INNOVATING LOCAL DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE NOTES

The opening address was given in the form of a filmed presentation by Viscount Younger, Minister for Faith & Communities, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the MHCLG, who opened by stressing the government's commitment to devolving power. He explained that local democracy programmes were being tested in three local authority areas – Dudley, Greater Cambridgeshire and Test Valley. He spoke of good inter-departmental working on the democracy agenda and he said: "People are most likely to engage if they can see the effect of things".

He was followed by the first of two keynote speakers, Cllr Georgia Gould, Leader of Camden Borough Council. Profiling her community, she explained that 50% of the children of Camden lived in poverty. Her authority runs learning programmes for adults as well as children but a large percentage of people did not engage with the authority.

The democracy agenda, she said, was about power and she was committed to changing the 'power dynamic'. The Borough Plan had been created through a Citizen's Assembly initiative (there were actually a number of Citizen's Assemblies). The community had set out a series of challenges they wanted to see solved. Recommendations which had come forward included the development of a climate change programme and a ban on cars. There were new youth programmes and traffic initiatives. People were beginning to appreciate that they had the power to change their own lives.

The other keynote speaker was Claudia Chwalisz, policy analyst for the UK's Open Government Network, who spoke of the team which had been working on citizen engagement for 20 years – trying to understand what works and what does not. "Many people feel they are forgotten", she said. "Only 10% of people feel that anyone cares". The only conclusion to draw was that "our democratic infrastructure is no longer fit for purpose". The key question was how to re-design

the system in a way that brings about more participation. The answer, she felt, was 'deliberation' which, she said, led to better policy outcomes and made government more inclusive.

There was a lack of international evidence about what worked but Open Government were in the process of correcting that. They had so far looked at 18 countries and a wide range of issues. She highlighted the 'Place Council' that has been set up in Belgium and which considers key issues that should go forward for delivery. It also has democratic champions and the parliament was obliged to take notice of the recommendations which came forward. She closed by asking how could the UK be more ambitious and change the architecture of its system?

There were break-out sessions run by various local authorities which were operating their own versions of Citizen's Assemblies and also a 'marketplace' over lunchtime when it was possible to chat to representatives from different authorities who were trying out different initiatives.

The closing keynote speaker was Ruth Ibegbuna, founder and director of the Roots Programme which brings together, informal programmes, people from radically different backgrounds to help them understand each other. She spoke of her personal experiences of teaching at both a top-class private institution and a school in a very deprived area of Manchester and how social backgrounds impact on everything from learning to aspirations. The only way forward was for people to open up, listen to and understand how other people from different backgrounds think.

Innovating Local Democracy Conference was organised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), and Luminate (funder of not-for-profit organisations) and held at The People's History Museum in Manchester.

Author: Cllr Lillian Burns, Prestbury Parish Council