HOW TO BRING ABOUT PEOPLE-POWERED PLACES

By Rich Wilson

A key lesson from our Listening to Each Other cell is that we must let people shape the agenda, through informal everyday listening activities as well as in more formal exercises like citizens assemblies. How to do this is explored here by Rich Wilson.

If the pandemic taught us one thing it's that our everyday actions matter. Whether it's the pandemic, climate or cost of living crisis we, the people, play an absolutely critical role in the effectiveness of the response.

The importance of people power for communities and local government is particularly acute. We know local authorities barely have sufficient resources to cover the basics of social care, waste management and highways. Given the spiralling cost of social care, an ageing population and growing inflation, we should assume the situation will get worse before it gets better.

The problem is that transactional public services and top-down local politics systematically deactivate people, eroding what the academics call self-efficacy and collective-efficacy.

But you knew that already. What is new is the opportunity to do something about it.

In the last few years we've seen a rapid growth in citizens' assemblies and Good Help public services. They are however rarely seen as interdependent aspects of local people power systems, but they are, and when recognised as such hold a key to unlocking the civic energy we desperately need. Here's how.

Getting local citizens' assemblies right

In the last few years we've seen over 39 citizens' assemblies in the UK. These are fora where citizens are selected at random and are demographically representative of the local population. They are usually 40-100 people in size and deliberate on an issue like climate change or public spending, making recommendations to local decision-makers. They are very effective at generating good policy (i.e. that practically works and will address the issue), overcoming polarisation and activating participants to address the issue in question.

The problem is the number of people participating is too small for the recommendations to get real political traction and the number of assembles are too few given the need to activate as many citizens as possible. The 'tipping point' for initiating cultural change is around 25 per cent of the population. So for a local authority size of around 100,000 we need around 25,000 people to start seeing themselves as active citizens and being invited to be part of governing the place.

For citizens' assemblies to achieve their promise of becoming the beating heart of people powered places the following four changes need to happen:

1. **Make them inclusive, so anyone can participate**
   The Global Citizens' Assembly for COP26 was governed by two principles: that anyone on earth could be selected for the core assembly and anyone on earth could run their own Community Assembly. We provided a toolkit that enabled anyone anywhere to have the same resources as the core assembly members, run a high quality local workshop and upload the citizens' proposals into the core system. We could invite every community group, school child, business or religious society into the citizens' assembly, transforming the quality of the data available and the number of people participating.

1. **Make them places for civic imagination**
   Citizens' Assemblies work best when they support participants to engage with the emotional reality of a situation (such as poverty or climate) and create the space to imagine new futures often outside what they thought was possible. This is especially critical now when we face unprecedented challenges that require transformative, not incremental responses. For example if your climate assembly is recommending more recycling or bus lanes you can be sure your process is insufficiently imaginative.

3. **Make them political chambers in their own right**
   In a previous article, I explained how the French national climate Assembly was a powerful political chamber that sent shockwaves across the political system. Framing citizens' assemblies as political chambers is not just important in terms of honouring civic voice, it's also a true reflection of the significant power that citizens have, and the impossibility of even the most diligent politician to accurately represent them.

4. **Raise their profile**
   The best citizens' assemblies capture the imagination of the entire population. The Irish and French Assemblies both had awareness in the adult population well over 75 per cent; and their deliberations were followed closely by the populations. A high profile generates public debate about the recommendations, energising local civic life and meaning that any proposals will be carried by a wave of popular interest.

Mainstreaming Good Help Public Services

The 2018 Good and Bad Help report described a national movement of people and places, committed to making public services engines of civic confidence and action. The Good Help project did not start life as public service reform initiative, though; rather it was the conclusion of a post-Brexit inquiry into why growing numbers of people felt 'excluded', 'deactivated' and 'wanting to take back control'. It turns out that if you want to support people to take control of their lives, or as Jon Alexander's recent book Citizens argues, for people to be active citizens not passive consumers, public services can be key drivers for achieving this.

I became interested in this area having founded and run Involve, the democracy charity, and was struck by how initiatives such as citizens' assemblies were insufficient to address the 'deactivation' crisis; and indeed were in danger of exacerbating power inequalities, if the only people who participated were already activated.

The pandemic has seen a rapid growth of Good Help organisations as public service commissioners have started to wake up to their potential. Clean Slate, the employment support organisation, grew rapidly going from 15 to 53 staff in two years. They now record annual financial gains of £1.8 million for over 2,000 people, nearly six times as many as before the pandemic. Organisations like Grapevine, Long Table and Community Catalysts can all tell a similar story. What has not yet happened, however, is for people to realise that if citizens' assemblies are the beating heart of people-powered places, then Good Help public services are the life blood, supplying the activated citizens to both rise to the challenges we face, and make the brave decisions we need.

This is not an argument for replacing politicians with citizens. It is, though, a practical plan for ensuring that people take their rightful place at the local governance table.

Rich is co-founder of the People Power Lab and Global Citizens' Assembly for COP26. In 2004 Rich founded the charity Involve, which under his leadership became a leading centre for public participation research, innovation and policy-making. He has been an adviser for the OECD, UNFCCC, WHO, UNDP, EU and many national and local governments. He has written over 100 policy reports, been a regular contributor to the Guardian, wrote the Anti Hero book, is a trustee of the Local Trust, a Clore Social Fellow and was deputy chair of ScienceWise.