



**opinion leader**



**BEYOND THE  
TOWN HALL**

How to really engage  
with local communities

*“There isn’t a single service or development in Britain which hasn’t been improved by actively involving local people.”*

Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

**The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships. The Governance of Britain. An Action Plan for Community Empowerment. Unlocking the Talent of our Communities. Four recent documents that each echo the Prime Minister’s call for “a reinvention of the way we govern”.**

Local devolution is key to reinvigorating grassroots democracy and ensuring that public services reflect what the public wants. But transferring power from Whitehall to the Town Hall and on to local communities isn't as simple as it sounds. So how can local authorities engage with the many different communities that make up their borough, city, district or county? How can you reach beyond 'the usual suspects'? What is the best way to involve local people in open and transparent consultation that takes into account their hopes and fears?

*“Community empowerment is local government's core business.”*

Sir Simon Milton, Chair of the Local Government Association

New freedoms for local authorities must go hand in hand with strong links to local communities – the Local Government White Paper makes that explicitly clear. With less ring-fenced funding, councils can now spend more money on issues that matter locally. But accompanying this is a new statutory 'duty to involve' local people that comes into force in 2009. While the statutory nature of the duty is new, it's something that many good local authorities have been doing for years – often with the help of Opinion Leader. Rather than an add-on, we believe it's a fundamental element of local governance.

*“Evidence suggests that if people feel their efforts will be rewarded by real change in their communities, they will be willing to step forward.”*

Re-invigorating our democracy, The Governance of Britain White Paper

**Involvement. Participation. Taking part. It doesn't matter what you call it as long as you encourage it.**

Opinion Leader pioneered deliberative and collaborative ways to engage people as a response to low voter turnout and a limited interest in 'politics'. There's a strong anti-political mood in the country – people don't feel that politicians represent them and they've lost trust in institutions such as local authorities. The result is a 'democratic deficit', where decisions are made without enough public input.

Meanwhile, local community groups, residents' associations and not-for-profits organised by ordinary people are doing something extraordinary – making a difference by running services and providing support. But for every citizen engaged in local action, there are too many who aren't, who feel ignored, and who are excluded from decisions that affect them. That's something we try to change.

*“People want to know that local government is listening.  
We help make that happen.”*

Viki Cooke, Founder, Opinion Leader

From Portsmouth in the South to Northumberland in the North, we've helped councils to:

- Involve local people in budget decisions;
- Consult with communities on Local Area Agreements;
- Establish on-going neighbourhood forums;
- Ensure there is user input into the design, delivery and assessment of local services;
- And address a thousand and one other important local concerns.

These shared conversations have shared benefits. Talking with your local electorate improves the reputation of your authority. User involvement leads to better quality local services. And a more thriving local democracy leads to greater community cohesion and social inclusion.

In return, local people get a better understanding of how their local council works, makes decision and allocates resources. Empowered individuals develop new skills and increased self confidence. And overall community capacity is improved.

*"It's changed my whole life. I didn't think I had a point of view, or cared... but now I know that I care, and know that I have a point of view worth listening to."*

Participant, Citizens' Summit

**"Change that we can believe in". It's something we were saying long before Barack Obama (although we certainly support the primaries, caucuses and town hall meetings that have inspired young and old alike to re-connect with American democracy).**

At Opinion Leader we have our own techniques for getting the public involved in local decision making that leads to real change. We run for our clients:

- Citizens' Forums – where local people spend between one and 2½ days discussing an issue in small groups, coming together for plenary sessions. More recently we developed the Collaborative Forum, which brings together diverse audiences to work on shared priorities and solutions;
- Citizens' Juries – where groups of citizens meet for two to four days to address key questions relating to policy or service issues;
- Parallel and Collaborative Workshops – that bring together diverse and sometimes conflicting groups to deliberate a live or key issue. Working as equals breaks down barriers and fosters mutual respect, collaboration and a shared ownership of the solutions;
- Citizens' Summits – where a large representative sample of the public is drawn together to discuss and vote on the future shape of services.

Our projects can include service users, service providers, citizens and national opinion leaders. And the potential list of topics is limited only by your needs.

*"The UK is experiencing low levels of public trust in politics and politicians. It is therefore a priority to introduce measures to revive trust in political decision making and to facilitate engagement with political processes."*

Re-invigorating our democracy, The Governance of Britain White Paper

**Trust. It's a two-way thing. We believe deliberative approaches aren't just useful techniques to explore important and complex policy issues. They're also a way of conducting public consultation in a manner that is open, transparent and accountable. That leads to lower levels of cynicism. And higher levels of trust. Here are some examples of our work over the last decade or so.**

### LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM

We ran the UK's first ever Citizens' Jury for Lewisham way back in 1996, looking at the issue of drug misuse and enabling local residents to hear evidence from the police, medical and youth workers, drug workers and drug users. Since then we've worked with Lewisham a number of times. For example, in 2004 we ran a 2½ day Citizens' Jury to measure the public's attitude to increased or decreased restrictions on car use within the borough. In 2005 we ran a similar engagement exercise on environmental sustainability, and in 2008 worked with them again using deliberative research to start a local conversation on the borough's medium-term future looking ahead to 2020.

### NORTHUMBERLAND COUNCIL

Opinion Leader recently ran three Citizens' Workshops across the county to explore views on whether Northumberland should move from being a county to a unitary authority – an issue of great local sensitivity. Using a deliberative approach, we ran day-long workshops that identified what form of local government would work best for the people of Northumberland and the individual local communities with which they identify.

### BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

Opinion Leader carried out a series of one-day workshops with Birmingham residents to discuss the level at which the Council Tax should be set and what Birmingham's spending priorities should be. One workshop was held with young people (aged 16 to 25 years) and three with people from a range of ages. The results were a key part of the input into the City Council's decision about the level of Council Tax set.

## TAMESIDE METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

Tameside wanted to engage members of their Citizens' Panel in an interactive and deliberative debate about key council services. A Citizens' Forum was held which focused on four key areas of council service provision: community safety, customer service, culture and sport, and the 15-year Plan for Tameside. Discussions explored local people's feelings about and aspirations for each particular service area. The forum also included a priority-setting exercise where groups considered a range of solutions to particular policy problems and identified which solution they would choose and why. The Council used the findings to inform future policy making.

## WOLVERHAMPTON CITY COUNCIL

Sometimes national issues have local impacts. We held a Citizens' Jury with Wolverhampton City Council as part of their response to the Lyons Inquiry into the role, function and funding of local government. The jury built on Wolverhampton's commitment to community consultation and public engagement, by providing a forum for local people to understand and comment on the issues being investigated by the Inquiry. The programme helped position Wolverhampton as a pioneering authority when it comes to citizen engagement, and informed their ongoing work.

## LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

The Children's Services Department wanted to address the lack of contact in the borough between young people and adults, knowing that adults were often afraid to approach young people they didn't know. We consulted local people on why different age groups had the attitudes they did towards one another. We also identified ways for Islington to tackle negative aspects of young people's image.

Two half-day workshops were held, one with young people (13 to 17 years old), and one with older people (35 years and over). They explored each age group's understanding of themselves, their relationship to Islington and how other groups saw them. Attitudes towards crime and anti-social behaviour were also investigated. A third full-day workshop was then convened bringing together for the first time both sets of younger and older participants. In mixed age groups, participants challenged one another's stereotypes and developed a common understanding of the issues at stake.

## BOURNEMOUTH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Opinion Leader ran two day-long workshops with residents from Bournemouth to explore their priorities for setting the council's budget. One session was with young people, the other with adult residents and participants in both sessions were recruited to be broadly representative of local demographics. A number of techniques were used to probe people's expectations of the council and the services it provides, and to give them the information they needed to set their priorities for future budgets. At the end of the day, participants presented the outcomes of their deliberations to council representatives who used the findings to inform the wider budget decision-making process.

## BIG LOTTERY FUND

Opinion Leader ran a series of six half-day workshops with the general public across the UK (including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Participants developed principles that could help the Fund decide how to prioritise applications, and discussed how different beneficiary groups fitted with the principles developed. The agenda was designed to enable people to move beyond a good causes 'beauty contest'. The workshops revealed how people approach priority setting, what their priorities are and are not, and consequently enabled us to make strategic recommendations to the Fund about how to communicate grants, including those that could potentially be controversial.

*“People must believe they matter. To achieve this, either there must be sustained feedback to participants in deliberative engagement exercises, or they must devolve the decision from government, e.g. to a citizens' summit.”*

Michael Wills MP, Minister of State for Constitutional Renewal



If you'd like to know more about how we can help you engage with communities and service users, please contact Nicola Austin, Director of Marketing, tel: 020 7681 3809, email: [naustin@opinionleader.co.uk](mailto:naustin@opinionleader.co.uk)

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*"I want to see a vibrant, reinvigorated local democracy – from neighbourhood level engagement and community calls to action, to a renewed focus on the devolution of powers and responsibilities."*

Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister

