Collaborative Government in Scotland

A Report on the workshop held on 30 July in the Playfair Library, University of Edinburgh

September 2014

Alistair Stoddart, the Democratic Society
The Collaborative Government in Scotland workshop was held on 30 July, 2014 in the Playfair Library at the University of Edinburgh. It brought together civil servants, academics and members of civil society in a joint event to discuss how we can create a new kind of collaborative government in Scotland.

This event was planned and completed before the referendum on independence, Scotland’s constitution was not a theme of the discussions. However, the outcome of the referendum process, in particular the high level of participation, make the discussion more relevant and important.

The following summary of the day’s conversations identifies the major themes to emerge and both problems and opportunities for collaborative government. Whilst this is the output from just one conversation, we believe the views expressed are representative and provide a clear set of intentions in terms of how we take the conversation around collaborative government forward.

**Starting a Conversation**

**How can government collaborate effectively with individual citizens, communities and civil society organisations to improve government policy and service delivery?**

Recognising that collaboration cannot be done to others, seven hosts from a wide range of organisations, projects and countries that are passionate about collaborative working hosted ‘world café’ table discussions covering:

- benefits of collaboration and participation;
- examples of effective collaboration;
- how joint work between government and civil society can encourage people to participate effectively in the decision which affect them; and
- areas where Government could experiment with collaborative working.

Participants challenged themselves to see if, from the day’s conversations, they could create a set of shared intentions for progressing collaborative approaches, and outline the steps that would take us forwards, towards a more active relationship between government and citizens.

Ken Thomson, Director General of Strategy and External Affairs for the Scottish Government and Catherine Howe, Governor of the Democratic Society and Chief Executive of Public-i provided both context and inspiration. Each participant self-selected four ‘world café’ table discussions. After the hosts presented their case study, and through facilitated dialogue, discussions flourished.

Facilitators from the partner organisations coproducing the event – the Democratic Society (Demsoc), the Scottish Government and Edinburgh University – observed the conversations, captured the key points and identified recurring themes. They then took part in an open
discussion summarising the conversations and drawing together the emerging themes. (The full list of speakers, hosts and facilitators is at the end of this report.)

**Putting the Challenge into Context**

“Government has changed a great deal. It is now clear that government no longer decides what they are going to do before they consult.”

Ken Thomson

In the past, consultation has been viewed as ‘daring people to disagree’. Government will always be about making decisions, staffed by people with good intentions taking the best decisions they can in given conditions. However, politics and society change. They have changed; the challenge now is to find, test and take to scale ways to continually improve the system within which decisions are taken.

An important part of this is finding better ways to get more people involved.

“Technology is having a disruptive impact on individuals, government and the wider world. Experimentation and collaboration are essential in order for government to be effective in this new world of uncertainty and change”

Catherine Howe

The world is moving out of an industrial society to a network society, which challenges and changes power structures, shifting them away from a hierarchical model and towards a collaborative and networked ecosystem.

Collaboration is collective wisdom; no one person holds the answer. The challenge is to set aside any professional arrogance and embrace the humility of going back to the place where we are learning; finding ways for the Government to move with civil society to a place where we can try ideas out and to be less concerned about the political viability of failure.

**Emerging Themes from the Conversation**

The conversation proved rich, a direct result of the quality of the contributions and engagement from participants, speakers, facilitators and note-takers and the main themes to emerge are set out below.

By synthesising and sharing the range of views expressed, thoughts shared and ideas generated in the room our intention is to keep the conversation going.
Shift Power: Reach out and involve others

The nature of power has shifted, globally and nationally and much discussion about the declining relevance of hierarchical systems and the rise of networks.

Delegates questioned the wisdom of any government appearing to dictate the services people receive whilst not always valuing the ideas or knowledge of users and other stakeholders. That being said, it was also acknowledged that we need government to be responsible and take decisions because ‘networks cannot’.

But there remains a need to ‘create opportunities for a more democratic and equal society’; and reaching out and involving citizens is one way government can achieve this. Through finding methods of collaboration and participation that demonstrate values such as increased efficiency, better policy, improved legitimacy and stronger relationships.

Government has to acknowledge it ‘does not know all the answers’ and be comfortable with the fact that it cannot ‘own’ all of the conversations that need to take place in an environment of collaborative government.

Collaborative Government is not about giving up responsibility, standards and expectations; but is about harnessing collective wisdom and experiences in order improve processes that will in turn improve purpose and paradigms for all involved: citizens, civil society, politicians and civil servants.

Overall, there is a feeling that government in Scotland has moved to improve collaboration, but more could be done to make decisions more open, deliberative, using collaborative mechanisms. Scottish Government could demonstrate commitment that the process we are constructing (with the public) will get us to the answers.

Go To Where People Are: Find and create safe spaces

It was suggested that for government to work effectively with others, public servants need to be confident in both hosting collaborative conversations and joining in pre-existing conversations. In terms of online spaces there was discussion about the need to experiment with different platforms and methods to assess what works best. In terms of offline spaces there was much talk of the importance of ‘community based approaches’ and connecting civil servants to communities in order to shape better policy and ‘better channels of dialogue’.

Government could identify ‘trusted intermediaries’ who are able to create environments where people can collaborate in what feels like a safe space for all participants. These trusted intermediaries could include civil society organisations and members of the democratic sector who are able to create a neutral environment for collaboration and ensure focused deliberation towards a specific outcome.
Good practice for Collaborative Government would involve going to where people are, to connect to existing conversations, rather than creating a new government website or whole new system and expecting people always to come to it.

One of the next stages for promoting Collaborative Government in Scotland may be to identify how and where safe spaces with trusted governance might be created. These should be both online and offline, local and national and owned by a variety of hosts.

There is strong support for the Scottish Government to openly experiment to ‘orchestrate a range of tools’ that make it easy for the public to interact and collaborate with government.

Establish Genuine Engagement & Trust: Moving from complaining to creating & making a visible impact

‘Authentic’ and ‘genuine’ were used to describe the kind of engagement that should take place in in a more collaborative government environment.

Consultation is not a tick box exercise nor should it be viewed as an opportunity to complain. The theme of complaining arose throughout the afternoon – “someone who complains has the potential to positively engage”, “government should consult on positive issues rather than on problems” and “offer people to create or engage on legitimate options – not just the choice ‘between a red and blue kitchen’.”
Genuine engagement could further strengthen citizen trust in government and authentic co-creation could be self-sustaining, in the sense that once citizens recognise they are able to have an impact on decisions that affect their lives, they will be more inclined to participate in future collaboration. It is important that citizens not only feel but know that they had been heard by ‘seeing that something changed as a result of engagement.’

Government should lean towards co-creation; the appetite is for more than a transition from ‘telling to asking’ rather from ‘hearing to listening’. It was also suggested that apathy to engagement exercises could be avoided by Government ensuring that it close the feedback loop, ensuring reasons for a certain decision are properly communicated and evidenced. This would involve finding ways of informing the public about the difference they have made.

Collaborative Government in Scotland should try to avoid creating invitations to complain and focus on opportunities to create better policies, services and processes with the public. It should involve well-communicated, genuine and meaningful engagement exercises that have a tangible impact in reality. Perhaps establishing continual conversations, that build trust and shared understanding over time, rather than relying on traditional approaches to consultation.

**Change our Culture: Learn through experimenting**

We should recognise that failure is a cultural thing we need to get over. The current culture in Scotland was described as ‘risk averse’, where a clear approach to experimentation could reduce fears of the implications of something going wrong and unleash innovation.

Collaborative Government could help change perceptions around failure, most notably through the process of co-design, where risk is shared between participant, and adoption of a mind-set that encourage people to learn from failures.

One table had a conversation about ‘beautiful failure’; a mind-set that encourages people to learn from failure through telling stories about projects that failed as well as recognise the key attributes of projects that succeed, highlighting the positives and (well evidenced) lessons that emerge in both scenarios. Thus it not about rationalising or identifying excuses for not achieving but about feeding learning into future projects and experiments.

A new cultural attitude to failure could allow for a more agile approach to participation, but it is easier to describe than to achieve in reality. The very process of creating Collaborative Government in Scotland should be viewed as an enabler for culture change.
Promote skills and capacity for Collaborative Government

Disengagement from traditional party politics does not necessarily correlate to disengagement from issues and services. Experience from around the world tells us that given time, resource, learning and compensation, randomly selected citizens can make sound policy decisions.

An important part of collaborative working is digital proficiency. Not all of us are ‘digital natives’, and organisational, centralised IT departments can often stand in the way of staff developing social digital skills.

Moving beyond digital, we should debate and explore the ‘new’ leadership skills for Collaborative Government. Both ‘facilitative leadership’ (a collaborative way of working and the ability to manage conversations and engagement processes to tap into people’s strengths and expertise in order to help create better, co-created outcomes) and ‘adaptive leadership’ (enabling civil servants to be agile and change processes based on feedback and evidence while working in an iterative fashion) were debated. In any scenario there were views that public servants should be supported to be ‘readied’ for Collaborative Government, with some advocating a greater shift away from traditional forms of training to support this.

Government should do more to embrace digital in meaningful way and better understand social media, not least given the benefits it could provide to collaborative government. Therefore attendees thought it was important to ensure skills of civil servants were improved to create more ‘responsive’ policy makers.

In terms of digital skills relating to citizens there should, of course, be a strong emphasis on digital inclusion and access as well as also providing a host of options, both digital and offline, to ensure maximum engagement.

There was consensus that Collaborative Government in Scotland must ensure that government, public and community organisations have the skills and capacity for effective engagement and co-design.

Expand and Continue the Conversation: Inclusion and Longevity

‘Engagement mechanisms can be fairly meaningless – it is the dialogue that must be meaningful for people and their lives.’ Any collaborative government project must take into account importance of diverse voices and inclusion. Once again digital inclusion is important to this process, with the challenge therefore being to focus on citizens who ‘find services difficult to reach’ rather than describing certain citizens as ‘hard to reach’.

The language used by Government and engagers plays an important role in ensuring the opportunity to participate is accessible to all, with consensus that if the collaboration process was carried out “at too high a level then people will not engage.” Both the legislature and the executive needed to understand the desire and shift to more collaborative government in Scotland.
Future engagement projects should give time and space to help people to understand what scale they want to engage at. This, once more, refers to the earlier suggested intention of creating a diverse range of tools that allows a diverse range of citizens to participate in ways they feel comfortable and confident.

There was a general call to invite more people from ‘the public’ to participate in the Collaborative Government in Scotland process, with future conversations and experiments also including local government, the health sector, front line staff, public servants.

**Capturing Insights**

The conversation suggests that successful collaborative government requires us to:

1. Go to people and joining other, pre-existing conversations
2. Establish a dialogue not host series of one-off conversations
3. Identify intermediaries and safe spaces trusted by all
4. Embrace networks rather than hierarchies
5. Move away from asking people what they think of a pre-determined policy (inviting to complain) to asking people to co-design the policy (inviting to create).

**Understanding the Difficulties**

Several issues were raised in the discussion as being particularly difficult or sensitive:

- **What is the role of representation, both in political terms and representation of groups by community leaders or pressure groups?**
  Participation can be seen as a challenge to representative structures, and as a threat to existing power networks. Collaborative government needs to be clearly aimed at a more participative representative democracy, not a replacement of representation by more participative means.

- **How is collaborative government perceived?**
  There is a risk that is seen as risk-shifting, or as “democracywash” for cuts to services. The goals of improvement, modernisation and participation must be clear in any project, though the realities of finances must be part of the overall frame.

- **More than the latest “fashion”?**
  Collaborative government requires trust and there is a risk that half-hearted efforts or collaborative government “by pro-forma” increase cynicism.

- **Collaborative government experiments need to work where they have political and organisational permission.**
Moving Forward

“We have to build democratic services together...government and communities can share, talk, listen, reflect and then move on to design, prototype, refine and learn.”

Andy Williamson, Lead Facilitator

In order for Collaborative Government in Scotland to be successful there must be collaboration from the beginning - co-design in the co-design processes and collaboration to create mechanisms of collaboration.

There were three principal outputs from the day:
- the conversation, recorded in this report
- the energy/mandate for further conversations and action
- the start of a network of people and organisations who can make further action happen

Participants also highlighted and shared various pieces of work underway in Scotland on collaborative government. The learning from these projects can be brought together to inform the continued conversation on collaborative government, and to inspire further experiments and projects.

Reaching a Set of Shared Intentions

There was a general agreement that this should be the beginning of the conversation rather than the end of it, and we should be opportunistic in making that happen. We will:

- **Carry on the conversation** in the autumn and beyond
- **Open up to other voices**, particularly local government, the health sector, and citizens
- Consider how to **identify and frame small low-risk experiments**, particularly addressing the issues of culture and failure
- Think about how we **create safe spaces and find trusted intermediaries** that can operate in and govern those spaces
- **Identify the tools that will enable government to collaborate** across its broad areas of work and encourage increasingly deeper levels of engagement from citizens
Collaborative Government in Scotland

30 July. The Playfair Library, University of Edinburgh

The Speakers

- Ken Thomson, Director General of Strategy and External Affairs, Scottish Government
- Catherine Howe, Governor of the Democratic Society and Chief Executive of Public-i

The ‘World café’ Table Hosts and Themes

- Robert Bjarnason, Citizens Foundation: Technology and Democracy
- Catherine Howe, Public-i: Collaborating for Public Services/NHS Citizen
- Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh: Beyond consultation: Innovations in citizen participation
- Christian Storstein, Scottish Government: Digital Engagement and Experimentation
- Angela Morgan, Includem: How can we connect those who are least heard in civil society?
- Tim Hughes, Involve: Openness and transparency in policy making
- Juliet Swann & Willie Sullivan, ERS Scotland: Democratic reform and innovation

The Facilitators

- Democratic Society: Alistair Stoddart, Susie Latta & Anthony Zacharzewski
- Democratise the Democratic Society: Andy Williamson
- University of Edinburgh: David Robertson
- Scottish Government: Doreen Grove

The Attendees

The event was attended by around 30 senior civil servants, 10 academics, and 30 members of civil society and the democratic sector.

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