

The Democracy Audit: a policy idea

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Introduction

This essay introduces the Democracy Audit (DA) as a policy idea to support thriving communities in England.

The DA approach would require organisations across all sectors to consider their practice of, and contribution to, democracy both internally and externally.

The approach adopts a pluralist idea of democracy, inclusive of participative, representative, and deliberative aspects (Saward, 2021). It aims to foster a greater emphasis on, and understanding of, the democratic involvement of communities across all sectors (public, private, and civil society), building on established knowledge of ‘what works’ at a local level.

The DA approach has several advantages:

- Familiar language and approach to organisations across different sectors (audit)
- ‘Bolt on’ implementation to existing reporting processes – low cost; high impact
- Flexible and scalable over time with long-term legacy potential
- A marketable policy ‘hook’
- Foregrounding communities and building on existing expertise

The rest of this essay sets out the context within which the democracy audit idea is introduced, including supporting evidence, before going on to detail the proposed approach and its implementation, a discussion of some potential barriers, and a brief conclusion with recommended next steps.

Context

As the essay question implies, we know there is inequality in England. However, we also know that within all communities and across all neighbourhoods, good work is happening, often driven by local people themselves through voluntary sector organisations, local businesses, and public sector initiatives (see for example Lee et al., 2024). The ‘good’ in this work is not restrained by sector borders or by the distinction between ‘social’ and ‘economic’. In order for communities to thrive both aspects need to be addressed.

Communities have been subject to a range of policy initiatives over many years with mixed results. Such initiatives have often been reduced to ‘normative policy goods’ (Osborne et al., 2016), confined to silo thinking, or to specific strategic interests (G and Leat, 1997; Torfing, 2019), rather than addressing the complexities of practice (Nicolini, 2012).

Policymaking is often based on assumptions about communities and community organisations regarding ways of working and ‘values’ (Dean, 2020; Voorberg et al., 2015), without acknowledging potential downsides (Williams et al, 2016; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013). The use of ‘empty signifiers’ (Smolovic Jones et al., 2016) in policy can aid adoption because of familiarity but can also lead to inconsistency in implementation.

The challenge of the essay question is therefore huge. How do we create a policy idea that is inclusive, low cost, implementable, and that has a legacy?

Any solution has to meet people 'where they're at', fit with existing initiatives, be easily applied, and have the potential to grow over time. It should also be broadly applicable and not risk exacerbating conflict and competition between communities.

The notion of 'policy' implies a top-down approach, driven by government. However, we know that bottom-up approaches from within communities are often better at addressing specific needs. Any new initiative therefore needs to join the levels of intervention; be implemented with authority but work to remove the possible 'democratic deficit' (Steffek et al., 2008) in our institutions. Something that grows power in local areas but also provides a supportive structure that enables, develops capacity, and delivers autonomy without an overburdensome transfer of responsibility and risk onto communities (Milbourne, 2013).

Policy also implies politics. Our current politics can be stigmatising and divisive both nationally and within local communities, and trust in politics is falling (Goss et al., 2024). Similarly, participation and faith in democracy generally appears somewhat shaky given the rise of conflicting political interests and community apathy (see for example Hopkin, 2020). Trust also links with power (Ran and Qi, 2019) and growing power is key to thriving communities (Follet, 1919).

Theories of democracy themselves can conflict and compete with one another. Ideological commitments to one 'form' over another have been criticised (Saward, 2021). The use of democracy in policy can also fail to acknowledge that alternative and even anti-democratic movements exist. This in turn denies a reality that communities have seen for themselves every day for decades.

There's a need, therefore, to focus on the practice of democracy, and what its effects mean for communities. How can we use aspects of democracy to achieve the outcomes that communities want and need, empower inclusion, form collective ideas, and organise collective decision capacity? Such practice needs to be *translated* into different contexts rather than *transferred* and that translation will rely on the involvement of people who inhabit those different contexts (Saward, 2021).

Challenging assumptions is a scary proposition. It will need to be made as easy as possible for people to engage with conversations about democracy that avoid demeaning individuals, organisations, neighbourhoods, or communities as 'more' or 'less' democratic. Instead, any approach should encourage a consideration of ways of working in a way that allows for differences to exist in purpose, contribution, and understanding, whilst acknowledging interrelationships with others. This also allows for flexible and bottom-up definitions of what 'thriving' looks like for different communities at different times.

In summary, we need policy approaches backed by a commitment to democratic practice which also acknowledge tensions, complexity, and alternatives that at times may contradict overriding positions but that sit within a consistent commitment to including and at times privileging the voices and assets of communities. This is not simply about making existing democratic institutions 'better' but making more neighbourhoods, communities, organisations, and individuals openly and engagingly 'democratic'.

Position

Communities cannot thrive without involvement. Involvement requires the practice of democracy. The practice of democracy requires some form of flexible design, along with support.

Solution – The Democracy Audit

The Democracy Audit (DA) is a simple idea that leverages existing practices to encourage participation, representation, and deliberation within neighbourhoods and communities by foregrounding democratic considerations within organisational life.

In basic terms, the DA is a requirement for organisations to make explicit their contribution to democracy by detailing both the ways they enact democratic practices internally and how they contribute to democracy externally in the communities to which they belong.

Auditing democracy is not a new idea although approaches have tended to focus on national level, representative aspects (for example Dunleavy, 2018). Others have sought to include local communities in national political decision-making (Levin et al., 2024). The UK ‘National Audit Office’ seeks to “hold government to account [and] help improve public services” (NAO, 2024), primarily through ‘value for money’ analysis. The process of such audit has been directly linked to improvements in democracy (Ferry and Midgley, 2022). However, any change at the national level inevitably requires significant capacity for effective implementation.

The use of financial language – ‘audit’ - rather than the language of ‘community development’ or similar, is therefore deliberate as it can leverage existing approaches and support structures inherent in organisational reporting processes. It also links a ‘soft’ practice (democracy) with the ‘hard’ language of business innovation and economic growth.

Use of ‘democracy’ on the other hand leverages the empty signifier of the term and notions of the ‘good’. It allows individuals and communities to express their positive contribution – in a variety of ways – rather than phrasing the approach as a compliance with a prescriptive notion of what democracy is or should be. It can also be ‘sold’ as demonstrating a commitment to a fundamental ‘British Value’. The downsides around empty signifiers regarding potential inconsistency of implementation, as referenced previously, can be balanced by the structure of the audit itself.

The DA therefore offers an expansive, inclusive, and embedded solution, leveraging existing ways of working, which is compatible with other approaches to both democracy and community development, such as participatory policy making, Asset Based Community Development, Co-production, etc. All of these approaches could for example be the way through which organisations demonstrate or build on their approaches to democracy identified in the DA. There are no shortage of established ways to involve communities, and we have robust methods and techniques to enable this. The DA provides a structure which will encourage, embed, and eventually legally require these approaches over time.

Implementation timescale:

Short-term (up to 24 months):

- Consult on and develop guidance for the DA – leverage expertise of NAO and others, including organisations and communities. Potentially link to the Social Value Act¹.
- Prime legally registered organisations and the sectors they are in, including regulators.
- Begin to explore connecting democracy audit with other aspects, such as embedding in the education sector.

¹ There is potential to reframe this as a ‘Social Value Audit’ however there is a danger that could alienate organisations who may not have engaged with such terminology before.

Medium-term (24 to 60 months):

- Introduce formal DA requirement in organisational submissions to regulatory bodies
- For organisations – each has to plot its own position and future course through a variety of conversations and leadership decisions with communities. Making this explicit provides a starting point to identify existing positive contributions, and areas for development.
- For individuals – for those currently engaged it provides a structure to frame the value of their engagement and to encourage others. Building on the positives inherent in communities – links with social capital. For those not currently engaged it raises the issue across sectors.
- Gather evaluation feedback on processes and results
- Iteratively develop the approach
- Promote the transparency of approaches and data for scrutiny, accountability, and sharing – builds on current expectations of audit processes

Longer-term (60 months and beyond):

- For organisations – a robust approach is fundamental to organisational reporting and accounts (legal requirement)
- Links across sectors in relation to contributions to democracy
- For individuals – baked into the educational and employment systems – bolstering ideas of citizenship. Notably this may also link in with and renew industrial relations.
- Societal – the end goal being that having a consistent focus across individuals, organisations, and communities will lead to a valuing of the practice of democracy, encouragement to contribute, and resourcing. Measuring what we value.

Discussion and Conclusion

Implementing the proposed Democracy Audit faces barriers, some of which will be discussed here. Tokenistic or instrumental approaches may arise in practice; similarly, exploitation of the process may result in ‘democracy washing’ akin to the ‘greenwashing’ we see as a response to sustainability issues. However, much like the environmental movement challenges greenwashing, those with an interest in democracy will be empowered through the DA to hold themselves, the organisations they engage with, and their communities to account.

There is a cost involved in carrying out the audit, both in terms of the time and capacity required to consider aspects of democracy, and in understanding new processes and procedures. It is likely some organisations will simply copy-paste template responses and others will see the incentive to add value to their offer. Scrutiny and transparency should identify this over time and differentiate between organisations that take the requirement seriously and those who do not. Any consideration, even an instrumental one, is a step above the current situation and along the path towards thriving communities.

Introducing such an initiative into a context that is broadly apathetic is also a risk. Starting with individuals, organisations, and communities who are already engaged can build on the strengths already present within communities and empower them through the DA to make their voices heard. Those who aren’t currently engaged also have to be encouraged to become so, and the structure of the DA – as a specific requirement – provides a scaffold to achieve this.

To conclude, the DA is cross-sector, inclusive and scalable. It builds on what already exists in local communities, what works, and what is familiar. It is flexible rather than prescriptive and encourages

wider conversations about democracy and community support. It is a simple idea with big implications, a marketable policy hook, and a potentially long-lasting legacy. The Democracy Audit builds the tent frame that allows communities to throw over the canvas and get to work.

Next Steps

Immediate next steps require a high level commitment to the policy, including central government sponsorship and assigned responsibility. Alongside this, key partners should be consulted in order to garner a diversity of perspectives relating to possible implementation, as set out above.

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