

Participation in local authorities

Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums
is a local authority museum service
so our government body
is made up of councillors
who are elected to represent the people
and they bring together
that whole set of important priorities for a local area.

And that's the whole basis
on which our country runs and is governed.

Working with communities
is a form of associative democracy,
so we value that input on very specific projects
and talking individually to local communities
about what's important to them.

And I think the projects
like Our Museum have enabled us
to bring together associative
and representative democracy,
reflecting that both are really important in society.

For a number of years now
it's always been local elected representatives
that's involved in the decisions
and solely that, but that's changing.

So I don't think there's tension
there at all and I actually find that
people want to help us
to make sure that we're delivering
the right services for their area.

There are lots of examples
where local authorities themselves
are engaging in powerful ways of listening
to the voices of the communities.

Here in Newcastle, we have participatory budgeting
where a budget is devolved,
right down to community level

and they then scrutinise the outcomes
to make sure that it's been effective.

When budget cuts come
to museums and galleries
there's a decision that has to be made.

Now if you've got local people
that's involved in that then they have to prioritise
where the local authorities are able to put their money.

So we would say, that's involving
people in the democratic process.

There's lots of advantages
to work within a local authority
and one of the big advantages is
the connections and the links
with other departments.

I can pick up the phone and speak to someone
in my neighbourhood's team,
we have links with schools,
with parks, with public health.

There's a willingness to work together
that's really encouraged within the council.

The priorities of vast majority of local authorities
are about better lives for the residents
and people coming into their area
so museum priorities are absolutely aligned
with those local authority priorities.

So as a local authority,
we're part of a big organisation
and that organisation is just slow to manoeuvre
and communities want
to see things happen now,
they want things to happen quickly
and we need to be much more responsive about that.

But I don't think it's necessarily
the local authorities saying 'no' as such.

I think it is just finding a way to move through that

and to move things along more quickly.
Things like exhibitions and events, stuff that we control,
we can be more engaged with communities
because we can be faster to react.
There will be certain elements
within the community that may come in
and just want to do the exhibitions,
or the way that the museum looks
other people, who may have a long history
with involved in policy making,
why should we not let them be involved as well?
I believe that you shouldn't limit people
from their involvement within an organisation.
Within Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums,
we have the alternative management team.
And I think that's a good thing.
So if we were to broaden
the depth of experience on the joint committee
to involve some people from the community,
I think that they would participate
just as fully as what a councillor would.
So I think there's a rule
for the community on boards
and on government bodies that deliver these services.
And that's what I'd like to see;
diversification across boards,
but also bringing an expertise,
that you might not necessarily have,
so to be more inclusive.