



# Crowd Wise

## Case Study: Deciding Policy

### Introduction

This was a two hour event that took part as part of a University of Gloucestershire Summer Seminar for the chairs and clerks of parish and town councils. It was held in Cheltenham in July 2009. The topic was: "How much power should local councils (parish and town councils) have in the 21st century?"

The timetable was as follows:

<i>When</i>	<i>What</i>
Lunch	Brief speakers and distribute ballot papers
1.30 – 1.40	First vote
1.40 – 1.50	Introduction
1.50 – 2.20	Each speaker has five minutes to explain and justify their proposal
2.20 – 3.00	Participants sit at six tables. The speakers each go to a different table. They present their position and get feedback on it. After ten minutes, they all move to the next table clockwise, so they all visit all of the tables.
3.00 – 3.10	Speakers summarise the discussion and say if they want to amend their proposals or combine them with those of others
3.10 – 3.20	Second vote
3.20 – 3.30	Discussion of second vote
3.30	Close

### Stage 1: Developing the options

Before the event, six speakers with a range of views on the topic were identified. They each provided a short statement of their views. Here are the six options:

- A. Local councils should not have more power. Communities would lose the opportunity to influence wider issues, through the connections between principal authorities' area-based arrangements and the rest of the authority.
- B. The power of local councils in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should remain unchanged, unless and until their democratic credentials are radically overhauled as part of a wider transformation of governance in Britain.

- C. Local councils should both demonstrate and earn greater responsibility and influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly through the Quality Parishes Scheme and within the new and proposed shire unitary principal local authorities.
- D. Local councils' powers should be expanded to include:
  - powers to confer the freedom of a place on regiments etc.
  - powers to create aldermen and alderwomen
  - exercising local charter rights such as the right to run markets.
  - managing their own elections
- E. Parish and Town Councils should have the power to decide locally what is best for their people through a power of General Competence.
- F. Local councils should have full power to deliver all services in the locality.

After the table discussions, each speaker had the opportunity to amend their proposal. For instance, the following changes were proposed for option F.:

- Insert "appropriate" before "services".
- There should be a compulsory requirement for unitary authorities to engage and consult with local councils.
- Increase duties as well as powers.
- Acknowledge that this increase in power and duties brings an increased need for quality control and accountability.

The facilitator then asked the speakers if any of them wished to merge their proposals. E stayed as it was. Options A, B and C combined into a single option. This read:

There should be a statutory duty to devolve on principal authorities and on other public service providers. This would be supported both by institutions such as the Audit Commission and by the self-improvement agenda of principal authorities themselves. There should be greater resources to train and support councillors.

Also, option F was merged with option E: the merged option read:

- Local councils should have powers and duties to deliver all appropriate services in the locality. This should be accompanied by increased:
  - resources
  - quality control
  - accountability

At the end of this stage, we were left with three options.

## Stage 2: The vote

You will see from the timetable that there was a first vote at the start. This was to acclimatise the participants to how consensus voting worked and to give the speakers an indication of how popular their starting positions were. (Option A came sixth and last, whereas option F came second.)

The main vote was on the three merged options. 44 votes were cast. E/F came first, just ahead of A/B/C, with E a long way behind.

### Stage 3: Analysing the vote

With a tight timetable, there was time at the end only to announce the results, not to discuss them. But it was evident that there was much overlap between the top two options, with E/F being about the powers of local councils and A/B/C being about the importance of principal authorities (that's borough and county councils, the next tier up from parish councils) devolving power to local councils. These two could have been merged into a final option. This would have commanded a great deal of consensus, in part because it would have drawn on at least five of the original six options. That final option would have read something like:

*Principal authorities and other public service providers should have a statutory duty to devolve the delivery of services to the local council. This duty should be supported by devolving financial resources, quality control, accountability and training.*

