

Local solutions to local problems: innovation in public participation

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This project trialled an innovative approach to police-community engagement; facilitating people from a local community to take part in informed debate and collaborative problem-solving about a local issue that mattered to them. The project forms part of What Works Scotland's programme of work on community engagement and capacity-building. It received co-funding from SIPR's Police-Community Relations Collaborative Projects scheme and was supported by Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority.

The project was led by Nick Bland with Oliver Escobar, with support from Ali Malik, Alex Wright, Sarah Weakley, and James Henderson, all at the University of Edinburgh. The project received practical support from North East Division's Partnerships and Events team in Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Aberdeenshire Council. This report summarises the findings of the trial; a full report will be published in May 2017.

The call for greater public participation

Over the past few years, there has been a growing view in Scotland that there should be substantially greater public participation in the decisions that matter to them. This was a central conclusion of the 2011 Christie Commission on public service reform, Cosla's 2014 Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, and encapsulated in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Policing 2026 articulates the aim to: 'strengthen our approaches to community engagement and participation, ensuring local services are effectively planned in partnership with communities'.¹ The challenge is to put the principle of participation meaningfully into practice.

Research across the UK has consistently demonstrated that the methods the police conventionally use to engage routinely with the public have limitations². Levels of participation in local beat meetings and other face-to-face fora are very low; those who go tend to be unrepresentative of the whole community. Forms of engagement tend to be organised by police or other local agencies, limited to communication about police activity and consultation about local priorities. There is little opportunity for the public to take part in anything meaningfully described as collaborative planning, problem-solving or decision-making.

There are innovative approaches to public engagement that emphasise the importance of structures and practices which enable the public to participate, termed 'mini-publics'³. The design of mini-public can vary but the following are central:

Participation: to ensure a representative presence of community views and perspectives which is crucial to the process of debate and deliberation.

Deliberation: to involve informed debate and reasoned decision making. The key to deliberation quality is the informed exchange of public reasons for reaching conclusions.

Empowerment: to give community members opportunity to be involved in local problem-solving.

Enabling participation: a local citizens' jury

This project trialled a form of mini-public called a citizens' jury. This has been applied with other public services but never for police-community engagement in Scotland, or it seems, wider UK.

Several potential sites for the jury were identified, presenting a local issue proving difficult to resolve: a local community-organised 5 November bonfire was selected. The bonfire had run for very many years but had grown in popularity and size. Local police, fire service and council were concerned with the event organisation, but relationships with the bonfire organisers had broken down. The jury was seen by all parties as offering a kind of mediation.

It was important that the design and conduct of the jury was independent and impartial and that this was mandated by all the parties involved, so they were assured the jury recommendations would be unbiased. A 'Stewarding Board' was set up, chaired by the WWS research lead, with representatives from police, council, fire and the bonfire organisers. The board agreed how jurors would be recruited, who would speak to the jury as expert 'witnesses' and what the jury would be asked to do. The board agreed the jury should consider four options and make recommendations about the future of the bonfire.

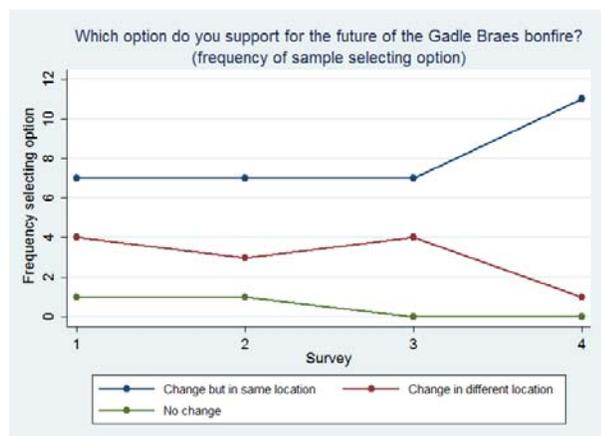
Standardly, a citizens' jury involves 12-25 participants; providing breadth of representation and enabling quality deliberation. In this project, jurors were recruited randomly, with a quota of equal gender split, representation across age and other socio-economic characteristics, and equal representation of opinions on the bonfire. A payment was made to compensate jurors for their time, and to ensure equal participation. Sixteen jurors attended day 1, twelve returned for day 2. The four were unable to attend for reasons outside their control.

A citizens' jury can often last five days. For this project, two days was considered feasible and affordable. The jury took place 9.00-5.00 on two consecutive Wednesdays in early October 2016, in a meeting room of a third-sector organisation. The

research leads facilitated the jury, with support from the team. The facilitators used a range of techniques to provide equal opportunities for jurors to take part, and to support discussion.

There were three information sessions, each of an hour. Pairs of speakers attended to give a short presentation as ‘witnesses’ about the bonfire, followed by extended Q&A with the jury. The speakers were from the three services and two bonfire organisers.

On day 2, options for the bonfire were discussed. All jurors recognised the longstanding tradition of the bonfire, the strong community pride and identity attached to it. Jurors valued its role in bringing the community together. But they identified the need for improvements to safety and organisation.



This graph from questionnaire data shows how juror’s views changed over the course of the jury.

The jury voted on the options and the large majority (11-1) decided that the bonfire should remain in its current location but with changes. They discussed and agreed a range of recommendations about improvements to safety, reducing the height and size of the bonfire, event organisation and clear-up. They also recommended that the three local services should work with the organisers to discuss and agree other improvements.

The jury process and its impact

The project’s research data included: jury discussion was recorded digitally, and transcribed; written material from the jury was photographed; jurors completed individual questionnaires at the beginning and end of each day; and nine qualitative interviews in December with some jurors, witnesses, stewarding board members.

Jurors were asked to rate the quality of their discussions, using criteria measuring ‘deliberative quality’. A strongly held, unanimously positive view was shown. Every juror:

- felt able to express themselves, and thought the other jurors could too;
- felt respected, that the group worked well together;
- thought the discussions had helped make up their minds;

- felt they had influenced the jury’s recommendations (they varied about how much).

Witnesses admitted surprise at the quality of their interaction with the jury. They felt the jury listened closely, asked serious, considered, constructive questions, and were thoughtful about what they heard.

Jurors admitted initial doubts and scepticism about taking part but by the end, there was unanimous support for the experience. They:

- were very glad they had taken part, greatly enjoyed the experience and found the discussions very interesting;
- would take part in a future jury on a local issue;
- felt it showed local people can work together on decisions;
- thought jury was good way to get public opinion and should be used for community decision-making.

All three local services saw a great deal of value in the jury. The process helped to ‘unblock’ the stalemate, renew relationships and open dialogue with the bonfire organisers, and gave them a more nuanced understanding of the community view. They saw benefit to applying the approach to other issues in other local contexts.

Many of the jury recommendations were implemented, although a couple were judged impractical. There were improvements made to safety and organisation. Unfortunately, the opportunity was not taken for the services to meet with the organisers and work collaboratively to improve the event. The short timescale before the bonfire took place was a factor. At the event itself, the fire itself was no smaller, and there was damage to a streetlamp. The services and jurors interviewed expressed remaining concerns about safety.

This project points to latent enthusiasm and commitment present in communities and which is not activated by conventional police-community engagement. Approaches like citizens’ juries can enable meaningful participation; the experience can increase confidence, enthusiasm and interest in further civic participation. The potential for greater public participation in policing is a prize worth pursuing.

References

- 1 Policing 2026: Our 10 year strategy for policing in Scotland (2017) Police Scotland and Scottish Police Authority: p.13.
- 2 For example, Harkin, D. (2015). Simmel, the Police Form and the Limits of Democratic Policing. *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 55 Issue 4, pp 730-746;
- 3 Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge University Press