

Community Empowerment and Timebanking

Timebanking offers a new framework for people to meet each other and to pool their efforts to provide sustainable long term solutions to issues of mutual concern.

By bringing groups and individuals together and by giving them incentives to co-produce public goods time banks increase both the self esteem of individuals and the collective efficacy of the local area concerned.

Time Banks are now of particular interest to LA's as they offer independent, community owned and diverse platforms for the engagement of residents in public affairs, as well as a modern means of mobilising the co-operation and skills of local people.

Giving, receiving and reciprocating are the basic building blocks of community life. We all want to see mutuality at the core of the relationship between public services and citizens and "back in the DNA of our society".

Time banking is the ultimate community empowerment tool - everyone can make a contribution and everyone's contribution is valued equally. Local people are offered incentives to reconnect with each other and the social networks that are created remain shaped by those people.

There is a plentiful supply of skills in every community but with all the restraints placed on our public services they hesitate to share their responsibilities with local people and many do not ask ordinary people to get involved anymore.

Time banking provides both incentives and rewards for wider participation and is driven by the most powerful community building agent - reciprocity.

Working on this simple premise of reciprocity, time banks aim to place value on community action, promote productivity and build social networks by engaging local people in the giving and receiving of services.

It allows people to amass time credits by participating in or providing a service that benefits the wider community.

These credits are then deposited in a time bank and can be spent on a whole range of skills and services on offer from other members of the bank.

In the process people who would not normally be involved in community activities or 'volunteering' come to understand that they have skills and abilities that are useful.

If we don't ask for and value contributions from individuals, (e.g. service users, their families, friends, neighbours and the wider community) then they are unlikely to feel connected and worst still, they will feel that they have nothing to offer and believe that they are powerless.

Community empowerment cannot be delivered through one way services controlled by 'professional strangers' and there is an urgent need for a more honest and straight forward approach to developing community involvement and finding a voice for disengaged communities.

Instead of the current message going out from professionals and activists, all be it unconsciously:-

"we are here to help you but you have little that we want or value"

they need to make it crystal clear to the local community that:-

"we can do it together, but we cannot do it without you - every single one of you"

We all want to make a difference and rallying to a "cause beyond self" is a universal human impulse.

However, local authorities seem at the moment to focus on things like smoother customer relations and to confuse this with community empowerment.

So called 'solutions' are put in place which meet short term, measurable targets and involve the same well known faces from the community in meetings centred around performance indicators set by outsiders.

Real community leaders evolve through action in the community on agendas that are important to local people.

Timebanking shows people how they all have skills that they can share and that when they do so they are contributing to the greater common good.

Through timebanking people begin to realise that through these circles of giving and receiving they can exercise both their rights and their responsibilities as citizens.

Slowly but surely these exchanges of practical and emotional support spread a sense of mutuality and trust which in time lead to empowerment.

We believe that given the scale of our social difficulties they can only be solved by the engagement of citizens - using ordinary human skills - on an unprecedented scale.

Our experience of timebanking, in public services and the voluntary sector - with its unique ability to reach and involve parts of society that are hardest to reach - offers policy makers the missing key to opening up access to the greatest resource we have: the rich variety of skills and experience of local people.

We also believe that the staff resources are already in place, desperately and ineffectively trying to engage ordinary people, often simply in decision-making in the name of community participation, when it is what people can *do* - not just what people can say - that is so vital.

Our strategy is designed to maximise innovation, and to work within existing financial constraints to match unused resources with unmet needs.

That means persuading the government to:

- Recommend that every local public service agency uses timebanking as a tool to harness the skills and time of the beneficiaries of services, their families and the wider community to co-deliver those services alongside professionals.
- Refine the 'duty to involve' as it is far too vague and susceptible to tick-box solutions which only serve to increase cynicism and disengagement.
- Understand that the role of local government has to simply be to facilitate relationships and act as mediators when there are disputes.