

## **UK Citizen's Council for the Future: Creating new spaces for citizens' voices and long-term thinking in politics**

*"The right way to do things is not to persuade people you're right but to challenge them to think it through for themselves"*  
(Chomsky)

### **Purpose of this paper**

This paper is intended to be used as a primer to bring together interested organisations to begin to explore and develop the proposition of creating a new space for UK citizens to engage with and inform long-term political thinking – a UK Citizen's Council for the Future.

The Council would integrate with existing public management systems (e.g. PSAs, budget system, legislation) to enable greater devolution, better accountability of public agencies to citizens, and real engagement with society on the most important policy and delivery issues.

The ideas set out here are indicative only and need to be fully developed and integrated into other related initiatives and governance structures. The SDC is interested in only take on the role of 'initiator/catalyst' for the idea; it would not be an SDC convened initiative, but would be managed by a group would take on shared ownership, resourcing and development to the next phase.

### **Purpose of the UK Citizens Council for the Future**

The SDC believe there is a need to create an established 'space' in which large numbers of the public can deliberate, together with 'experts', as an integral part of framing, considering and shaping critical policy issues with the long view in mind. The mechanism would need to be seen as part of the machinery of governance, and for each critical policy issue on which it focuses, tied closely to:

- a. decision making, leadership, initiatives and action by governments and other key actors
- b. wider (public) education and awareness, the creation of new political space.

### **Why do we need it?**

The need for this kind of mechanism is elegantly put by Tom Bentley in the Demos publication 'everyday democracy' (2005):

*“Over the next generation our societies will have to negotiate profound transitions in social, economic and cultural life.... The fundamental question for twenty-first century politics is how to combine market economies with other kinds of value – social, cultural, environmental, public and moral – in ways that sustain our societies and our natural environment, and align economic production with human need. ... First, we need systems of decision-making and organisation capable of helping to make the choices visible, or transparent – to connect the act of individual choice with the wider, collective consequences. Second, we need to create regular opportunities for people to think, talk, learn and decide together about the issues over which they are making choices”*

For further analysis please see the annex 1.

### **How will it work?**

A UK Citizens Council for the future could:

- be convened (bi or tri-annually) with cross party support, as an established part of UK governance, with a balanced and knowledgeable ‘oversight’ group guiding the convening of the Council, the focus of its deliberations, and specifically how the results will tie into policy making.
- be integrated with existing governance systems, such as the Comprehensive Spending Review
- engage up to 5,000 citizens in deliberation with experts and based on ‘evidence’ on a critical long term issue (e.g. climate change, pensions), answering the question ‘what opportunities does this present, and what should government, citizens and business be doing to address this issue, taking a 20, 50 or 100 year perspective.
- take place over several months. In preparation for the discussion, experts from all sides of the issue would produce neutral materials and develop a menu of policy options and ideas for individual action, while grassroots campaigns would reach out to UK citizens from every walk of life to participate in a forum on the issue
- the national discussion would be launched with discussions in local councils for the future, established as part of the re-branding of community strategies as sustainable community strategies, rescuing the lost element of LA 21
- the council’s deliberations would start with the launch of an ‘UK citizens discuss [issue X]’, that would challenge users to consider facts, think about choices, and declare priorities. Of the millions who visit the site, hundreds of thousands would also participate in online deliberation groups
- the BBC (or media partner) could host a series of themed programmes to broaden interest and understanding
- during the course of the national discussion, large-scale deliberative meetings would be held as simultaneous events in London, Cardiff,

Edinburgh, Belfast (mechanism could be to use America Speaks – see [americaspeaks.org](http://americaspeaks.org))

- with millions of people participating, broad goals and specific strategies would emerge
- be linked to worldwide events (America Speaks currently working up a proposal for a citizens deliberation on climate change/energy futures)
- be linked to an annual 'state of the future' speech from the PM, first ministers, leaders of councils
- be linked to a representative in Parliament charged with being the MP (AM, MSP) for the future
- be linked to Key Performance Indicator setting for departments and be linked to the SDC's watchdog role

### What would a council for the future achieve?

The Council for the Future, accompanied by a range of related initiatives (such as a series of BBC broadcasts on the topic) has the potential to:

- **Educate large numbers of citizens** from diverse backgrounds about a selected issue, the long term implications, uncertainties, impacts and possible solutions. An educated public will not only be more interested and engaged, it will also be able to make informed decisions rather than relying on individual campaigns and often conflicting arguments.
- **Enable elected officials to pursue reform** with the support of informed and decisive voters. The Council for the Future findings, and the accompanying national discussions in the media would build a constituency for the views that are reached and, in doing so, would give policy-makers the political support they need to act on the public's behalf.
- **Generate new and innovative solutions** that have broad public support. Those involved in a national discussion would hear and respond to the views of people from across the country, the solutions they develop would encompass the interests of all interests and areas across the UK. If augmented with local or regional councils for the future, local solutions could be devised.
- **Build momentum** to push through gridlocked issues. By convening thousands of people at a time, it is possible to shine a spotlight on important policy concerns so that they can be addressed by decision-makers. The size and demographic diversity of the meetings capture the imagination of the media. Our experience shows that participants in these types of meetings continue to be civically engaged at higher levels than the general population.
- **Make policy development cost effective.** While the cost of a national discussion is likely to be substantial, it will be comparable to (if not even less than) what will no doubt be spent on public opinion polls and public

relations strategies on this issue. Authentic engagement of the public up-front can mitigate the likelihood of expensive controversies and delays later on.

- **Empower citizens and consumers to make choices through which they play a role in addressing the problem of climate change.** For example, by learning about the climate change threat as well as about our national energy system and the link between the two, citizens and consumers will understand how they can play a role themselves through their consumer, everyday, political and civic choices.

### **How do we know it would work?**

The council for the future would ensure high quality deliberation, achieved through strong facilitation, meticulously crafted educational material that is neutral and fair to all perspectives, and working with experts to clarify issues and answer questions. Such meaningful and productive deliberations will help shift the way people understand complex problems and build capacity to understand and adapt to change.

Our belief that it would work draws on three sources of experience:

- **Citizens juries:** Engaging small numbers of citizens, these have been used with great success on a range of issues, including the most complex (e.g. nanotechnology) at the local, UK and EU levels.
- **Stakeholder dialogue:** Engaging with larger numbers of people, sometimes over periods of years, a number of processes (for example, convened by the Environment Council) have delivered detailed deliberation and robust results, bringing together the range of stakeholders, communities and citizens at local, regional and UK scales on issues as diverse as waste management and the future of nuclear power.
- **America speaks:** Over the last ten years, AmericaSpeaks, a national, nonprofit organization based in Washington DC, has used the “21st Century Town Meeting” to engage tens of thousands of people (up to 5,000 per meeting) in deliberations about complex public policy issues. Meetings have also served towns, cities, states, regions and the nation on issues ranging from the redevelopment of Ground Zero after 9/11 to a national discussion on Social Security Reform that engaged nearly 50,000 Americans and identified specific reform elements that the public would support. America Speaks was used as part of the DH’s ‘You health, your care, your say’ consultation.

## Annex 1 - Evidence of need

- recent publication by Meg Russell for the Fabians on 'must politics disappoint'. She makes the case for a more 'frank and engaged politics' which calls for a new ethos for politics which acknowledges difficult choices and engages citizens in finding ways forward.
- On commenting on the 2003 strategic audit by the strategy unit for the cabinet, the Times stated " governments overestimate their influence and impact in the short term and underestimate it in the long term" (quoted in May 2005 Prospect article by Geoff Mulgan)
- The analysis of stubborn or 'intractable' policy controversies (Schon and Rein 1994) showed that problem-solving required a much better understanding of how various parties framed the situation, thus arguing in favour of a more direct involvement of societal parties in policy making processes.... deliberative approaches to public policy emphasise collective, pragmatic, participatory, local problem solving in recognition that many problems are simply too complicated, too contested and too unstable to allow for schematic, centralised regulation. Deliberative Policy Analysis, Hajer and Wagenaar
- Thomas Meyer argues that while representative democratic process and political parties are able to take the long view, back and forward, and embody the idea of long deliberation as a pre-requisite for consent and justice, the modern media undermine this capacity . Meyer sees the media reducing the political system's capacity 'to generate citizen participation' while also marginalising representative institutions and processes, leading politicians to favour 'issueless stage management' and responsiveness to 'the momentary preferences of isolated citizens' . This reduces the capacity of Western political cultures to focus on long-term challenges
- Media organisations, subject to similar competitive pressures, focus obsessively on the immediate and are notoriously poor at framing long-term issues and exploring processes rather than events. 'The environment' and issues of sustainability fail to conform to the short-term definition of what counts as news, unless they can be framed in the context of the immediate and discrete - the Johannesburg Summit, an oil spill. Ian Christie
- "much innovative democratic thinking has gone into generating new forms of deliberation, through citizens' juries, assemblies, deliberative polling and so on. But the experiments often have in-built limits – either they are not sufficiently connected to real power to have any purchase, or they are enclosed by location and scale, and therefore have little leverage on wider public attitudes or political culture." Tom Bentley, Demos, Everyday Democracy, 2005