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# Civic engagement as participation in designing for services

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## Abstract

In spite of the increased interest on collaborative and participatory design approaches to design in public sector, less attention has been paid to the contribution of design into civic engagement in local decision-making. This paper takes an organisational perspective to explore the role of civic engagement activities in local decision-making cycles, drawing on literature and insights from a workshop with local authorities' representatives and art and design academics. Zooming out from specific civic engagement activities, the paper outlines local decision-making as a design process, proposes four scenarios, and provides insights into better understanding the decision-making cycles that lead to service transformation in local authorities. The authors argue that while design can facilitate civic engagement practices, an increased understanding of local decision-making cycles can enhance the adoption of participatory approaches in designing for public services in local authorities.

KEYWORDS: public sector, civic engagement, democracy, service transformation

## Introduction

In designing for policy and public services, national, regional and local governments have an imperative to innovate in order to maintain the quality of their service provision and deliver more inclusive governance scenarios with ever increasingly scarce resources. This requires governments to consider innovating the principles of decision making to deliver valuable outcomes for citizens (Christiansen & Blunt, 2012).

In recent years, there has been a growing use of design in public sector organizations for communicating, implementing, informing and envisioning future policies, products and services (Junginger, 2013). The contributions of design and designers to address the social

challenges currently facing public sector have been largely explored in the design literature, i.e. proposing scenarios of provision in which citizens take a more active role, embracing ‘public and collaborative’ scenarios (Manzini & Staszowski, 2013), raising questions about the role of design and the designer in democratic endeavours (Junginger, 2013, O’Rafferty et al. 2016) and more recently calling designers to ‘stand up for democracy’ (Manzini & Margolin, 2017). Yet, in spite of the rich literature on collaborative and participatory design approaches to design in public sector (i.e. Huybretchs, Benesch & Geib, 2017; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Lee, 2008) less attention has been paid to design contribution to offer modes of civic engagement in local decision-making (Design Commission, 2014) with few significant exceptions: i.e. ‘designed engagements’ as bespoke and engaging experiences for meaningful dialogue that provide rich insights into matters of public concern and preferable futures (Teal and French 2016); codesign to improve public spaces in the context of local plans (Cruickshank, Coupe & Hennessy, 2013), or the role of citizen engagement in social innovation (Davies & Simon 2012, Davies et al. 2013).

This paper takes an organisational perspective to explore the role of civic engagement in local decision-making processes in England. The first section starts out by briefly reviewing the state of the art of civic engagement, and continues by focusing on the context of English local authorities. The second section draws on insights gained in the context of the Public Collaboration Lab, and proposes a simplified model to approach civic engagement in local decision-making with four scenarios. The article concludes by suggesting that an increased understanding of institutionalised methods of civic engagement and their contribution to decision-making can facilitate participatory approaches to design for public services in local authorities.

## Civic engagement in local decision-making

Civic engagement is an act of political participation (Eknam & Amna 2012; Houses of Parliament, 2015) that enriches the practice of representative democracy by “expanding the sphere within which citizens can exercise influence” (Bourgon, 2008, p.13). Civic engagement activities fulfil several democratic functions, such as educative by developing civic skills and virtues, integrative by allowing individual voices to be heard, deliberative by opening up decision-making to public reasoning and legitimacy by increasing the transparency of decisions (Michels & de Graaf, 2010; OECD 2001, 2006). In addition, civic engagement exercises bring a citizen-centred approach to public management providing a better understanding of social needs, and divergent thinking towards solution of complex problems that potentially leads to improving government’s outcomes (Cooper et al. 2006; Davies & Simon 2012). Civic engagement can take many forms which differ considerably in their character and objective (Cornwall, 2008). Different approaches are adopted to suit diverse contexts, whereby sometimes the jargon hides as much as it reveals. In the public sector context, civic engagement typically refers to “any process that directly engages the public in decision-making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision” (EPA, 2017). In order to narrow down this broad definition of civic engagement,

we turned to Stuart Fox's comprehensive literature review of frameworks of political participation in Britain to limit the scope of civic engagement in the context of local authorities' decision-making to: *voluntary* and *active behaviour* engaged by an *individual or group* with the aim of affecting public concerns, *targeted at local authorities* as responsible for discharging services, and restricted to formal participation or *institutionalised methods* (Fox, 2014; Houses of Parliament, 2015). In turn, these formal or institutionalised methods employed by local authorities are well summarised by Genere Rowe and Lynn J. Frewer (2005). The authors approach civic engagement activities focusing on the information flow between sponsor<sup>1</sup> and citizens, and develop a typology of mechanisms –and competencies of each mechanism– consisting on three modes. Firstly, *public communication* as a one-way flow of information from sponsor to the public that aims at efficiently transfer relevant information. Secondly, *public consultation*, which is a one-way flow of information from the public to the local authority, who then must process the information gathered. It must be noted that public consultation is also seen as a limited two-way relationship that includes feedback to the public (OECD, 2001). Anyhow, consultation is broadly considered to be a “reactive way of participation” (European Center for Not-for-profit Law, 2016, p.23) in which members of the publics are consulted upon a tentative proposal. Thirdly, *public engagement*, which establishes dialogue between local authorities and citizens and captures it into an ‘accurate composite’.

Beyond the information flow framework –which provides a terminology attuned with that of local authorities’–, accounts of civic engagement broadly approach the relationship between government and citizens as either *adversarial* or *potentially collaborative* (Quick & Feldman, 2011). As an example of the former, the Ladder of Participation by the American Sociologist Sherry Arnstein (1969) provides a typology of citizen participation that ascends from nonparticipation to degrees of tokenism and degrees of citizen power. Arnstein's ideal of collaboration revolves towards citizens moving from an “empty ritual of participation” towards citizens “having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process” (ibid, p. 216). However, Arnstein's normative scenario does not acknowledge the complexity of local government and citizens' relationships (Bovaird 2007) and places citizens and civil servants in opposition (Junginger 2014) which is of little use to facilitate collaboration. Conversely, *potentially collaborative* approaches to practices of civic engagement are most relevant for participatory approaches to the design of policy and public services. In this vein, Simon Burrall and Jonathan Carr-West (2009) differentiate between *extractive engagement* as a one-way channel communication where state actors attempt to extract relevant information from citizens; and *discursive engagement* which is aimed to facilitate meaningful conversations. Although it falls beyond the scope of *formal participation*, Sarah C. White's political approach to participation is most relevant. She distinguishes four major types of participation based on interests for top-down and bottom-up actors, and functions: *nominal participation* is largely for top-down legitimation and bottom-up inclusion, and serves the function of display; *instrumental participation's* is a means to an end that serves top-down's efficiency interest, and is seen as a cost by local people; *representative participation* is an effective means of

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging organisations that carry on civic engagement activities on behalf of a public authority.

communication that aims to ensure sustainability and leverage; and *transformative participation* aims at empowerment and is an end in itself.

Categorisations of civic engagement practices are artificial and elusive as different forms of civic engagement are often mingled, overlapping and complementing each other. On the one hand, even activities that may in principle fall under tokenism can grow into inclusive decision-making processes (Davies et al. 2012). On the other, activities aimed to provide a space for public discursive engagement can in practice be limited to nominal/instrumental participation.

White argues that “sharing through participation does not necessarily mean sharing power” (1996, p.6) and claims that participation should also extend to management and decision-making. In this note, it is worth noting that civic engagement activities open up decision-making processes to take in citizens’ input, mainly aimed to contribute to policy-making without mention of delivery. If attention is turned to policy implementation and design for services, civic engagement gives way to *co-production* as participation in the delivery of public services. In this regard, Victor Pestoff (2012) refers to collaboration in different stages of the policy cycle without being mutually exclusive: the author distinguishes between co-governance as the input or engagement into policy formulation, and co-production and co-management at the output or policy implementation. In this line, the Care Act 2014 defines co-production as when “an individual influences the support or services received” but also as “influence on the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered” (Department of Health, 2014, p.12), blurring the boundaries between civic engagement and co-production. Other scholars have also recognised that civic engagement may extend to any point in the policy cycle, from agenda-setting, policy direction, policy design or policy delivery (Bourgon, 2008; Involve & NCC, 2008). In this line, Sabine Junginger (2013, 2014) also notes that policy problems and solutions emerge together and that the distinct clear cut stages of the policy cycle are conceptual rather than practical. Christian Bason approaches co-production as a governance scenario, and proposes a shift from “delivery of services to people, towards a scenario that is designed to better enable co-production of services with people” (2012, p.50).

In the context of the United Kingdom’s representative democracy, the Localism Act 2011 is especially relevant<sup>2</sup> as it has sought to decentralize and devolve powers to local government. That means that local government operate more locally, increasing communication with individuals, local communities and other local governments. Devolution and decentralisation aims at taking decision making closer to citizens, devolving decision-making cycles, creating new scenarios of local consultations and canvassing the need for greater civic engagement in local decisions. According to the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, governments have a ‘Duty to Consult’, and the Code of Practice on Consultation (Cabinet Office, 2004) encourages consideration to more informal ways of engaging with stakeholders and

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<sup>2</sup> Also of relevance are Communities in Control (2009), Control Shift (Conservative Party, 2009), Equality Act 2010, Strengthening Local Democracy (2010), Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

highlights the importance to engage proactively with particularly difficult to reach individuals. The Revised Consultation Principles (Houses of Parliament 2013) provides further guidance and acknowledges that traditional written consultation is not always the best way to engage in fruitful dialogue. Nonetheless, it is at the discretion –and capability– of local authorities to choose the most appropriate methods of consultation on the basis of guaranteeing fairness. In addition, the most recent guidelines update encourages “informal iterative consultation” as an on-going process that includes “collaborative approaches” and is tailored to the needs and preferences of particular groups who “may not respond to traditional consultation methods” (Cabinet Office, 2016, n.p.).

In sum, English local governments have “statutory duties to consult with local people about changes in their area” (Local Government Association 2011, n.p.) and although decision-making cycles seemed to revolve around public consultation recent legislative reforms encourage more inclusive, iterative and discursive forms of civic engagement. Taking into account the current financial situation at the light of public sector cuts, the realisation of these recommendations poses a challenge for local governments which must find novel ways of bringing power closer to the citizen with ever limited resources.

## Public Collaboration Lab: Creative engagement and consultation

The research reported in this paper was conducted as part of the Public Collaboration Lab, a one-year, AHRC-funded research project that established a strategic research collaboration between the London Borough of Camden, the citizens they serve, and the University of the Arts London exploring the potential for, and the value of, design-led research to address societal challenges, and engage with citizens and other societal actors in the co-design and co-delivery of some aspects of public services. Two interrelated action research activities were delivered in parallel: Firstly, citizen-centred exploration of how collaboration plays in specific service contexts. Secondly, exploration of scenarios, mechanisms and measurement of impact of the lab’s scenario and means of democratising social and service innovation and informing policy. The Public Collaboration Lab explored synergies of collaboration between local government and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) through design-led action research projects, which have increased understanding of HEIs’ roles in supporting innovation practices within local research, and explored the potential for co-design to democratize public service reform and improve public outcomes. (Thorpe, Prendiville & Olivier, 2016). ‘Future Libraries’, a design-led action research project undertaken by MA Industrial Design students in collaboration with Camden’s library services delivered creative consultations and the project’s findings contributed to the Council’s proposal for statutory consultation around the future of libraries. The students designed and produced creative engagement artifacts, co-design workshop methods and tools, as well as a digital publication of the project findings (Thorpe et al. 2016). Drawing on the ‘Future Libraries’ project the authors identified civic participation as one of local government’s operational objectives in alignment with design education’s learning outcomes.

Following on, a half-day workshop on ‘Creative Engagement and Consultation’ was held at Camden Council’s offices. The workshop aimed at exploring how local authorities’ design and deliver civic participation activities as part of their decision-making processes, in order to identify potential contributions of participatory art and design practice to deliver more creative and possibly more inclusive engagement and consultation to inform decision-making and design of public services. In preparation for the workshop, literature review, in depth interviews and workshops with Council’s officers provided insights on the complexity and diversity of civic participation activities. This preliminary research informed the design a ‘decision-making journey template’ (Figure 1): a hands-on diagnostic exercise that captures an overview of decision-making cycles, focusing on civic engagement activities and identifying potential contributions of participatory art and design approaches. In addition, the template plays out as a boundary object (Star 1989) to facilitate and document communication between local governments’ officers and art and design academics. The template aimed to explore the hypothesis that tools and methods employed to inform, consult and engage citizens should respond to the extent in which citizens can influence the decision-making process, in order to align expectations and maximize resources.

The workshop gathered 58 participants, including 32 officers from 13 local governments from across the country who are responsible for civic involvement activities; and 26 art and design academics from 14 HEIs interested in exploring new opportunities for collaborative learning. Participants formed eleven groups with even representation and chose a decision-making journey that best represented their local authorities’ practice. Using the provided ‘decision-making journey template’ participants generated eleven journeys in areas as diverse as local regeneration plans, commissioning of social care services, major transformation of culture or leisure services among others (Figure 2). The first exercise, led by local government representatives, focused on the visualization of the chosen journey, detailing: 1) milestones, particularly statutory and non-statutory civic engagement activities, 2) and the degree to which citizens may influence decisions. 3) The methods and tools used to engage citizens in each exercise, 4) timeframe and 5) actors involved. The second exercise, led by art and design academics, focused on 6) identifying opportunities to draw on participatory art and design to enhance civic engagement activities.

The authors have approached the data analysis through a design-lens. In making sense of diverse local authorities’ decision-making journeys these have been mapped against an extended version of the Double Diamond design process (Design Council, 2005) understood here as a project management process. The analysis has given rise to (1) a simplified and archetypical model that provides an overview of civic participation in local decision-making cycles, and (2) four scenarios that account for the diversity of local decision-journeys. The scenarios depicted are not exhaustive nor normative, but rather illustrative of local authorities’ decision making processes as shared during the workshop.

This is the decision-making journey for \_\_\_\_\_

Some context: \_\_\_\_\_

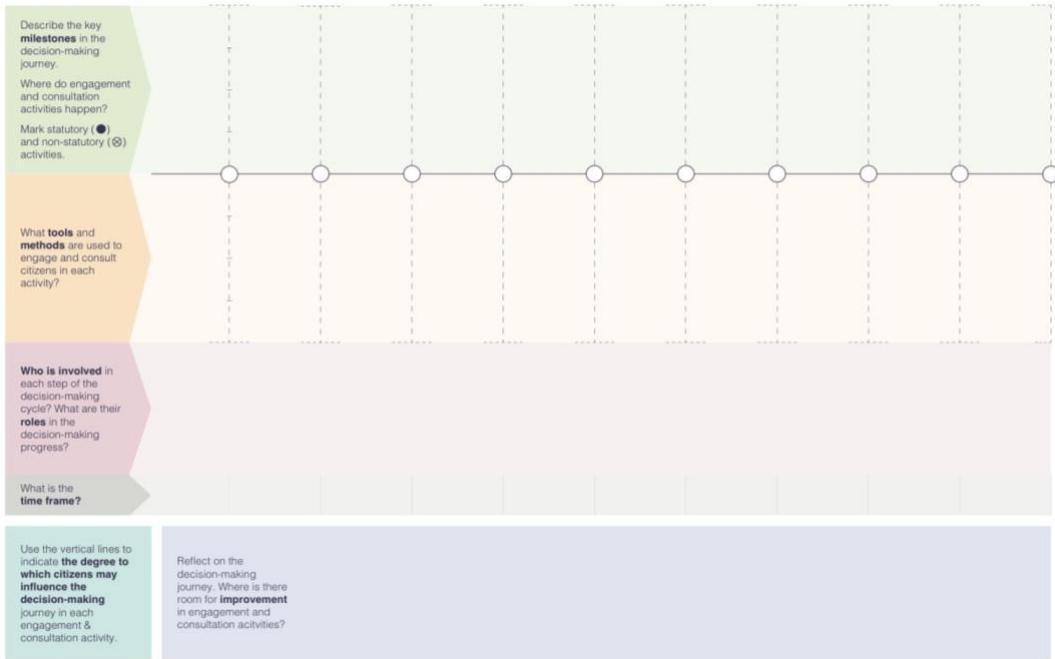


Figure 1 Decision-making journey template.

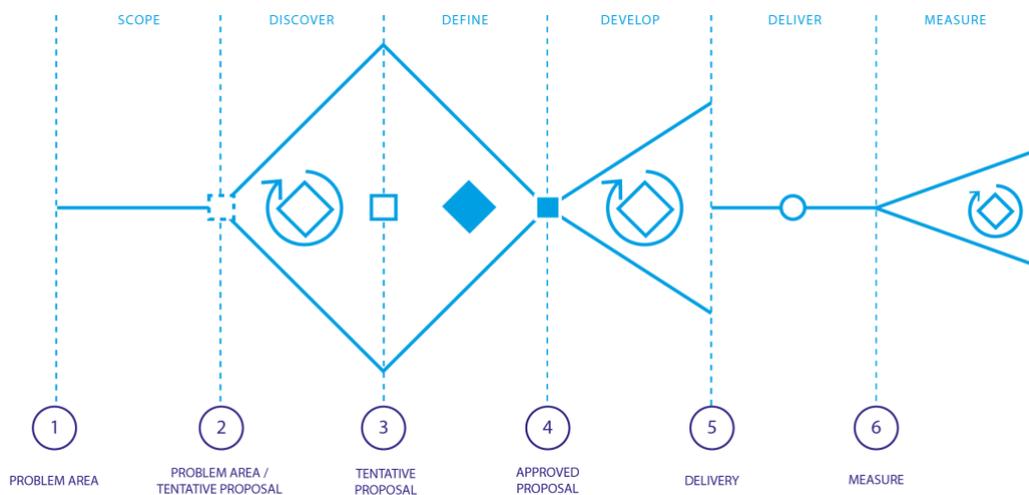


Figure 2 A decision-making journey template in progress during the workshop

## Decision-making journey scenarios

Zooming out from specific civic engagement activities to the decision-making cycle as a whole, Figure 3 shows a model of an archetypical decision-making journey focusing on citizen engagement. The model takes into consideration processes, methods and actors. Citizens' opportunity to influence decision-making processes in each civic participation activity has been inferred from participants' responses and expressed with the height of the diamonds. For instance, the 'scope' stage is represented flat because participants consistently reported no civic engagement practices during this phase.

It must be noted that local authorities' representatives often refer to *public communication* as *information*; *public engagement* as *informal consultation* or *pre-consultation*, and *public consultation* as *statutory consultation* or *formal consultation*.



**Figure 3** Simplified local decision-making model based outlined as a design process.

(1) A decision-making journey is initiated either in a) in a proactive manner to improve current policy or service provision with a somewhat specific or open exploratory question; or in a reactive manner to respond to b) an event or emergency (such as riots) or in order to achieve strategic objectives. The latter and most common scenario can in turn be initiated in response to c) updated priority settings, such as budget reduction; d) to a Councillor or Service Board proposal, which might have been motivated by citizens. The identification of a problem area or vision is carried out internally by public servants, officers and service teams, heavily driven by the local authority's strategic objectives and priorities and informed by pre-existing data evidence. No civic engagement processes are used during this stage.

(2) A problem area or vision is -maybe just roughly- defined and cycles of civic engagement exercises commence. A typical cycle is constituted by several activities. In a first iteration, aimed at defining a tentative proposal that addresses the problem area or vision, local authorities gather public opinion through informal (and somehow exploratory) public consultation. Diverse stakeholders are involved at this early stage, such as community representatives, interested local residents, community researchers or front line staff. During

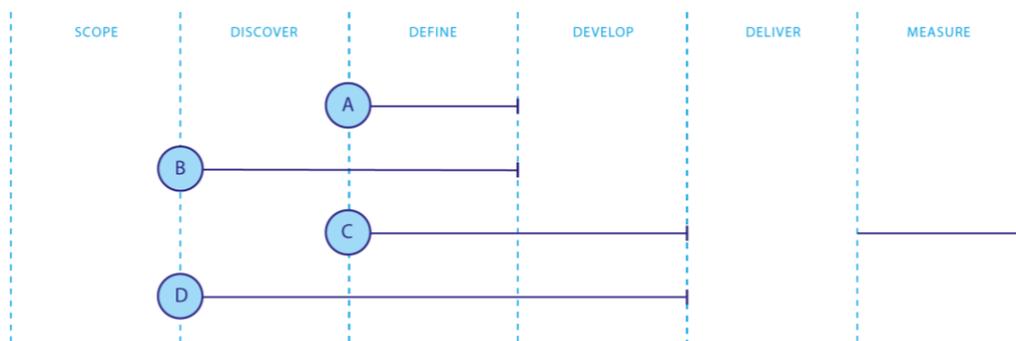
the convergent stage, local authority representatives analyse information and generate insights based on agreed strategic objectives.

(3) Insights gathered during this first cycle of civic engagement inform the development of one or several tentative proposals, upon which citizens are formally consulted. Feedback from the formal consultation is taken into consideration and the proposal might be modified accordingly, completing a second cycle of civic engagement.

(4) A proposal informed by data evidence, public engagement informal consultation, and thirdly by a formal consultation is reviewed by cabinet members, and if appropriate signed-off for its implementation.

(5) The proposal approved by cabinet is further developed with or without public engagement, and finally delivered. Public communication exercises feature throughout the process, especially during the delivery phase.

(6) A performance monitoring and evaluation is initiated, and the results will inform the setting of strategic objectives and future decision-making cycles.



**Figure 4 Four scenarios according in which civic engagement activities feature at different stages of local authorities' decision-making journey.**

Scenario A, *consultation*, is based on 2 decision-making journeys. In this scenario, a tentative proposal is well articulated by the local authority based on data evidence to address strategic objectives. Members of the public are formally consulted upon it and their feedback is incorporated into the proposal. The proposal is presented, approved by cabinet, and therefore ready for implementation. In this scenario, civic engagement is reactive and limited to top-down formal consultation intended to legitimate the proposal.

Scenario B, *engagement and consultation*, is based on 5 decision-making journeys. In this scenario, civic engagement activities aim to facilitate meaningful conversations to co-define a problem area or vision. Taking into considerations strategic objectives, data evidence and the insights gathered, ultimately local authorities articulate a tentative proposal. Members of the public are formally consulted upon it, and their feedback is incorporated into the proposal. The proposal is then presented and approved by cabinet, ready for implementation.

Scenario C, *consultation and engagement towards coproduction* is based on 1 decision-making journey. In this scenario, a proposal based on data evidence is presented and approved by

cabinet, ready for implementation. Up to this point, civic engagement is limited to top-down formal consultation. Later on, on-going informal consultation exercises provide citizens the opportunity to contribute to the proposal's development and to provide insights to evaluate the proposal. Civic engagement activities aim to facilitate meaningful conversations intended to seek consensus in further articulation of the proposal.

Scenario D, *continuous engagement towards coproduction* is based on 3 decision-making journeys. In this scenario, members of the public are consulted in a series of civic engagement exercises, and citizen's feedback is iteratively incorporated to define a problem area or vision, and ultimately a tentative proposal. Informal consultation exercises seek active citizen participation into further development of the proposal. In two instances civic engagement was limited to customise the implementation. In the other instance citizens contributed to co-develop service concepts with service prototypes.

The four scenarios provide a better understanding of the diversity of decision-making cycles that lead to service transformation in English local authorities, and suggest that civic engagement activities differ in intent at different stages of the decision-making process, and therefore must be designed accordingly. For instance, it may be argued that whereas in scenario B informal consultation activities are mostly aimed at informing the development of a proposal for cabinet approval, in scenario D informal consultation activities could also go about assembling and supporting communities to actively contribute to the co-development of a service transformation proposal. Scenarios A and B suggest that civic engagement activities are limited to legitimate or inform a policy formulation.

## Discussion

This paper has explored academic literature concerning the role of civic engagement activities in local decision-making cycles. The authors have noted that English local governments are encouraged to incorporate potentially collaborative and discursive modes of civic engagement into their institutionalised methods of civic engagement. Then, drawing on insights from a workshop with local authorities' representatives and arts and design academics the paper has outlined local decision-making as a (participatory) design process, and proposed a simplified decision-making journey and four scenarios.

In designing for public services, institutionalised civic engagement activities are tasked with bringing a citizen-centred approach to public management. However, it has been noted that civic engagement activities can serve multiple functions and consequently categorisations of the relationship between government and citizens in decision making processes is often elusive. In the authors' experience, both the process of generating and the proposed decision making models contribute to shed light into and inform the design of civic engagement activities and local decision-making processes. Firstly, the visualisation of local authorities' decision-making journeys assisted local authorities' representatives to communicate complex local decision-making processes during the workshop. The resulting decision-making journeys assisted participants to achieve a shared understanding of specific decision making cycles, and supported the collaborative examination of current and desired civic engagement activities and decision making models that would potentially enable more collaborative design and delivery of services. Secondly, zooming in and out from individual design engagements to decision-making cycles as a whole provided a better and shared understanding of the contributions and limitations of discrete civic engagement activities to the articulation of more collaborative decision-making processes and co-produced services.

Daniela Sangiorgi (2011) argues that participation is a key resource in public service transformation to challenge non-collaborative models of service delivery. In this vein, we believe that in order to bring decision-making closer to citizens and move towards collaborative service models the contribution of design must zoom in and out from the design of civic engagement activities as *moments* of participation, to a means for supporting *potentially collaborative* interactions between diverse societal actors and throughout the decision making cycles, underpinning the emergence of more collaborative decision-making processes and co-produced services.

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