

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE NHS

## Deliberative democracy and the devolution of power in Camden

Georgia Gould interviewed by Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite

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Deliberative democracy has the power to counteract division and lack of trust in politics, deliver more radical solutions to problems, and involve communities in tackling those problems. We talked to Georgia Gould, leader of Camden Council, about the transformative potential of deliberative democracy at a local level.

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**Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (FSB):** What was the problem that you were hoping that deliberative democracy would solve?

**Georgia Gould (GG):** There is huge distrust at the moment in our political process in general, and fragmentation within our political debate; often issues are approached as single issues which impact on different groups, and there aren't forums where people from different backgrounds, and different communities, come together.

We also felt that some voices end up getting lost or missed out of the debate in Camden. We're an incredibly dynamic and diverse borough, we have so many people who want to get involved in politics; but there are other people who don't have as much time, or as many resources, or who for reasons of language aren't

always able to be part of that dialogue. I didn't want any one voice to dominate decision-making. Citizens' assemblies are a powerful way of ensuring that different voices are heard, but also of allowing different communities to come together and discuss trade-offs, and be part of the political process *collectively*.

What was really interesting in our first big citizens' assembly – on the future of Camden – was how much social isolation emerged as a key issue. People really value Camden's diversity and community, but there was a sense that communities were being pulled further apart, that there was a rise in hate, that community spirit was at risk. Having a place where we come together as citizens to hold political dialogue helps address that. My long-term ambition is that every citizen in Camden will go through the process in some way – so that each will have been part of that process of collective dialogue, collective imagining of the future we want. Whether that's about the future of their neighbourhood, or a big issue – we've got a citizens' assembly on the climate crisis at the moment. I think that if this was replicated nationally it would transform the trust and understanding of our democratic process.

**FSB: Honing in on this term citizenship – this is something research on deliberative democracy really highlights, that when people come together to discuss an issue in their capacity as *citizens*, rather than as an individual, or as a consumer, you get different outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Have you seen that in practice?**

**GG:** Absolutely. When we provide services we often use terms like 'customer', or 'service user', and I talk a lot about the need for us to think about people as citizens. Not all our residents in Camden are citizens of the UK, of course, but everyone who lives here is in a broad sense a citizen of Camden.

In citizens' assemblies, the dialogue is about what we as a council can do, but it's also about what communities themselves can do. And we really find that the discussion goes in that direction. If it's just someone coming with an issue to the local authority, then the discussion is *what can you do in local government about my problem?* But when people come together as citizens to discuss an issue, we end up with a discussion about what the council can do, but also what the community can do – so you get to a completely different place. Citizens set the agenda, determine what they want to do about it, and how the council can support them in that.

And whatever the issue, we find that the solutions always involve an element of connectedness – of neighbourhoods coming together. Things like street parties are really important – they're ways of being together in the real world. We've found in the process of doing these assemblies that there is a huge desire to be part of and contribute to Camden.

In fact, the assemblies have been just one part of a broader suite of forms of civic engagement. We did a community survey, led by our community researchers – local

people from diverse communities in Camden who are paid to do research within those communities – and 80 per cent of the people surveyed said they wanted to work with their neighbours to improve the place in which they live. That’s a really significant desire. If we can enable and support citizens’ forums they can be really powerful.

At the moment, we’re trying a neighbourhood assembly in the north-west of the borough on health and wellbeing. There’s a lot of change going on in the health and social care system at the moment – but a lot of the work to deliver greater integration of services is driven by the people running those services, not the users. So we thought we should see what happened if this process was led by a social movement for health. What would that look like? How could we create it?

The neighbourhood assembly is made up of people from the community, and then alongside them we have community organisers, who are working to build capacity. We gave the assembly all the research on health and wellbeing in the area, and we thought perhaps obesity would come out as the priority, but in fact the things they wanted to look at were more about community connectedness, family resilience, and mental health and wellbeing. And they’ve come up with a number of initiatives which will be run by citizens, with the support of the council. So that’s blended an assembly process with a move into social action.

As part of this process there have been some really interesting interactions – like older people talking about how young people don’t have mental health issues, and the young people correcting them. Despite our diversity, that dialogue across generations doesn’t always happen, and creating a space for that is really valuable in and of itself.

Behind this process is a group of service leaders from the NHS, adult social care, and children’s services, who are working with the assembly, listening to them and thinking about how we can change our services to support the outcomes and the initiatives they’re prioritising. So it’s an experiment, a different way of working.

**FSB: Do you see this process – this flipping of who leads on a process of change to put citizens in charge – as one that could be rolled out to more and more areas of service delivery?**

**GG:** Yes. In fact, where our residents are the most vulnerable, that’s often where the council has the most power, and where this approach is perhaps most important.

The area where the state has the most power is social care, particularly children’s services. We talk about sharing power – and we think that’s something we really can do, and the most powerful way to tackle some of the deep inequalities in our communities – but of course in our social services and our children’s services, we also have a really serious responsibility to keep vulnerable people safe. One of the models we’ve used really successfully in this area is family group conferencing.

Where a child is at risk, the professionals will work with the adults around that child for several months, and then when a decision is being made as to how the child and their family will be supported, the professionals will step out of the room and the adults will discuss together how they think that the child and family can be best supported.

Moving on from that, we've started something called Full Circle, which is almost a neighbourhood version of family group conferencing, led by people with experience of social services. We did a conference recently to discuss this issue, called *To Love is to Act*, and there were mums there who'd had their children removed by social services – to tell their stories to social workers and to act as peer support to other mothers. The point was to have really difficult conversations about how to share power in these very hard circumstances. We're doing something similar now in adult social care services.

So wherever you are in the council, we can think about how we change power structures. For me, it comes down to relationships; often as a council we segment people into different 'issues'. If you have a relationship with someone and see them as a whole person, you can have a dialogue with them, understand what they want out of life, and support them in a different way. This means we need to support the capacity of individuals and communities – so, for example, we're putting money into developing community organisers; we have community liaison officers for estates undergoing regeneration processes.

**FSB: Where did you look for inspiration or examples in developing citizens' assemblies and in thinking more broadly about devolving power?**

**GG:** I looked a lot at Australia and Canada, and the use of citizens' assemblies there to make really difficult, big decisions. What's always really appealed to me about the model is the focus on deliberation. We have consultation processes, and a lot of angry and polarised debate on social media. That precludes deliberation. I have a lot of faith that if you take time to explain, to give people information, show them different views on an issue, explain the resource constraints, then you will generally get to a more creative and better place in taking decisions. The work in Australia and Canada really demonstrates that.

I also wrote a book about young people and politics, and that showed just how alienated and mistrustful young people feel about politics.<sup>2</sup> They really feel they aren't heard within the political process. A young man came to one of our citizens' assemblies and, at the end, he said he'd only come for the voucher, but it turned out to be the best thing he'd ever done. It's important that we remunerate people for their time, whether in citizens' assemblies, or as community researchers. We need to value their time. But it's also clear that people can get a lot out of being part of the process.

We've also talked to Barking and Dagenham about their participatory cities work; we've been to Wigan to look at the Wigan Deal; to Leeds, where they've managed to reduce childhood obesity with a family-led approach. We also had Citizens UK in to do a training session for our councillors about community organising, and how their role interacts with that of councillors – because of course, one of the dilemmas in all this is how you integrate participatory and representative democratic processes.

**FSB: This emphasis on pushing power downwards, and trying to work with community groups or groups of local people is very similar to the old GLC ethos in the 1980s.**

**GG:** Yes – and it's particularly important because we can't redistribute money, but we can share power, and build up the capacity of our communities, in part so that they can push for and advocate for the economic redistribution that's needed in other ways – like through trade unions. That's a very political act that the council can do. Sometimes people say to me, *people don't have time, it's not important to them to get involved in decision-making, in government*, and my answer to that is that, in fact, people who face multiple forms of deprivation are often the people who are most engaged with the state. The people who have least power are the people to whom it's most important to redistribute power.

In each of our neighbourhoods we're trying different approaches to building community capacity. So we've also been looking at what they've been doing in Barcelona, and we're working to create new civic spaces that are led by and curated by citizens.

**FSB: We've recently published a piece on the use of the Foundational Economy approach in Barcelona – and this leads me to a key question I wanted to ask, which is how this work to redistribute power fits in with an economic agenda?**

**GG:** We've been working on the community wealth building principles. Camden is a place of extreme wealth inequalities; Somers Town, in between Euston and Kings Cross, for example, is starting to feel like an island of poverty in all this wealth. We want to get our economy working for our citizens, and we have some levers in order to do that – planning, convening, bringing services back in house, and procurement. We've been a living-wage borough for a long time now, and we're signed up to the ethical care charter. We can also show leadership as employers – we're trying to employ those furthest from the labour market; trying to support in-work progression; we're working on a Universal Training Income trial: where people are out of work, or in in-work poverty, we support them through training and progression opportunities to help them onto the next step.

These two things – redistributing power and changing how our economy works – definitely go together for me. In Camden 2025 we have a number of challenges which intimately involve employers in the borough as citizens, as part of our community.

**FSB: The background to all this is of course massive funding cuts in the last decade. How has that affected your work?**

**GG:** Austerity has forced us to think differently about what we do – but even when we had more money going into the public sector, some of these fundamental inequalities still existed: not only in incomes and wealth but in education, health, and so on – so we would have had to change the way we do things anyway. A big part of the problem was that communities weren't being involved enough in identifying problems and solutions.

Austerity, of course, is pushing more people into worse and worse poverty, and creating strain on all our services, from the NHS to the police force, and making this work more important than ever – but it was needed anyway. Building up civic power can be a route to changing public services, but can also impact on how the economy works.

We've managed to protect a lot of our services, as well as our voluntary sector, our community organisations, youth clubs, and libraries; we fund 120 community festivals a year – so our civic space feels alive. All this work is about trying to build a sense of an alternative to austerity, extremism, polarisation. It's important that as many of our citizens as possible feel they're part of this, whether by getting involved in voluntary work, or just taking out the recycling. My hope is that creating a sense of a viable alternative can feed into a sense nationally that our politics, economy and society can be different.

National politics at the moment is in a deadlock; I'd love to see transformations in funding for adult social care, or youth safety taken seriously, but given that not much is happening at the moment, we have to get on with building the alternative at the local level.

**FSB: Let's talk about the mechanics of the process a bit. How do you select people to participate in the citizens' assemblies?**

**GG:** We've used various external partners – the Campaign Company, Demos, and now Involve – to run the assemblies. For our current assembly on the climate crisis, we used our community researchers to ask people in their area if they'd be prepared to be part of it. Then we selected randomly based on the demographics of Camden. It's important to use an independent facilitator, and to have an independent group helping to select the speakers to put in front of the assembly.

Each one has been a learning process. We've run an assembly on the future of Euston, a huge regeneration project run by the government. We held an assembly of citizens from Somers Town and Regents Park to help create the planning framework for that, and what's been really great is that I go in and I don't recognise anyone – which is rare. There are loads of really active, engaged groups in Camden, which is great, but we wanted to bring in people who wouldn't otherwise be part of

the process. In that area, some of our stakeholder groups are community activists with huge local knowledge and expertise, and we've invited them to be observers of the process – or sometimes to be expert presenters. In our climate crisis assembly, we've invited Climate Action Alliance to be part of the steering group and present to the climate crisis assembly as experts.

**FSB: Can you give me an example of a decision that you think has been different because of a citizens' assembly?**

**GG:** Absolutely – in Camden 2025, what surprised me was the focus on social isolation and community cohesion. The issues we as the council were focused on – health, housing, and so on – did come up, but the focus of the assembly on social isolation is now forming a huge part of our work going forward.

In the work on Euston, we found quite a clear consensus from the group that Euston Square Gardens is not a well-used space, and that they'd be prepared to lose it in order to have a better park, set back from the road. That's not a decision that's been made, we're still well away from any kind of decision. But it's interesting because that's a decision that I would never have touched. But residents have been saying that they never use it, and that they'd like a bigger, civic space – like Granary Square but something that residents felt more ownership over – at the heart of the development. So now that's something that's a red line for us.

The trade-off between height and community value was another important negotiation – and the citizens were also prepared to go further on height than I thought. Something else that wasn't as high on our agenda as it was in the citizens assembly was the need for a supermarket in the development.

In our work on neighbourhood health, I would have thought obesity would have been the top priority, but our citizens' assembly, when they'd had all the health data, concluded that community connectedness was the most important health issue. And that's now what's shaping our thinking.

Each time, the dialogue hasn't changed out of all recognition, but the emphasis has changed. We've only had one session of our climate crisis assembly, so I don't know what'll come out of that. In a way it's the most high-profile assembly we've convened, because it's such a critical issue. We've said that the assembly will form the basis of our next climate action plan; the group will present to full council. Talking to our officer who's been attending the meetings so far, there are three areas that have been coming out – things we're doing already; things that are quite controversial; and things that are highly controversial, that we as a council wouldn't have dared go near. So having a citizens' assembly opens up those possibilities. They can push you to go further than you thought was politically possible.

Going forward, I want this to become a consistent part of what we do – something that everyone has a chance to participate in. Nationally, I'd love to see a citizens' service like jury service, which is a permanent part of our democracy, and which the government supports, as with jury service. It could tackle major issues like Brexit that we simply can't do just within Camden.

It is resource intensive, though. We do pay people, because we want to support and value them – and that's not without controversy for some people.

**FSB: Have you ever had any issues where a citizens' assembly has made recommendations you as a council simply can't or don't want to implement?**

**GG:** It hasn't come up yet. We haven't said at the start of our assemblies that we'll implement 100 per cent of what the assembly recommends, rather that we'll respond to the suggestions and take them on board. We also present to the assembly on the resource constraints and trade-offs we face as a council.

My big worry is not so much that an assembly will come up with an unworkable proposal, but that it might come up with a set of proposals that we don't have the resources to deliver.

But I do have a lot of faith in the process. I think that when we run a citizens' assembly we should make a commitment to implement as much of it as possible, within our resources and with reference to our values as a council. If we run the process well and invest in the people properly, I think we'll be able to trust in the outcomes.

They are advisory, though, and we do still have a role for representative democracy; they won't override the decisions of our representative institutions.

**FSB: I'm interested in this idea that what you're trying to do is create a sense that another world is possible in how you run the council. Do you see this agenda as fundamentally a Labour agenda?**

**GG:** I think if you follow it to its logical conclusion, it ends up being a Labour agenda: having a civic-led system means putting power in the hands of people who wouldn't in the past have had it, and that has implications for the distribution of resources as well as power.

I do think these tools can and should be used by everyone – our country needs more ways of overcoming divisions and resolving differences by negotiation and dialogue. But what we're trying to do in Camden goes a step further: we want to really change the power relationship, and this is a radical, Labour agenda.

It's hard to share power – it's risky, and it takes resources. So where I see people leading the way it's mainly Labour people. Though there are still parts of Labour that are quite committed to an older style of top-down resource allocation.

**FSB: Have any Camden councillors been worried about this approach?**

**GG:** Absolutely; some are worried about eroding the democratic role of councillors, some have been anxious that we don't know what will be recommended by an assembly. I think in fact this way of working gives councillors even more of a role – if we're talking about citizens coming together as communities to change the place they live and work, you need someone to take a leadership role, and I see that as the role of councillors.

As Stephen Covey says, 'things move at the speed of trust'.<sup>3</sup> When people see citizens' assemblies in action, they get behind the idea, and that goes for our councillors and some of our community activists. I also think we, and all councils, should be investing more into the development of councillors if we want them to be genuinely community leaders.

**FSB: So much of what you've talked about is about the power of bringing together people in face-to-face interactions. What role does the internet play in doing democracy differently?**

**GG:** The internet has fuelled many of the negative trends we've seen – division and hate – but it's really a tool, and the outcomes depend how people use it. For the climate crisis citizens' assembly, we've used Commonplace as a platform for people to share ideas, and it's worked very well for us. But sometimes those platforms can be another space for those who are already very involved to discuss. So it's part of the process, but I'm sceptical when people suggest that an online platform can be the solution to all our problems. We need those real human contacts – those trusted relationships are what get people to engage.

**Georgia Gould** is leader of Camden Council.

## Notes

1. Oliver Escobar, 'Beyond anti-politics through democratic innovation', *Renewal*, Vol 24 No 2, 2016.
2. Georgia Gould, *Wasted: How Misunderstanding Young Britain Threatens Our Future*, Little, Brown, 2015.
3. S.M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, Free Press, 2006.