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On 28 September the IIPS hosted its annual What the Citizen Wants event at the RSA in London, presenting our latest research findings on the values, attitudes and aspirations of the British public, to a large audience of public sector officials and third sector organisations.

This year's event returned to trademark themes of public engagement, expectations of service delivery, and trends in community involvement. But against a context of significant social and political change, we dug deeper to ask how citizens are responding to the call to action represented by the 'Big Society', looking at people's ability and willingness to take more control over their own lives and the wellbeing of their communities.

How big is society?

If the Big Society requires an active public, and a less controlling state, the evidence is promising, in a number of ways.

On a personal level, people told us that they derive significant emotional benefits from getting involved. Core drivers for this involvement are:

- Opportunities to meet new local people
- Improving something of personal interest and relevance
- The reward of helping others and satisfaction of giving something back
- Having more control over issues that matter personally (particularly children's education)

Results from surveys carried out for the IIPS by our sister company TNS-BMRB support these findings: they showed that the public is receptive to being involved in their communities, and that a solid majority of people (57%) could be categorised as 'community participants', attending or supporting community events and helping their neighbours. So the ambition to build a 'Big Society' may appear to chime well with a grassroots appetite to be involved and invested in our local areas.

But is this enough? The stakes have been raised: all eyes are looking to the local, with residents and communities both taking part in the conversation and being expected to take on more responsibility, accountability, and sometimes leadership in the delivery of services.

So what stops people from getting more involved?

The IIPS brings thought leadership on innovations in research and consulting to national and local government. We host events to share our insights and methods, run roundtable discussions for our clients, and pursue an ongoing proprietary research programme of citizen insight. The IIPS is supported by TNS-BMRB and The Futures Company.

Barriers to community involvement

Qualitative research found that while people appear to embrace the idea of community involvement, their behaviours do not always follow. We looked closely at the barriers people face, how these could potentially be addressed, and identified relevant international examples from our Global Streetscapes database, to learn how other countries have tackled barriers to community engagement.



TIME

It won't come as a surprise that the most common response to why people are not more involved in their community is 'lack of time'. But it's more complex than this. Some people were held back by a fear of over-committing or being taken advantage of by others.

Overcoming the time barrier:

Offer flexible options for involvement so that people can get involved on their own terms and in their own time, offering as much or as little as they are able.



Streetscape example: Volunteer San Diego's Flex Program allows people to get involved when it suits them.



RED TAPE

Red tape and bureaucracy can be frustrating and take the fun out of getting involved. For some, it can put them off all together.

Overcoming the barrier of red tape:

Approach community involvement from a 'customer journey' point of view, identifying the 'pain points' in people's engagement journeys or efforts to join in. Remove unnecessary requirements where possible. Where they are still important and necessary (such as CRB checks), make the process easy.



Streetscape example: South Korean discount parking for volunteers incentivises participation, and also makes it easier to participate.



CONFIDENCE

A lack of confidence can also be a barrier. People can be held back by the belief that they lack the requisite skills to get involved in certain activities. They may be afraid of being held responsible for things which are beyond their control. Older people in particular worry about potential repercussions – especially in relation to working with young people, or intervening in difficult situations.

Overcoming the confidence barrier:

Allow people to be involved at different levels with clear structures of responsibility, providing guidance and training where needed – and easy access to expert advice and support.



Streetscape example:

Young people get involved in Greece's 'Help at Home', with support and advice from social workers.

This paper summarises the headline findings from The Futures Company qualitative work for the IIPS looking at why people get involved in their local areas, what they are doing, and why they don't or can't participate. Some respondents were also assigned a behaviour change task: they were asked to get more involved in their communities, and then to tell us in a video diary how it went.

We've also drawn here on The Futures Company's Global Streetscapes database. Our extensive network of streetscapers, located in 60 cities in over 40 countries across the world, continuously captures new examples of emerging and evolving trends and innovations.

For more information about our work in this area, or to know more about what we can do for you, please contact Alex Oliver alex.oliver@thefuturescompany.com or Andrew Curry andrew.curry@thefuturescompany.com



NOT FEELING WELCOME

People can be easily put off by the perceived exclusivity associated with certain community groups and activities. 'Cliques' and 'closed shops' are frequently cited, particularly in relation to church or charity based activities. People can easily believe 'it's not for people like me', or sense that they may not be made welcome.

Overcoming barriers to feeling welcome:

Enable involvement through organisations perceived as 'neutral', making community involvement feel more inclusive and 'normal'. Build on the social benefits of involvement by encouraging people to bring a friend and hold 'open day' activities to help potential joiners to get to know who is involved, and exactly what it would be like to participate.



Streetscape example:

Australia's online Live Local community posts footage and pictures of local improvement activities.



INFORMATION

On a practical level, people often don't know where to start. Even if they are interested in finding out more, they may be unaware of how to get more information. So individuals are limited by a lack of direction, basic information, and supporting systems.

Overcoming information barriers:

Follow best practice in the use of customer insight to understand your audience and the messages and channels that will be most effective in reaching them. Then set up information hubs in familiar locations, where they will be easily accessed.



Streetscape example:

Mexican shoe-shine pit stops provide information on the go.

Making the transition from community involvement to public service delivery

The call for greater responsibility central to the Big Society will need to be managed carefully and communicated well. In spite of the personal benefits implicit in community engagement, our research has revealed a gap between what the Big Society seems to ask of the public, and what the public is currently able and willing to give.

Indeed, as the stakes are raised and 'community involvement' evolves into participation in public service delivery, the barriers to building a Big Society escalate while the drivers of relevance and personal interest potentially diminish. If more is asked of people in terms of time and responsibility, those in government and beyond will need to address these barriers in two ways, at a systemic level and as a behaviour change challenge, and innovate in order to overcome them.