

Trafodwn: how People's Assemblies show a new way forward for food and farming in Wales

Five online events organized in spring 2020 across west and mid Wales explored a new way of talking about food and farming, offering pointers for how Wales might emerge from Covid and Brexit with a radical new approach not just to our food systems but also to citizen participation in government. They were People's Assemblies, an approach that is about bringing people together to explore contentious issues in a way that establishes common ground and allows new solutions to emerge.



The first, organized by Vicky Moller and Anna Monro of the Cardigan branch of Extinction Rebellion (XR Aberteifi), was held on Zoom on the evening of Thursday 30 April. The idea arose from weekly Zoom calls that they had been holding for the coordinators of scores of community groups responding to Covid across the county. At these weekly meetings people discussed the future, and it was clear that they did not want to return to the old normal. The leading area where they wanted to see change was food and farming, which led to the idea of an event dedicated to the topic.

It was a success. Fifty-eight people attended, nearly all of them staying the two hours, and they were highly energised and wanting action by the end. Two attendees went on to organise further People's Assemblies on the same topic, one in the same county, and one in the Brecon Beacons. Meanwhile, another group that included members of XR Aberteifi went on to organise an event for Ceredigion on 23 June, which attracted 156 people and was co-hosted by Elin Jones, Plaid Cymru Member of Senedd for Ceredigion and Llywydd (chair) of the Welsh Senedd. Ceredigion MP Ben Lake also spoke.

A fifth event followed in northeast Pembrokeshire with some overlap of organisers, this time with the wider focus of community resilience. Some 76 people attended this one, and it has led to four working groups focussing on different themes, of which food and farming is one.

What are People's Assemblies?

People's Assemblies are self-selecting and unofficial groups which meet to discuss topics of general concern. They do not attempt to be representative of the population as a whole, but they do allow for a public discussion of concerns that can cut through polarized debates.

The People's Assemblies that have happened in Wales so far have each had three phases. First is the Input phase, consisting of a set of short presentations from invited speakers representing a range of expertise, including farmers, community organizers and environmentalists. This is followed by the Deliberation phase, where smaller breakout groups of around eight people, each with a facilitator and note taker, discuss a key question or questions. Each group's notetaker then reports back to the main assembly with the top points from their group and all points are recorded – this is the Feedback phase.

Central to the Assemblies is the work of the facilitators, each of whom took part in a short training in the three pillars of the method: **radical inclusion** (hearing all voices), **active listening** (dropping your own agenda to give your full attention to the speaker); and **trusting the process** (allowing the wisdom of the hive to generate new thinking).

The events were advertised through existing networks, mostly online, and by direct invitation to individuals. The organizers also made real efforts to bring in disparate voices. In Ceredigion for instance they enlisted the cooperation of the farming unions and phoned lists of farmers, with the result that every one of the 17 breakout groups had one or more mainstream farmer present, as well as environmentalists. For the Ffynnone (northeast Pembrokeshire) event they went door to door to ensure the attendance of ordinary residents who would not normally attend such meetings.

Afterwards, volunteers collated, summarized and circulated the notes from the breakout groups, and these documents are available from the organizers. The feedback from the events was heartfelt. One farmer commented that he had no idea so many people cared about farming. For many, it was an emotional experience to find such warmth and compassion between hitherto opposing sectors. Another said of the Ceredigion Assembly:

"I must congratulate you on this meeting, it was quite amazing to have such a breadth of participation.

We are retired farmers...To have a platform where parties involved in farming, land management, horticulture, nature reserves all on large and small scales being represented was so very worthwhile.

...there is an urgent need for our systems and remuneration to be fairly overhauled, and all parties to understand that they must listen to each other's problems and needs when moving forward. Agriculture and land use in all its various forms is the backbone of Wales.

I do hope you are able to use this sort of event as an example in the Senedd and Westminster as a way forward in working together. Cardigan XR is to be congratulated.”

What needs to change in food and farming?

In the breakout groups, participants were asked what changes they would like to see. The results from the five events are extensive and diverse, and it is hard to do them justice in a brief summary. The interesting thing was the shared conclusions that repeated in all or most breakout groups, as well as the inventive range of proposed solutions. The overwhelming wish seemed to be to build community and to have more control over local food systems, either as an alternative to the globalized supermarket model which is so dominant, or in some sort of compromise. The list below is adapted from the report of the Ceredigion event, as an example of the concerns that were expressed.

- *Education* – from schools up to adulthood, people wanted to see more awareness, experience and appreciation of food production, and a culture of learning from each other.
- *Local scale* – reconnecting producers and the public was important, while recognizing that the countryside produces for distant cities too. People wanted to see mixed farming, family farms and a better infrastructure including abattoirs, distribution hubs, processing and storage.
- *Young people and farming* – There will be no-one to produce our food if we don't get young people involved. This means education that prepares people for careers in food and farming, and placing a higher value on the work.
- *Access to land* – this is a barrier to young farmers, and also for community project and home growing. The planning system is important here.
- *Viability* - good farming has to pay properly. Good farming means many things, including: wildlife rich, soil building, carbon storing, health giving, water managing etc.
- *New ways to think, work, organise, own, govern and buy* – we must join together and put the heart and humanity back into food and farming. Examples included more People's Assemblies, farmer co-operatives, community projects, CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), OPD (One Planet Development).
- *Government* – people wanted to see government shape the food system for the better, using tools such as subsidies, purchasing, planning, law and messaging. But they also wanted to reform the relationship between governed and government, restoring trust and humanity, and joining top down and bottom up.
- *Dominance* - opposition to supermarkets was a common theme, with a feeling that the subsidy and planning system is not working for nature, farmers or public health. Against that, some held that there was a role for both large and small farms and called for a balance between them.
- *Nature* – there was regular mention of wildlife, ecology, carbon sequestering, soil health and biodiversity, often in the context of altering the scale and methods of food production. Nature corridors, permaculture, agroforestry, extensive farming and so on were suggested, along with farm visits for the public. Subsidies and regulations should reconnect farming and wildlife, not position them as either/or.

- *Support for change* – farmers in particular said that they needed help to change direction, for instance if they were to produce more for local markets.
- *Strategy and science* - there needs to be good coordination, including scientific research and monitoring, to achieve food security in a dispersed, rather than a centralised, landscape of people, nature and producers. This must take account of land classification, carbon sinks and wildlife value, but also nutritional requirements and farming methods. It should be at the level of regional or river catchment self-reliance, and enable small farms to benefit from the same data tools as large scale production.
- *Joined up* - the government should be encouraged to join up its budgetary thinking. Food overlaps with many policy areas, and government spending on health, wellbeing, education, housing and so on could be better integrated with food production and land management, so these needs are met via farming and activity on the land.

Many other points were raised at the Ceredigion event and at the others, including the role of the arts, concerns about mental health, asset transfer by local authorities, local currencies, renewable energy and calls for more female leadership, better rural transport and a Universal Basic Income.

Deliberative democracy

The experience of these Assemblies was that they reliably left participants feeling empowered and hungry for more. They are a taster of a growing global alternative to our adversarial model of democracy – where rival parties slug it out and we choose between them every few years, often motivated by fear of those we oppose. This new model, sometimes known as Deliberative Democracy because it involves a shared exploration of a topic rather than a battle between party lines, has accelerated over the years since its start in the 1980s.

The People’s Assemblies described here were citizen-led and unfunded, but the principle is also seen on a larger scale when Citizens’ Assemblies are commissioned by governments who want to make difficult, longer term, divisive or ethical decisions with public buy-in. These events use an approach similar to the recruitment of jurors to ensure that the groups are representative, and they typically run over several days or weeks with professional facilitation. A recent [OECD study](#) of about 300 government-commissioned events on five continents gives more details, and [good practice guide](#) is also available.

Wales held its [first Citizens Assembly](#) at Newtown in July 2019, to discuss how citizens could engage with the National Assembly for Wales (now the Senedd), and since then there have been calls for Wales to [make more use of them](#) in the recovery from Covid. The Well-being of Future Generations Act provides a framework for direct public influence on government in between elections, but because it is binding only on public bodies and does not of itself support citizen engagement it is clear that some further action is needed. As Professor Laura McAllister of Cardiff University’s Wales Governance Centre [wrote in the Western Mail](#) recently:

“We have a chance to reverse normal political relationships, for the public to be in the driving seat via something like a more expansive citizens’ assembly...If a consensus was reached, we could then hand over our blueprint to the parties and test their genuine appetite for change.”

The People’s Assemblies on food and farming were baby steps. There was no mandate from government and the events were not representative of the general population. For instance,



the supermarkets did not attend so they tended to be blamed without having a chance to defend themselves. But the commonality of conclusions is striking, and a reasonable mandate for action. As Vicky Moller says of the Ceredigion event: “Elin Jones’ decision to co-host with the local Extinction Rebellion branch was in the spirit of the event. Everyone feared hostility or ding dong argument. It didn’t happen.”

Above: Ben Lake MP addressing the Ceredigion Assembly

Next steps

One of the events, in northeast Pembrokeshire, led to the setting up of four action groups. The significance of the others lies as much in the inspiration they created, which will shape future relationships, as well as the feedback that has been shared with elected representatives and local Council. Importantly, it is a fundamental tenet of People’s and Community Assemblies that the participants know why the assembly has been called and what will happen to the findings. If nothing different happens as a result of an Assembly, it has failed in its potential impact and, worse than that, people will feel disillusioned and that their time has been for nothing.

There are also plans for more Assemblies. One will tackle another divisive issue, tourism in North Wales, where there is enthusiasm on both sides of the divide to find a shared solution. There are also plans for more Assemblies on food and farming later in the year. These Assemblies could play a crucial role in engaging citizens with government in Wales. The ground-breaking Well-being of Future Generations Act sets out a process whereby public bodies are required to collaborate with the public in creating an ecologically sustainable Wales, but it is not enough on its own, as [David Thorpe explains](#) in a recent blog for the One Planet Centre.

He calls for Citizens' Assemblies (that is, randomly selected groups) to work with the Public Services Boards of every local authority, and for the boards to be held accountable to them. That would raise awareness of the Act and tap into the energy and expertise of community groups, which has been so much in evidence during the coronavirus pandemic.

Thankfully, there is a growing number of trained facilitators available, all helping to satisfy people's thirst to have they say, be heard and, most vitally, be part of the change that many of us know is needed for a more sustainable and just world.

Let us build on this principle of 'trafodwn' – Welsh for 'let us discuss' –and a good term for this newer version of deliberative democracy. It is organised from the ground up, with both sides of the divide *wanting* to meet and sort things out. Something is stirring.

**Written by Vicky Moller and Jane Powell, with additional material from Angie Polkey
August 2020**