

Changing the nature of transactions between local state and citizens: an experiment to encourage civic behaviour

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Abstract

One of the impacts of increased global information flows has been increased expectations of citizens and consumers for flexible and speedy transactions. Over the last 20 years public service providers have attempted to adapt partly in response to these trends. However, one consequence has been to shape the relationship between people and public services as a predominately consumer relationship, with opportunities for co-production and citizenship increasingly lost. This paper reports on a recent experiment to investigate effective ways to encourage civic behaviour. The aim was to transform a passive one-way transactional relationship between consumer and provider into a more active two way co-production relationship. The experiment identifies how local authority staff can encourage callers to a contact centre to get involved in neighbourhood activity. We pioneer a new type of evaluation - design experiments - which share some features of action research and of experiments. In the empirical research we shape how the institution responds to citizens to test whether more civic behaviour can be generated. We present preliminary findings from the design experiment: what was the impact on civic behaviour? How did citizens perceive the motivations behind the intervention and did this affect the response to the intervention?

INTRODUCTION

Current concerns with declining levels of political activity and efficacy together with a recognition that government cannot achieve tricky policy outcomes without public engagement have led to increasing attention to involving citizens and promoting neighbourhood activity. Yet, while strategies are developed to find new and innovative ways of stimulating participation, the issues raised in thousands of day to day encounters between council officers and citizens go unrecorded. Local council contact centres receive these routine enquiries and are increasingly adopting technologies and working methods from the private sector to strive to provide excellent customer care. Yet the person being treated as a customer may be acting as a good citizen, hoping their phone call will lead to neighbourhood improvements, cleaner streets or better neighbourhood relations. This paper reports on a current design experiment to investigate how council officers can encourage callers to get involved in improving their neighbourhood, transforming a one-way relationship between consumer and provider into a two-way co-production relationship. We start by examining the relationship between the local state and citizens and discuss the need for change. We define the different forms of civic behaviour and look at how institutional factors might influence this

behaviour. We briefly describe a new type of evaluation – design experiments – and outline how this methodology was used in a research partnership with a local authority to encourage neighbourhood involvement. The preliminary findings are described and we use these findings to reflect on the impact of institutions on civic behaviour.

NEED FOR CHANGE IN STATE-CITIZEN RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS

State institutions have an impact on the way civil society operates, providing a political framework within which citizens act. This role of institutions in influencing civic behaviour has been variously described as the “political opportunity structure” (Maloney, Smith, & Stoker, 2000), “political variable” (Foley & Edwards, 1996) or “institutional design variable” (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001). Local government has a particular role here because it is the institution closest geographically to citizens and its responsibilities for leading and shaping the local environment, services and civic infrastructure which link it to civil society. Here we explore the institutional design factors which can impact on civic behaviour, including the institutional rules and practices and the opportunity structures.

The participation of local people in public sector institutions is a feature which runs through much of current UK local government policy. Participation supports both the service improvement and democratic renewal elements of the public service and local government modernisation agenda. There are two key reasons why an increased focus in this area is important now. Firstly, government cannot achieve policy outcomes on employment, crime, health, education, environment, transport and the economy with citizens that are passive and disengaged. There is a belief that government can have much greater impact across all these policy areas by engaging service users and others in the planning, design and delivery of public policy; there is an understanding that achieving change, particularly on tricky issues, requires the input of a wide set of institutions and actors, drawn both from within and beyond government (Rhodes, 2007). Secondly, a greater focus on civic behaviour is part of encouraging people to take greater responsibility for their own actions which is seen to strengthen individual character, enhance quality of life for the whole community, while at the same time lowering the tax burden and allowing for a less coercive state and judiciary (Halpern et al., 2004).

There has been much handwringing in the local government sector about the difficulties they have experienced in trying to increase active citizen participation, with typically low numbers of citizens taking part in governance. For example research by John (2008) based on the UK Citizenship Survey found that 9% of the population have taken part in citizen governance. This is a higher figure than other estimates of only 1% (Skidmore, Bound and Lownsbrough, 2006) but nevertheless still a small proportion. Some local

government practitioners have argued that the lack of participation is down to the apathy of citizens, or at least citizens' preferences for more worthwhile activities, such as watching TV:

“To be honest, when I go home I don't join the residents' association where I live; I want to go to the pub or watch Coronation Street, and the vast majority of the population still want to do that. It's not my job to... force people that do want to do that into becoming community activists...” (community development worker in a deprived area of a large city, quoted in Durose and Richardson, 2009 forthcoming).

While it may well be true that these other temptations are a barrier to citizens undertaking civic activity, this line of argument fails to acknowledge the role that institutional design and opportunity structure may play in facilitating or hindering participation.

Community development and consultation teams in local government attempt to mobilise citizens and have conversations with residents in what is often a limited range of settings. These tightly specified settings mean that civic engagement takes the form of a hurried survey on the doorstep with no opportunity for dialogue. However, citizens want those in power “to engage in proper discussions: to listen, to deliberate and to account for their actions” (Rogers, 2004 p 27). Talking can take a collective form and deliberative forums can create opportunities for citizens to directly influence the political agenda (Smith, 2005). There is a place for formal committees, but they tend to be dominated by people with committee experience (Rogers, 2004) and can act as a constraint on the practice of citizenship by some, as can evening meetings in draughty community venues. Local groups and neighbourhood forums offer a useful point of contact, but tend to appeal to a narrow range of the population.

Participation in political opportunity structures is limited partly because people do not get the support they need to overcome the barriers to participation, such as their resources – including education, income, time and citizenship skills (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2001). People are less likely to participate in the opportunity structures if they believe their participation will not have an effect (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003). Local authority officers can play a role in delivering learning about citizenship, particularly frontline roles like social workers and those in the youth services, but local authorities often focus too much on mechanisms and structures of involvement at the expense of developing the skills, confidence and willingness of citizens to engage in them (Andrews, Cowell, Downe, Martin, & Turner, 2008 p 497). Local government can also take account of individual resource constraints and the unequal distribution of resources among the population by paying expenses, using plain language and being aware that citizens have varying amounts of time available (Lowndes et al., 2006a).

Therefore, the political opportunity structures created by local government tend not to provide a sufficiently attractive offer to citizens in terms of: the volume and variety of opportunities to volunteer, join groups, attend meetings and make comments; and the quality of these opportunities including the support provided, the amount of influence and institutional responsiveness.

At the same time, local authorities have thousands of interactions with residents every day through the services they provide. Here, the evolution of service improvement and efficiency agendas has resulted in gains in customer care, but has meant missed opportunities to develop civic activity. One of the impacts of increased global information flows has been increased expectations of citizens and consumers for flexible and speedy transactions. Over the last 20 years public service providers have attempted to adapt partly in response to these trends. However, one consequence has been to shape the relationship between people and public services as a predominately consumer relationship, with opportunities for co-production and citizenship increasingly lost. A resident ringing about their bin collection may get excellent customer service, and an emptied bin, which is an important part of the basic delivery of public services. But the relationship between the institution and citizens during these everyday points of contact is a passive, one-way transactional relationship between 'consumer' and 'provider', rather than an active two-way relationship of co-production.

This issue has been picked up by central government in a report by Sir David Varney (Varney, 2006) on the further transformation needed in public services. The transformational government field had previously been dominated by a rather dry, technical debate, focusing on the pounds and pence and software requirements rather than on people, about the role of ICT in making efficiency savings. His intellectual contribution was to identify the transactional nature of the relationship between local government and 'customers', and the mismatch between this identity given to citizens and other aspects of their lives:

"I have found that departments which provide services focus predominantly not on the citizen, but on an aspect of the citizen called 'the customer'. This allows the department to focus on the delivery of their service—a transactional relationship ... This model of service provision is underpinned by a mass of helplines, call centres, front-line offices and websites The leading edge of the new service economy that has emerged is much slicker, more immediate, more convenient to the citizen and less intrusive on the busy citizen's time. The focus is increasingly on the totality of the relationship with the citizen". (Varney, 2006: p. 1)

Varney made the point that different departments: "do not appear to accept each other's identification of the citizen, the citizen has to validate his or her identity at each service transaction" (p. 1) and gave striking examples of this

in relation to a citizen's dealings with providers of different services, including the fact that each citizen, on average, has to prove who they are to government 11 times every year, and that it took up to 44 phone calls to deal with various parts of the bureaucracy after a bereavement.

Varney did not focus on civic activity, but the same point can be made about how this type of institutional design hinders further civic participation. That is, one part of the institution is trying to deal with people as citizens, but in a narrow range of often unappealing ways (going to a formal meeting); other parts of the institution encounter the same people in ways that better suit people's existing behaviour (e.g. ringing a contact centre), but deal with those people as customers.

CHANGING THE NATURE OF THE INTERACTION

We see civic behaviours as including both action to influence institutions and actions taken when citizens are doing it for themselves. There is a distinction between individual civic behaviour and the collective activity of groups (see table 1).

Table 1. Classification of civic behaviour

		<i>Type of activity</i>	
		Influencing institutions	DIY
<i>Level of Activity</i>	Individual	Individual political action	Individual DIY
	Collective	Collective political action	Collective DIY

Civic behaviour can manifest itself in four ways. (a) *Individual political action*, where individuals seek to influence institutions by complaining, signing petitions or contacting politicians; (b) *collective political action* where people work together to influence institutions by marching on parliament, attending health forums or joining political parties; (c) *Individual DIY*, when individuals act in the wider public interest by reducing their consumption, recycling household waste or shopping ethically; (d) *Collective forms of DIY* civic behaviour include being a member of a community group, forming a social enterprise, exchanging favours formally (e.g. via a timebank) or informally (mutual aid) or becoming a volunteer.

Civic behaviour to influence institutions seeks to shape rules, laws and policies of national and local government and other institutions like schools, police or health services. It includes conventional political behaviour such as

contacting an MP, voting or joining a political party; oppositional behaviour such as taking part in protests and rallies and innovative new forms of activity, for example through joining community governance structures which are relatively new opportunities attracting previously under-represented groups (John, 2008), such as joining a neighbourhood forum or attending a patients' forum of a local health trust. All of the forms of civic behaviour which seek to influence institutions can be taken either as individuals (complaining, signing petitions, contacting politicians) or through collective action (marching on parliament, attending health forums or joining political parties).

Do-It-Yourself (DIY) civic behaviour is where citizens are doing it for themselves rather than seeking to persuade or influence institutions. This can include self-help activity with wider social benefits and any situation where citizens take the initiative to implement solutions to social problems. This behaviour can be individual or collective.

When a citizen calls a local authority contact centre, the presumption by the authority appears to be that their behaviour does not fit within any of the four boxes in Table 1. Yet the person being treated as a customer may be acting as a good citizen, hoping their phone call will lead to neighbourhood improvements, cleaner streets or better neighbourhood relations. Even if a call is not orientated towards improving public goods, or influencing the institution more generally, there is still a possibility that the caller would be willing to consider making this sort of contribution, if they were asked. Currently a civic 'ask' is not made of residents during these routine service interactions. But research shows that being asked to participate is a key driver facilitating participation. The ask is most effective if it comes from a family member or friend but employers and faith organisations can be important mobilisers (Verba et al., 2001). Although it is likely that people will respond more enthusiastically to an invitation from someone close to them, mobilisation by a local authority can be effective: the invitation both informs the citizen of an opportunity they may not otherwise have been aware of and conveys that the authority values their opinion (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2006a; Rogers, 2004; Stoker, 2004). As well as being asked, people want to be thanked for their participation (Rogers, 2004).

In this experiment we set out to change the nature of the interaction between the institution and citizens during everyday points of contact, transforming a passive, one-way transactional relationship between 'consumer' and 'provider' into a more active two-way co-production relationship. We vary the institutional factors in two ways, and examine whether this leads to a change in civic behaviour. Firstly we vary the opportunity structures: the volume and variety of opportunities to volunteer, join groups, attend meetings and make comments; and the quality of these opportunities including the support provided, the amount of influence and institutional responsiveness. Secondly we vary the institutional rules and practices, the nature of the interaction between citizens and professionals. The research question for this design

experiment is “How can a local authority vary its institutional behaviour to successfully build on customer contact to encourage civic behaviour?”

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The design experiment is a relatively new methodology in UK social science. It has its origins in the design sciences, where it is used to develop a useable product from an initial innovation, by repeatedly tweaking the design until it reaches a sufficiently high standard to be launched. The methodology has been adapted for use in evidence-based policy making, where there is often an innovative idea of what might work, but it needs tweaking and refining to find out how best to implement it in practice (Stoker & Greasley, 2005; Stoker & John, 2008). It is an experimental method in that it manipulates an intervention and observes it over an extended time period, and there is a comparison group.

This design experiment approach has already been used in a small number of studies with UK local authorities (Askew, John, & Liu, 2008; Askew & Richardson, 2008). During a design experiment researchers work with a local authority over a period of time to design, implement, evaluate and re-design an innovation. The aim is to perfect the intervention over several iterative cycles until it is the best it can be. The essential requirements of a design experiment are:

- i. An identified problem or concern.
- ii. An innovative, untried approach to the problem or concern that the authority wants to do anyway but where there is a lack of clarity on how to implement it.
- iii. Clearly defined and measurable objectives for the intervention.
- iv. A single setting or a small number of settings
- v. A comparison group or area where a more standard form of practice is operated.
- vi. A clear theory and a set of hypotheses to test.
- vii. An initial plan of design-redesign cycles based on the hypotheses.
- viii. A commitment to comprehensive recording, attention to detail and regular reflective reviews.
- ix. A clearly defined and stable governance group who own the design experiment and have the authority to implement change.
- x. A willingness to revise the intervention in response to the research evidence to achieve the highest standard.
- xi. Researchers and practitioners work as a team.

These features make the design experiment methodology a highly appropriate one which creates space for this sort of innovation in local government. Design Experiments do not require the organisation to have ‘the answer’ before they start (i.e. know what will be an effective intervention in advance),

but they reduce the risk to the organisation of the intervention failing, as adaptations can be made. As a piece of research, the method transfers some risk to the academic partner. The method arguably suits the nature of this type of ‘small-c’ organisational change i.e. pilot projects, as it is best suited to a single setting or a small number of settings.

This design experiment focuses on promoting neighbourhood activity, exploring how staff can encourage callers who phone the contact centre about environmental issues to get more involved in their neighbourhoods. The research focussed on two neighbourhoods in a northern town.

Table 2 Neighbourhood characteristics: first wave neighbourhood¹

	First wave neighbourhood
Neighbourhood size	1400 households; 4000 residents (approx)
Proportion of people receiving key working age benefits (2005)	15-19% (borough average is 21%)
Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007	Within 30% of most deprived areas nationally
Ethnicity (2001 census)	57% white 41% Asian 2% other

The first neighbourhood is a residential area which is relatively deprived in national terms, but is fairly affluent compared to surrounding areas of the town. The housing is mostly owner-occupied or privately rented. It has a high ethnic minority population, mostly of Pakistani and Bangladeshi family heritage. The area was chosen as a suitable area for this experiment because it has an active and welcoming community association together with a range of other potential activities. The second wave of the experiment will take place in another neighbourhood, which is less affluent, less ethnically diverse and with a majority of social housing, but that phase of the design experiment is currently taking place and is not reported in this paper.

The experiment includes all telephone callers from the neighbourhood to the council’s contact centre about cleansing, environment or neighbourhood services. There are two steps to the experiment. Firstly, officers in the contact centre ask callers “We are currently promoting civic awareness in [your neighbourhood] and are looking for people to get involved in improving the area. We want to encourage people to take action on community issues in the area. Would you be interested in finding out more?” and provide some basic information on next steps. Secondly, the citizens who are identified as interested are split into two groups. Half join the intervention group. They are encouraged - using a variety of approaches – to take further steps such as joining a local group, becoming volunteers or changing their environmental

¹ Information gathered from the Office for National Statistics Neighbourhood Statistics 11th August 2008 <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/>

behaviour. The other half are a comparison group and are sent an information pack on opportunities for civic participation in the neighbourhood. The existing opportunities to participate were unchanged by the experiment: what was new was the pro-active approach by a local neighbourhood officer, providing information and encouragement. All participants were interviewed at the start of the project and eight weeks later and asked about civic activity and attitudes.

The first wave, in the first neighbourhood, lasted from April – June 2008. After two weeks the researcher presented some initial research findings to the project steering group and the intervention was tweaked slightly. The research findings of the first wave were discussed by a steering group of managers from the contact centre, staff from the neighbourhood team, neighbourhood engagement managers and policy officers, together with researchers from the University to refine the intervention for the next wave. The aim was to identify the most effective and appropriate way to design the intervention, both in the contact centre and in the neighbourhood.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In the first wave 30 people expressed an interest in finding out more about getting involved². All of those who expressed an interest were referred to a neighbourhood worker: 13 were referred for an information pack and 17 were referred for a visit or appointment. Before they were contacted by the neighbourhood worker, all participants were interviewed over the phone by a researcher about their civic behaviour, civic attitudes and discussing their concerns and motivations for getting involved.

From the start of the research, there had been some concern from local authority staff that there would be an adverse reaction from citizens to this change of approach. In particular the contact centre managers were worried that people phoning to report problems or make complaints might be aggravated by being invited to be proactive on neighbourhood issues: those reporting a problem with a local service would be angry at being asked to take action themselves. Expressed in terms of our theoretical framework, these practitioners were hesitant to change the institutional rules. This was because the members of staff were not convinced that people would welcome a shift in how the authority saw their identity or a change in the nature of the relationship.

The research tested these assumptions about citizens' preferences. The doubts of members of staff proved to be unfounded among those citizens who

² The contact centre were not able to record the total number of calls they received in the research period, so unfortunately we cannot say what proportion of callers showed an interest in getting involved.

took part. Citizens were generally supportive, with 92 per cent agreed that the council should encourage callers to get more involved. One person spoke about the importance of the council working in partnership with members of the public:

“They [the council] are restricted in what they can do. They should work with the people to get to the bottom of it rather than tell people to ring somewhere else. We raise the same issue repeatedly and no records are kept. They probably live in the community and can benefit. We need to step back and see each others’ perspectives”.

However, there was scepticism from some about council motives, i.e. whether institutional responsiveness would genuinely be greater: “Worried it’s just a token gesture”. Others were sceptical about how far the project could overcome barriers to participation, and argued that other citizens would not respond: “They are flogging a dead horse” and “it will fall on deaf ears”.

Table 3 Who is planning to get more involved?

	All participants	Those planning to get involved in action to improve the neighbourhood
Sex	15 female (50%)	2 female (20%)
Has children in household	18 (60%)	2 (25%)
Age range	16-24 1 25-34 10 35-44 14 45-54 1 55-64 2 65+ 2	16-24 1 25-34 2 35-44 6 45-54 0 55-64 1 65+ 0
Ethnicity	14 white (47%) 16 Asian (53%)	6 white (60%) 4 Asian (40%)
Employment	21 working (70%) 4 home carers 3 retired 2 unemployed	7 working (70%) 0 home carers 0 retired 2 unemployed
Unpaid help to groups/clubs in last 12 months	11 (37%)	3 (30%)
Unpaid help to someone who was not a relative in last 12 months	15 (50%)	7 (70%)
Contact with:		
councillors	8 (27%)	5 (50%)
MPs	5 (17%)	2 (20%)
Council officers	9 (30%)	4 (40%)
	Total = 30	Total = 10

Despite these concerns, the simple introduction of the 'ask' did generate a positive response from citizens who are normally considered to face barriers to participation. Over the seven weeks of wave one, 30 callers said they would like to get involved in improving the neighbourhood. The profile of the research participants was equally split between female and male and just over half were Asian: there were 7 white men, 7 white women, 8 Asian men and 8 Asian women. 60 per cent of participants had children living in their household; 37 per cent were under 35; 70 per cent were working or self-employed. There was variation among the participants in their level of pre-existing civic behaviour, including one person who was a school governor, a few who had been officers for local community groups and half had given unpaid help to someone other than a relative in the past year. But within the participants there were 5 people who had not undertaken any civic activity in the last year other than eco behaviour like recycling and picking up litter. The contact centre was successful in attracting a cross section of people in the neighbourhood.

40 per cent of participants agreed that they can influence decisions affecting the local area. This is a higher level of efficacy than the 26 per cent of residents across the local authority who agree they can influence decisions affecting the local area (Best Value User survey 2007). Even among those who disagreed, some felt that groups can achieve more, "If enough people get together, but individually no" and "not me personally, but maybe as a group". 40 per cent of participants agreed that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve the area. In response to this question, some felt that there were some sorts of people who do pull together and others who don't. Typical comments were: "Half and half" and "A few, minority would pull together, but majority would not". 70 per cent of participants feel strongly that they belong to the immediate neighbourhood, about the same as the local authority figure of 71 per cent (Best Value User survey 2007).

We looked at people's motives for wanting to get involved in improving the area as a way of testing how far their existing behaviour fitted in any of the four boxes in Table 1. People's motives did appear to be broadly concerned with public goods like community safety or environmental conditions, and therefore could be classified as civic: most people wanted to make a difference in the area. 7 of the 30 were motivated by a principled feeling that everyone should do their bit i.e. an explicitly stated belief in co-production. For example, "I think I should – not just complaining, actually doing something" and "If you're not making an effort you can't complain".

The types of behaviour people discussed doing included:

- Individual political action: some wanted their views responded to, e.g. that there should be more presence from police community support officers or improved parking, or that services should help to improve the appearance of the area by reducing the amount of dumped rubbish, or litter.

- Individual DIY: citizens helping to make the area more attractive, for example by improving front gardens.
- Collective DIY: Some talked about setting up a neighbourhood watch, “We should be vigilant and help each other”.

Some people wanted to undertake a mix of types of behaviour, or did not have a clear idea what they wanted to do e.g. a desire to ensuring the area is a good place for children to grow up in and providing enough for children and young people to do so they do not hang around and get into trouble. No-one explicitly mentioned wanting to engage in collective political action e.g. joining a local forum.

These results indicate that the experiment was successful in changing some aspects of the institutional design, that these changes were in line with citizens’ preferences, and that the changes had been effective in generating an interest in civic activity. The next stage was to see if we had adapted the political opportunity structure sufficiently to actually engage and retain people in the experiment.

The 30 participants were all contacted for another telephone interview 6-8 weeks after they were referred to the neighbourhood worker. None of them had undertaken any new action to improve their neighbourhood, but 10 people said they were planning to get involved. When compared to the whole group of participants, the 10 people who want to get more involved were more likely to be male, less likely to have children, and were more likely to be white. Among the 10 are 4 white men, 4 Asian men, 2 white women and no Asian women. Their previous involvement in groups is about the same as the rest of the participants, but they are more likely to have been informal volunteers and more likely to have approached a councillor, MP or council officer.

Of the thirty who showed initial interest, when asked 6-8 weeks later, ten were still hoping to get involved in local activity: the initial enthusiasm of most of the participants was not translated into action.

There are a number of potential explanations for this. One explanation is that there was a gap between intention and action: people said when asked that they wanted to take action, but when it came to it their enthusiasm waned or other things got in the way. We did find some evidence of this, with people telling us “Maybe I am not the right person – I’m too busy”; and “If I had time I would but I am working”, but these barriers were also mentioned by those who did still want to get more involved.

What this suggests is an alternative explanation, that the opportunity structure was not changed enough: people volunteered with the full intention of taking

action, but the offers made to them were unattractive. The quality of the opportunities offered, in terms of level of support, or flexibility for people who are working, was not adequate.

The types of opportunity were not right either. Going back to people's interests in different types of civic behaviour in Table 1, we found that a number of people at the end of the first wave said they wanted to be listened to and action taken, i.e. individual political action, but they had no interest in collective political action or collective DIY through the various existing groups and forums in the area. But most of the activity promoted by the local neighbourhood team was "collective political action" or "collective DIY" – joining an existing local group involved in improving the area or setting up a new group. One person said "I just want to put my opinions forward, not go to meetings and things ... I am happy to put my views forward and be consulted". A woman said,

"I wear a hijab and I don't want to go into an environment where they don't know about normal Muslims, only the terrorist extreme. If there were other people of my origin I might go. If I go the first time and it is accepting then it is fine."

Perhaps more people would have retained their interest if they were offered opportunities for more individual political action or even individual DIY – it could be that bouncing them into collective action was not what they thought they had stepped forward for.

The other aspect of the opportunity structure that the experiment perhaps failed to adapt sufficiently in the first iteration was institutional responsiveness. We found that citizens have a set of conditions before they'll respond: there is a quid pro quo. If people were to take action themselves, they had expectations that the local authority would play its part in delivering adequate services in the neighbourhood. If the citizen made an effort but then found that the council was ineffective they got disheartened. A bin strike during the experiment meant rubbish was left uncollected and the council was seen to be failing to keep its side of the bargain. As one resident commented:

"The original phone call was about the back alley and it is still in the same state. I have cleared it and then it has deteriorated again. I was promised that fliers would be put through every door explaining the system and nothing has happened. And the bin strike has made it worse".

Another told us:

“The Council doesn’t seem to listen. Dead rats have not been moved – I had to do it myself. The bin was not emptied for 3 weeks. They need to improve the service round collections”.

Citizens can regard their behaviour as part of a contract with responsibilities on both sides: they will deliver their side of the bargain by participating only if the local authority delivers a reasonable standard of services (Askew, Cotterill, & Greasley, 2009).

The next wave of the experiment will be re-designed to take account of the issues raised from the research in the first wave on both institutional design and opportunity structure. This next wave will test out this approach in a contrasting neighbourhood (more deprived, more social housing). Institutional and opportunity factors will be altered, learning from the first wave. The opportunities to get involved need to be more varied, including one-off fun events to catch the attention of those too busy to commit to on-going meetings and opportunities for people to have their voices heard about crime and litter/waste issues. Neighbourhood staff will start by listening carefully to the issues people want to address and use that information to identify opportunities for them to engage with. A number of participants were sceptical about how many people would respond to this initiative so it could be beneficial to call people together or publicise the level of response.

CONCLUSIONS

During the first wave of the design experiment there was some variation in the institutional rules and practices by altering the contact centre routines and providing neighbourhood-based support. Approaching people who telephone the contact centre has attracted a broad cross-section of people, including some who local authorities traditionally find hard to engage with and people who had not previously come forward for civic activity. The initial group of volunteers included young people, Asian women and people without a strong background of civic activity. However, the neighbourhood intervention seems not to have inspired the interests of all these initial volunteers. The next wave will endeavour to try different approaches at the neighbourhood level to maintain the interest of a more diverse group. We will also test the approach in a different neighbourhood where the material factors and cultural context will be different.

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