

# A Collective approach to local decision making – principles and top tips



Meaningful and effective decision making is about providing opportunities to merge various areas of expertise. This has the potential to alter and transform the current situation in a powerful, innovative way. We can't simply continue to do things as we always have. If we do, we will not make progress or improve the life chances of people who have been left behind, ignored or stifled.

Valuing progressive local decision-making is about having an open mind and being prepared to collaborate and embrace the uniqueness of different areas of knowledge and insight. This can then lead to decisions, actions and fairer responses to the issues facing our community. It is about creating a community that values all voices and ensures people are able to realise their potential, so "things are not done to people but with people." **This is all our responsibility.**

*"It is more than telling your life story. It is about reflecting on your experience of having been impacted by both 'good' and 'poor' local decisions. Debatably, intentions have meant well but unfortunately have sometimes made things harder for people in our community. The knowledge and experience we have means we are in a position of giving advice or insight on what would work, what wouldn't work and what the outcome of a given decision would be" – Diane, Thrive*

**In working with people with direct experiences of poverty, the following key principles are crucial to informing this approach:**

- **Recognising** that key knowledge about poverty, social security and the negative impact of inequality is held by those in communities who have lived experience of socio-economic disadvantage. This is a critical starting point, and we need to 'listen and learn'.
- **Understanding** that meaningful involvement is not about gathering a thousand stories, but about understanding the collective experience, truthfully represented. People with power need to be prepared to sit around the table with diverse forms of expertise and be ready to engage in processes of engagement that disrupt and challenge traditional power differentials and enable a meaningful and effective sharing of expertise to take place. Best practise here includes engagement initiatives that can include things like events, public living rooms and street kitchens. Food is a good incentive to bring people together. The primary focus is on bringing people together, listening, raising awareness of what is going on in their area, and providing an opportunity to engage if people want to. Not everyone wants to be active in their community, and many are tired of consultation exercises that tick boxes and offer very little feedback.
- **Accepting** that real success comes when there is a bringing together of different types of expertise (lived experience and other expertise such as e.g. statistical analysis or policy knowledge) through collaboration and co-production. This is a radical process of reimagining expertise and re-calibrating working processes.

Thrive is an award-winning organisation working in Teesside, advocating for the voice of lived experience to be included in decision-making processes.

The key principle behind a Poverty Truth Commission is that decisions about poverty must involve people who directly face poverty.

*"The aim is to ensure that people who have experienced poverty first-hand are at the heart of how the borough thinks and acts in tackling poverty and inequality. "Lived experiences provide a holistic approach when addressing a problem. We are also bigger than our lived experiences. We bring additional expertise; insight and knowledge. So why are we ignored? Our expertise should be valued. It is this expertise that could make the change that is needed."*

## CONTACT US



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# Top Tips

## To support the development and sustainability of mechanisms whereby local people can influence decisions that impact on their lives:

- Get to know your community. Build trust, establish and develop relationships with existing community groups, forums, advisory groups, community organisations and local experience panels to formalise connections. You can access the community through existing trusted relationships. Be prepared to accept that this takes time.
- Seek help and support from others, this is key. It is hard to do this on your own. Work with community activists, ward councillors, schools, churches, businesses, and key service providers to reach out to the wider community and not duplicate work going on.
- Facilitate structured discussions to explore:

**A.** How local people and organisations want to connect.

**B.** What support and resource is needed.

**C.** What would a 'community' decision making forum look like.

- Engage and get to know your wider community to establish ways of including them in decision making forums.
- Find out where people gather and start developing relationships.
- It is good to provide refreshments and connect with people. Find out their interests, their concerns and what is important to them.
- Ensure that gathering places are safe, accessible, and convenient, and that any identified barriers are removed.
- You can also get to know your community through wider community engagement initiatives which include things like events, public living rooms, and street kitchens. Food is a good incentive to bring people together. The primary focus is on bringing people together, listening, understanding what is going on in their area, and providing an opportunity to engage if people want to. Not everyone wants to be active in their community, and many are tired of consultation exercises that tick boxes and offer very little feedback.
- Listen and do not jump to conclusions. Do not try to step in and fix the problem. People are tired of being told 'what would work' and 'how they should do things'. Ensure you are working with them to arrive at potential solutions. This can be a learning curve for all.
- Think about language and messaging. Appreciate and value all knowledge. Community insight and knowledge is rich and well informed by their own experiences.
- Identify your community's personal strengths and limitations — you might be surprised at what you learn and be able to collectively harness this untapped expertise.
- Give incentives and a thank you. Cover childcare, transport, vouchers and/or gift cards.