# Building Trust Through Public Engagement

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# Report Abstract

**1.** All governments must be trustworthy. Trustworthy governments are competent in satisfying their objectives and judicious in choosing their objectives. They also act in the public interest rather than the interests of a select few. But government trustworthiness is near useless if it is not recognised by citizens. And government trustworthiness does not always guarantee public trust. To gain trust, one must successfully communicate one's trustworthiness to potential trustors.

**2.** A common approach to securing government trustworthiness and public trust by creating institutions that regulate the government. Public Auditors such as Audit Scotland provide this regulation. Public Audit differs from private audit in that its remit covers questions surrounding government performance and value, which transcend the traditional financial audit with which private auditors are concerned. Supporters of audit believe that audit supports government trustworthiness and demonstrates that trustworthiness to the public. Opponents of audit argue that audit undermines either government trustworthiness or public trust in government.

**3.** My research had three objectives. Firstly, to establish a theory of public trust and government trustworthiness. Secondly, to examine the relationship between audit practice and government trustworthiness with a view to understanding in what ways audit can positively impact government trustworthiness. The final part of the project established a theory of communication that enables public organisations (including public auditors) to communicate their trustworthiness to the public.

**4.** This is the third of a series of three Audit Scotland reports which will outline the key conclusions of my research and suggest positive recommendations both for public organisations who aim to develop both the trustworthiness of their organisations and public trust in their organisations. Each report will focus on one of the above objectives. This report will present a conceptual model of public engagement called *empowering public engagement*, which auditors and public organisations can employ to enhance trust in their organisations….

# 1. Building Trust in Audit Through Public Engagement

**5.** In this report, I introduce a model of public engagement called *empowering public engagement* and show how this form of engagement can be used to build trust in auditors and in public organisations. Roughly, empowering public engagement is any form of public engagement which enables participants to influence either the content of the engagement or its consequences.

**6.** I will motivate empowering public engagement by firstly outlining what I take to be two large obstacles to trust in both public auditors and public organisations. Then I will show that empowering public engagement can be used to help overcome these obstacles. Following this, I will conclude the report by providing examples of how empowering public engagement might work in practice.

## Two Major Obstacles to Trust – Vulnerability and Interest Divergence

**7.** In this section, I will explain two of the most pressing obstacles to trust in public organisations, which our model of empowering public engagement will help us overcome. These obstacles are caused by two problems, which I call *The Vulnerability Problem* and *The Interest Divergence Problem*.

## The Vulnerability Problem

**8.** To some extent, vulnerability is a necessary part of trusting relationships. If I trust you, I judge that you will keep your commitments, and I will be disposed to rely on you to keep those commitments. In doing so, I make myself vulnerable to you, since you could fail to meet that commitment. For example, if John relies on June to pick him up after work, then John makes himself vulnerable to June's failing to pick him up from work, either out of incompetence or negligence.

**9.** Although we must be willing to take on some vulnerability when we trust, vulnerability can, in extreme circumstances, make us less likely to trust one another. Hobbes' illustrates this in the following example of the state of nature, a state of extreme vulnerability where trust is all but impossible.

"Life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

**10.** Implicit in Hobbes' point is that due to the extreme vulnerability that we would find ourselves in the state of nature - a condition of scarce resources and danger - trust between different people would be hard to establish, if not

impossible. We need not take Hobbes' more extreme view that trust would be impossible; the point to recognise is only that, in situations where at least one person is highly vulnerable, such a person may be reluctant to trust, since trusting would require them to take on an even greater amount of vulnerability. It doesn't make trust impossible, but it can make it difficult.

**11.** We can strengthen Hobbes' thought by looking at less extreme examples. Setting aside the legal problematics, suppose you have the option of trusting an insured driver or and uninsured driver to drive your car. Suppose they are both equally competent drivers and equally willing to drive. Which one are your more likely to trust? If you are being rational, it seems that you should trust the insured driver, and a part of the explanation of this is that you are less vulnerable to the insured driver if things go wrong. If they crash, you lose your car, but they have insurance to cover the loss. In the case of the uninsured driver, the stakes are much higher, you are more vulnerable to them since if they crash you lose your car with no recompense.

**12.** Vulnerability problems are common in political contexts. The average individual citizen has very limited political power to influence the operations of government and public organisations. Such problems are exacerbated when individuals belong to especially vulnerable groups due to wealth and social classes. For citizens who lack substantial political power or influence, they are already vulnerable to the operations of government and public organisations whether they trust them or not. If one cannot afford private alternatives, for example, then one is reliant on the NHS and state education service.

**13.** The thought that vulnerability acts as an obstacle to trust is supported by empirical studies on trust in political institutions which show that while there is an increase in government trust as a general trend, there is an increasing "trust gap" in which those belonging to vulnerable groups are trusting far less than those belonging to less vulnerable groups (Edelman, 2020a & 2020b; Ipsos 2019). Vulnerable in these studies is defined as groups who belong to lower economic-classes and people who have a lower level of education. Other studies also show that those who are most trusting of public organisations tend to be those closest to, or have some involvement in, the running of those organisations, while those who are further from the public sphere tend to be less trusting (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002; Christensen Laegried, 2014). This further supports the idea that those who are further removed from positions of public authority, who are in virtue of being so far removed more vulnerable to its operations, tend to be less trusting in public organisations than those who are less vulnerable to its operations.

## The Problem of Interest Divergence

**14.** Perhaps a greater obstacle to trust than vulnerability is the interest divergence problem. This problem causes a few difficulties for establishing trust, but in each case the problem has the same root. Take two agents (individuals or organisations), who have a set of interests or values that either conflict or are incompatible with each other. This is interest divergence. In my research I identify the following three ways that interest divergence undermines trust:

| (1) The Distortion Problem | Divergent interests between the private interests of decision-makers and the public interest can cause decision-makers to implement policies, either innocently or deliberately, that are more in accordance with their private interests rather than in the public interest. |
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| (2) The Motivational Problem | Divergent interests decrease the motivations of trustees, especially when the relationship between trustor and trustee is impersonal. |
| (3) The Public Interest Problem | Divergent interests between private and public interests result in public distrust of government institutions, even when these institutions correctly identify and support public interests, if such support is not in citizens' private interests. |

**15.** The distortion problem occurs when the interests of decision-makers (or auditors) diverge from those of ordinary citizens (or sub-groups of ordinary citizens). When this occurs, if there is not sufficient challenge to the voices of decision-makers (or auditors), this can result in either the deliberate or unconscious privileging of the interests of those in power over those of ordinary people. It is important to stress that the distortion problem can be deliberate or implicit, since it is the implicit bias in decision-making that is arguably much harder to track. The idea of implicit bias is that we have subconscious preferences towards or against groups or individuals (Brownstein 2019). To some extent, implicit bias is unavoidable; however, it can, in cases where a group all share the same implicit bias, lead to systematic forms of exclusion or neglect of groups of people. In the context of audit, then, if auditors are taken to be members of similar socio-economic groups, there is a worry that when auditors make value judgements, say, in a performance audit report, that these value judgements may be biased in favour of the values and preferences specific to the groups of people who conduct the audits. That this can occur implicitly is problematic because auditors may be unaware of the biases that inform their decision making and value judgements.

**16.** The motivation problem is related to the distortion problem. Human beings are generally motivated by doing what is in their interests to do, and they are motivated to avoid doing what is not in their interests. If something is inimical to my interests, I will be less inclined to do that thing, especially if I could do something that is in my interests instead. Political decision-making is crowded with decision-makers who belong to similar socio-economic groups, and these decision-makers have similar interests in virtue of belonging to such groups. Acting in the common or public interest may not always coincide with doing what is in the interests of their particular groups, and this conflict can motivate decision-makers to act in their own interests over the public interest. The motivation occurs when there is interest divergence, because if your interests are inimical or conflict with mine, I have a greater motivation to not do what is in your interests.

**17.** The Public Interest Problem is an analogue to the distortion problem, only here it is the public rather than their representatives that are the problem. In cases where the interests of individual citizens or groups of citizens differ from those served by the government, those individuals whose interests are not represented or undermined may be less trustful of government than those whose interests are better served or represented by the government. This perhaps explains why the most distrusting groups of government tend to be those whose voices are typically excluded from government decision-making, as well as wealthy individuals who operate in the private sector, while those of a middle-class background with a university education seem to be most trusting of government. What is especially troubling about this problem is that those who distrust the government because it does not serve their private interests overlook the fact that the purpose of the government is to serve the common interest. Thus, it is the nature of the role of government that it should sometimes overlook the private interests of citizens to support the common interest. However, at the same time it is rational for citizens whose interests are significantly undermined to distrust the government in the sense that the government is an organisation that is damaging to their interests. What governments must do, then, is encourage citizens to support the common interest by demonstrating that it is (at least in some cases) more important than their private interests.

**18.** The problem of interest divergence is a big obstacle to trust. To trust the government, citizens need to be confident that the government will meet its commitments. One of the commitments is a commitment to serve the public interest or the common good. Problems of interest divergence make it difficult both for governments to fulfil this commitment, and for the public to trust the government. If public organisations are crowded by individuals of a similar interest group, this can lead to explicit but more importantly, implicit distortion in which the interests of those individuals are taken to represent the public interests while they do not. Differences of interest between the interests of decision-makers and the common interest provide motivation for decision-makers to favour their own interests over the common interest. Finally, if members of the public do not find their interests to be represented by the government, and if they perceive their private interests as more important than the public interest, then they will be more likely to distrust the government. When thinking about how to enhance trust in public organisations (including public auditors) we need to find ways of reducing interest divergency problems or find ways of enabling people to trust in spite of their diverging interests. One way in which public auditors may do this is to ensure a greater diversity of thought and interests are represented in their institutions. Doing so can help prevent the potential biases towards the interest of a more homogenous and middle class group as opposed to the interests of a diverse body of tax paying citizens with different creeds, beliefs, and values.

# 2. Building Trust Through Empowerment
## Empowering Public Engagement

**19.** In this report, and in my thesis, I look examine how we can use public engagement as a tool to improve public trust in public organisations. I argue that the best way to do this is to come up with models of public engagement which are targeted at removing or at least limiting vulnerability and interest divergence problems as obstacles to trust. To this end, I develop a model of public engagement called empowering public engagement. In this section, I will explain what *empowering public engagement* is and how it can overcome the obstacles to trust discussed in the previous sections.

**20.** I define any form of public engagement empowering to some degree if it meets one or more of the following conditions:

    (1) It enables the audience to *meaningfully* change/influence the discourse at hand, e.g., by changing topics or determining conclusions.

    (2) It enables the audience to *meaningfully* discuss and raise areas of concern.

    (3) It enables the audience to *meaningfully* change/influence the consequences of the discourse.

    (4) It enables the audience to *meaningfully* enact change/have influence outside of the discourse.

**21.** The application of *meaningfully* echoes a thought by Weatherford. It is the thought that for political engagement to effect positive attitudes regarding governments' commitment to the common good, the engagement should connect citizens to the world of politics in ways that allow citizens to have some impact within public discourse and in shaping its consequences (Weatherford, 1992: 160-1). What this means is that empowering public engagement in the context of civic trust relations is a form of engagement that redistributes some of the political powers of public organisations to the public. This is not to suggest that empowerment requires public organisations to cede all their political discretion to the public; there must be give and take on both sides. But what matters, minimally, is that the engagement allows audiences to have concrete and sincere influence either on the discourse, its consequences, or both.

**22.** Now that we have a grasp on what it means for public engagement to be empowering, we can understand why empowering engagement is conducive to trust. McLuhan argues that the medium in which we communicate can convey messages that go beyond the content of that communication: as he puts it, "The

Medium Is the Message" (1997: 7). In my view, the empowering model of public engagement does just that. It is a mode of communication that says, "We care about what you have to say", "we think what you have to say is important", "we want to make sure that we provide public value", and "we see you as integral to the work that we do." It does this because empowering models of public engagement require the speaker to grant the audience some political discretion to shape the discourse or influence its consequences, which in turn carries an implicit message that the speaker thinks that the audience has valuable contributions to make. If the audience belongs to a less powerful group, it grants greater power to that group, removing some of its vulnerabilities to the trustee. It may also reconcile interest divergency problems, not because empowering modes of public engagement means that the speaker must share the same interests with the audience either at the start or end of the engagement, but because the willingness to allow the audience to discuss matters of interest to them, and the willingness to provide solutions and take those interests seriously, demonstrate that you care about those interests. In demonstrating these things, you assure your audience that they have the power to shape the discourse, potentially quelling their reluctance to trusting grounded in vulnerability. You also assure your audience that their interests matter to the discourse, thus potentially quelling reluctance to trust grounded in interest divergence.

**23.** There is an additional advantage to empowering public engagement, especially for public auditors like Audit Scotland, for whom auditor independence from auditees is a core commitment of the organisation. One of Audit Scotland's core commitments is its organisational purpose: to provide independent assurance that public money is being spent properly and provides public value. Empowering public engagement may be a key method by which auditors can prove their independence from auditees, at least to participants. If auditors engage with the public to determine the consequences of an audit, then this very act suggests that Audit Scotland is not simply 'in the pocket' of the auditees because they are willing to let the public voice shape the audit findings. It may also communicate that Audit Scotland has the competence to determine what is of public value, another core commitment of public auditors, since knowing what is of public value is necessary for determining whether public organisations perform well and provide value. In practising empowering public engagement, auditors communicate at the very least that they take these commitments seriously, and at best, that they meet these commitments.

**24.** Empowering public engagement models are trust-conducive because they remove two of the primary barriers to trusting public organisations, namely vulnerability and interest divergence problems. They can also communicate that the public organisations their commitments to the public interest seriously. In addition to these reasons, psychological research on trust formation suggests additional evidence of the trust-conducive nature of empowering engagement. Nenko et al. note how perceptions of fairness and inclusion are key determiners of individual judgments surrounding effectiveness and satisfaction (2019: 1). In the context of relationships between patients and doctors, Keating et al. note how the willingness to allow patients to participate in the decision-making procedures surrounding their treatment increases patient trust in doctors (2002; Cook et al., 2004). Including the public in discourse about the design and delivery of public service, or including them as part of the audit process, is one

way in which public organisations can demonstrate fairness and inclusion in their operations. Doing so, as these empirical studies suggest, should be conducive to trust. Moreover, they will dissolve the two trust problems discussed in the previous section. They make those involved less vulnerable to political authority since participants will play some role in determining the design and delivery or services. Moreover, they will dissolve interest divergence problems either because the interests of participants will be satisfied by the organisation engaging with them, or at the very least, because the organisation engaging with them will demonstrate that they care about the interests of participants, which they do implicitly by giving them a voice in their operations.

**25.** There is a final reason why empowering engagement may be more conducive to trust. By empowering the audience, the organisation must trust participants to engage in the discourse in a meaningful way. If an organisation attempts to include the public in discourse about its operations but does not trust the public to make valuable contributions, then the whole engagement process would be pointless. That organisations must trust their participants is itself one way that they may elicit trust in response by participants. Empowering models of public engagement work under a presumption of reciprocal trust. The speaker communicates to the audience that they are willing to trust the audience to provide an insightful and meaningful contribution to the discourse. This willingness to trust may elicit trust in the opposite directions. If I am willing to make myself vulnerable to you through trust, then you may be more likely to make yourself vulnerable to me through trust.

# 3. Conclusion & Recommendations

**26.** This report has developed a model of public engagement that is conducive to trust. This model is empowering public engagement, which is a form of public engagement which gives participants the power to either determine the discourse of the engagement and/or its consequences. I presented several reasons as to why this form of engagement is trust conducive. A key reason was that it overcomes two big barriers to public trust in public organisations: Vulnerability Problems and Interest Divergence Problems. In this concluding section, I suggest several practical recommendations for public organisations seeking to enhance trust through empowering public engagement. Some of these recommendations also draw from the conclusions from the previous reports.

## General Rules for Successful Empowering Engagement

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| **Deliver Real Impact** | Public Engagement must be more than lip service – one must not only give opportunities for engagement, but one must ensure that the process has impactful consequences on operations.<br><br>Empowering Engagement is demanding – since empowering engagement requires impactful involvement from participants, it is consuming for both time and recourses. Therefore, it must be done selectively, perhaps by focusing only on issues that matter deeply to the public. |
| **Reach Vulnerable Groups** | Removing the vulnerability problem and the interest divergency problem requires engagement with hard-to-reach groups. Good empowering engagement strategies will include methods of reaching these groups. |
| **Trust in Participants** | In order for empowering engagement to be effective, one must trust the participants in the process. What this means is trusting that participants have valuable contributions to make to the discussion, in terms both of representing their own interests and even |

| | providing valuable knowledge to the organisation. |
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| **Public As Citizens** | In line with the Public Value Management & Scottish Approach to public service delivery, participants should be treated as citizens, not consumers. Treating participants as citizens means treating them as key contributors to a democratic process, rather than as a passive consumer of services. |
| **Openness** | Empowering engagement is not merely a data gathering exercise. One should avoid an overly restrictive approach to empowering engagement, since this limits the scope of what participants may wish to speak out, which ultimately might undermine the whole process. There should be a focus on discussion, deliberation, and a willingness to entertain novel ideas and ways of thinking. |
| **Feedback** | Empowering Engagement will require some form of feedback. Even if the engagement is not as in depth as a focus group or citizen panel, it is important that organisations demonstrate to participants and (where possible) the wider public, that their contributions do have an impact. To do this is to show the public that public engagement is actually empowering and not merely lip service. |

## Examples of Empowering Engagement

• Focus Groups

• Consensus Conferences/Citizen Panels

• Digital Engagement – EXAMPLES Information provision; social media; consultation; surveys; customer services.

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