

Strengthening participation and people power in Greater Manchester

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Summary of key points

- To extend people power in Greater Manchester the strengthening of participation should be underpinned by a set of key design principles for decision-making.
- **Processes should be open and porous (allowing new people to join), transparent, inclusive, embedded and valuing the fullest range of expertise,** including lived experience alongside technical, bureaucratic and political expertise.
- Extending people power **can complement representative democracy** and enhance decision-making. For example, connecting Greater Manchester and district **equality panels more strongly** to scrutiny functions and the work of local elected members.
- Plans to **embed socio-economic inequality and discrimination in the equalities' governance architecture** should be developed.
- There are many **examples of existing initiatives across Greater Manchester, including innovations to increase the voices of people and communities who are typically less heard.**
- The **development of a community of practice for politicians and practitioners would encourage the exchange of ideas, information, expertise and examples.**
- When considering how **to strengthen participation consider all the methods available, target audience and objectives, and choose wisely.** For example, the use of people's assemblies should be carefully targeted and primarily considered for specific policy decisions, especially where decision-making is contentious.
- The progress of these principles of people power can be measured in the early stages by **reviewing engagement and equality structures against milestone indicators and process outputs.**

Background and context

In the autumn of 2020, Greater Manchester's [Independent Inequality Commission](#) met to develop their recommendations for how the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) could address the entrenched inequalities in the region. To feed into the deliberations, [Policy@Manchester](#) organised a roundtable for the Commissioners which brought together insights from researchers at The University of Manchester with research expertise into participatory decision-making. The contributions covered issues around ensuring the voice of different ethnicities in co-production, the voice of young people, whose voices should be included in participatory governance, and how to make use of 'citizen science' experiments.

When [the Independent Inequalities Commission reported](#) in the Spring of 2021, one of their key recommendations was to pivot towards 'people power'; examine how to further open up decision-making to improve diversity in representation; and ensure that engagement and equality structures had a greater mandate and resources to challenge public bodies. For example, Greater Manchester (GM) has established a series of [Equality Panels](#) designed to bring together community members and campaigners from across communities-of-identity across the region.

Moving forward, the refreshed [Greater Manchester Strategy](#) sets out a commitment to achieving equity and tackling inequality, through a distributed leadership model whereby decisions and issues are taken and addressed as close to communities as possible – ensuring that people are at the centre of decision-making. To support these 'ways of working', GMCA invited further work from The University of Manchester to map existing participation mechanisms and look at how they might be improved. As part of this assessment, Policy@Manchester organised a further workshop to bring together key stakeholders to consider the principles which should inform participation, to map existing participation structures and processes and to identify good practice. Attendees from across all ten boroughs in Greater Manchester included executive members with responsibility for equalities, Chairs from the Equality Panels, stakeholders from the voluntary sector, and public service officers.

This report draws on these discussions within Greater Manchester and examples of best practice elsewhere. It sets out key principles that should underpin greater pluralism in policymaking, maps out the different ways in which participation can take place, and makes suggestions for strengthening participation.

What's right with representative democratic systems in Greater Manchester?

Each one of Greater Manchester's two million registered electors has the opportunity to vote for their local councillor which then informs which party assumes control of each local council. This system of representative democracy underpins the formal functions and decision-making practices of all local government. The party with the majority seats in each borough elects a leader for the council, and their party's manifesto informs the council's policy priorities. And now, voters in the city-region also vote for an elected mayor. In a separate ballot the mayoral candidate who gets over 50% of the vote has separate powers, working with the ten authorities to set region-wide priorities. In each borough, council officers with expertise ensure policies are put into action to help deliver the priorities of the party in power. Checks and balances are built in through the publication of a forward plan, a scrutiny system and political priorities are subject to public challenge and debate.

There have been [some indications of public enthusiasm for city-regional level decision-making generally](#), but also specifically for structures like the Combined Authority. For example, public opinion data by YouGov, commissioned by the BBC in 2018, found that three quarters (73%) of respondents who were familiar with the concept, expressed support for combined authorities. Places like Greater Manchester, that [already had a combined authority, were most enthusiastic about them](#).

So why is greater people power needed in Greater Manchester?

The core system of representative democracy has many strengths: it is open to all, and takes the majority view, which is one way to ensure fairness; it involves open debate about different ideas on how to run Greater Manchester; it is organised through groups and political parties; and it is delivered and supported by professionals in local government. Representative democracy is a tried-and-tested way to operate in a democratic way. There are some well-known problems; for example, not all residents register to vote or have the right to vote, and turnouts at elections are typically not as high as we would like them to be. But overall, the system does well.

However, the formal system has some 'in-built' limitations. Political parties, though they help voters make broad choices about what kind of politics to vote for, are often not representative of the communities they serve or of the communities of identity that span across the region. A system that takes the views of the majority is fair, but, by definition, can neglect some minority views. As the Independent Inequalities Commission points out, there are intersecting inequalities and the voices of the most marginalised people are not heard. Formal democracy is retrospective – we have the

right to vote out politicians who have made bad choices after the event, but what about before or while those decisions are being made? Formal democracy gives a democratic mandate, but that mandate is often quite broad, built on a general manifesto commitment or pledge. This can lead to difficult choices emerging later on that need more detail on people's preferences. Therefore, it can add to the formal system if there are extra inputs, particularly from minoritised voices, that help political decision-makers in real time with more 'fine-grain' perspectives and choices.

How can more people power enhance Greater Manchester's democratic systems?

Greater participation in decision-making is vital to extend, support and challenge the system of elections and formal representation. There are a range of models for how to make political and policymaking processes more 'porous', ranging from people's or citizens' assemblies, juries, participatory budgeting, co-production of policy, forums and consultation processes. These participatory models can enhance formal decision-making, bringing in the lived experience of those to whom policy is directed and drawing in the expertise of researchers and campaigners with knowledge of particular policy issues under consideration.

However, without consideration of the principles and procedures underpinning participatory processes, the problem of under-represented voices being heard or listened to can occur in more participatory decision-making too. Here, participation may take place only with the usual suspects or with the domination of special interests. And sometimes people might not want to become more engaged in policymaking – they just want democracy to work for them and know they have a means of redress and expressing voice on matters that concern them between elections.

The principles of people power

Looking at the benefits and problems of getting democratic people’s power working to give voice to all those who live in Greater Manchester and particularly ensuring those whose voices are not heard currently suggests some **underlying principles need to be in place**:

Principles for designing ways of strengthening participation

The problem	Design principles
Closed	Open, porous and transparent
Lack of representativeness	Inclusivity – representativeness
Tokenistic	Embedded (routinised – responded to)
Only valuing some types of knowledge	Valuing expertise of different kinds, including lived experience

Figure 1. Design principles for local decision-making

Case study - Greater Manchester Women & Girl’s Equality Panel

The development of the Women and Girls’ Equality Panel provides an opportunity to consider how these principles might work in practice. The Panel grew out of an earlier task group convened by the then Lead Member for Equalities in Greater Manchester, Cllr Brenda Warrington, with an invited membership to consider how to get women’s voices heard in Greater Manchester. The Women and Girls’ Equality Panel’s key aim is to enable women and girls to live their best life in Greater Manchester. Applications were invited for panel members and widely publicised across the region. The 18 panellists appointed for an initial two-year period were chosen deliberately to reflect the full diversity of women in the region, to draw on a wide range of expertise and to ensure all parts of the region were represented.

Since January 2021, panellists have conducted in-depth inquiries into women’s safety and into education, skills and employment, taking evidence from a range of officers, academics and campaign groups, and drawing on panellists’ own lived experience to contribute to national and regional policy consultations. Findings from the Panel are fed back to Political Leaders and Greater Manchester policy and practices have changed as a result of the Panel’s scrutiny and recommendations. **This link with the formal governance and scrutiny mechanisms is a strength.** Initially the work of the Panel was supported by officers in GMCA but after a tender process, the organisation

and support of the Panel is undertaken by a convening organisation supported by the charities [GM4Women2028](#) and [the Pankhurst Trust](#). This widens still further the reach of the Panel in seeking women’s voices.

How does the Women & Girls’ Equality Panel reflect the principles of people power?

Design principles	Women and Girls’ Panel
Open, porous and transparent	Membership by application after advert
Inclusivity – representativeness	Purposive appointment to reflect diversity, background and geography
Embedded (routinised – responded to)	Developing role, (champion, advise, challenge and support) – emerging routines to ensure scrutiny, input, challenge
Valuing expertise of different kinds including lived experience	Professional, academic, lived and experiential

Figure 2. Design principles and Women and Girls' Equality Panel

What different routes exist for people to participate, and how might they be strengthened?

The workshop on strengthening participation in Greater Manchester, held 9 March 2022 brought together politicians, Chairs from the Greater Manchester Equality Panels, officers working on equalities and public consultation and stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector. The workshop was opened by Councillor Arooj Shah (the then portfolio holder for Equalities and leader of Oldham Council). Participants shared their knowledge of existing participatory initiatives across the city-region and its boroughs and how these initiatives could be strengthened. We also heard from visitors Temidayo Eseonu from [The Young Foundation](#), Sarah Allen from [Involve](#), and Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh, and ex-[What Works Scotland](#).

Key findings from the workshop

- The need to balance online and face-to-face consultations, ‘*people may not be able to read, might not have digital literacy or a laptop*’
- The value of informal consultations in places where people gather, like parks, libraries, shops ‘*look for spaces where people gravitate and feel respected and safe to speak their truths*’
- Feedback on consultation is vital and honesty about possibilities and constraints
- Using citizen’s juries and assemblies in policy decisions should be facilitated by independent organisations and should be representative of the wider population
- Participatory budgeting can be transformative at a large scale; for example, Paris, France or Lisbon, Portugal have large green environmental participatory budgets

- **Co-production takes commitment and has time and resource costs for communities** – it's important to consider these when seeking to scale it up
- **The voice of people experiencing racial inequalities / and racially minoritised communities are often missing and are also diverse** – accessing these voices requires an ethic of care and can require '*sitting with*' uncomfortable experiences
- **Capacity building for involving people is vital**, including working with different communities and in difficult situations '*think about how we can use emotions to steer people to more participation*', '*building confidence and trust is key*'
- **Evaluate at the right time and with time for the impact to be visible** '*allow space for experimentation and failure*'

Figure 3 (over) captures current participatory processes in Greater Manchester with suggestions for how they can be improved. Participants agreed that the development of expertise, ideas and capacity would be enhanced by continuing the dialogue through development of a **Greater Manchester wide community of practice** and that **inclusion of socio-economic inequality and discrimination in the equalities governance architecture would strengthen the voice of those facing intersecting inequalities.**

What kind of citizen engagement?	What's it good for?	At what scale?	Which types of citizen are involved and how do they get involved?	How can it be improved?
Elections	<p>Delegation of political decision-making</p> <p>Authorisation of decisions</p> <p>Formal electoral representation</p>	<p>Wards</p> <p>LA</p> <p>GM-wide</p>	All registered voters	<p>GOTV and registration campaigns</p> <p>Postal voting and voting locations – voting experiments</p> <p>'Between election' constituency work</p> <p>Consultative councillors</p>
Panels, consultation groups, committees and forums	<p>Voices of under-represented groups and organisations</p> <p>Scrutinise forward plans</p> <p>Sounding board</p> <p>Critical friend/constructive challenge</p> <p>Agenda setting/self-defined agendas</p>	<p>GM-wide</p> <p>LA level</p>	<p>Active citizens</p> <p>Communities of place, issue, identity and/or interest</p> <p>Established groups and intermediaries like Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations</p> <p>Purposive recruitment; for example, by geography, identity and intersectionality</p> <p>Snowball and 'convenience' sampling, based on existing networks</p>	<p>Stronger mechanisms to hold decision-makers to account</p> <p>More 'collaborate' and 'empower'</p> <p>Open dialogue at earlier stage; opportunities to set self-defined agendas; inform strategic planning as well as specific issues</p> <p>Resourcing for groups and locality-based staff</p> <p>Use with multiple engagement routes – recognise limits, conflicts of interest, over-represented groups</p>
General consultation exercises	<p>Understanding salient values for affected people</p> <p>Getting first reactions (without context)</p>	<p>Neighbourhood, ward, LA, and/or GM-wide.</p>	<p>Interested/affected citizens</p> <p>Self-selection</p>	<p>Use alongside more deliberative and dialogue-based models</p> <p>Look at profile of responses and fill any gaps;</p> <p>Use only when appropriate/sparingly</p>

What kind of citizen engagement?	What's it good for?	At what scale?	Who is involved and how?	How can it be improved?
Opinion surveys	Collating wide range of experiences and views from general population or specific subgroups Going beyond self-selected participants	Policy area-specific	Individual citizens Invited Statistically representative; for example, random stratified sample of population	Greater use of deliberative polls where appropriate Citizen and Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) groups can also initiate these processes
Intelligence from administrative data	Getting 'objective' observable data on people's behaviours or current preferences (rather than self-reported behaviours)	Policy area-specific	No active involvement Data is harvested from existing sources (by officers)	More use of these sources Better understanding of how current preferences are shaped, and might be altered
Deliberative processes; for example, citizens assemblies, citizen juries, participatory budgeting	Bringing different values and perspectives Informed debate; changed views Advise on difficult policy agendas Reconciliation of competing demands or views Prioritisation of funds	GM-wide Policy area-specific LA	Individual citizens Invited Statistically representative; for example, random stratified sample of population	Greater use of deliberation where appropriate Citizen and Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) groups can also initiate these processes
Community research, lived experience, and co-production	Collating specific perspectives from communities of issue, identity, interest or place Including lived experience in a structured way	Neighbourhood, ward, LA, and/or GM-wide.	Communities of place, issue, identity and/or interest Interested/affected citizens Purposive sampling Self-selection	More use of these sources Support and resources Better use of appropriate sampling strategies in community research, for example, purposive sampling for qualitative research

What kind of citizen engagement?	What's it good for?	At what scale?	Who is involved and how?	How can it be improved?
Citizen-initiated processes; for example, petitions, social media campaigns, activism, community organising	Holding decision-makers to account Check and balance Shaping/challenging policy agendas	Neighbourhood, ward, LA and/or GM-wide	Interested/affected citizens Communities of place, identity, issue and/or interest Self-selection	Stronger/more transparent mechanisms for decision-makers to respond
DIY community action; social enterprise; asset-transfer; community-led regen; social and solidarity economy	Create/develop new social innovations (micro and larger scale) Promoting development in equitable ways (inclusive growth)	Neighbourhood, ward, LA and/or GM-wide	Social enterprises Civil society organisations DIY informal groups	Infrastructure support Funding Sharing ideas about developing 'the commons'
Informal interactions	Rich conversations on views Unstructured forms of dialogue and deliberation Reaching people 'where they are at' Capturing uncertainty and ambivalence	Micro-level	Individual citizens At access points to services and organisations	Better ways to capture information from interactions Creating spaces in which this can happen

Figure 3. How participation currently takes place in GM and how it can be improved

How can progress towards people's power be assessed?

Ultimately, there are some democratic and equality outcomes we might want to see in the city-region. There are lots of examples of people's perceptions and beliefs that have been measured in national and local surveys. For example:

- if people have a sense that their contributions to decisions are being listened to, heard, and responded to;
- how far people believe that they could influence what decisions are made if they wanted to or needed to;
- how far people see that decision-makers can be held to account effectively;
- how far people feel those involved in decision-making are able to understand and represent their views and interests, or have them in mind when making decisions;
- to what extent people identify with those involved;
- how far people trust in the decisions, and also the ways that decisions have been made, even if they are not directly involved, and even when they do not agree with the result;
- if people feel that there are meaningful opportunities for minority views to be raised and considered.

However, these are relatively aspirational measures. People's feelings are driven by a complex mix of factors. These perceptions are unlikely to be changed quickly or by one 'magic bullet'. Each participatory initiative contributes what it can to a bigger whole.

Therefore, **progress of people power could be effectively measured in the early stages by milestone indicators**, such as:

- Is a process in place for how all the engagement networks and panels appoint members, publicise their work, support and challenge the work of Greater Manchester and the districts, and report on their recommendations?
- If there is a process, is it reviewed and refreshed at regular intervals?
- How are processes and structures performing against the people power principles?
- What changes in practices, policies or procedures have been informed by people power?

About the authors

[Professor Francesca Gains](#) is a Professor of Public Policy, Academic Co-Director of Policy@Manchester and a member of the GM Women and Girls' Equality Panel. She chaired an Independent Inequalities Commission roundtable discussion on participatory governance in December 2020.

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