



Research Summary

Civic education and local government – a literature review

Introduction

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In the UK, the disengagement of many citizens from political processes, coupled with increasing anti-social behaviour, have suggested that support for civic culture and democratic political institutions is deteriorating. To address these problems, policy-makers have taken an increasing interest in encouraging people to re-connect with government and their communities through becoming active citizens.

Since 1997, the government has introduced citizenship education in schools, active learning for active citizenship through the Home Office's Civil Renewal Unit, and a requirement for local authorities to '*alert young people to the working of social and public life... and the means at their disposal for influencing local policies*', as part of their wider duty to promote 'effective community engagement'.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The literature review has been produced by the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff University, as part of the ODPM research project *Civic Education: good practice guidance for local government*. For the purposes of this research, 'civic education' has been defined as educational, learning or promotional activities carried out in a local context, by or on behalf of local councils, to enable people to become more involved in

democratic processes. The focus of the study lies outside the school-based citizenship education programme that is part of the National Curriculum, though activities supporting and extending the curriculum fall within its remit.

The review applies the available evidence, from within and beyond the UK, to national policy debates about citizenship and local decision-making, and begins by describing the theoretical and policy context surrounding the goal of effective citizenship. Empirical evidence on the purposes, practice and impacts of initiatives to promote citizenship is then explored, before the prospects for civic education and the future support of effective citizenship are hypothesised.

Key findings

CONCEPTUAL DEBATES

Current policy debates on local government centre on the ideal of 'active citizenship' which emphasises the need for citizens to fulfil social and political obligations. The content of these obligations remains subject to intense discussion between civic-individualists (helping people to become volunteers and informed consumers), civic-republicans (emphasising direct political participation) and civic-pluralists (building a diverse but cohesive civic culture). Although civic republicanism is most strongly associated with current government policy, each of these interpretations is relevant to the array of practices through which local government might support civic education.

¹ Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions: *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*, white paper presented to Parliament, December 2001, HMSO, London.

KNOWLEDGE, YOUNG PEOPLE AND CITIZENSHIP ACTIVITY

The recent introduction of citizenship education in English schools offers pointers to the wider development of civic education by local government. In particular, there is an important role for local authorities in supporting school-based learning by fostering links to council activities, councillors and the wider community. Current research indicates that opportunities for pupils to connect school-based learning with participation in the community are weakly developed at present, and often hampered by the prejudice of adults. Youth cabinets and youth parliaments provide just one set of vehicles for this task.

Various studies suggest that young people with higher levels of civic knowledge are more confident of participating effectively in politics as adults, more likely to undertake voluntary action, and more willing to vote. These effects are enhanced in learning environments that are democratic in themselves, by promoting an open climate for discussing issues and encouraging students to take part in shaping school life. Other studies have found that the impacts of increasing *adult* political knowledge appear to vary between countries: in Australia it increased political literacy and competence but not participation, whereas in the Dominican Republic and South Africa, civic education led to people becoming more participatory at local level. However, improvements in participation were dependent on the provision of training that could overcome the resource disparities that exist for political participation, such as education, political interest and gender.

Studies that focus on young people suggest that policies to promote effective citizenship must be embedded in people's local concerns and sensitive to the willingness of citizens to become engaged. The importance of tacit (rather than forced) learning of effective citizenship is well recognised. Here, involvement in the service activities of councils and political events can provide raw material in the form of knowledge, models, and reflective matter.

THE SOCIAL CAPITAL CONNECTION

Evidence from both sides of the Atlantic suggests that social capital (taken here as comprising the resources found within the 'relations among persons', which can generate social action such as obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms) has a positive relationship with

political action and civic efficacy. Civic education can help to reinforce this reciprocity. However, perceived opportunities for citizens to influence decisions are at least as important as personal aptitude in encouraging political engagement. Research has suggested that institutional design within local governance can play a large role in shaping the development of communal social capital, notably by improving relationships with the voluntary sector, opportunities for public participation, the responsiveness of decision-making, and arrangements for democratic leadership and social inclusion. Being asked to participate also makes it more likely that people will do so.

A number of analysts have hypothesised connections between aspects of social capital (including levels of trust, civic engagement and volunteering) and government performance. Quantitative studies from the US provide some support for this hypothesis, and research also demonstrates a positive relationship between higher social capital and perceptions of local government. Establishing the direction of cause and effect between performance and citizenship activity however, is more complex, suggesting that policy-makers and practitioners must be sharply attuned to the varying attitudes of different groups of citizens and the context in which they are working.

INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACTS

There is evidence that public administrators can influence civic culture in various ways. US studies have shown that local government strategies centring on information, participation and reputation can reduce public cynicism about politics and encourage, *inter alia*, citizens to participate in community affairs. Public servants themselves, in the activities they get involved in outside their job, are also important contributors to civic culture. In the UK, supporting public participation initiatives with elements of civic education – including capacity building, developing a civic infrastructure of social groups, enabling citizens to shape the terms of involvement and providing feedback – has improved social outcomes.

There is also evidence that initiatives which empower communities have positive impacts in terms of fostering solutions to problems which are drawn from local peoples' knowledge and experience, delivering greater accountability to local citizens and – in some instances – helping to revitalise democracy by bringing policymaking closer to the average

citizen. Ensuring the sustainability of ‘bottom up’ initiatives, however, remains a thorn in the side of capacity-building and empowerment activities.

Positive evidence that involving the public in decision-making can have wider impacts on their sense of citizenship is available from analyses of citizens’ juries and similar practices. Not only do jurors bring relevant local knowledge and commitment to bear on decision-making that is usually carried out by “experts” but some jurors became more civically active as a result, and all parties gain new skills, knowledge and learning.

BARRIERS TO PROMOTING EFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Existing research also points to some clear barriers to the extent to which civic education-type activities will achieve the desired results.

The first challenge is to understand the exclusionary processes that may constrain different groups of people from becoming more effective citizens, so as to ensure that initiatives do not end up reinforcing existing patterns of disadvantage. Thus, different methods are necessary to reach different citizen groups, with particular efforts required to empower the resource-poor by building their capacity for civic engagement.

There are also significant resource implications in widening the availability of civic education. For the public, these issues are bound up with practical barriers, such as childcare and transport. For local authorities, such discretionary, cross-sectoral activities often fare poorly in the pursuit of efficiency savings. Furthermore, more fundamental questions will always remain about the desirability and scope of *government* intervention to establish genuine *citizen-centred* government.

Conclusions

Drawing a more cohesive picture of what makes for successful civic education is hampered by the various ways in which the success of civic education initiatives has been interpreted (knowledge, virtues, behavioural changes etc) and the importance of context in framing the impact of interventions. Nevertheless, the literature review has confirmed the key issues which local authorities seeking to support effective citizenship will need to address:

- **Sustainability** – because too many initiatives tend to be short-term and *ad hoc*;
- **Demand** – because involving local citizens in the design of initiatives can often make those initiatives more effective;
- **Tailoring** – because different approaches are required to assist different, and especially marginalised communities;
- **Best practice participation** – because opportunities for participation that are meaningful and susceptible to public influence provide a vital context for tacit learning about citizenship;
- **Joined-up working** – because of the need to overcome the proliferation and *ad hoc* nature of many citizenship-related initiatives;
- **Models of democracy** – i.e. the type of democratic processes that initiatives should support, because civic education activities can push local democracy in more consumerist or public interest directions;
- **Evidence** – because the general paucity of evaluation in this field hampers organisational learning.

Overall, the existing evidence base for what delivers success is useful but not extensive, and there is relatively little research that has examined directly the efficacy of civic education delivered by local government outwith the school curriculum. Nevertheless, local government is well placed to play a full role in supporting effective citizenship and enabling local communities to participate collectively and deliberate in democratic decisions. Although existing research has shown how broad social characteristics significantly influence citizenship activity, it is also true that local institutions can generate increased social capital and civic engagement.

NEXT STEPS

Future research on civic education will help practitioners, policy-makers and theorists to clarify the contribution that local government can make to nation-wide efforts to develop the capacity for effective citizenship. Subsequent stages of this project involve surveys of local government experience in promoting effective citizenship and detailed case studies of interesting practices. The main objective of the study is to produce guidance for a wide range of audiences, especially local

authorities, on how the delivery of civic education activities may be improved. The research team would be delighted to receive comments on both this review and also on approaches to civic education that are being adopted by local authorities. Please contact Richard Cowell (cowellrj@cardiff.ac.uk , or 029 20876684), Rhys Andrews (andrewsr@cardiff.ac.uk) or Janet Crawford (janet.crawford@odpm.gsi.gov.uk or 020 7944 5575).

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