizen dialogue, but the aim is to make it possible for all citizens to be well informed. This is done by outlining a clear process for how the citizens will be informed of the decision and the path leading up to it. It is a question of being proactive rather than reactive in the contacts with the media, as well as working with information materials produced in-house.

The Toronto experiences show that the municipality carries out citizen dialogue on more and more issues. The initial fears that lobby groups would dominate or that dogmatists would come up with crazy ideas proved to be totally unfounded and the citizens’ competence and responsible attitudes toward the development of the local community is impressive.

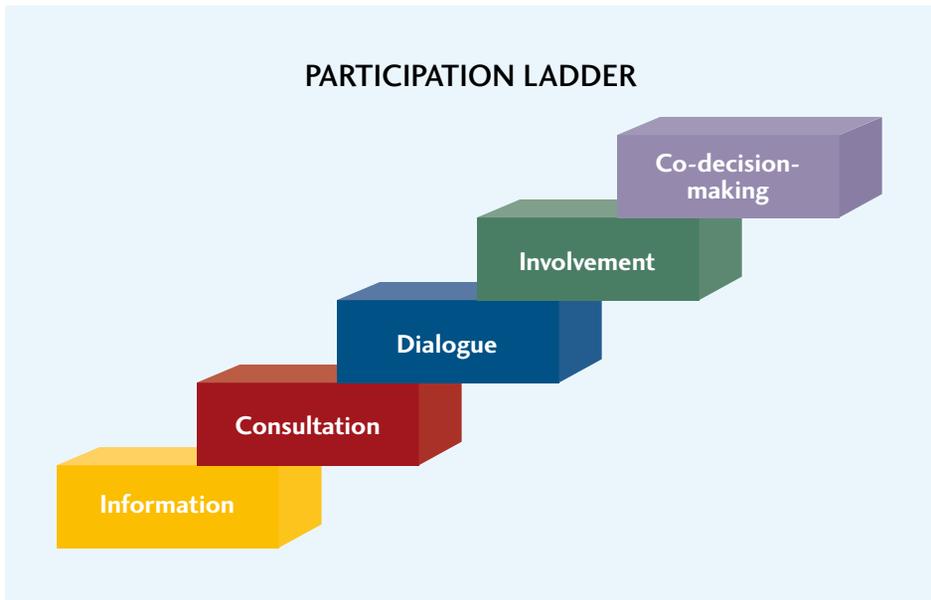
QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › What issues are suitable for dialogue in our local authority?
- › What issues are not, and why?

Clarity about the forms of participation offered

As already mentioned, “the Swedes” are interested in discussing social and political matters. The local authority may choose from a range of methods and tools to achieve greater engagement. Generally it is the issue at hand that determines which form of participation is most suitable. In the 1960s, a “ladder of participation” was developed by Sherry Arnstein to describe different levels of participation. In the Citizen Dialogue project, we have modified that model somewhat to give a picture of different levels of participation in Sweden.

In face of the decisions to be made, you should consider how you can enable the citizens to take part. It is also important to be clear towards the citizens about what level of participation they can expect. The aim is that the ladder should illustrate the different levels of participation in decision-making processes.



Information – in order to participate, a person needs to be well informed and able to absorb facts about the issue at hand. Some decisions are not suitable for citizen dialogue, but people have a right to be informed about what decisions have been made. A transparent local authority builds trust and confidence.

Consultation – means giving citizens the opportunity to say what options they think are preferable in a particular question. The starting point here is a set of options prepared by experts or officers and accepted by the elected representatives; the citizens may then decide whether they prefer option 1 or 2, or A or B.

Dialogue – means giving people the opportunity to meet others to engage in dialogue on a topical issue. The starting point is that everyone should have the opportunity to make his or her voice heard and present arguments for his or her view in the matter. There is no need to reach a consensus.

Involvement – means that people participate during a longer period of time and are involved in a development process, from a blank sheet of paper to a finalised proposal that will form the basis for political decisions. This is participation at a deeper level.

Co-decision-making – the elected assembly has delegated responsibility to a committee or board, where the delegates are not elected on the basis of party membership but as individuals. Examples are Svågadal snämnden (the Svågadal committee) in Hudiksvall; and school boards, where also parents are members.

The ladder of participation should be seen as an aid in the structuring of citizen dialogue in relation to the decisions that the politicians will make. The starting point should always be the particular circumstances of the local authority.

Botkyrka and Huddinge have produced handbooks for the structuring of citizen dialogue based on different levels of participation.



QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › What forms of participation do we have today?
- › What forms would we like to have?

Methods for reaching seldom-heard groups

How do we avoid the problem that is often raised today, namely that citizen dialogue means giving those who already have resources yet another way to influence? How do we listen to everyone, not just to lobby groups and those who shout the loudest? It is important to stress, however, that there are already people who try to influence by “shouting the loudest,” and lobby groups who seek out elected representatives to give their views on particular issues. Experience shows that when local authorities have carried out citizen dialogue, it has generally been through invitations to places and forums that the politicians and officers are familiar with. To many groups in the society, it feels neither natural nor comfortable to come to these meetings.

An international trend for coming to grips with this problem is to both invite and reach out to people in the community. It is a matter of gaining a good understanding of how the citizens want to communicate and engage in dialogue with the local authority. This means that using the same dialogue approach for all citizens is not enough. When only a few people turn up to the meeting that you have arranged, you cannot draw the conclusion that nobody is interested and be satisfied with that. If you seriously want to know people’s values, priorities and opinions, you have to actively take responsibility to find the methods that suit different groups in the community.

International experience shows that you have to depart from traditional meetings and develop new approaches to dialogue. You can do this by using new technology, through outreach activities and through cooperation with civil society organisations or key individuals who are well networked in particular fractions of the community.

In Catalonia, Spain, there is a legal requirement that citizens should be consulted before important decisions. This means that the local authorities have developed different methods for reaching different groups. One approach is to mobilise important individuals in society, people that the citizens respect and have confidence in. It could be a priest, a doctor or a football player.

These people become ambassadors for the dialogue, and by their participation they show that it is important to engage in the development of the local community.

In Blairgowrie, Scotland, an advisory board has been set up with active citizens who are well networked in the community. The local authority raises topical issues with the board who then considers how best to reach people and who may be most likely to be engaged in the issue. The focus has been on enterprise development.

In the UK and Australia, dialogue tools using new technology have been developed. E-panels, e-petitions, games etc. are methods used to engage people in discussions about local matters and priorities in a simple way.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › What groups do we have problems reaching today?
- › How can we reach out to those groups?

The dialogue must be meaningful

Citizen dialogue must be meaningful. If we want to create engagement among people, a win-win perspective is necessary. People must know that they are being listened to, and get feedback on how their views have been taken into account.

Below are a number of success factors that must be included for the dialogue to be seen as meaningful.

- › Dialogue should take place early in the decision process
- › Politicians and officers must show honest intent
- › The issue at hand must be of interest to people
- › Citizen dialogue should be build into the governance system and schedule
- › There should be a clear purpose and clear boundaries
- › Combining invitations and outreach activities help reach more people
- › Visualise
- › Feedback

The politicians and the administration must feel that it is important to obtain knowledge about the citizens' views on the issue at hand. This means having both a structure for citizen dialogue and a culture of focusing on the citizens. Some local authorities have reformed their governance structures to be more citizen-oriented, but that is not enough. Based on the structure, you must also develop an institutional culture where the citizens are in focus, and where the advantages of citizen engagement are seen both from a democracy perspective and an efficiency perspective.

Citizen dialogue must happen early in the decision-making process, when there is time to actually consider the views that are expressed. For public trust in the organisation to increase, it is important that people feel that they are really able to influence decisions and that the dialogue is not just for show.

A clear purpose and boundaries is also important when it comes to creating trust. All participants must be made aware of the rules. There is never a wishing well; decisions at the local authority level are about prioritisations. It must also be made clear that the dialogue plays an advisory role. The final decision is made by the elected representatives, and the result of the dialogue is one among a number of factors that form the basis of their decision.

As already mentioned, the local authority must work actively to invite and seek people out if they are to reach more people than those who always show up. Of course, you should not stop talking to the organisations and individuals who always participate, but the local authority also needs to find new ways of reaching those who seldom take part. This is necessary in order to gain an understanding of what different groups think about the matter in question.

In local authorities we are used to handling matters with the aid of written documents. But people absorb information in different ways. To visualise the circumstances of the decision to be made has proven a successful method when it comes to improving citizens' understanding of the different factors and prioritisations that need to be taken into account before a decision is made.

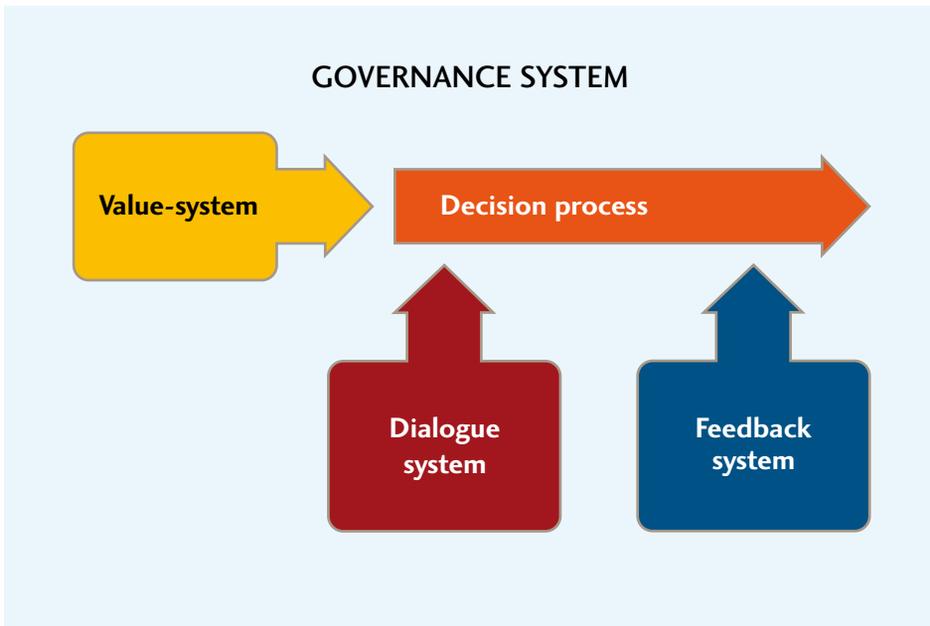
Feedback is essential. In studies people have spoken about their experiences of participating in meetings and giving their opinions, and then not being told how their views were used. They feel that their input disappeared into a black hole and are left with the feeling that what was said was of no interest. Feedback is necessary to build confidence in the dialogue and the organisation. Even if the views expressed are not taken into the final considerations, it is vital to feedback and explain why the decision was made the way it was, and how you view the opinions that were raised.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › Do we have a structure today for how we listen to our citizens?
- › Are we honestly prepared to be affected by what we hear?

Important factors in a system for citizen dialogue

There are at least four important factors to consider when citizen dialogue is introduced to a governance system.



The first factor is values, principles or starting points for citizen dialogue. You need to agree on the reasons for having the dialogue, and the principles for how it is to be implemented. In Aarhus, Denmark, people have been working on this at different levels, both internally within the organisation and externally, together with the citizens. This has led to eight principles for citizen dialogue.

Århus principles

1. Citizen dialogue should always support and use as a starting point the values of the municipality of Aarhus: Credibility, Respect, and Engagement.
2. Citizen dialogue should always be carried out (and is mandatory) in the starting phase of an assignment.
3. As a minimum, the citizens have a right to be heard.
4. A change of strategies, plans and projects that could have important consequences for the people always requires a new citizen dialogue.
5. The citizens must have real opportunities to participate.
6. Private engagement in the quality and development of the municipality's or private residential areas shall be promoted.
7. Cooperation with organisations, advisory boards and associations shall be maintained and developed.
8. Processes, methods and competencies for citizen dialogue must be continually evaluated and improved.

Developing a framework for citizen dialogue is the foundation of a systematic approach. It may also support the development of an internal culture with the citizens in focus.

The second important component is to have a clear system for citizen dialogue tied into the governance process. The system should clarify if and when the dialogue should take place in relation to the decision to be made. It is also important to consider whether the dialogue should be carried out in several stages of the decision-making process. Perhaps first when all you have is a blank piece of paper and only the basic facts are presented; then later for people to make up their minds about existing proposals; and finally a dialogue about the result and its consequences.

Only when the decision on the procedure for dialogue is made should you decide which tools in the dialogue tool box to use. There are many different methods for dialogue. Lewisham, a local authority in London, has produced a tool box with descriptions of a large number of citizen dialogue tools. Before each new dialogue, a number of tools are selected with the aim of reaching as many different groups of people as possible. The underlying idea is that one tool is never enough to build a good picture of people's views before a decision is made.

The last part is about feeding back the decision and the results that have come out of the dialogue. Here, too, the local authority needs several tools. It could be physical meetings, web presentations, in-house-produced communication materials and information via the media. In Lewisham a newspaper is published every month, where dialogue activities that have taken place are described alongside information about how the results have been used and forthcoming dialogue activities. Participants in the different dialogue projects are also given the opportunity to give their views on how the dialogue was carried out, and its results.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- › Do we need principles and frameworks for our citizen dialogue?
- › Today, do we feed the results of our dialogue activities back to the people?

Possible gains with a systematic approach to dialogue

The task for the elected representatives is to govern the authority based on the guidelines and the needs that exist within the organisation. To be able to govern as well as possible, they must be familiar with the values and needs that exist in the local community and be able to apply these in a wider context. This implies the ability and the knowledge to shape and adapt the organisation, based on current laws and regulations, to the values and needs of the inhabitants.

For several years, the focus of citizen dialogue has been the development of a better working democracy. In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition in both Sweden and abroad that a systematic approach to citizen dialogue also leads to efficiency gains.

Gains of citizen dialogue from a democracy perspective:

- › More involvement increases the citizens' knowledge about the democratic processes.
- › Research shows that participation in different contexts is inherently good, and strengthens the social capital in the community as well as the individual.
- › Participation through citizen dialogue creates democratic legitimacy.
- › Citizen dialogue early on in the decision-making process leads to an increased engagement and sense of responsibility among the citizens. Even if they do not get what they want, they have gained knowledge and understanding of the background to the decision which makes it easier to accept it.
- › Human beings' constant need to be listened to and respected becomes a source of energy which may lead to curiosity and interest, which in turn may develop into a broader engagement in e.g. a political party.

- › Different interest groups are given the opportunity to meet and solve problems together. The dialogue provides an arena where people can argue their views, but it is also a forum for listening to other people's opinions on the same issue. This may give an insight into the politicians' dilemma in dealing with different viewpoints that must be reconciled.

Gains from an efficiency perspective:

- › Participation in citizen dialogue may increase the understanding of and facilitate the application of prioritised measures.
- › Through dialogue, citizens may obtain a better understanding of the activities of the local authority. They may also obtain knowledge about the elected representatives' responsibilities for prioritisation of common resources.
- › More systematic citizen dialogue may lead to better agreement between public service supply and the citizens' needs. The community's needs are always changing, and there is a risk that the local authority continues to offer services that few people, or nobody, require. Changing needs may be clarified through systematic dialogue.
- › Increased participation gives stronger legitimacy to the decisions made by the elected representatives.
- › Increased participation also means more transparency and knowledge about the conditions for local government. To participate, you have to be well informed not only of what the local authority is doing but also of the results of its activities. The citizen needs to be convinced that the resources used give the right service at the right cost and of the right quality.
- › Increased transparency leads to better quality of public services. If the information about the results becomes more transparent and is openly presented to people and media, then the requirements on the internal development of quality are emphasized.

QUESTION TO DISCUSS

- › What have been the gains from the citizen dialogue activities that we have carried out?

Risks to be aware of

Introducing citizen dialogue to the governance processes requires careful planning and preparation. Citizen dialogue is not something to be taken lightly. It requires logistics and the ability to be at once reactive, proactive and interactive to be really effective. Researchers point to a number of risks that need to be considered and addressed for the dialogue to be the effective tool that it is intended to be.

The biggest risk is that citizen dialogue leads to a more unequal democracy, where those who are already resourceful get another forum through which to influence decisions. It is not unusual for local and regional authorities to use forums and places where politicians and officers feel safe, such as public meetings in the council chambers. This limits the numbers and types of people who feel inclined to take part. Therefore, the elected representatives must actively seek out citizens where they are and where they gather, in order to obtain their views on the issue in question.

There is also a risk that citizen dialogue in the community deflects from party-political activities. Why should I choose to go through the political parties, if I can influence the local authority directly? It is important that citizen dialogue is a complement to representative democracy, not a replacement. By being clear about the principles for the dialogue, its purpose and framework, you can avoid it becoming a competitor to the political parties. The parties' views on different issues may also be made clear in the dialogue context, through, for instance, presentations on the local authority web-page, or as written background material for the dialogue.

A lack of overview of the bigger picture is another factor that researchers stress as a risk when working with citizen dialogue. The citizens engage in local issues and often lack either the interest in or the knowledge about the need to prioritise from a holistic point of view. But you could also ask whether it is not important for people to engage in things that affect their everyday life. Depending on where you are in life, or where your particular

skills and interests lie, it is only natural that you are impelled to get more involved in certain issues than other ones. The responsibility to join up the bigger picture and make it visible rests with the politicians. It is worth remembering that many of our elected representatives started their political engagement through one particular issue and then went on to widen it to include the totality. Therefore, one must not look down on engagement in what is local and near.

QUESTION TO DISCUSS

- › How do we handle risks in our dialogue activities?

Final comments

In this pamphlet, we have tried to give a picture of issues to discuss and agree on before you take the step to ask citizens for their engagement. In Sweden, we live in a safe democracy, and it is easy to take it for granted – it is not something that we have to defend every day. In other parts of the world, democracy is something to dream about, something that people are imprisoned and even die for. But even the most well-functioning democracy is sometimes put to trial. We believe that in our increasingly individualistic society we both want and need to become more engaged as citizens; some of us in the big issues and others in the smaller, more local ones. It is a question of how local authorities, their elected representatives and officers find ways to seize the engagement that exists in most of us. In order to do that, they require well thought-out action plans. It is a question of having an organisation that wants to and is able to listen to its citizens. This requires both a structure and a culture that keeps the citizens in focus.

Do you want to know more?

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11 thoughts about citizen dialogue in local government

Our democratic society faces a number of challenges, with declining trust in political institutions, uneven election turnouts and a diminishing interest in party memberships. Increasing peoples' engagement is therefore a challenge for local authorities. A more systematic approach to citizen dialogue could support such a development. Citizen dialogue is a broader concept than a dialogue between two people. It is about seeing the citizens' knowledge and skills as an asset when shaping the local authorities of the future. It is about using many different methods to find out what citizens' think and value, and making the citizens in turn better informed about the responsibilities and activities of the local authority. It is about using a systematic approach to citizen dialogue to strengthen democracy and increase the efficiency of local government.

In this pamphlet we point to a number of areas that need to be considered and discussed before citizen dialogue is integrated into a local authority's governance process.

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