

## **Our citizens are valuable and knowledgeable - a Strategy for Local Democracy in the Municipality of Ballerup**

*Mayor Ove E. Dalsgaard*

In the Municipality of Ballerup, the town council passed a Strategy for Local Democracy in December 2008. Because it is so new, the effect of the Strategy still remains to be seen. But in the following, I shall present our visions regarding local democracy in Ballerup, and how we hope to make citizen participation a systematic part of our way of working.

### **Background for the Strategy for Local Democracy**

We have a long tradition for citizen participation and local democracy in Ballerup. Over the past three decades, we have established a 'modus operandi' where citizen involvement is a natural part of the process in connection with larger planning projects, policy making, area improvement projects etc.

According to Danish legislation, we are mainly obliged to involve the citizens in projects to do with physical planning - local and municipal - and within the fields of social services and school administration. But in Ballerup, we go further than that. Partly because we think that it is only right for our citizens to have influence on decisions which directly affect their daily lives; partly because our citizens can make important contributions to our decision making simply because they have valuable detailed knowledge and experience about everyday life in our community.

But if we already do involve citizens to such a considerable extent, then why do we need an actual Strategy for Local Democracy? There are several reasons:

- Democracy can not survive, if the citizens do not have the will to take part in debates about local issues. With our strategy, we wish to ensure the political focus - and the necessary resources - so that citizen participation will be seen by all as a natural element in the development of our municipality.
- Both local politicians and municipal public servants are replaced over time. Therefore, we need a Strategy to make sure that our tradition for citizen participation will be continued and further developed.
- As a result of a municipal reform in Denmark, which took effect on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, a number of tasks have been transferred from the national level to the local authorities. Many of these tasks have a direct impact on our citizens' daily life, e.g. water supply, public transportation and health. Therefore, the local politicians more than ever need access to the local knowledge of the citizens.
- In connection with the municipal reform, the government urged all local authorities to consider formulating a policy for local democracy. It was not an obligation, but we think that it is a very good idea.

### **When is our Strategy relevant?**

The Strategy for Local Democracy will take effect whenever we deal with general strategies, policies, plans and projects which affect the whole municipality or large parts of it, or which affect the development of a specific local area. It will not be relevant in cases which affect only a limited number of persons.

We have a long and successful tradition for dialogue with various boards, councils, organisations and businesses within the municipality - naturally, this will continue, but our Strategy focuses on the citizens as individuals.

It goes without saying that the representative democracy is the basis of it all.

## **Focus on citizenship**

'New Public Management' has gradually led us to a situation, where citizens see themselves as customers or consumers of public service. But the municipality is not a private company, which you can choose not to 'buy from'. There is only one supplier of these services, namely the municipality, which belongs to us all. Therefore, we need to focus more on citizenship and on our common responsibility for the community.

Our Strategy for Local Democracy focuses on **citizen** participation, not on **user** participation - a very important distinction. A 'user' acts as a consumer of public welfare and is focused on his or her specific needs, which is perfectly legitimate - we are all users of public services in one aspect or the other. But a 'citizen' acts a member of society, relates to the local issues from a broader perspective based on opinions, values and ideals, and is able to consider other peoples' needs and opinions as well. Our Strategy aims at developing and facilitating this kind of citizenship.

## **Most important challenges for local democracy**

Apart from past experiences, our Strategy is based on the results of a comprehensive all-day hearing, in which appr. 100 broadly representative citizens - plus members of the town council - spent a whole Saturday taking part in various workshops and discussing different aspects of local democracy. The resulting 'Citizens Catalogue for Local Democracy' has functioned as an important contribution to the Strategy.

According to the participating citizens, the four most important challenges for local democracy are:

- Communication/information
- Real influence
- How to make it attractive for the citizens to participate
- How to involve young people and immigrants

All these aspects are clearly addressed in our Strategy for Local Democracy.

## **The contents of the Strategy for Local Democracy**

Our Strategy consists of three parts: Policy, Principles & Procedures and a 'Toolbox'.

The **Policy** is about our visions for local democracy. We have set up four basic goals:

### **1. Citizens must be given the possibility to be heard and to participate in connection with political decisions.**

We shall arrange participation processes in relation to all general strategies, policies, plans and projects. It must be made clear from the start what is - and what is not - open to discussion. Our communication with the citizens must be customized both to the topic and to the relevant group of participants. And we must always report back to the participating citizens regarding the further process and the resulting decisions.

### **2. The knowledge and local experience of the citizens shall contribute to better informed political decision making.**

All citizens with an interest in the topic at hand must be given the opportunity to contribute with their specific knowledge and opinions in order to give the local politicians a better basis for decision making. And we must do our utmost to make sure that all relevant parties are heard - including those groups of citizens which may not come forward on their own accord.

**3. Citizen participation should lead to a better understanding and acceptance of the political decisions.**

Through dialogue and participation, citizens shall be made to feel responsibility and ownership in relation to the municipal decision making. We shall make sure that the citizens will be able to see and recognize their own contributions, either directly in the contents of the decisions or e.g. in a preface or agenda text explaining the political choices and priorities which have been made.

**4. The citizens' interest and enthusiasm for citizenship must be enhanced, and we shall aim at imparting more influence and responsibility to them.**

For the sake of Democracy, it is important to obtain a broad representation in the democratic processes and to make the citizens take on their citizenship. We must try to include all groups of citizens regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, etc. Basically, local democracy is a matter of cohesion in the community, and the local politicians have a special responsibility to bring this across to the citizens.

We have set up six **Principles & Procedures** to ensure that we reach our goals:

**A. It is obligatory for the town council to consider methods and degrees of citizen participation at the start of every large policy, project etc.**

This is a prerequisite for obtaining successful democratic processes. The council members must consider *how* to involve the citizens, *whom* it will be relevant to involve, and the *extent* of involvement. It must always be made quite plain what the citizens may have an influence on, and what cannot be discussed because of fixed restrictions such as binding legislation, the economic situation, etc.

**B. Citizens have a right to be heard, and they must be given real opportunities to participate.**

The right to be heard pertains to strategies, policies, plans and projects which are of interest to a broad range of citizens. The town council is responsible for prioritizing and decision making, based on input from the various citizen groups. It is important that all citizens with an interest in any given topic have the opportunity to be heard. For various reasons, some groups of citizens may be unable to engage themselves in the debate. It is our responsibility to set up the democratic processes in such a way that the participation of these groups is facilitated, and we must always allow enough time for the processes to be carried out properly.

**C. Citizens should be involved as early in the process as possible.**

The case at hand must of course be thoroughly researched and described by the local authority, before the citizens are involved. But it is important that involvement takes place as early in the process as possible, so that citizens may comment on – and present alternatives to – the suggestions presented by the town council.

**D. It is important to focus on communication and information. Keywords: targeted, necessary and adequate.**

In order for the citizens to be able to contribute, it is of course essential that they know that a democratic process is taking place. The citizens must have easy access to all the information they need, including reports on the resulting decisions.

We need to seriously address the question of communication during the whole of the processes. Our communication must be open and professional and customized for the purpose: information, invitation, dialogue etc.

We must always consider how to reach those groups of citizens which do not react on traditional means of communication – for instance, young people must be contacted by other media than the middle aged.

We have set up a sub site on the internet ([www.ballerup.dk/naerdemokrati](http://www.ballerup.dk/naerdemokrati)), where all information regarding citizen participation and local democracy can be found in the future: the Strategy, news about ongoing processes, reports on previous processes, etc.

**E. The members of the town council and the public servants in the Municipality of Ballerup are ambassadors for local democracy.**

The main purpose of our Strategy is to make sure, that citizen involvement becomes a natural and systematically integrated part of our political decision making and of our public administration. We need to make sure that every part of the municipal administration is geared to facilitate and give priority to citizen involvement. And we must make it easy and attractive for the citizens to get involved.

**F. Processes, methods and competences regarding citizen involvement must be evaluated regularly in order to improve and adjust our way of working.**

Initially, we shall carry out two different rounds of evaluation:

Approximately one year after the Strategy takes effect, we shall evaluate whether our municipal organisation has lived up to it and carried out citizen involvement as stipulated in the Strategy. After another few years, we shall evaluate the effect of the Strategy, i.e. find out whether the citizens and the members of the town council have felt any effect.

The **Toolbox** is meant as a source of inspiration. In order to get the best result out of a citizen participation process, it is vital to choose the right method. Different topics and different groups of citizens call for different types of democratic processes. There is no one way to fit them all, each process must be tailor made. Therefore, we have worked out an appendix for our Strategy, namely at toolbox describing different ways of involving citizens in various contexts.

The toolbox is meant to be a dynamic instrument, aimed at giving inspiration regarding type and extent of citizen participation to municipal public servants involved in arranging a democratic process. It is a separate part of the Strategy for Local Democracy, because it is our intention to revise and update it regularly, based on the new experience and information we expect to 'harvest' over time. At present, it contains 12 different methods to involve citizens, spanning from electronic surveys to open space meetings, future scenario meetings, focus groups and workshops.

**Facts about Ballerup**

Ballerup is a suburban municipality situated 15 km. north-west of central Copenhagen.  
There are appr. 47.000 inhabitants  
Ove E. Dalsgaard (social democrat) has been mayor of Ballerup since 1982  
[www.ballerup.dk](http://www.ballerup.dk)