

**States of**

**Participation:**

**International**

**Best Practice**

**in**

**Civic Engagement**



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND







## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Liam O'Farrell, Researcher at the University of Iceland.

The work was funded by Rannís, the Icelandic Research Fund, as part of the [Democratic Constitutional Design](#) (*Lýðræðisleg Stjórnarskrárgerð*) project. This project studies the ongoing reforms to the Constitution of Iceland and is developing a theoretical framework for democratic participation and civic engagement. The research team is working alongside the Prime Minister's Office to monitor the implementation of a programme of constitutional revisions over two parliamentary terms, 2018-2025.

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To cite this report:

O'Farrell, L. (2020) *States of participation: international best practice in civic engagement*. Reykjavik: University of Iceland.



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## Executive summary

This report opens with a discussion of the purpose of civic engagement, drawing from research that shows it is not only about enabling the public to express their views, but also building trust and strengthening democracy. This means that civic engagement needs to be embedded into institutional culture and practices. The epistemic or democratic functions of civic engagement therefore need to be considered by institutions.

The report argues that, counter-intuitively, the Covid-19 pandemic has created fertile ground for thinking about greater civic engagement and public participation in decisions. Ten examples of innovative civic engagement methods in cities across the world are introduced and discussed. These cover digital platforms, participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, participatory planning, and citizen science.

There is an in-depth case study of Vienna, a city where civic engagement is deeply embedded in the practices of local government. Vienna is frequently cited as a place with a very high degree of public participation, and it is no coincidence that it is also regarded as the best city in the world to live in, along with a strong culture of innovation and community cohesion.

The report closes by laying out the implications of these case studies, with suggestions of next steps for cities that seek to incorporate civic engagement principles and practices. Seven key recommendations are made: embeddedness, communications, defining policy areas, setting long- and short-term aims, adapting existing institutions, handling opposition, and co-producing shared values.



## What is the point of civic engagement?

The aim of this report is to serve as an introduction to the topic of civic engagement and introduce case studies of best practice taken from cities across the world. Effective civic engagement is about more than just incorporating the views of the public into policy and service design. Of course, there is a place for this model of technocratic engagement. For example, service users' [experiential knowledge can complement](#) the technical knowledge of policymakers and subject matter experts, facilitating the creation of more holistic interventions. However, the clue to civic engagement's higher function is in the first part of the term. Done well, it serves a democratic and epistemic function, meaning that civic engagement is related to issues such as justice, fairness, and inclusion. It is not simply a box to tick at the end of a policy process, with the public able to make a few cosmetic changes to a decision.

Civic engagement is a process [initiated](#) by local and national governments, whereas participation is citizen-led. Both necessitate rethinking top-down hierarchies of knowledge, power, and decision-making. True engagement means empowering the public to take at least partial ownership of decisions, building a relationship of mutual trust. This enables the co-production of shared visions for the future and collaborative identification of problems, needs, and local assets. Democratic engagement also requires those involved to find compromises, even when they have the power to bypass or ignore others. Such ideas can seem anathema in the context of 'winner takes all' electoral systems in countries such as the UK and USA.

Places with a weak participatory culture are characterised by a disconnect between government and citizens, which can foment popular hostility towards perceived political or economic 'elites'. In the global context of growing economic inequality and intensifying, overlapping crises from climate change to the Covid-19 pandemic, this can lead to widespread feelings of powerlessness and a general sense of dissatisfaction with how things are working. We see across the world that these ingredients can lead to frustrated protest voting, as well as the rise of populist movements promising easy solutions to complex problems.

The centralisation of executive power and resources means that regions and cities are not able to articulate their own strategies to deal with challenges, or create a marketplace of ideas through experimentation on the local level to see 'what works' and can be scaled up nationally or even internationally. Political centralisation is also linked to increased [voter apathy](#), which psychological research shows is driven by widespread perceptions that politicians are fundamentally dishonest, that an elite few decides how the country is run, and that the parliament does a bad job. This needs to change. Local communities are the ideal places to start this change.

In creating a civic engagement strategy for any city, it is important to distinguish between the ideal and the achievable. In an ideal situation, austerity cuts to local authority budgets that have taken place in many countries would be reversed. Ideally, every city would have a world-class digital civic engagement platform, as in Reykjavik, or have the rich engagement ecosystem of Vienna. The case studies in this report represent outstanding practice, and demonstrate what can be achieved through sustained, committed work to actively involve and empower citizens. Such developments do not happen overnight. It takes time and resources to build up public confidence and get buy-in. The public needs to trust that their ideas will be taken seriously, and public institutions in the city need to trust the public to identify their own needs and articulate appropriate, situationally specific solutions.

These case studies can also be seen as a roadmap for further exploration of the terrain of civic engagement. There may be a 'late starter advantage' in thinking about these innovations, whereby lessons learned elsewhere can be applied. Progress towards catching up can be faster than being a pioneer in the field. This so-called 'catch-up effect' has been documented in development economics, whereby poorer countries develop faster as they can replicate successful technology from countries that have already gone through industrialisation. The same principles can apply when borrowing the learning from elsewhere to build more participatory societies, although it should of course be borne in mind that cultural context is important too.

Research shows that public involvement makes a meaningful difference to the quality of decisions. For example, Iceland's draft ['crowdsourced' constitution](#) of 2011 was developed in collaboration between citizens and experts, with the public having particular impact on the formulation of values and basic rights. 1 in 10 public proposals were taken forward by the Icelandic Constitutional Council, demonstrating that citizens can make recommendations with the capacity to enrich the quality of decisions at the very highest level.

Moreover, cities on the world-ranking lists of most liveable urban areas share the common feature in that they all have long-standing commitments to civic engagement and apply participatory policies in their local government. This is the thread that binds together places as disparate as Melbourne, Vienna, Bern, and Honolulu. Action at the local level is the means by which international pronouncements are [given tangible form](#), moving beyond the announcements of government officials and representatives at the UN into practical action. Being a global citizen and responding to globally shared challenges starts with democratic participation in our home communities and cities, and empowering people to feel that they have a stake in the future of their area and the planet.







## Has Covid-19 changed the terrain of engagement?

Given that Covid-19 has only recently become part of our lives, there has not yet been a systematic review of how organisations and governments have changed their approaches to engaging with the public in response to the pandemic. In part, this also reflects the uncertainty of knowing when things will return to normal, or how working and living habits will look afterwards. However, there is anecdotal evidence that organisations are becoming more interested in digital methods as a means of engaging the public in a socially distanced way.

We now stand at a crossroads. Civic engagement, devolution of power, and deliberative democracy are tools that we know can work to [rebuild the legitimacy](#) of political institutions that have been much undermined in many Western democracies. Handling the pandemic means requiring citizens to trust in the information that they receive from officials, and also for governments to use impartial, reliable figures and evidence-based advice. This is an opportunity to reset the moves towards 'fake news' that have been much documented in recent years.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, Covid-19 presents a good opportunity for developing civic engagement strategies. Firstly, organisations have a chance to pause, reflect on established practices, and think critically about what needs to change. Secondly, there has been a tremendous flourishing of communal trust and interconnectedness. This moment of focus on social solidarity is an ideal period to attempt to reconnect the public with public institutions, and to also think about how power and resources are distributed in our societies.

Research in China has shown that, in the context of Covid-19, governments can use [social media for citizen engagement](#) that positively affects trust through dialogue and sharing of the latest information. Contrary to conventional views of Chinese social media as being sites of self-censorship and surveillance, the [latest research](#) has found that citizens have used the platforms for active engagement, including claim-making and negotiation with authorities. In the Western context, where free speech is seen as a fundamental right, individuals may feel able to be more critical of government information than the average user of a Chinese social media platform. There is a dark side, however, with individuals able to make false claims and the potential for hostile powers to undermine electoral processes with disinformation.

The pandemic has shown the importance of channels of communication between citizens and authorities, and the extent to which a functioning society relies on neglected values such as solidarity. In order to successfully overcome the pandemic, there needs to be a mutual relationship of trust between citizens and authorities.

Civic engagement can achieve this. Covid-19 therefore provides the opportunity to introduce new, more unifying political narratives and rebuild trust through the use of credible, nonideological, and nonpartisan knowledge, along with the centring of experts over vocal populists who rely on emotion rather than facts.

Another important change has been the renewed focus on the structural inequalities facing black people as a result of the Black Lives Matter protests. This is an opportunity for local and national governments, as well as agencies and organisations outside of government, to work alongside communities to tackle the ongoing discrimination that ethnic minority citizens face and work in partnership to develop an inclusive vision for the future.

Engaging with the issue of inclusion is one of the key areas of debate in contemporary civic engagement literature and research: namely, how far and by what mechanisms can we ensure a diverse range of views are represented in decision-making? For example, [research on digital democracy](#) has found that marginalised groups (e.g. ethnic minorities) continue to struggle to make their voices heard, or even contribute at all, in digital engagement spaces. Issues that women care about receive [less attention](#) in participatory budgeting processes than those championed by male participants, leading to calls for feminist principles of participatory budgeting to be developed. Similar problems are found in urban planning, where spaces are designed by the largely male practitioners of this field without consideration of how [differently](#) men and women experience space. The result is that women can feel unsafe using the spaces in our cities.

A further issue is the notion of [cognitive diversity](#), an emerging and contentious area of research in this field. The question remains on the extent to which the views of those who think differently – from left-wing anarchists to far-right nationalists – can and should be incorporated into civic engagement and contingent structures of democratic deliberation. Indeed, is there a need for such ‘cognitive diversity’ at all, or does this undermine efforts to draw attention to the voices of groups that experience discrimination? Moreover, what limits can reasonably be placed upon speech and public discourse in such forums, if any at all?



## How should cities approach the development of a civic engagement strategy?

The case studies in this report give an idea of the range of engagement methods that exist. On a practical level, there needs to be a clear roadmap that starts with simple steps and ramps up. An effective engagement strategy is not be set in stone from the outset, but instead is iterative, applying learning from piloting new methods and adapting to changes. For this reason, this report concludes by considering the implications of these case studies and suggesting possible next steps for cities to take on their own civic engagement journey.

It would be remiss to discuss innovative methods for engagement without considering the limitations on such innovation that are placed on local authorities. Frequently, national government rhetoric about empowering communities and devolving responsibilities does not accord with reality. In the UK, for instance, there has been no '[devolution revolution](#)'. The country is an outlier among developed countries in how centralised it is, despite plenty of evidence showing that this [undermines](#) Britain's economic success and increases feelings of disempowerment and voter apathy. A centralised political and economic system with a weak civic engagement culture, along with a 'first past the post' voting system that makes voting in many places superfluous, seems almost designed to generate popular dissatisfaction. And yet, Britain's society is far more stable and united than the media and political debates suggest, with only a [very small minority](#) thinking that their affiliation with a political party is an important part of their identity.

The autonomy of local governments to develop their own policies is frequently limited, yet there is plenty of evidence of the benefits of devolution. Research found that [devolving responsibilities](#) over council tax, business rates, infrastructure, planning, housing, and skills to the ten Core Cities of England outside London and the South East would increase the size of the UK economy by £222 billion. Instead of autonomy and funding being devolved, the UK government has instead used devolution to '[devolve the axe](#)'. Take Bristol, where the £15 million budget for the combined authority does begin to balance out the £156 million cuts to Bristol City Council.

There is not an 'out of the box' model for good engagement; each city adapts their own slightly different methods, attuned to the facts on the ground and within the constraints that governments place upon them. There is an [established link](#) between low incomes, inequality, and low engagement, which is a major barrier to building a participatory culture in the places we live. Civic engagement does not exist in a silo and a participatory culture cannot be built within the confines of an exclusionary economy and society. Cities should take steps build up networks of local [anchor institutions](#) as means of community empowerment and civic engagement.







## Profiles of best practice in civic engagement



The following sections introduce different forms of civic engagement, with two case studies for each. There are of course many more case studies that could have been chosen, or alternative methods of engagement that could have been highlighted. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but instead to be a starting point that demonstrates the range of methods that are used across the world and highlight some of the successes of each, along with challenges they have encountered.

Further research needs to be done on civic engagement methods that are used in less-developed countries, with particular attention on low-cost solutions that have been used for public engagement in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The ten examples given in this report focus almost exclusively on Europe, with one case study coming from each of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Rich engagement cultures of course also exist outside of these highly developed areas. Furthermore, the significance of local culture and factors such as religion, language, and history cannot be overlooked when considering politics and engagement. What works in Iceland would likely not work in Madagascar without being adapted to local conditions, for instance. These limitations notwithstanding, it is hoped that the case studies below can inspire further research and exploration of this topic.



## Digital platforms

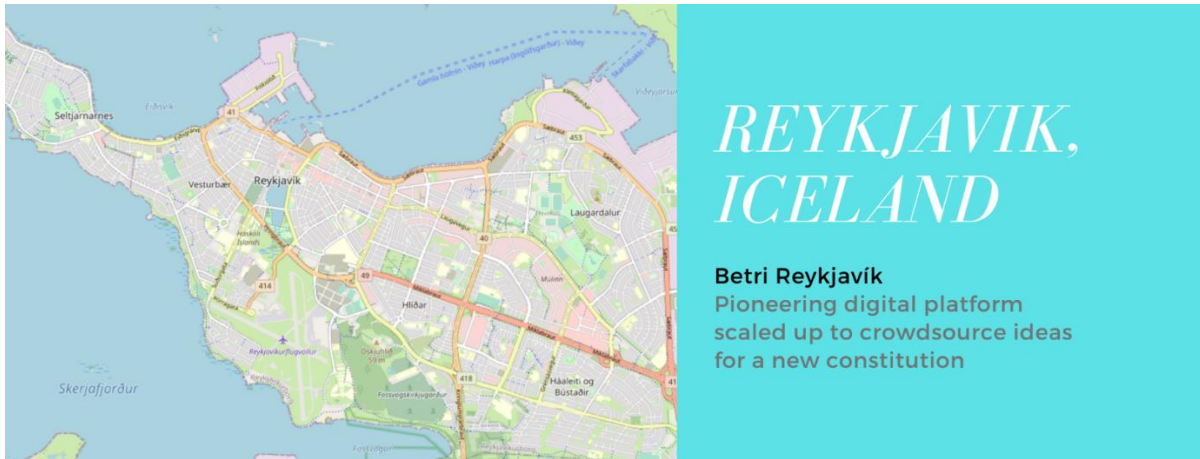
E-participation is a growing trend in civic engagement worldwide. A [review](#) of digital tools for engagement found that digital platforms are primarily used for three key functions: monitoring of government, institutional agenda setting, and input to decision-making. This can be done on social media or dedicated sites. Digital platforms can be used for information access and exchange, petitions and online campaigning, consultations, participatory budgeting, and voting.

However, digital engagement is not a silver bullet for mass involvement in decision-making. One core problem with digital engagement is that there are [barriers to the participation](#) of certain groups. Those of poorer backgrounds, with lower educational attainment, and members both the oldest and youngest age groups, along with people with lower interest in politics, are far less likely to use such platforms. Men are much more likely to use digital platforms for engagement than women. This means that the [‘usual suspects’](#) who dominate politics in the physical world – better educated and wealthier white men of middle-age and above – are disproportionately represented in digital engagement too.

Another challenge of digital platforms is that they can be [disconnected from political processes](#), or used in an advisory capacity whereby those in power continue to control the terms of the debate and all possible outcomes. Such an approach is not truly participatory and may struggle to attract public interest. After all, time is precious, and people are not often willing to give their time to initiatives without tangible outcomes that they can influence.

Moreover, building up bespoke platforms is a major challenge for engagement. This is expensive and requires significant promotion to become more widely known. However, using existing social media is also beset with difficulties. While some organisations use this approach of going to the people where they are, rather than trying to get them to come to the organisation, [platforms such as Facebook and Twitter](#) are hotbeds of trolling, hate speech, fake accounts and spam that hinder efforts at civic engagement.

The most important conditions for successful e-participation are: embeddedness in political processes; for the role that the outputs of the e-participation will play in decision-making to be clearly defined from the start; for feedback to be given to participants about what has been done with their contributions; and an effective mobilisation and engagement strategy, with communications that are tailored toward different target groups. The two case studies that follow demonstrate what an effective digital approach towards civic engagement looks like.



The [Better Reykjavik](#) platform has been hailed as a [leading example](#) of digital innovation in government. The platform is produced by the Citizens Foundation, working alongside Reykjavik City Council, with the aim of better integrating citizens' voices into decisions, as well as facilitating the devolution of power and neighbourhood funding. It is one of the most successful digital platforms for engagement in the world.

A variety of projects have been operated through the platform. This includes crowdsourcing for ideas for education policy and setting the city's democracy strategy (including young people's issues). There have also been physical investments as a result of initiatives launched on the platform, such as new schools, community centres, cycle paths, and constructing a leisure centre in a housing estate on the urban periphery. A percentage of the city's capital investment budget has been devolved to neighbourhoods themselves to decide how to spend it on the platform.

Better Reykjavik has proven itself to be scalable, replicable, and transferrable: key tests of digital engagement. It has recently been scaled up to the 'Better Iceland' platform, to crowdsource ideas for the new Constitution of Iceland. The technology has been piloted in other cities across Europe, such as Madrid and [Dundee](#).

Reykjavik is a small city and is also highly prosperous. As a national capital, it hosts a range of institutions that give it a different dynamic to regional cities. In addition, the city is far less diverse than many in Europe, although minorities do exist, such as a relatively large Polish community. These conditions impact on the success of Better Reykjavik. Nevertheless, while the platform has an automatic translation function built in, more could be done to include migrants' perspectives, such as a dedicated section of the platform for issues specific to migrants. In a conversation with Robert Bjarnason, head of the Citizens Foundation, he said the two keys to the platform's success were embeddedness in the political process and constant marketing of achievements to show citizens that the platform is worth engaging with.



The [synAthina](#) platform aims to develop a [participatory culture](#) in the Greek capital, where public trust in politics was low following the financial crisis. The platform is geared towards problem identification, problem-solving, and political reform. If regulations hinder citizens from carrying out popular ideas, the synAthina team works with Athens City Council to update relevant regulations and policies.

[Thousands](#) of projects have launched on synAthina since 2013, with hundreds of civic groups organised to tackle problems in the city, from litter and graffiti to education and inclusion. The platform is a portal for posting training and internship opportunities as well as advertising cultural events in the city, encouraging people to use it in their everyday lives and build up awareness of the platform. Cultural institutions promote their schedules on synAthina and create bespoke opportunities to take part in their work through volunteering and placements. This is thus a collaboration between anchor institutions across the city.

A particular strength of the platform is how it has been used to help the city cope with the ongoing migrant crisis in Greece. Alongside the digital platform, synAthina offers a [meeting space](#) in the city centre that groups on the platform can book to use, free of charge, 24 hours a day. Support groups targeted towards marginalised citizens that have few resources benefit from this access to a safe physical space.

The successive of the project has been iterative, developing over time. The platform offers community groups space and connections with the municipality, building trust. Given the significant financial pressure on the city, citizen groups have organised to provide services. Athenians have volunteered to teach asylum seekers the Greek language, and the University of Athens has offered free courses to teach new skills to refugees, enabling them to build new lives and thus integrate into the city. Citizens' groups and the local authority alike put out 'open calls' on the platform, seeking help from volunteers with time or skills to offer.





## Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting was first practiced in Brazil in 1989 as a means of democratising the finances of a city government and creating more accountable governance. Citizens deliberate on [how resources should be allocated](#) and what spending priorities are, rather than this process being dominated by elected politicians who can be beholden to other interests, or technocratic council officers who can be far removed from the situation on the ground.

The method was pioneered by the city of Porto Alegre, a relatively prosperous city in Brazil, initiated by the centre-left Workers' Party. The party's aim was to initiate an 'inversion of spending priorities'. Historically, public resources had been disproportionately spent on wealthier neighbourhoods. Participatory budgeting was envisioned as a mechanism for helping poorer citizens and wards receive larger shares of public funding, by inviting citizens themselves to debate what the priority issues of the city were and how money should be spent.

Different approaches practiced across the world seek either to get a demographically accurate sample of citizens, or to have greater representation of specific groups to feed into the development of decisions disproportionately affecting minority populations. Common to other forms of engagement, participatory budgeting can have the same issues of the ["usual suspects" being overrepresented](#) or dominating debates. This can be mitigated with sampling and trained moderators, allowing all participants ample time to express their views.

[Communications, marketing](#), and embeddedness in the political process are important for the success of participatory budgeting. When done well, [studies](#) show that it results in: a fairer allocation of public resources; greater perceived transparency, accountability, and trust in government; and an improvement in the participation of marginalised citizens. It has also been shown to improve the outcomes and living conditions of the poorest citizens, and innovative ideas submitted by citizens can create real change. However, there can be problems with participatory budgeting. [Tensions can arise](#) owing to the design, process, implementation, or surrounding policies and institutions that have not been designed to accommodate this mechanism. This can lead to political opposition.

Nevertheless, experiences across the world show us that participatory budgeting has a transformative power that can help engage with hard-to-reach groups and co-produce holistic responses to the challenges they face.





Participatory budgeting originated in Porto Alegre and has since spread to hundreds of cities across the world. At its peak, the city devolved responsibility for spending £130 million. Tens of thousands of citizens took part. The process [comprised three layers](#): neighbourhood assemblies in 16 wards, thematic assemblies by department of the municipality, and meetings of delegates elected by the neighbourhoods to attend coordinating sessions with the council.

The experience has been widely viewed as a major success, in terms of redistributing spending to areas that are in greater need, improved outcomes on a range of metrics, and greater inclusion of women, ethnic minorities, and those with low incomes and low education in political processes. However, in 2017 the centre-left Workers' Party lost the city, and new conservative leadership [suspended the process](#). Participatory budgeting had become increasingly unpopular with politicians, particularly among those on the right. This highlights the challenges in changing institutional culture and the power dynamic that exists in civic engagement, where those in the position of power can end initiatives that they perceive to be a threat to their authority. A similar situation happened with Britain's NHS Citizen initiative, which was set up in 2012 to integrate a deliberative system into formulating health policy but was shut down, being perceived as a [challenge to decision-makers](#).

Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre lacked a mechanism for incorporating citizens' views into long-term planning and was beset by issues of short-termism and a focus on smaller issues. Nevertheless, research has found that over the lifetime of the participatory budgeting process, the city's development level [rose significantly](#) above comparator cities and poorer neighbourhoods achieved much higher levels of public investment per head than had previously been the case. It also benefited city officials, who had struggled to [make unpopular decisions](#). Instead, citizens were confronted by the trade-offs required and sought to negotiate solutions that were more acceptable to them and their neighbours.





Portugal is the first country to try participatory budgeting on the [national level](#), drawing from the success of this policy in the capital of Lisbon since it was launched in 2008. In the 2016/17 financial year, [€2.5 million](#) was allocated; a tiny fraction of the city's overall budget, and much smaller than the sums involved in Porto Alegre. The city announced its intention to '[de-digitising](#)' its participatory budgeting in favour of face-to-face methods, which it speculates could better reach groups such as young people, seniors, and migrants. It is likely this will have to wait until after the pandemic.

Lisbon's experience has been described as a '[slow but continuous transformation](#)'. This slowness could be its strength, as it has avoided the conservative backlash that occurred in other trailblazers. Lisbon's approach differs in that it does not place a special emphasis on issues relating to social inclusion, wealth redistribution, and specifically improving outcomes among the most marginalised groups. This could also be a reason for less political opposition.

A recent development in the city is a new [Green Participatory Budget](#), where citizens can decide on how funds are allocated to help deal with the green energy transition and building resilience in the face of climate change. This is a good example of building support for participatory budgeting through a policy area where there is widespread agreement that something needs to be done. Similar work in the [UK](#) and [USA](#) might also begin with a response to climate change or protecting the environment, where polling shows a high degree of consensus among the public that is not reflected in politics.

Participatory budgeting is a powerful tool but one that is fragile, as it depends upon widespread public involvement and the support of political actors. Cuts in funding or rolling back of policy areas covered can undermine the legitimacy of the process in the public's eyes. Nevertheless, the experience of Lisbon has built the evidence base for participatory budgeting and shown how this is a method that can evolve over time in a positive feedback loop.





## Citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are part of a wider movement of rediscovering the art of democracy as originally practiced in Ancient Athens. We associate democracy with the act of voting, making it difficult for us to think about alternative ways that democracy has been practiced historically. In fact, the Ancient Greeks considered sortition to be a superior form of democracy, with voting seen as leading towards polarisation, demagoguery, the emergence of a political class detached from citizens' concerns, and with the risk of corruption and dominance of elite over mass interests. The Athenians favoured the random selection of citizens to deliberate on issues, with access to information from experts, along the lines of a contemporary trial by jury.

As numerous political scientists and researchers have commented, we appear to have reached the limits of the electoral democratic system established after the American and French revolutions. This '[Democratic Fatigue Syndrome](#)' is expressed in growing distrust in the establishment, the rise of populism, political spin, and 'fake news' mass media narratives that support elite interests. Innovations such as mini-publics, deliberative polling, and citizens' assemblies seek to incorporate sortition once more. The aims are to either [overcome political polarisation](#) on the individual level or generate recommendations that can feed into political decision-making processes, if not serve as the basis of decisions themselves.

Take the example of a [deliberative poll](#), where citizens are broken into groups and provided with reading material written by neutral experts. Thus informed, citizens discuss issues and come to an agreement among themselves. Moderators are present to ensure that all participants have a chance to speak. Research finds that people who hold more extreme opinions on an issue consistently move towards consensual positions in this setting, with greater consideration of the merits of other standpoints. Although not required, in practice many recommendations from citizens' assemblies are tested through a referendum, in order to connect with democracy as it is more widely understood (namely, as an electoral process).

A key debate among practitioners and researchers of citizens' assemblies is how to ensure diversity, and in particular the relative importance of demographic and cognitive diversity. Demographic diversity means factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, education level, income, employment status, immigration status, or geographic spread. These factors can be controlled through a survey, although having a representative sample can bring its own problems (e.g. can one disabled person in a sample speak for all disabled people?) Cognitive diversity includes factors such as political attitudes and personal values. [Some](#) claim that cognitive diversity is more important than value diversity in these processes, although this remains a minority and highly contentious view.





The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in 2004 was a [pioneering example](#) of this form of civic engagement. This is an example of a politically difficult topic being given to the public to decide. The recommendations were not ultimately made into law as they narrowly failed to achieve a super-majority in a subsequent referendum. However, data on successes and failures of the process have fed into later, successful citizens' assemblies held elsewhere.

The sample size was 160, evenly split for gender and geographic spread, alongside two aboriginal members. Participants were randomly selected from a pool of those who responded to one of 15,800 invites to take part. However, those who volunteered were disproportionately in favour of electoral reform compared to the wider public. The process took place on specific days over twelve weeks, with 50 public hearings and hundreds of submissions. Members deliberated over the relative merits of different electoral systems, making a [recommendation](#) to replace the province's first-past-the-post voting system with the single transferable vote system. This recommendation was put to a referendum, where 57.7% of voters accepted the recommendation. However, a condition was for 60% of voters to be in favour, meaning that the process failed the success criteria placed upon it.

Over the process of the assembly, participants came to a consensus on the merits of single transferable vote, which had not been the case initially. Although ultimately unsuccessful, this failure was also a product of [institutional restraints](#) placed upon the process (in terms of the supermajority requirement in the referendum) which it could be argued were designed to stymie the potential for change from the outset. The assembly was also notably lacking in both demographic diversity (particularly ethnic minorities) and cognitive diversity (as most participants were in favour of some kind of electoral reform) as well as overemphasising geographic spread. It thus was a useful demonstration on the need for more robust sampling in future efforts.



The [Irish Citizens' Assembly](#) was established in 2016 and empowered to deliberate on contentious issues that politicians have been unable to resolve for decades. It has attracted significant attention for having made sweeping changes to the Republic of Ireland. These include the legalisation of abortion and gay marriage, reforms to the pension system and retirement age, the establishment of an independent agency to tackle climate change, changes to the law around voting and referenda, and work on gender equality.

The assembly comprises 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s members of the public and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> politicians from the Dáil Éireann (national parliament). Studies on the effects of this [mixed membership](#) find that the inclusion of politicians has not negatively impacted upon the operation of the assembly and its outcomes. In fact, it has enhanced the legitimacy of the process among other politicians and the public. Citizens are selected for inclusion based on gender, age, and social class, along with screening to ensure exclusion of those who are members of interest or lobbying groups. Members of the public are encouraged to submit opinions, ideas, and recommendations either by post or through the official website. Deliberations are livestreamed and uploaded to YouTube afterwards. Assembly members are provided with expert evidence and are empowered to call specialists to present and answer questions.

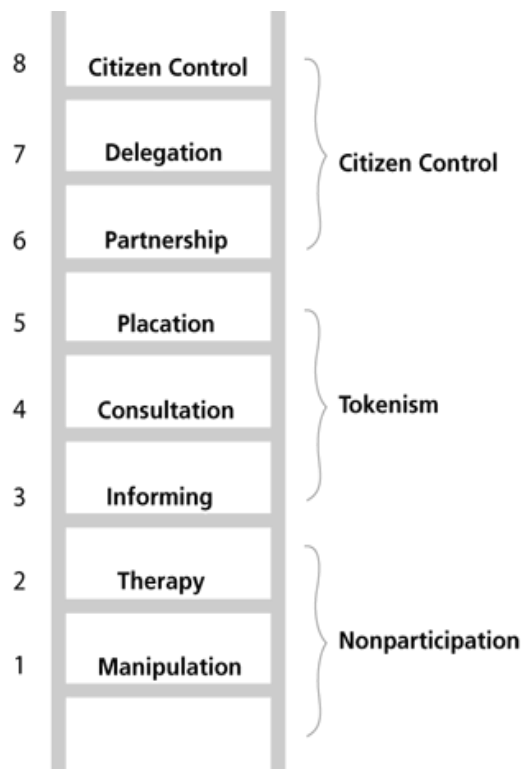
As in British Columbia, recommendations were subject to referenda, making Ireland the first country where gay marriage was achieved through popular vote – a dramatic change in a country formerly known for its staunch Catholicism, where organised lobby groups and religious pressure halted progress on gay rights for decades. Those who participated reported feeling more empowered, more understanding of those who disagree with them, and more empathetic than they were before. Participants showed that ordinary members of the public can make [nuanced, representative decisions](#) on complex issues through deliberation. It also benefited political parties, giving the conservative Fine Gael party a way to address abortion without taking a position that could alienate parts of its base.







## Participatory planning



Arnstein's Ladder (1969)  
Degrees of Citizen Participation

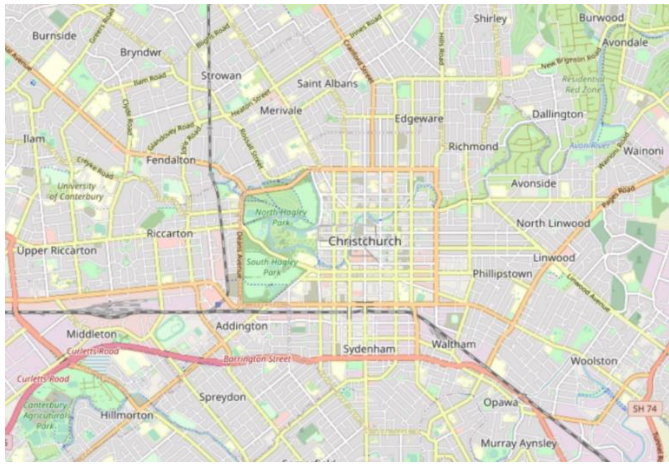
Participatory planning is about empowering citizens to make decisions that shape the physical world they live in. Participatory planning theory draws from Arnstein's [Ladder of Participation](#) (see diagram to the left, taken from the Citizen's Handbook). Although there have been many revisions to the ladder model since it first appeared in 1969, Arnstein set the standard for how participatory urban planning, and civic engagement more generally, is conceptualised.

The Ladder of Participation is a mechanism for rethinking dominant knowledge and power hierarchies. In participatory planning, communities are empowered to diagnose their own problems and formulate solutions or visions for the future that are [rooted](#) in their lived experience. While technical experts can be involved as facilitators or to provide information, ideally citizens should shape the process themselves as far as possible.

Current models of public consultation in urban planning have the effect of shutting some people out of the planning process or restricting the range of choices available. Allowing communities to have a greater degree of control over their areas and set their own priorities increases engagement, and in doing so [increases trust](#) in planning and politics. It also builds consensus for developments, particularly when these are controversial and residents perceive that the changes are being 'done to them' by the local authority, rather than being done 'with them', 'for them' or 'by them'.

Participatory planning is a means of ensuring that the views of the most [marginalised groups](#) are factored into the decision-making process. Such inclusion creates a sense of ownership and motivation diffused throughout the community, promoting positive change that is highly context specific. As with other methods of civic engagement, the idea is that the products of such a process are more holistic and reflective of the challenge they seek to address, which should enhance the long-term [viability](#) of the intervention.





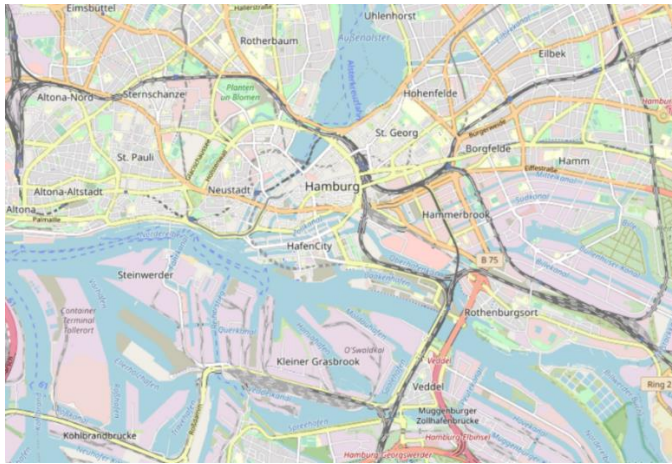
## *CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND*

**Resilient Greater  
Christchurch Plan**  
Building a more resilient,  
engaged city after a disaster

Following a major earthquake in 2011 that destroyed much of the city, Christchurch City Council developed the [Resilient Greater Christchurch Plan](#) to rebuild in a participatory manner. The plan sought to incorporate principles of resilience into urban planning. This includes preparedness for natural disasters and climate change and also tackling the causes of [social instability](#), such as long-term unemployment, poor public transport infrastructure, and inclusion of marginalised groups.

The initial scope of the plan was drafted by the local authority in collaboration with stakeholder groups, with an unprecedented level of public engagement that generated [106,000 ideas](#) over 6 weeks of consultation. These were fed into the development of the plan. However, the final iteration of the plan prioritised technical expertise over the lived experience and subjective knowledge of citizens. This demonstrates how [the belief persists](#) that technical knowledge of experts is objective, true, and sufficient, whereas local knowledge is considered subjective or irrelevant. Studies have shown that the opposite can in fact be true, with technical knowledge being based on uncertain or problematic assumptions, whereas local knowledge often employs objective and systematic methods. Moreover, individuals can hold both forms of knowledge at the same time.

Nevertheless, a strength of the final plan is its degree of engagement with indigenous people and conscious use of Maori traditions, culture, and ideas in a society where 'Englishness' continues to be prioritised. The plan has a strong emphasis on [co-producing structures](#), agendas, and policies to overcome the frustration residents felt towards the local authority, and low trust and legitimacy of decisions made 'behind closed doors'. Citizens were empowered to decide how public spaces were used in the city, with community groups [reclaiming](#) many spaces that had previously been given over to commercial use. Data held by the authority was published in an open source format for free use. Training programmes for community leaders and groups were launched, along with a time bank for volunteering.



## *HAMBURG, GERMANY*

CityScope FindingPlaces  
Community-led settlement of  
asylum seekers in one of  
Germany's regional powerhouses

In 2015, Germany welcomed half a million asylum seekers fleeing the war in Syria. As one of the most dynamic and prosperous cities in the country, Hamburg attracted a large proportion (79,000) of the refugees accepted into Germany that year, with more to follow in 2016. The Senate of Hamburg set up the [FindingPlaces](#) platform as a mechanism for involving residents in decisions about refugee accommodation, to mitigate against potential unrest. A [Human-Computer Interaction platform](#) was designed by MIT and HafenCity University's Science Lab to be deployed in dozens of community meetings with 500 participants. [161 locations](#) were chosen by citizens to be developed into new housing units for asylum seekers.

Citizens were able to interact with a map of Hamburg where empty sites were highlighted, such as parks, sports fields, car parks, disused industrial spaces, agricultural spaces on the urban periphery, and plots of undeveloped land. Sites were assessed for viability by a technical board. 44 of the 161 sites were determined to be feasible, with 6 being developed immediately and 10 being held in reserve for future development. The platform showed how digital platforms can inform citizens of the [trade-offs](#) required in making difficult decisions. Accommodation solutions were found to house 24,000 refugees, well in excess of the project's goal of 20,000.

A challenge the project faced was a very compressed timeframe. The process had to move fast, hampering the ability to raise public awareness. Mailouts were sent to 5.1 million people in the metropolitan area, but the organisers acknowledged more could have been done. The platform could only host 20 people at any one time owing to technical limitations. Citizens also struggled at first with using the platform. However, FindingPlaces showed that participatory planning can yield success, provided there is a clear research question, strong collaboration with locals, and [effective digital design](#). The project built up acceptance towards refugee accommodation in the city and [improved public perceptions](#) of transparency, accountability, ownership and trust in the city's government.







## Citizen science and co-production

Citizen science is known by many different names across the world, including community science, crowdsourced science, civic science, and volunteer science. Although the terms differ, they describe the same process: [public involvement](#) in the gathering and occasionally analysis of scientific data. This makes it a form of participatory action research, where volunteers are involved in creating new knowledge and answering research questions.

Not only can this have an economic benefit for commissioning organisations, but it can also make citizens feel more engaged in their local areas, strengthening a sense of community and better anchoring the research in its specific context. This can also be a means for citizens to gain new skills. Examples of citizen science include counting wildlife, amateur astronomy, collecting air pollution data, involvement in oral history projects, and cleaning up beaches and other natural environments.

Citizen scientists can also [become advocates](#) for causes. For instance, in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the University of California, San Francisco has released a smartphone app to educate citizens and help them collect data to feed into scientific research. The hope is that citizen scientists will also help educate those around them on how individuals should respond to the threat of the coronavirus.

Participants in citizen science research projects can be trained or given instructions on a protocol, so that data is of an assured quality for use in scientific research. This can be a good technique for bringing together demographics who do not frequently mix in everyday life. For example, retirees and young people are often keen volunteers in citizen science projects, which can help overcome generational divides in society. It can also help those [without formal educational qualifications](#) to take part in data collection, gain new skills and networks, and be thus empowered to contribute to decisions that affect them and perhaps move into employment using these new capabilities. Scientists and researchers of course benefit through vastly increased volumes of data for their research, along with a clear way of demonstrating impact and the community involvement of their work.

A related concept is co-production, whereby citizens work with agencies and institutions to design the services and policies that affect them, from identifying needs to testing solutions. Communities are seen as equal partners in the decision-making and policymaking process, and citizens' lived experience is incorporated alongside the technical knowledge of experts to create rooted, locally attuned responses to issues.

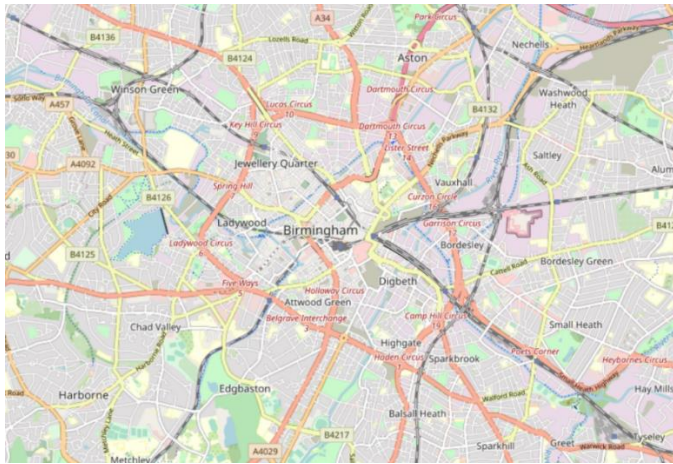




Sydney has a rich ecosystem of citizen science projects run by organisations across the city. This provides citizens with a wide variety of opportunities to engage in gathering knowledge, learning new skills, meeting others, and building a personal and professional network. For instance, a major development of the [Chullora Wetlands](#) involved citizen science over the period 1991–2012, with findings contributing to new policy and unlocking the potential of the site to benefit society, while also reaping economic returns.

Scientists in the city are also using citizen science to supplement [marine conservation](#) work, sustainably developing marine sites for tourism and other uses while protecting the fragile habitat. Such public involvement increases the understanding of the sites and benefits citizens who participate through educating them about the sites and scientific research methods, learning more about their local environment, making new friends, engaging in decision-making processes in a proactive manner, and participating in activities that many define as recreational. Similarly, [other ecological projects](#) in and around the city have documented the benefits of citizen science for the scientists who initiated the research.

The [Australian Museum](#) has a Centre for Citizen Science that helps the institution develop knowledge on its own collection, alongside projects to build up image libraries of local wildlife and climate activism for future cataloguing and exhibitions. The [University of Sydney](#) also initiates a large number of citizen science projects. There are many ways for citizens in Sydney to participate in co-producing knowledge and gain new skills; the website of the [Australian Citizen Science Association](#) lists hundreds of such opportunities. Anchor institutions across a city collaborating in this way can help make public organisations truly public, with benefits for the organisations as well as citizens themselves.



## *BIRMINGHAM, UK*

### **USE-IT!**

Pioneering co-production in a  
superdiverse post-industrial city

**'USE-IT! Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together'** was a collaborative project between anchor institutions across the city to test new mechanisms to help poor citizens build resilience, enhance their employment prospects, and contribute to the identification and response to problems they face. The project trained 80 residents through an accredited [training programme](#), which is being scaled up to a community enterprise. The project also included [skills matching programme](#) that found 200 migrants with qualifications needed by the local health service, and support for social enterprises alongside [research](#) into community assets and financing.

The project sought to co-produce knowledge and thus challenge existing power dynamics, in which vulnerable citizens are [acted upon](#) rather than in collaboration with. Participants of USE-IT! gained new skills, confidence, and made meaningful impact to the strategy and decisions of many organisations. Through empowering people to shape policies and developments in their area, the project was a working model of an intersectional response to [epistemic injustice](#) in a highly diverse part of the city. It also tested [theoretical debates](#) on co-production, with residents' lived experience being valued alongside the technical knowledge of experts.

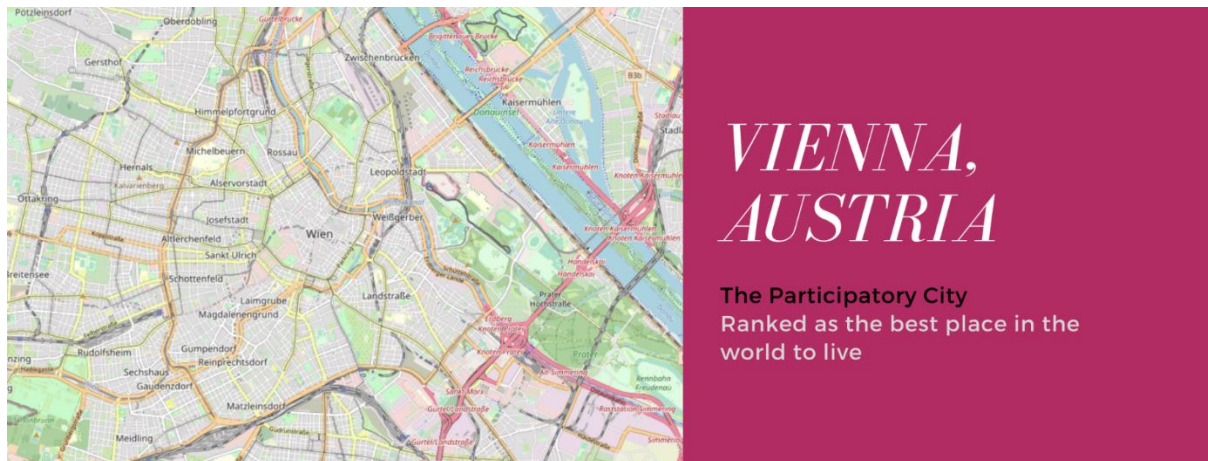
Through 24 commissioned research projects, community researchers on USE-IT! contributed to the knowledge gathering underpinning policy formulation for organisations across areas including poverty, migrants' integration, health, innovation, transport, food, the arts, and issues affecting the youth and elderly people. Community researchers made contributions to the [UK2070 Commission](#) and secured a [£100,000 grant](#) to tackle childhood obesity. Birmingham is one of the most diverse cities in Europe and findings from this project can offer insight to other cities on the continent as a demographic transition is forecast to take place over the coming decades. A particular strength of USE-IT! was partnering with marginalised migrant communities and empowering them to build resilience and think about what problems they saw in their areas, as well as what solutions might be appropriate.







## In-depth case study: Vienna



The Austrian capital has a population of 1.9 million, with 2.6 million in the wider metropolitan area. Formerly the capital of the vast Habsburg Empire, the city centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site on account of its outstanding architectural heritage. Vienna dominates a variety of international league tables. It has consistently been ranked as the world's most liveable city by the [Economist](#). The UN has previously named it as the [most prosperous city](#) in the world, and it has also previously ranked first in the world for its [economic innovation](#). Perhaps surprisingly, this baroque city of waltzes is also the [world's smartest city](#), ranking first on a list made up predominantly of East Asian cities using information technology to address urban problems. Vienna's urban planning and culture of civic engagement is also very highly regarded. The city's latest Urban Development Plan set a goal of becoming a truly '[participatory city](#)'. The plan also showcases Vienna's interdisciplinary approach towards policy and engagement, for instance with '[gender mainstreaming](#)' across diverse policy areas to consider the impacts upon women.

Vienna is a vision of what the participatory city could look like, with lessons that are relevant to places that might seem very different. Vienna is highly diverse; a 2012 report by Statistics Austria found that 38.8% of the city's population had full or partial migration backgrounds. The city is the fastest growing in Europe, with a population growth rate of [4.65%](#) forecast over the period 2000-2025. The city's urban form is dominated by a vast ring road encircling the city core, which has been [much-researched](#). A flagship central railway station opened in December 2015 that has kickstarted development and investment in the inner city. The city is also dominated by vast social housing estates. This is to say that, while each city is unique, they also have commonalities or have specific factors that might be comparable to places that are otherwise quite different. Other cities could learn from the processes underpinning Vienna's experience of building a participatory and more equal society.



## Political embeddedness

The introduction to the most recent [Urban Development Plan](#) for Vienna opens by saying that ‘today, urban development would be unthinkable without the transparency of information and active involvement of the citizens affected.’ The city has a variety of mechanisms for gathering public ideas, from Urban Renewal Offices and Neighbourhood Management Offices in the districts to binding guidelines for participatory procedures. These are based on mutual respect and trust between the municipality and citizens, willingness to learn from citizens’ lived experiences, and transparent decision-making. Co-production is embedded into the planning process and decisions that are taken on the management of the city.

There is a dedicated city councillor for Participation, who is currently the Deputy Mayor. This ensures that participatory processes are embedded into decision-making across all policy areas in the city. Vienna takes an interdisciplinary approach towards tackling social problems and identifying needs, bringing together experts and citizens to discuss more holistic strategies along with problem identification. This can be a problem in policy formulation in the traditional, top-down, expert-led methods commonly used elsewhere.

Research has found that the labelling and construction of ‘[target groups](#)’ by policymakers who are far removed from the lived experience of citizens can lead to unintended stereotyping and even discrimination against segments of the population. The stigmatisation of some behaviours and lifestyles as ‘problems’ to be fixed, because they deviate from ‘normal’ (a highly contested term), leads to organisations pouring resources into fixing perceived problems that may not actually be problematic at all. Enabling citizens to define their own needs and articulate what would help them is thus an important step in democratising policy and making a fairer society.

## Urban planning

The [Vienna Model](#) of urban planning has been influential across the world. The city recognises housing as a human right and owns a quarter of the total housing stock, with various third sector housing associations also having sizeable stocks. This is used to encourage social mixing, support diversity and integration policy, and design inclusive public spaces in collaboration with communities in the social housing complexes and beyond. The city's [Manual for Gender Mainstreaming](#) lays out how feminist principles and women's specific needs for urban space are to be integrated into development. These principles have attracted significant attention. A two-month '[Vienna Exchange Program](#)' disseminates Viennese inclusive urban design principles and placemaking strategies to developing countries, and in doing so builds international, personal, and professional connections between participants.

Community engagement is embedded into regeneration projects, where a bottom-up approach is encouraged that prioritises the needs of current residents, rather than prioritising what planners and council officers think international investors might want from projects, as happens all too often elsewhere. One way that this different ethos is given physical form is in the use of public space. Rather than being privatised, semi-public spaces dominated by commercial uses, in Vienna there are programmes for temporary public space activation and civic innovation. This allows residents and community groups to determine how spaces are used and creates dynamism, with a changing programme encouraging return visits and uses of the space, as well as providing an outlet for citizens' creativity. Mini-parks or 'parklets' can be installed on request for a temporary period in order to encourage people to engage with others living in their area.

The municipality is also conducting research with communities on how best to mitigate the Urban Heat Island effect. This has included the installation of modules to the front of buildings that facilitate the growth of climbing plants, reducing the reflection of heat and light to the street level. Another topic that has received attention is shade, and by extension access to green space. A recent [New York Times](#) investigation demonstrated that in US cities, more prosperous areas tend to have more trees and cover for residents to seek shelter from the sun, with poorer areas (where residents are more likely to wait at bus stops, or walk to complete errands) having less shade. This is just one example of an urban planning need that might not be picked up by a trained urban planning expert, particularly one from a privileged background who may not understand what it is like to live in a poor district of the city.



## Integration and diversity

The [Vienna Integration Concept](#) is based on the notion of ‘integration from day one’, with systematic support being given to new arrivals from the moment they arrive in order to support them in adapting to the city as quickly as possible. To equip new residents with the skills and knowledge they need to become active participants in society, new migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are given coaching (which is available in 25 languages), an education booklet with vouchers for language schools in the city, and information modules on topics such as the labour market, housing, education, healthcare, and equality. There is a special focus on human rights (particularly women’s and children’s rights) as the basis for an inclusive city.

The city makes use of its diversity through projects such as ‘multilingual reading mentors’, language exchanges, and the Vienna language app. The municipality works proactively to assess and recognise the skills and qualifications migrants might have brought with them from abroad, or direct new arrivals towards skills training. The city seeks to integrate new arrivals into the community as soon as they arrive, but there are also active initiatives geared towards prevention and de-radicalisation, to help overcome the danger of isolation and drift towards radicalisation that is seen in other cities that poorly integrate new arrivals.

The municipality launched the Vienna Charter, the first and largest citizen engagement project of its kind in Europe, to enable Viennese people to define what matters to them and how to define good neighbourly relations. These have been enshrined in a framework, which is for instance given to social housing residents. Finally, the municipality has also empowered an independent monitor to assess progress towards inclusion and regularly commissions research on how different demographic groups of citizens are engaging with decision-making processes in the city. In common with elsewhere, [research](#) shows that those with fewer educational qualifications participate less, as do women and those with migration backgrounds. Even in Vienna, financial resources correlate with how likely citizens are to take part in civic engagement processes. However, the city is proactively working to overcome such barriers, doing more than many other cities in this regard.

## Digital engagement

As was previously referenced, Vienna has been named the '[world's smartest city](#)' in a list otherwise dominated by East Asian metropolises. The study analysed smart technology and data-driven solutions that cities have employed to tackle challenges such as growing populations, traffic and transport, climate protection, and solutions to problems faced by citizens. The review of Vienna summarised that:

'What is so compelling about the Austrian capital's performance are its comprehensive framework strategy and innovative solutions for mobility, environment, education, healthcare, administration and a standardised monitoring system for all Smart City projects. Vienna has, for example, been implementing an advanced e-health approach and is the first German-speaking city to provide open government data.'

- [Smart City Strategy Index](#)

The city is building on this competitiveness in digital innovation by rolling out 5G as standard, providing free internet across the city, and constantly seeking to test out new digital methods and ideas. Vienna has embraced [digital petitions](#) and interacts with citizens on social media. The '[Wienbot](#)' chatbot, accessible through Facebook Messenger, recently won an international award for digital innovation in government and civic engagement. The AI chatbot can answer questions on 250 of the most frequently accessed topics on the City of Vienna's website, and also connect users with other city services. A demonstration of the product shows that it can help out residents who have lost their wallets, need to collect a form from the local district office of the council, or want to know why they are unable to park on a street today.

Vienna has also pioneered [Open Government](#) principles, which seeks to increase the transparency and democratic accountability of the local authority by making its data publicly accessible. As a result, Vienna has been named as a European 'Best Practice' city. Everything that is not explicitly secret is made public, strengthening democratic oversight over the municipality's decisions. This also benefits researchers and businesses, as data is released quickly, comprehensively, and with support for its use. There are also no limitations on the commercial use of the data in order to encourage innovative uses. This is part of a strategy with goals stretching to [the year 2050](#) to build a smart city on bottom-up solutions, rather than through focusing on top-down approaches.



## Climate and energy

The Smart City Vienna framework strategy pays special attention to climate and environmental protection, renewable energy, and public transport. The updated Vienna Model for urban development also lays down standards for new constructions to meet. The municipality places a requirement on developers to build generously sized apartments and other spaces. In addition, there are compulsory regulations for thermal qualities, as well as measures including rainwater and grey-water recycling and the incorporation of solar and wind energy. The result is that many new '[passive houses](#)' in Vienna no longer require traditional heating at all.

The implementation of these measures is underpinned by a strong focus on citizen engagement. For instance, [10,000](#) local inhabitants directly participated in activities designed to gather public opinions on the redevelopment of a neighbourhood in the Simmering district, which houses 21,000 citizens. Outreach was based on a combination of information and gamification, with a focus on including children so that they could act as 'Smart City ambassadors'. Citizens are also involved in the drafting of Local Mobility Strategies for their areas, to understand where there are gaps in public transport provision and whether there can be new solutions (for example, e-bike sharing). There are also low-tech citizen-led initiatives, such as '[Gardening together](#)', where residents can create and maintain neighbourhood gardens and urban farms.

## Summary

Vienna shows what can be done with a bold vision for bottom-up, citizen-led solutions to problems, combined with a local authority that eagerly embraces change and innovation. Vienna City Council seeks to continuously learn, both from its own experiences and from elsewhere, and sets ambitious goals that are achieved in partnership with residents. Although the city's economic foundations have historically always been strong, owing to its status as an imperial capital city before the First World War, and status as a centre of diplomacy after the Second World War, it was not a given that Vienna would rise to become the world's smartest, most prosperous, or most innovative city. Nor does its heritage mean Vienna is somehow destined to be consistently ranked as the world's most liveable urban area. The rich civic engagement culture of the city has been instrumental in building a dynamic, outward-looking metropolis of 2 million people that makes a big impression on the global stage.





## Implications for other cities

On the basis of these international case studies, and drawing from the wider literature on the topic, there are seven key implications that can guide other cities as they plot their course on civic engagement. In short, these can be summarised as:

1. Embeddedness in the political process
2. Importance of communications and marketing
3. Starting with policy areas of consensus – or topics that politicians struggle to deal with
4. Setting long-term aims and flexible short-term strategies
5. Adapting existing institutions and policies
6. Handling political opposition through building support across society and politics
7. Co-producing shared values, aspirations, and visions for the future

### 1. Embeddedness in the political process

Research on civic engagement emphasises that innovations must be [embedded](#) in the political process, rather than being a one-off or stand-alone measure. If this is not done, the innovation will be seen as lacking in legitimacy or power in the eyes of the public, with [resulting low participation](#) that will undermine efforts at genuine citizen involvement in decision-making. This means innovations should have defined areas of competency and tangible results that can be presented to the public. Embeddedness means empowering citizens to take decisions that may be at odds with what elected officials or government officers may favour and a willingness to try something other than 'business as usual'.

### 2. Importance of communications and marketing

Civic engagement efforts must live with the fact that they are competing for the attention of people who have many competing demands upon their time. Imagine a single mother working long hours and coming home tired. Which seems more appealing: relaxing in front of the TV, or making a submission to a planning consultation? The [economy of attention](#) means that well-designed, intuitive, interesting platforms or processes must be communicated and marketed in such a way as to appeal to hard-to-reach groups who are underrepresented in politics.

[Reviews](#) of e-democracy platforms conclude that they must be accompanied by an extensive communications strategy that is tailored towards different target groups. An embedded form of civic engagement can start small and grow iteratively, with successful public involvement in decisions being marketed to encourage and incentivise greater numbers of people to participate. Of course, such strategies come with costs that should be factored in as a necessity, rather than an optional extra.



### 3. Starting with policy areas of consensus – or topics that politicians struggle to deal with

There are two different approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective when it comes to civic engagement in decision-making processes. The first is to begin with policy areas of consensus. This can mean devolving relatively [small amounts of funding](#) to neighbourhoods to decide how to improve the local urban realm, which is a relatively uncontroversial place to start empowering a public not used to having control over these kinds of decisions. Alternatively, a policy area that enjoys widespread public agreement can allow both citizens and institutions to test civic engagement and participation in a way that is less likely to throw up shock recommendations. For instance, surveys show that [virtually all Britons](#) believe climate change is happening. Innovations such as [Green Participatory Budgets](#) are a good mechanism for involving the public in co-creating responses to climate change on the municipal level and building up trust and a wider culture of citizen involvement.

Alternatively, civic engagement can be a useful means of breaking political deadlock on controversial topics where politicians are unable to handle the issue. The foremost example of this is how the [Irish government devolved](#) the responsibility for making recommendations on topics such as gay marriage and abortion to a citizens' assembly. Political parties were increasingly out of step with Irish public opinion (as subsequent referenda demonstrated), but the parties felt too beholden to interest groups and influential voices in society to make such recommendations. A risk of such a strategy, however, is that citizens' assemblies can be critiqued as a one-off tool for authorities to maintain political control and avoid having to take difficult decisions, which after all is what representatives are elected to do.

### 4. Setting long-term aims and flexible short-term strategies

A major criticism of civic engagement strategies, including Porto Alegre's pioneering participatory budgeting policy, is that the lack of long-term aims leads to inbuilt short-termism that is just as bad as policies made by politicians who are seeking re-election who make decisions to shore up their electoral support. Aspirational or challenging targets should therefore be set for such innovations, with regular reviews, to ensure that they are sufficiently geared towards tackling long-term or systemic social issues.

Nevertheless, strategies must also be flexible and able to be changed as the situation itself changes. This can be considered similar to [Agile project management](#), where there are incremental steps and constant releases of a 'product' (in this case, a civic engagement innovation) where successes are built on, failures are discarded, research is conducted to maintain awareness of the environment and learning is constantly applied in a positive feedback loop.

## 5. Adapting existing institutions and policies

Introducing civic engagement in a context with a low participatory culture means that innovations need to be made in an environment with a legacy of top-down, detached decision-making, rather than the transparency and mutual trust between the public and institutions that is required to build a truly participatory culture. This therefore means that ‘institutions of exclusion’ need to be reformed to become ‘[institutions of inclusion](#).’ The [artificial binary](#) between ‘impartial, reliable’ technical knowledge of experts and ‘biased, superfluous’ lived experience of citizens also needs to be overcome. Individuals can hold both forms of knowledge simultaneously. Moreover, both rely on similar methods and can supplement each other for more holistic service design and policy formulation.

We know that civic engagement works, even on the highest level. This was demonstrated by the positive impact of public involvement in drafting the world’s first ‘[crowdsourced constitution](#)’ in Iceland, although this has yet to be ratified by the country’s parliament. Overcoming latent hostility towards such methods is a political challenge that can reap rewards, through adapting institutions and policies to make them more trusted, accountable, and enhance the legitimacy of decisions through centring the views of [target groups](#). Ultimately, empowering citizens means rethinking hierarchies of knowledge and power that have persisted for decades, if not centuries, in our societies. It also calls for leaders to ask ‘why’ decisions are made in certain ways, and whether a certain institution is always best placed to handle a particular decision.

## 6. Handling opposition through building support across society and politics

As was described in the case study of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, conservative opposition to the initiative – which was closely associated with the centre-left Workers’ Party – meant that a change of political leadership in the local authority led to the demise of the city’s pioneering financial civic engagement model. The same issue was seen with Britain’s [NHS Citizen project](#), which sought to build a deliberative system within the country’s health service but was shut down after being perceived as a threat to the power of decision-makers. Moving slowly, as in the case of Lisbon’s participatory budgeting, and starting with areas of consensus – such as a Green Participatory Budget – is one potential option. However, the case of the citizens’ assembly in Ireland showed that devolving responsibility to make controversial decisions to citizens can be one way of handling divisive issues when politicians are unable to act. There are benefits to both approaches; which approach to take will depend a lot on the local cultural and political context.

Political opposition to innovations must be managed through building cross-party consensus and working on issues of common interest alongside opposition parties. As theories of civic engagement maintain, the views of minorities and opposition

groups must be considered when making decisions, in order to build a broad consensus. While opposition can come from conservative parties that are sceptical of change, civic engagement initiatives can also face opposition from far-left or anarchist groups, who may [protest that such projects](#) are 'gradualism', or a means of co-opting activist energy into political structures and neutralising the threat it poses. There are no easy answers to the challenge of managing opposition, with cases being highly specific to local conditions. However, it is imperative that a strategy for managing such opposition is devised at the outset and is maintained, as it is only through building consensus and compromise between different interest groups that the legitimacy, and thus longevity, of civic engagement strategies can be maintained.

## 7. Co-producing shared values, aspirations, and visions for the future

The risk of relying upon technocratic modes of consultation and opinion-gathering can obscure the higher values that civic engagement strives towards – namely, empowerment, strengthening the legitimacy of democracy, building trust, and creating more locally-rooted, holistic approaches towards addressing social issues. City authorities and citizens need to learn to trust each other and collaborate as equal partners, and also to mutually question the appropriate level for making decisions. Active steps must also be taken to ensure the inclusion of marginalised groups, so that the legacy of historically discriminatory policies are not [perpetuated](#).

Different forms of knowledge within the community need to be recognised as having worth in the decision-making process, with lived experience of policies and institutions guiding improvement of services, along with discussions about what exactly citizens need from their institutions. Ultimately, avoiding the short-termism that can undermine the long-term survival of civic engagement strategies also requires a statement of values and shared aspirations for the future that citizens, the local authority, businesses – indeed, all stakeholders – can work towards. These visions for the future serve as goals to be achieved and also enable citizens to think about what kind of a place they want to live in. As aspirations are achieved, confidence is built. The perceived worth of taking part in civic engagement processes is thereby enhanced, thus increasing participation in a virtuous circle. Seeing how engagement and participation results in change to the world around them empowers citizens, which is ultimately the heart of what civic engagement intends to achieve.







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