

DIALOGUE WITH THE PUBLIC AS A KEY TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, Kazakhstan has taken significant steps toward modernising its public administration system and strengthening interaction between state institutions and citizens. One of the key initiatives in this direction is the concept of a “Listening State,” aimed at hearing citizens’ opinions, considering their proposals, and increasing accountability to society. This article examines dialogue with the public as an important mechanism for improving the effectiveness of local governance. The author analyses public hearings as an institutional tool that enables the integration of citizens’ knowledge and life experience into the decision-making process. In addition, the article reviews international practices of involving children, women, and older adults in urban planning and local governance processes. It also considers the role of emotional intelligence and communication skills of civil servants in building trust between the government and society. The study demonstrates that sustainable development of local governance is directly linked to establishing continuous dialogue with the public, ensuring inclusive citizen participation, and the ability to transform citizens’ proposals into concrete managerial decisions.

Keywords: public participation, local governance, public hearings, listening state, civic engagement, emotional intelligence, open government.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Kazakhstan has taken significant steps toward modernising its public administration system. One of the most important initiatives in this direction is the proclamation of the concept of a “Listening State”. This concept requires public authorities not only to act as decision-makers but also to be able to listen to citizens, take their opinions into account, and bear responsibility for responding to those opinions.

International studies show that the majority of citizens’ appeals are not entirely new issues but rather long-standing problems that remain unresolved and therefore recur repeatedly (Yessetova, 2021). This indicates that strengthening dialogue between society and government does not automatically lead to positive outcomes; it becomes effective only when accompanied by concrete actions. If citizens are given only the impression that their opinions are being considered, without real decisions being made, the result is distrust and disappointment.

Public councils are an important element of democracy; however, they often fail to generate creative solutions, as participants tend to repeat familiar and conventional ideas (Landry, 2006). Genuine change requires non-standard thinking and reliance on personal experience.

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ROLE OF PEOPLE IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The most important figure in a city or rural area is the ordinary resident who experiences the effects of global processes through their daily activities and personal life experience. The task of local governance is to ensure that people's everyday lives proceed with minimal obstacles and to develop administration as a horizontal rather than a strictly hierarchical structure.

Quality of life is closely connected to a sense of place, and this connection grows stronger as people actively participate in the development of their living environment. Urban or regional development is not limited to infrastructure construction or building facilities. First and foremost, it is the art of understanding people's needs, life experiences, aspirations, and expectations. Landry (2006) states that "*the most important and vital resource of a city is its people*". He points out that human intellect, imagination, creativity, and motivation are increasingly becoming strategic resources for the development of cities and regions. For this reason, public hearings are an important tool for genuinely taking into account the opinions and experiences of residents. Public hearings should not be considered merely as formal procedures; they must be regarded as effective mechanisms aimed at improving the quality of local governance.

Public hearings

Public hearings are widely recognised as an important mechanism for structuring interaction between society and public authorities, as they enable the incorporation of citizens' everyday experiences and needs into governance processes. Citizens often possess context-specific knowledge that remains inaccessible to formal government institutions, thereby enriching the informational basis of public decision-making (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015).

Existing research on participatory governance consistently demonstrates that the inclusion of diverse perspectives contributes to more informed and legitimate outcomes. In particular, Faga (2006) emphasises that consensus in public decision-making does not require uniformity of opinions, but rather mutual understanding of the rationale behind decisions. Similarly, Beierle and Cayford (2002) argue that public participation enhances decisions quality by combining expert knowledge with of citizens experimental insights. Taken together, these approaches suggest that participation should be understood not only as a democratic norm but also as a functional mechanism for improving both Informational robustness and legitimacy of governance outcomes.

However, the existing literature predominantly conceptualises public hearings as deliberative and participatory practices, while their role as a managerial instrument within public administration remains insufficiently explored. In this regard, public hearings can be reconceptualized through the lens of stakeholder management, where the objective is not to eliminate disagreements but to systematically identify, articulate, and integrate competing interests into the decision-making process. This perspective aligns with approaches in public management and project governance, where stakeholder engagement is treated as a structured process aimed at balancing diverse expectations and reducing implementation risks.

From this standpoint, the effectiveness of public hearings depends not on achieving full consensus, but on ensuring meaningful dialogue and the incorporation of diverse viewpoints into final decisions. This interpretation is further supported by the framework proposed by Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015), which distinguishes between "thick" (sustained, deliberative) and "thin" (quick, accessible) forms of participation. Their combination

highlights the need for participation mechanisms that are not merely formal, but systematic and outcome-oriented.

Thus, public hearings can be understood not only as a form of civic engagement, but also as a managerial tool that contributes to conflict mitigation, enhances decision legitimacy, and strengthens the overall effectiveness of public administration. Crucially, their value lies not simply in providing a platform for expression, but in the extent to which citizen input is institutionally integrated into concrete policy and managerial decisions.

Thick-thin strategies – deliberative forums, citizens' juries

Thin strategies – simple and quick actions, such as signing a petition or filling out a survey. According to the approach proposed by Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015), the effectiveness of public participation cannot be ensured by relying on a single format. Rather, meaningful outcomes emerge when interaction between citizens and government is organized across multiple levels and through diverse participatory mechanisms.

From this perspective, the authors conceptualize “thick” and “thin” strategies not as competing approaches, but as complementary modes of engagement. “Thick” strategies refer to intensive, deliberative, and long-term forms of participation, including forums, citizens' juries, and public deliberations. These formats enable participants to engage in in-depth discussions, consider multiple perspectives, and develop informed judgments. As a result, decisions produced through such processes tend to be more robust and legitimate. However, these approaches are resource-intensive and require significant time, institutional capacity, and organizational effort.

In contrast, “thin” strategies are designed to be accessible, rapid, and scalable, allowing for the inclusion of large segments of the population. These include tools such as online surveys, petitions, and other forms of quick feedback collection. While such mechanisms are effective in broadening participation, they generally do not facilitate deep deliberation or nuanced understanding of complex issues.

The central argument advanced by the authors is the need to integrate these two approaches. Exclusive reliance on “thin” strategies risks producing superficial participation, where citizens' views are collected but not meaningfully explored. Conversely, relying solely on “thick” strategies may limit participation to smaller, more engaged groups, thereby reducing inclusiveness.

Therefore, effective public hearings — and, more broadly, local governance systems — should combine these approaches by initially gathering a wide range of perspectives through “thin” mechanisms, and subsequently engaging in deeper, more structured deliberation through “thick” formats. Such an integrated model ensures both breadth and depth of participation and increases the likelihood that citizens' inputs are translated into concrete policy decisions.

In their opinion, this approach allows public hearings to become not merely formal procedures but mechanisms for genuinely collecting civic opinion and transforming it into decision-making. Governments should establish partnerships with networks that have achieved success in civic participation, such as non-profit organizations, universities, and mass media.

If a regional development strategy answers the question “what should be done,” public hearings focus on “how it should be done.” In this regard, public hearings should not be viewed merely as a formal procedure to meet legal requirements but as an effective tool for improving the quality of local governance.

According to the regional media, the rate of child injuries in the West Kazakhstan region has been steadily increasing. Data from the regional multidisciplinary children's hospital indicate that compared to last year, the figure has risen by 15%. Available statistical data indicate that approximately 12% of child injury cases occurred on playgrounds.

The effectiveness of public hearings is measured not by how they are conducted, but by how the opinions expressed during them are subsequently taken into account. In some countries, public hearings are held not during the implementation phase but after project completion, which allows early identification of mistakes and more efficient use of resources (Gramberger, 2002).

Thus, public hearings should not be viewed as isolated administrative procedures, but rather as part of a broader system of public dialogue. However, their effectiveness depends not only on institutional design but also on how they are conducted in practice and whether they ensure meaningful participation of different social groups. In this regard, it is important to examine the key conditions under which public hearings can contribute to more inclusive and effective local governance.

Elements for successful public hearings

Public hearings can contribute to the effectiveness of local governance only if they are designed and implemented in a way that ensures meaningful participation and tangible outcomes. In this regard, it is important to move beyond viewing public hearings as merely formal procedures and instead focus on the factors that determine their practical effectiveness.

This section aims to identify the key conditions under which public hearings can function not as a formal requirement, but as a substantive mechanism of public dialogue. Particular attention is given to the principle of inclusive participation, which is essential for ensuring that decision-making processes reflect the diversity of social interests within a community.

The analysis presented here is not limited to describing individual examples but seeks to advance a broader analytical argument: the effectiveness of public hearings depends on their capacity to incorporate the perspectives of different social groups whose experiences, needs, and expectations may significantly differ. In the absence of such inclusiveness, public hearings risk reproducing partial or biased perspectives, thereby reducing their contribution to the quality of decisions and to public trust.

In practice, public dialogue is often confined to the most active or visible groups, while other segments of society remain underrepresented. As a result, decisions based on such limited input may fail to address the needs of the wider population. Therefore, targeted approaches are required to broaden participation and ensure that diverse voices are meaningfully included.

In this context, drawing on international experience makes it possible to illustrate how the inclusion of different social groups enhances the quality, legitimacy, and responsiveness of decision-making processes. The examples presented below are not merely descriptive; rather, they serve to demonstrate how different groups contribute distinct forms of knowledge to governance processes. For instance, the involvement of children helps to identify aspects of the urban environment that are often overlooked by adults, particularly in relation to safety and accessibility of public spaces. The participation of women contributes to a deeper understanding of everyday patterns of infrastructure use, including mobility, lighting, and perceptions of safety. Finally, the inclusion of older adults ensures that issues related to

accessibility, comfort, and social inclusion are taken into account – factors that are relevant not only for this group but for society as a whole.

Thus, the examples discussed demonstrate that effective public hearings require not only the formal inclusion of citizens, but also the institutionalization of mechanisms that ensure the participation of diverse social groups. Such an approach enables public dialogue to evolve into a meaningful instrument capable of improving the quality of governance decisions and supporting the sustainable development of local communities.

International experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of public hearings increases when they are designed to include diverse social groups whose needs and perspectives are often underrepresented in decision-making processes (Gramberger, 2002). The following examples illustrate how the inclusion of children, women, and older adults contributes to more balanced, informed, and sustainable decision-making in local governance. In addition, they illustrate how the involvement of children, women, and older adults contributes to more inclusive, balanced, and context-sensitive governance outcomes. These cases show that different groups possess unique knowledge about urban environments, and their participation allows public authorities to identify problems that may otherwise remain invisible.

Involving Children

The “Child-Friendly Cities” initiative was established in 1996 and has since become an international movement supporting the creation of cities that ensure the rights of children at the local level and make the urban environment child-oriented (UNICEF, 2026). A project aimed at creating child-friendly cities involved children and youth in the planning process. In the cities of Rouen (France), Locarno (Switzerland), and Kitee (Finland), children are regarded not merely as “users” but as “equal participants” in urban planning processes. Planners visit schools and work with children to map their neighbourhoods, identifying places they enjoy and areas they consider unsafe. Ideas are collected through workshops, model-building, drawing, LEGO activities, and game-based formats. In some cities, “Children’s Councils” operate under municipal administrations, and their proposals are incorporated into official planning documents. As a result, safer and more inclusive public spaces are created for all residents.

Involving Women

In the 1990s, Vienna became one of the first European capitals to officially introduce a gender approach into the urban planning process. A special role in this direction was played by the “Frauenbüro” (Women’s Bureau) of Vienna, which promotes women’s participation in urban policy and planning. The Frauen-Werk-Stadt was a project that introduced a new approach to housing development. (Schmidt, 2023).

Differences in the ways women and men experience and use urban spaces were openly recognized. Gender analysis is used to examine mobility, lighting, public transport, and accessibility of public spaces. During focus groups, women identify locations where they feel unsafe or face difficulties when moving with children. “Safety maps” are created to mark problematic areas, followed by pilot projects to address these issues. As a result, cities become more comfortable not only for women but also for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Involving Older Adults

At the global level, complex issues such as population aging and inequality in healthcare require special attention. One way to help older people live the lives they desire is the “Age-Friendly Cities and Communities” initiative, a global program launched by the World Health Organization in 2007. Its aim is to adapt cities to the needs and requirements of elderly citizens.

“In an age-friendly community, policies, services, and infrastructure that include physical and social environments enable older people to age actively — that is, to live safely, maintain good health, and participate fully in society.” (Marston et al., 2021)

Older people participate as full partners, describing how urban strengths and weaknesses correspond to their experiences and identifying barriers associated with the city.

The World Health Organization initiative demonstrates the importance of considering the voices and experiences of older people in urban design, serving as a model for inclusive and citizen-oriented urban development.

In the Netherlands, older people are valued as sources of experience and knowledge. “Councils of Older Adults” operate under municipalities, reviewing plans, providing recommendations, and in some cases exercising veto rights. Interviews with older residents are conducted not in offices but in their homes, clubs, and medical centres. “Slow walking” audits assess the availability of benches, road surfaces, stairways, and access to public transport. Pilot projects are implemented and adjusted based on feedback from older citizens. This approach embodies the principle that “a city comfortable for older people is comfortable for everyone” (UNECE,2018),

For example, when improving residential courtyards, if the opinions of parents, older residents, drivers, and people with disabilities are not considered simultaneously, decisions become one-sided. Therefore, inclusive participation is crucial. Moreover, residents want to see tangible outcomes of their involvement. When citizens choose which trees to plant in a park and later receive a photo report stating, “Planted based on your ideas,” they understand that participation has real meaning.

Empirical evidence confirms that inclusive participation is not merely a normative ideal, but also a factor that delivers measurable outcomes. The WHO framework for age-friendly cities, developed based on the involvement of older residents in 33 cities across 22 countries, serves as a basis for policy design and evaluation, demonstrating the practical role of older people in shaping the urban environment.

Moreover, the OECD report *Cities for All Ages* summarizes international experience and shows that age-inclusive urban design and citizen participation can yield social, economic, and environmental benefits, such as improved access to services, strengthened social cohesion, and enhanced local economic opportunities. (oecd.org)

Finally, the global network of age-friendly communities covers more than 1,700 cities in 60 countries, providing extensive real-world examples of how citizen participation improves the well-being and quality of life of older residents. (bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com)

-The presentation of Charles Landry’s Creative City concepts in professional development courses for civil servants has been positively received by practitioners and public officials, who highlight its practical relevance for improving citizen-oriented governance. This observation is consistent with broader research showing that training programs focused on participatory approaches and citizen engagement can enhance the capacity of public officials to design more inclusive and responsive policies (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2017). Studies also indicate that

integrating citizen perspectives into decision-making processes contributes to higher-quality public services and increased trust in government institutions (Beierle and Cayford, 2002). Therefore, governance based on continuous dialogue with the public can be considered not merely a normative principle, but an evidence-based mechanism for improving the effectiveness of local governance.

While inclusive public hearings create opportunities for meaningful citizen participation, their success ultimately depends on how public officials interpret, facilitate, and respond to this interaction. In other words, institutional mechanisms alone are insufficient without the capacity of civil servants to engage effectively with citizens.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of civil servants in ensuring that public dialogue leads to tangible governance outcomes.

The role of civils servants in the process

The adoption of new solutions in local governance depends primarily on trustworthy communication between individuals and society. In 2024, the public association “East Kazakhstan Youth Information and Analytical Agency” conducted a study on the quality of public services. The results revealed that employees’ politeness and courtesy were rated lower compared to other sub-criteria. From this perspective, it is evident that enhancing employees’ politeness and courtesy is directly linked to developing their emotional intelligence and establishing effective communication with citizens.

In the context of public dialogue and participatory governance, the quality of interaction between civil servants and citizens becomes a critical factor. Effective communication is not limited to procedural compliance but requires the ability to understand citizens’ concerns, manage emotions, and build trust. This is where emotional intelligence plays a central role.

The concept of emotional intelligence emerged from difficulties in predicting employee competence, effectiveness, and commitment in leadership roles. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, argues that effective interaction depends on emotional connections, meaning that managing emotions enables more effective relationships with others (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive and regulate emotions; active listening is its manifestation in conversation, while open-ended questions serve as the primary tool for activating it. Closed questions do not reveal the essence of a problem. For example, the question “Did you submit the documents on time?” allows only “yes” or “no” answers. In contrast, “How did the document submission process go?” helps identify specific difficulties. Instead of asking “Is everything clear?”, asking “Which aspects are unclear for you?” allows misunderstandings to be detected and errors prevented. The open-ended question “What actions did you take to resolve the issue?” helps understand the history of an appeal and prevents repeated requests.

Open Government

The ability of civil servants to engage in meaningful dialogue with citizens is closely linked to broader institutional transformations within the public administration system. In recent years, these changes have been conceptualized through the principles of open government, which emphasize transparency, participation, and accountability (Miguel, 2025). This initiative, aimed at building an open and accountable state, is reflected in President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s decree “The Basic Principles, Values, and Directions of the Internal Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan.” The document defines the central idea as “the construction of a Just

Kazakhstan: an open, strong, and prosperous country with equal opportunities and a progressive and responsible society”.

Despite the rapid expansion of digital technologies, many citizens do not perceive significant improvements in how governments operate, which contributes to relatively low levels of trust in public institutions. Recent evidence shows that only around 39% of people trust their national government, while concerns about responsiveness and inclusiveness remain widespread (OECD, 2024). At the same time, digital transformation does not automatically lead to more citizen-centred governance, as it requires deeper institutional change beyond technological adoption (OECD, 2024a). These findings suggest that a persistent gap remains between governments and citizens, particularly in terms of perceived responsiveness and meaningful engagement.

This problem is confirmed in practice. In 2024, a study conducted by the public association “East Kazakhstan Youth Information and Analytical Agency” on the quality of public services revealed that the government bodies responsible for the following services ranked among the most bureaucratic state institutions: (a) assignment of age-based pension payments; (b) granting deferrals from military service; and (c) processing documents for providing persons with disabilities with technical and assistive (compensatory) devices (local administration).

The key to resolving this issue lies in changing the mindset of civil servants themselves. “Employees should not limit themselves to performing bureaucratic procedures; rather, they should create real value for citizens and meet their needs through the principles of open government”.

This transformation begins with language and approach. When asked, “What specific problem of people are we solving?”, a civil servant should not say, “implementing a courtyard improvement programme”, but rather “reducing injury risks and improving safety in residential courtyards”. Such an answer demonstrates that a civil servant is not merely a rule executor but a creator of public value.

In governance models based on transparency principles, communication quality plays a decisive role. The principles of “The Art of Conversation” proposed by the prominent French writer and thinker André Maurois, have practical significance for civil servants’ interactions with the public. According to Maurois, a meaningful conversation is based on the ability to listen, understand, and respect the personality of the interlocutor. He considered listening to be “the main condition of conversational culture” (Maurois, 2016).

Listening without interruption, allowing citizens to express their thoughts fully, considering emotional states, focusing on understanding rather than proving one’s position, avoiding bureaucratic language, speaking clearly and accessibly, and ending dialogue with hope are essential skills defining the professional image of a modern civil servant. A similar people-centric approach is successfully applied in business. International corporations implement the Kaizen system, which promotes respect for people and resources, proving its effectiveness in management practice (Imai, 2017).

The culture of dialogue with the public is not a new phenomenon; it has deep roots in the works of Turkic and Kazakh thinkers. The ideas of Yusuf Balasaguni in *Kutadgu Bilig* and Zhusipbek Aimautov in *Loving the Nation* lay the philosophical foundation for a modern understanding of a “state based on dialogue with the people”.

Yusuf Balasaguni, in his work in *Kutadgu Bilig* considered the ruler's relationship with the people as the main criterion of strength of power. he advised rules: "Be humble in heart and speech, be gentle in conduct" (Balasaguni, 1986). These lines emphasise that the strength of power lies not in dominance but in humility and respectful interaction, which directly contributes to strengthening citizens' trust.

The idea that trust in authority depends on the behaviour of its representatives was further developed by Zhusipbek Aimautov. He argued that educated and enlightened individuals set the vector for societal development: "Those who lead the Kazakh people on the right path or mislead them are the educated". In his view, a public servant detached from the people and unaware of their concerns loses trust; and governance without trust becomes governance without dialogue. Aimautov also criticised authoritarian styles, noting: "It is easy to find an official who shouts like a bear, but difficult to find one who patiently, calmly, and without shouting gets the job done" (Aimautov, 1918).

These ideas resonate with global philosophical thought. Even Al-Farabi, in *The Virtuous City*, noted that the main goal of society is the achievement of human happiness, and governance is based on justice and wisdom (Al-Farabi, 2015). Centuries later, the Florentine thinker Niccolò Machiavelli came to a similar conclusion: "A ruler must rely on the support of the people, because without the support of the people power cannot remain stable" (Machiavelli, 2000). In the context of local governance, this means that effective leadership requires not only formal procedures and rules but also active engagement with the population.

Thus, dialogue with the public should be understood not as a single instrument but as an integrated system that combines institutional mechanisms, inclusive participation, and the professional capacity of civil servants. Public hearings serve as a key platform for such dialogue, but their effectiveness depends on the extent to which diverse social groups are involved and their input is translated into real decisions.

The transformation toward open government requires not only formal mechanisms but also a fundamental shift in administrative culture – a move toward genuine engagement with citizens, based on trust, respect, and real accountability.

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