



Conference « Paths to follow » organised by the Municipality of Valongo in the framework of the European Local Democracy Week – Remote meeting, 19 October 2020

Session: “A Global World - Webs of Participation and Financing in Citizenship”

Speech by Bryony RUDKIN, Congress Thematic Spokesperson on the European Local Democracy Week (United-Kingdom)

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Mr Mayor,

Dear colleagues, dear participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr. Mayor, for your kind initiation, it is a great pleasure for me to be here today – even as we continue to live and work in very special circumstances this year.

The current situation makes it difficult for us, for the local and regional elected representatives, to work and fulfil our responsibilities in delivering more vibrant and supportive services to our citizens. Nevertheless, over the past months we have been taking full advantage of the opportunities presented by new technologies for both service delivery and engaging citizens in our communities. And today, I am happy to be part of this Webinar and celebrate the European Local Democracy Week thanks to these modern technologies which bring us and citizens together.

- Valongo Municipality has always been active in the framework of the European Local Democracy Week, and I must say that you and our other partners from across the 47 member states of the Council of Europe have been a true inspiration for us, showing examples of ingenuity and creativity in the current conditions.
- As Spokesperson on the European Local Democracy Week for the Council of Europe Congress, I welcome this initiative and take this opportunity to invite all of you, all conference participants, to engage actively in the European Local Democracy Week, the ELDW initiative, check out the best practices on the ELDW website that could be organised in your own cities, but also contribute your

own examples that can be shared with others. The ELDW team of the Congress secretariat and myself, we are more than happy to communicate with you and answer your questions.

- As you know, the theme of the 2020 Edition of the European Local Democracy Week is “Local Democracy: Building Trust”. In the Council of Europe Congress, we attach great importance to building trust between citizens and local authorities, which is even more important as we are facing the Covid crisis. Today, citizens’ confidence in public authorities and institutions of governance, especially, in their communities, is crucial if we are to manage this crisis successfully, together.
- At the same time, the pandemic compels us to work even harder on communicating with citizen and engaging them in public debate and decision making. We must find new innovate ways of doing so. The crisis has highlighted the key role of local governance in protecting citizens, and we need to sustain both citizens’ participation and their confidence in our capacity to deliver effective responses, and to continue providing services.
- We must show resilience, and we must make sure that the pandemic does not lead to the lockdown of local democracy.
- Today, many activities are taking place through the use of digital tools; but strengthening online engagement requires digital skills. Therefore, I would like to stress the need for greater support to those who have limited financial and technological opportunities to access services online or participate in online events. Local and regional authorities should be paying special attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups as we strive for inclusion in the digital age. We might think of special facilities or funds to support such groups, engage with them and encourage their initiatives.
- But local and regional authorities themselves might need support from higher levels, national and European, because entire communities could find themselves in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation, too. National and Europe support to the local and regional level is therefore crucial for the post-crisis recovery, and for adapting our societies and communities to the new conditions.
- In this regard, financing citizenship-related initiatives remains vital for brining public action closer to citizens’ needs, and for ensuring its ultimate effectiveness. In this regard, activities such as participatory budgeting is one of the most successful tools of involving citizens in decision making.
- Valongo municipality has been engaged in participatory budgeting, especially for young people, for many years as part of the ELDW activities, and I invite local and regional authorities present here to look at the best practices of our host and replicate them in your communities.
- We are convinced that trust between citizens and the authorities is key to the good functioning of democracy, and the ultimate glue that holds our communities together. Local authorities play a crucial role in strengthening public confidence, as they are at the frontline of addressing citizens’ concerns. The local and regional level can help significantly to reconnect with citizens and restore confidence in democratic processes and institutions. And today, this can be done online as well.
- Once again, thank you for having me today and for organising this important event in such difficult times.