

From Projects to Permanence

James MacDonald-Nelson, Hannah Terry, Claudia Chwalisz, Josh Burgess & Lucy Reid | 15 July 2026

Executive summary

Cities are messy, complex, diverse, beautiful places - they are where most people live. Even for those who don't live in a city, there are policies, budgets, and place-based strategies implemented by decision makers which shape the places they call home. From the neighbourhoods we live in, the public services we have access to, and how we move around, cities and regions are the places where decision making impacts us greatly. **At the same time, most people don't have opportunities to truly shape these decisions. Citizens' assemblies offer a way to tackle this when they are embedded as part of our democratic infrastructure.**

Establishing an ongoing citizens' assembly while building supportive civic infrastructure requires a completely different mindset than implementing a one-off assembly. It needs to be approached like a marathon, not a sprint.

Investing early in what comes after a first assembly is fundamental to building new democratic institutions. Doing so leads to catalytic ripple effects that impact how we fund, innovate, reimagine, and intentionally cultivate new forms of democratic infrastructure.

Those ripple effects begin with decisions made long before assembly members convene for the first time. Starting with this mindset makes it easier to consider how a citizens' assembly, and those involved in implementing it, are not only people delivering a process, but catalysts for wider change with enduring impact. ([Chwalisz & McKinney, 2026](#)).

To us, this means establishing citizens' assemblies not as one-off events, dependent on political will at a moment in time, but as **new institutions, to which power can be shifted.** It's about the establishment of an institution that is embedded in law, parliamentary rules, or binding policy frameworks and the shift in norms and cultures that goes along with this.

We offer guidance and inspiration about how to get there, reflecting on the lessons from [DemocracyNext's Cities Programme](#) and our experience as advisors to two cities and two regions across three continents – [Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg](#), [Vilnius, Lithuania](#), [Kerewan, The Gambia](#), and [Central Oregon, USA](#). We also dive into the impact that the assembly has on members and others involved in the entire process.

Lessons for building democratic infrastructure

01

Build broad support

02

Cultivate ecosystems and build capacity

03

Planning for permanence breaks down siloes

04

Invest in communications

05

Independent evaluation is fundamental

06

Fund for systemic change

07

Integrate technology early

08

Multilingual deliberation is a strength

By the end of the paper we offer recommendations:

For cities considering first-time assemblies

- A long-term goal to catalyse a thriving deliberative ecosystem is a lasting legacy that outlives a one-off citizens' assembly process.
- Build widespread support before you start, and ensure it is a cross-partisan endeavour.

For practitioners supporting democratic innovation

- Intentionally cultivate an ecosystem of people and organisations to support, advocate for, and deliver assemblies.
- Invest in in-person workshops and convenings.
- Experiment with technology.

For funders of deliberative democracy

- Funders must dedicate more resources to capacity building and ecosystem development, not just one-off processes.
- Invest in sustained, systemic investment in the people and organisations committed to making democratic innovations the norm.

We make the argument that how we build capacity, convene, communicate, evaluate, fund, innovate with new technologies, and design for inclusion all play a role in cultivating new forms of democratic infrastructure.



Democratic renewal requires building new institutions and investing in supportive civic infrastructure, not isolated participation exercises. Citizens' assemblies are not just a useful tool for citizen engagement; when designed and delivered well, and embedded as new institutions, they shift power. When given a mandate, they can become democratic infrastructure. They should exist as permanent forums rather than one-off experiments.

But the conditions for this do not emerge on their own. They require investment - in local capacity, in ecosystems of practitioners, in evaluation, and in the political groundwork that makes recommendations impactful. They require funders willing to measure success over years and decades rather than project cycles, and commissioning authorities willing to commit to what comes after the final session.

Democratic renewal will come from embedding citizen deliberation into how decisions get made. These cities and regions show that another democratic future **is** possible.

