

# CLEAR: An auditing tool for citizen participation at the local level

Version Sept 2006

The CLEAR tool exists to help local governments and other organisations or groups at the local level to better understand public participation in their localities. It is a diagnostic tool: one which helps public bodies to identify particular strengths and problems with participation in their localities and, subsequently, to consider more comprehensive strategies for enhancing public participation.

The CLEAR tool develops from a framework for understanding public participation<sup>1</sup> which argues that participation is most successful where citizens:

- C an do** – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;
- L ike to** – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;
- E nabled to** – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;
- A sked to** – that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;
- R esponded to** – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered.

The tool is organised around these five headings and provides a focus for individuals to explore participation in their area. This tool is a refined version that reflects the experience of the road test conducted by 23 municipalities in five countries during the Spring of 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Part one of this document provides guidelines on using the tool and developing the diagnosis. Part two provides the main body of the tool.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the CLEAR framework and its conceptual and empirical basis, see: Lowndes, V., Pratchett, L. and Stoker, G. (2006) 'Diagnosing and remedying the failings of official participation schemes: the CLEAR framework' *Social Policy and Society*, Vol 5, No 2 pp281-91; V. Lowndes, L. Pratchett and G. Stoker (2006) *Locality Matters: Making Participation Count in Local Politics*, London: IPPR

<sup>2</sup> See documents from the Council of Europe Conference 'Tools for strengthening democratic participation at the local level', Tampere, 28-29 June 2006.

# **PART 1: Guidelines on using CLEAR**

## **Self diagnosis using CLEAR**

It is important to distinguish the process of self-diagnosis from the audit and evaluation tools that have proliferated in the public sector in recent years. The tool does not seek to provide standardised objective data that can be used to compare localities and reach some ranking or classification of different municipalities. It does not produce a benchmark which judges a particular area. Indeed, any attempt to compare localities on this basis misunderstands the aim of self-diagnosis and misuses the information that is produced from the process. The tool does not generate directly comparable information on participation that can be used by third parties to contrast or evaluate areas.

The self-diagnosis process facilitates reflection and understanding of local political participation among those who are most in a position to do something about it. Potential users of the tool, therefore, include:

- Elected or appointed officials in local government
- Other public bodies that have an interest in sponsoring participation initiatives
- The organisations of civil society within a locality
- Citizens interested in enhancing the participation opportunities within their localities

An important feature of the CLEAR framework is that its five factors are neither hierarchical nor sequential. The presence of one factor is not a precondition for others and effective participation does not necessarily depend on all of the components being present although, in an ideal world, they would be. Furthermore, the model does not attach a specific weight or importance to any particular factor: there is no assumed balance between the different factors that should be expected in any given locality. Rather, the underlying assumption of the diagnostic tool is that it will serve two purposes:

1. It will help those conducting the diagnosis to identify and understand the balance of factors affecting participation in their localities
2. It will provide an opportunity for all those involved in a diagnosis to reflect upon the relative strengths and gaps in participation in their localities and to consider strategies for addressing these gaps.

## How to use the CLEAR tool

The tool works by posing a series of questions which those conducting the diagnosis seek to answer. The way in which these questions are asked and the people involved in answering them (government departments, local voluntary organisations, citizens' groups, politicians, individual citizens and so on) will vary between localities, as will the techniques that are employed (e.g. interviews with key stakeholders, surveys of citizens, focus groups of municipal employees and so on). The key point is that the tool is adaptable to local circumstances to enable interested parties to diagnose the strengths and limitations of publicly sponsored participation initiatives in their area, with a view to improving them.

For each of the five factors the tool provides a series of themes which have been elaborated into indicative questions. These questions suggest the types of issues that users of the tool might want to investigate under that heading. Not all questions will be relevant in every context. Moreover, in different local or national contexts it may be necessary to adapt the questions to suit the type of data that is available. For example, some countries can provide very accurate statistical information about the socio-economic conditions of each locality. In others, it may be more appropriate to use specially collected information or even the informed judgments of local people. The tool is for self-diagnosis: the way in which the questions are developed, therefore, should suit local needs while remaining honest to the main themes that the tool is articulating.

Similarly, it may be necessary to adapt the range of questions depending upon the types of respondents to which the tool is being addressed and the types of method being used. Local politicians might be expected to have different knowledge of the locality and the ability to offer insightful judgments on particular issues that would not be reasonable to expect of citizens who are not politically active.

The methods for collecting information and evidence are deliberately underspecified in the CLEAR tool. The information that municipalities have access to varies both between and within countries, as do the resources that municipalities have to commit to the diagnosis. Similarly, the amount and nature of cooperation with other organisations and citizen groups in the municipality will be locally specific, requiring different approaches to meet those needs. The tool does not assume a single methodology for implementation. Each user can design their own method to suit local needs. However, in implementing the tool, users should be sensitive to the following points:

- *Existing data sources* – what data is already available that can be used to answer the questions and what data will it be necessary to collect fresh? For some questions it may be particularly useful to seek proxy measures – those that give a good indication of the general picture (e.g. measures of educational attainment are normally a good proxy for socio-economic status). For other questions it may be more useful to seek

judgments and opinions from a variety of stakeholders. The tool inevitably requires some new data collection but this aspect can be a relatively small and low cost part of the diagnosis.

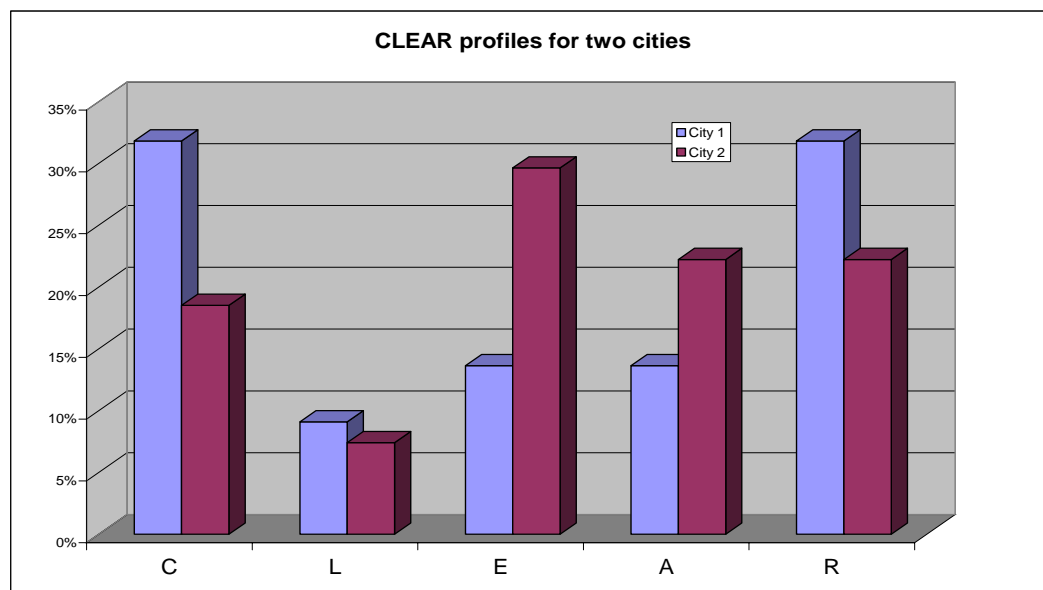
- *In-house or consultancy activities* – where data needs to be collected from stakeholders (as opposed to simply being retrieved from existing data) there are a variety of ways in which it can be achieved. Some organisations may feel it is most appropriate to collect the information themselves, using their in-house expertise. Others may employ specialist consultants to collect and/or analyse the evidence on their behalf. Both approaches are potentially appropriate. However, it is eventually the responsibility of the commissioning organisation to take on-board the findings and respond to them.
- *Quantitative and qualitative information* – the tool does not anticipate a particular technique or approach. Some questions lend themselves to collecting quantitative information (e.g. those around skills). Others are more suited to more qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus groups. Inevitably, therefore, organisations will need to have a mixed approach: interviews with some stakeholders, perhaps a survey to collect particular information, focus groups with particular citizens, as well as drawing upon existing information sources. The precise mix will depend upon the resources available to the organisation and the amount of effort they want to commit to the diagnosis.
- *Range of stakeholders engaged* – the range of stakeholders in this field is potentially large: from elected politicians and their political parties; through employees of various public bodies; to organised interests, community groups and, indeed, individual citizens with no recognised affiliation. Again, it is up to the sponsoring organisation to decide which stakeholders it will want to involve, although inevitably it will want to ensure that a range of voices are heard, beyond those that are already recognised as being influential. For the tool to be effective, however, it is necessary to reflect the interests of a range of stakeholders.
- *Level of analysis* – the tool is not limited to a particular administrative jurisdiction or geographic community. In some areas it may be best suited for use at the municipal level. However, in cities it may be more appropriate to think in terms of smaller communities or neighbourhoods or, even, for comparing between neighbourhoods in the same city. In these circumstances the goal would not be to compare absolute levels of participation between communities but, rather, to diagnose which participation techniques are most useful for engaging different communities.
- *Sequences* – organisations may not want to collect all of the information at the same time. Organisations may want, first of all, to undertake an initial diagnosis in-house, using a small team of officers or elected politicians, before extending the process to other stakeholders or focusing upon specific communities of geography or interest.

Implementing the CLEAR tool, therefore, requires those charged with responsibility for it to think carefully about the techniques they will employ and the way in which they will be sequenced. While they can learn from how others have undertaken the process,<sup>3</sup> there will always be a requirement to adapt the tool and its questions to local circumstances.

### Analysing the evidence – the CLEAR profile

As the information is collected it is likely that particular problems and issues (as well as strengths) will present themselves. These are part of the diagnosis and will require action on the part of the organisation. However, beyond these very specific responses it is also useful for the organisation to create a 'CLEAR profile' of participation in their locality.

The point of such profiles is to develop an understanding of how the different aspects of CLEAR look in a given city. The chart below offers an example of CLEAR profiles for two cities.



For each city, the total per cent across the five factors adds to 100, it is just differentially distributed between them. The scores are arrived at by adding the responses from all the questions and considering their relative significance. For example, for the two cities presented above, the following analysis was concluded:

<sup>3</sup> See the documents from the Council of Europe Conference 'Tools for strengthening democratic participation at the local level', Tampere, 28-29 June 2006.

	City 1		City 2	
<b>C</b>	Population and socioeconomic profile identified Citizen have access to resources and skills for participation Other forms to engage citizens in participation	32	Socio economic and population profile has been identified Citizen have access to resources and skills for participation	19
<b>L</b>	People do not trust each other No strong community spirit Some group voices are more legitimate than others and some groups are excluded	10	People have low trust in each other and in the municipality No strong community spirit	7
<b>E</b>	Voluntary sector is active and some organisations are influential Umbrella organisations exist Municipality supports the voluntary sector Sector's weakness identified	13	Several voluntary organisations exist Voluntary sector is very active and influential Voluntary organisations sufficient to reach all citizen groups Umbrella organisations exist Municipality support the voluntary sector Sector's weakness has been identified	30
<b>A</b>	Several forms of participation are promoted Internet used for information purposes Sufficient forms to engage citizens into participation	13	Wide range of forms of participation are promoted Internet used for information purposes Strategy on participation exists Not all forms of participation reach all community groups	22
<b>R</b>	Statutory procedures exist on citizen participation Decision makers good at understanding citizen views and municipality good at explaining decision to citizens Communication strategy has been improved to engage citizens in decisions Citizen programme exists and politicians have been trained	32	Statutory procedures exist Decision makers are good at understanding citizen views Municipality is good at explaining decisions to citizens Citizen education projects exist and some politicians trained	22

There is, inevitably, an element of judgment in this process. However, the outcome is also objective in so far as it draws upon systematically collected evidence.

Creating such profiles inevitably begs the question, what should be the appropriate profile for a municipality within CLEAR? It is tempting to assume that all factors in the CLEAR framework should be equally distributed and that any deviation from that equal distribution should be subject to correction. From this assumption, policy responses to a CLEAR diagnosis would seek automatically to build up those areas which register low and, possibly, to diminish the effects of higher scoring components, in order to achieve balance. However, such an assumption misses a fundamental point in the CLEAR framework: the framework is derived from an analysis of participation in different localities and takes, as its starting point, the understanding that all localities are different. This difference means that citizens' resources, cultures of trust and reciprocity and networks of civil society all vary. As a consequence, the integration of civil society into public life and the extent to which public authorities will need to promote and respond to public engagement will also be different across localities. If the very simple point that all localities are different is accepted, then it is inevitable that the balance of different components in the CLEAR framework will also vary.

It is up to each municipality to determine what the appropriate balance should be and to develop responses that might help to achieve that balance. It follows that this balance, in terms of both reality and what may be deemed desirable, may vary over time as well as place. As a diagnostic tool, therefore, CLEAR is expected to be subject to several iterations in any one

locality. Over a number of years it may be possible to identify significant changes to the CLEAR profile in response to public initiatives.

## Policy responses

If a CLEAR diagnosis reveals a profile that the locality is happy with, then there is no need for any policy response. However, it is our assumption that the process will reveal at least some areas where municipalities feel they should take some action to address gaps or limitations in what they currently observe. As the next table indicates, there are a range of responses that municipalities could make if their investigation using the CLEAR framework reveals “gaps” or areas of difficulty.

### Responding to investigative lessons from CLEAR

Key factor	Policy Response
Can do	Community development, training and development and practical support through the provision of community centres and resources targeted at those groups or communities that may need help to find their voice.
Like to	Build a sense of community or neighbourliness. People have to feel part of a community to be comfortable with participation; so strategies of building social or community cohesion may be an important part in creating the right environment for participation
Enabled to	Strong civic institutions can give the confidence to express their views. They may need to be monitored, challenged and managed so that they provide channels for the representation of a wide range of interests rather than a privileged position for a few. Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication is an important part of the policy agenda for municipalities committed to participation
Asked to	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive provide the best option in terms of making the ‘ask’ factor work. Different groups will require different forms of mobilisation. See Table Y for more details
Responded to	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond - through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback

Of course, one of the main areas where municipalities might seek to change their profiles is in relation to their promotion and sponsorship of participation. These changes might involve extending the range of opportunities and

initiatives or, more simply, changing the emphasis within them. The following table provides details of some of the many and diverse ways of asking the public their opinion.

**Different forms of 'asked to': applying CLEAR**

<b>Form</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Illustrative Case</b>	<b>Web Resource</b>
<b>Consultative innovations</b>	Informs decision makers of citizens' views through a combination of methods to explore public opinion.	Public debate on the future of GM technology in the UK in 2001	<a href="http://www.gmnation.org.uk/">http://www.gmnation.org.uk/</a>
<b>Deliberative methods</b>	Enabling a cross-section of citizens to have the time and opportunity to reflect on an issue by gathering opinion and information in order to come to a judgment about an issue or concern.	The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly in Canada was established in 2004 and over eleven months, 160 were given the task of reviewing the province's electoral system.	<a href="http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca">http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca</a>
<b>Co-governance Mechanisms</b>	Arrangements aim to give citizens significant influence during the process of decision making, particularly when it comes to issues of distribution of public spending and implementation practice.	Participatory Budgeting started its existence as a form of engagement in Porto Alegre, Brazil in the late 1980s but by 2004 it is estimated that over 250 cities or municipalities practiced some version of it	<a href="http://www.pgualc.org">www.pgualc.org</a>
<b>Direct democracy</b>	Referendums called by citizens that come in two broad forms. Popular initiatives allow the recall of decision made by elected representatives. Citizens' initiatives – allow citizens to set the agenda and put an issue up for public decision	Quite widely practised in Switzerland and the United States	<a href="http://www.iandrinstitute.org/">http://www.iandrinstitute.org/</a>
<b>E-Democracy</b>	The use of information and communication technology to give citizens new opportunities to engage.	The UK National Project on local e-democracy has produced a wide range of tools for e-participation aimed specifically at helping local governments improve democratic engagement	<a href="http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk">www.edemocracy.gov.uk</a>

## PART 2: The CLEAR tool

### The context of citizen participation in the municipality

This first section provides the opportunity to gather contextual information on the nature of participation in the area and some indication of the initiatives that the municipality is already taking to encourage more active citizen engagement.

- What is the population of the municipality?
- What are the main service responsibilities of the municipality?
- What are the key features of the locality (e.g. rural/urban, economic activities, regional position, etc.)?
- What is the turnout at local elections? How does it compare with the national average and is it increasing or decreasing?
- What is the level of *non-electoral* participation in the area (e.g. compared with the national picture or similar localities)? Is it increasing or decreasing?
- Which form of participation are citizens most likely to use in seeking to influence municipal decision makers (e.g. petitions, protests, media campaigns, contacting politicians or municipal employees)?
- Which forms of political engagement are decision-makers most likely to respond to?
- Which groups of citizens does the municipality focus its participation initiatives on (e.g. users of a particular service, residents of a neighbourhood, specific sections of the community)?
- Which groups of citizens tend to be the most disengaged or excluded from the political process (e.g. young people, elderly people, single parents, people with disabilities, ethnic minority groups)?
- What are the main issues that trigger participation in the locality?

# Can do

This section is concerned with the socio-economic arguments that have traditionally dominated explanations for variations in local participation rates. It is the argument that when people have the appropriate skills and resources they are more able to participate. These skills range from the ability and confidence to speak in public or write letters, to the capacity to organise events and encourage others of similar mind to support initiatives. It also includes access to resources that facilitate such activities (resources ranging from photocopying facilities through to internet access and so on). These skills and resources are much more commonly found among the better educated and employed sections of the population: those of higher socio-economic status. The questions are designed to help municipalities explore the strengths and limitations of citizens from this perspective.

## **Educational attainment**

What are levels of education like in the locality? Have most people got basic education, or higher level qualifications? How does the picture differ for different groups of citizens – young people, older people, minority groups?

## **Employment and social class**

What is the class make-up of the locality? What is the balance between different occupations – e.g. professional, skilled, semi or unskilled work, self-employment? What are the main employers in the area? Is there a problem of unemployment in the area? Is unemployment concentrated among particular parts of your community?

## **Demography**

What is the age profile of the population in the municipality? What proportion of the population belongs to an ethnic minority group? How many significant ethnic minority groups are there in the municipality (i.e. that the municipality recognises and addresses in its communications with citizens)? What languages are spoken in the locality? Are there other demographic factors that may be significant for participation (e.g. family structure, student concentration, commuters)?

## **Resources**

Do citizens have easy access to appropriate resources for political participation? For instance, are there plenty of accessible meeting venues? Can citizens get access to computers, photocopiers or telephones to help them participate? Are these resources available to those who don't have access to them through at work or at home? Do the local media support participation by providing information and communication channels (e.g. local TV, newspaper or radio)? Do citizens have time to participate?

## **Skills/knowledge**

Do citizens have the necessary skills for participating in political life (e.g. the ability to write letters, speak in public, organise meetings etc)? Do citizens have the competence to utilise the resources in their community (e.g. to use computers, the Internet etc.)? Which skills are in short supply? Do some groups of citizens have more access to resources, and more skills to use them, than others?

# Like to

This factor rests on the idea that people's felt sense of community encourages them to engage. The argument is that if you feel a part of something then you are more willing to engage. Evidence from many studies confirms that where people feel a sense of togetherness or shared commitment they are more willing to participate. This concern about a sense of attachment to the political entity where participation is at stake has been given new impetus in recent years in relation to debates about social capital. A sense of trust, connection and linked networks can, according to the social capital argument, enable people to work together and co-operate more effectively. Sense of community can be a strong motivator for participation. Conversely, an absence of identity or commitment to a locality can militate against participation.

The questions in this section focus particularly on the sense of identity and community that exists in the locality and associated stocks of social capital (in terms of trust and reciprocity)

## Identity

What is the main focus of identity for people – the local neighbourhood, the town or city as a whole, or the region they live in? How well do people in the same neighbourhood know each other? Do citizens identify with the municipality? How attached are people to the area in which they live? How important are *non-geographical* sources of identity – like ethnic or cultural identity, social class, or 'communities of interest' (among young people, or gay people, or those with a particular interest – like sport)?

## Homogeneity

How stable is the community – have people lived at the same address a long time or is there a lot of mobility? Does the community have a strong sense of history and tradition? To what extent is there a similarity of identity across the community (i.e. are people largely the same – and if not, where are the main cleavages)? Are values and priorities the same across the community – and if not, where are the major cleavages?

## Trust

How much do citizens trust one another? Are people generally helpful to one another or do they tend to put self interest first? Is anti social behaviour a problem? How much do citizens trust the municipality to make decisions that are in the interest of the community as a whole? How much do citizens trust the national government to make decisions that are in the interest of the community as a whole?

## Citizenship

Is there a strong community spirit that supports collective action? Do people feel a sense of responsibility towards the community? Are there groups or sections of the community that are likely to feel excluded? Is there a sense in the municipality that the voices of some groups are more legitimate than others?

# Enabled to

This factor is premised on the research observation that most participation is facilitated through groups or organisations. Political participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks. Collective participation provides continuous reassurance and feedback that the cause of engagement is relevant and that participation is having some value. Indeed, for some, engagement in this manner is more important than the outcome of such participation. The existence of networks and groups which can support participation and which can provide a route into decision-makers, therefore, is vital to the vibrancy of participation in an area.

The questions in this section focus on the existence and membership of groups to support political participation, and the existence of a 'civic infrastructure' that can encourage the development of such groups and ensure that they remain connected with local decision-makers.

## **Types of civic organisation**

What sorts of organisations exist and are active in the locality (e.g. youth groups, environmental campaigns, social welfare organisations, parent-teacher associations, sports or hobby groups, ethnic associations, cultural bodies)? Is there a census of such bodies? Which organisations have the most members? Which have the most influence on municipal decision-making? Is the range of groups sufficient to address the full range of political issues that citizens wish to engage in?

## **Activities**

How active are civic organisations? Are they increasing in number? Is membership increasing? Do such bodies seek to influence decisions at the municipal level, or get involved in running local services? What are the main ways they do this?

## **Civic infrastructure**

Are there any 'umbrella' or coordinating agencies that exist specifically to support the development or growth of civic organisations in the area? Do they have sufficient resources and capacities to reach out to a range of organisations? What support does the municipality give to civic organisations (e.g. grants, premises or equipment, staff support, access to facilities, opportunities to meet decision-makers)? What are the major weaknesses of the voluntary and community sector in the area? Does the local media support the work of civic bodies (e.g. publicising their activities)?

## Asked to

This factor builds on the finding of much research that mobilisation matters. People tend to become engaged more often and more regularly when they are asked to engage. Research shows that people's readiness to participate often depends upon whether or not they are approached and how they are approached. Mobilisation can come from a range of sources but the most powerful form is when those responsible for a decision ask others to engage with them in making the decision. Case studies have demonstrated how open political and managerial systems in local municipalities can also have a significant effect by extending a variety of invitations to participate to their citizens. The variety of participation options for engagement is important because some people are more comfortable with some forms of engagement such as a public meeting while others would prefer, for example, to engage through on-line discussions. Some people want to talk about the experiences of their community or neighbourhood while others want to engage based on their knowledge of a particular service as a user.

This section asks questions about the ways in which the municipality is seeking to engage with citizens, the variety of initiatives that it supports, and the way in which it communicates these initiatives to the public.

### Forms of participation

How does the municipality seek to engage citizens in decision-making processes (e.g. surveys, consultations, focus groups, citizens' juries or panels, regular forums)? Does the municipality seek to use the internet for citizen engagement (e.g. putting information online, online consultations or discussion forums, use of email or SMS texts)?

### Strategy

Does the municipality have a strategy for engagement or are initiatives more piecemeal? Does the municipality collaborate with any other organisations in consulting or engaging the public? Are citizens offered incentives to participate (e.g. honoraria, gifts, IT equipment, service enhancements, discounts on charges)? Are participation activities normally held at official premises? Has the municipality experimented with unusual locations to encourage participation (e.g. citizens' homes, schools, supermarkets)?

### Reach and diversity

Are existing forms of engagement sufficient to reach all the different sections of the community (young/old, ethnic minority groups etc)? Are particular forms of participation used to reach specific citizen groups? Do decision-makers give higher priority to the findings of some forms of participation over others (e.g. those that produce quantitative preferences)?

## Responded to

This final factor captures the idea that for people to participate on a sustainable basis they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference and that it is achieving positive benefits. For people to participate they have to believe that they are going to be listened to and, if not always agreed with, at least in a position to see that their view has been taken into account. Responsiveness is about ensuring feedback, which may not always be positive – in the sense of accepting the dominant view from participants. Feedback involves explaining how the decision was made and the role of participation within that. Response is vital for citizen education, and so has a bearing on the 'front end' of the process too.

This set of questions asks how different messages are weighed by decision-makers and how conflicting views are prioritised. They also examine how information on decision-making is fed back to citizens.

### **Listening**

What are the procedures for ensuring that the citizen's voice is considered in decision-making? What mechanisms are used to feed the results of particular consultation or participation initiatives into the decision-making process?

### **Balance and prioritisation**

How are the views of citizens balanced against the opinions of professionals and elected members, especially where they diverge? How good are decision-makers at understanding and taking into account the views of citizens?

### **Feedback and education**

How good is the municipality at explaining to citizens the reasons for a particular decision and the ways in which citizen views have been taken into account? To what extent do citizens understand and accept the decisions made by municipalities? What efforts is the municipality making to improve its communication with citizens? Does the municipality have a programme of citizen education in relation to participation? Does the municipality provide support to politicians and/or officers in learning how to respond more effectively to participation?

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