

community sector

community conversation

community development

community research

community organising

community coordination

community action



community democracy

**a way to get better democracy
so everyone can work together
to get everything they need**

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Summary of the model described in this pamphlet

Stage 1 - Getting involved in your community

Whatever else you do you should get involved with many types of local activity and make contact with many types of people who are active locally by making yourself useful and building trust. If you are already active, try and get involved in new things.

Stage 2 - Community Coordination / Conversation

Community coordination can start by simply exchanging information on what people are doing in the local area, but even in the short term it can also include pooling some resources, sharing skills, and finding time to discuss immediate needs and also strategic issues. However, it is likely that only a small number of people will feel able to spare the energy to actively do this. So it's important to communicate with and involve a wider diversity of people by going to them wherever they are, both those already active and those not currently active.

Stage 3 - Beginnings of a wider local group

When you have managed to increase the diversity and size of the coord group you can start to publicly discuss plans to develop into more. It's crucial that a culture of direct, participatory democracy is already established. At this stage you can expect the group to start to become a *really* powerful voice in other campaigns that you are involved in. However, it's important not to get stuck in this phase, and keep connecting and recruiting in order to build a truly democratic group.

Stage 4 and beyond

As the group grows so will the things you are able to do, especially by federating with similar groups in other neighbourhoods to create real power. However, this process will need to continue and spread if it is to realise that promise.

INTRODUCTION

Whether you believe we have almost no democracy, or quite a lot, almost everyone would agree that we need more. And not just more of the same, but a better kind of democracy that doesn't rely on professional politicians

Democracy is doing the things that need doing yourself as part of a community of other people doing the same.

Democracy should be much more than occasional voting on the colour of essentially identical politicians - real democracy means participating in open, informed discussion and decision on everything that affects you. Most importantly democracy is about doing - to participate in democracy is to do the things that need doing yourself as part of a community of other people doing the same. Many people are already doing this often informally and without funding but find themselves increasingly not just excluded, but under threat from, the current large scale political arrangement.

This kind of democracy is best done face to face, frequently and therefore on a small, local scale (in an area of no more than a few thousand people). Those already working on this scale should join forces, not just as a survival strategy to continue what they are doing through these difficult times, but to start involving everybody to build a new type of bottom up organisation so everyone can work together to get everything they need.

I'm not necessarily saying we don't need larger scale structures similar to those we have now, but that if we are to have them they must take their lead from these basic units - equally respected, informed individuals discussing and acting together as communities, and I suspect that this must mean that those structures would look very different.

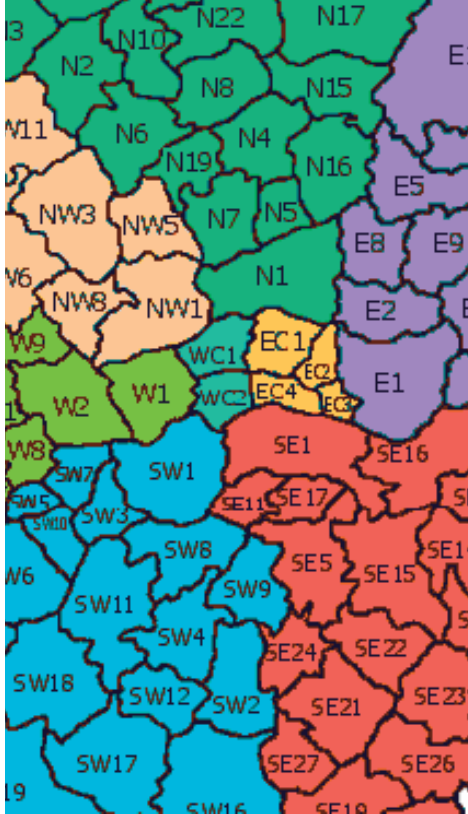
Adding this kind of democracy has immediate benefits for people who currently get a raw deal but also those that have most of what they need except the feeling of a unified and supportive community - increasingly almost everyone seems to fall into one of these categories. I also realise that this isn't a panacea for the many divisions and arguments we have with each other - but I do think it is a better way to resolve them.

In order to try and build this I have developed a model that anyone can follow, it's a work in progress and I will be developing it, so please do send me your comments. It also assumes that you're starting from scratch and obviously many people reading

Post code areas often better represent real communities than borough or ward boundaries

this will already be doing many of the types of things mentioned.

STAGE 1



What size area?

The chances are that you know of at least some people living or working near you of a similar mind, but perhaps they are too spread out or too busy with other stuff - don't be tempted to widen your area too far to get this off the ground – you are better off having a group of people doing this separately but supportively in small nearby locations than trying to cover a bigger area.

If you are a small group that live very close together or you are starting yourself as an individual you have the opportunity to choose a smaller area to work in. I would recommend that you choose the smallest area that corresponds to a 'community' to give you the best chance of getting involved and known in a shorter time, you can always change the area of coverage later. Don't be ruled by existing borough or ward boundaries, as these very often don't correspond to real neighbourhoods – in fact they often cut across the places that

people identify with and choosing an area that currently feels on the edge, or might be ignored by traditional structures because it straddles boundaries or is in some other way cut off might be an advantage. Also take a look at post code areas as these are often more realistic communities.

Get involved as an individual in the area

There are loads of different things from very established, traditional charity / volunteering opportunities to really active local short term or single issue campaigns.

The kind of voluntary action, often called 'the community sector' to distinguish it from the increasingly large-scale charity sector, is perhaps

The most important thing you need to do is to get out there and get involved

the most important. It's a sector that is finding it ever more difficult to survive and I believe that this kind of community coordination is a way not only to make this sector more sustainable but to build on it towards a more democratic society. The people running these projects are likely to be really embedded in the community, they also often have access to meeting spaces and the ability to network with other groups, and so are key actors in any local community.

STAGE 2 - Coordination / Conversation

For various reasons community action often happens in parallel or even in competition with each other. The attempts at coordination that do exist often happen at a larger scale (e.g. at a local authority or national level) and involves only a small section of the huge numbers actually doing things. Community coordination can start by simply exchanging information on what people are doing in the local area, but even

The main aim is to trigger conversations

in the short term it can also include pooling some resources, sharing skills, and finding time to discuss immediate needs and also strategic issues to work on. Unfortunately, although many in the community sector will see the advantage of working together, they are often working over-capacity just to keep things ticking over. Those that can spare the time need

to get the ball rolling so that others can join at a later stage.

This coordination group needs to prioritise increasing the number of active people, which is an aim in itself, but will also have the added benefit of freeing up longer term activists. In order to do this you need to go to people where they are, ask them what they want and work together on their issues as well as your own, asking questions in some kind of survey is a good way to do this, as it will also provide evidence that organisations can use to support their work. In addition to asking questions you must also work together to take action on the results and continue to do this - I've called this Q&A - Question and Action.

The best way is to start the process and learn as you go, don't think of this as a classic survey or research where you work out the questions before you start and hope to get some kind of robust data. See this stage as a process of a cascading cycle of research and action, you start with the coordination group, and go out to where people are. Questions need to gather both immediate needs and long term desires.

You may want to target specific groups either because they are in need of this kind of thing, you think they will be interested or to get a balance of respondents - the aim is to try and do everyone in your area (this probably won't ever actually happen due to churn and other reasons, so it's a good idea to try and get reasonably representative sample). This is an exercise in conversation, research and publicity all rolled into one. The only rule is that there needs to be a process where people can

it's important that we couple the long term stuff with the more immediate needs

collectively take action to achieve the things that are identified, and also that the process continues to ask questions.

Some ideas include discussions with small groups (perhaps campaigning or social groups, or even just randomly selected people) setting up an online survey (using a tools such as Survey Monkey) stopping people on the street and asking them to answer just one or two simple questions

(people are rarely ready for a long conversation in this situation). You could maybe have a slightly longer conversation by going door to door, but be ready for most people not to participate. Some people may be willing to be filmed - which can be a good trigger for further conversation, especially if posted online or publicly screened. Other results can be typed up as a blog post or turned into questions to add to your list. The action side of things is more likely to be a traditional face to face meeting for everyone that's interested, but try and involve people who don't want to come to meetings by making them quite informal (perhaps over a meal?) and keeping people up to date with progress through as many different channels as possible - both online and offline. It doesn't just have to be surveys and meetings - bringing people together for social events also contributes to the strength of a community.

STAGE 3 - Beginnings of a wider local group

At some point the process you established to take action on the results of the questioning will be ready to formalise itself. Exactly when and what the format will be depends on local circumstances, but I tend to think that when you have around 1-2% of the population of your area involved on some level is a good time to launch and start to publicly discuss plans to develop into more. At this stage you can expect the group to start to become a *really* valuable asset in other campaigns that you are involved in and other issues that might arise. In short, it's about keeping doing all the connecting and recruiting by addressing immediate issues and providing a space for people to think about their long term aims as in stage 2, but now you're able to start publicly saying, probably in general terms to start with, what this long term vision might look like, and continuing to take steps to build it.

I tried to jump straight from stage 1 to this stage, by trying to unite all the people currently active in my area into a 'Community Forum'. I had made lots of contacts and thought that simply getting those people together and then putting up posters announcing a really exciting opportunity for the community to work together, including people with a real track record, would bring people in to get involved in the community for the first time. But I came to realise that was flawed (for both active *and*

inactive people). Most of the currently active people were too busy to consider getting involved in something they probably saw as 'just another damn meeting'. And for the currently inactive people, its rather grand and intellectual claim didn't seem to resonate. It was then that I developed the idea for stage 2 as an intermediate stage out of which a 'forum' a 'peoples council' (or whatever) could emerge when it was ready, rather than forcing it.

It's difficult to say exactly what a 'neighbourhood forum' or 'community association' set up by this process will do or how it will be constituted, as each area will develop those appropriate for them. I imagine that at this stage some of the original coordination group will want to focus on their pre existing long term projects. I hope that they will also concentrate on keeping the structure and attitude of the group democratic and inclusive.

Democratic attitude

Creating a democratic process is much more than just adopting the 'correct' organising model. Democracy is not intrinsic to any method but an attitude that can be brought to bear on almost any system. The attitude of respect, encouragement, giving enough time to discuss when needed and what happens after a decision is what matters. It's also quite fragile and needs constant vigilance as breaches, either real or perceived, can spread very quickly.

Much of the work it does might be quite similar to that which existing groups do, except that the increased size and diversity will give activities more weight. Some particular examples come to mind are not just campaigning to prevent the closure of local services but, with larger numbers, perhaps being able to keep things running in defiance of cuts. However, it's important not get stuck in this phase, and keep connecting and recruiting in order to continue building towards a truly democratic society.

STAGE 4 and beyond

You need to keep growing by continuing to speak to new people and addressing their issues and as the group grows so will the things you are able to do. Federating with similar groups in other areas and linking with change coming from other sources to create real power. This process will need to continue and spread to create the democratic revolution outlined here and to be honest I really don't know how it will develop. One thing I do know is that the more people start to work together locally with a democratic attitude and as these democratic communities maintain links with others we will inevitably grow towards a future radically better than our present.

Democracy is not intrinsic to any method but an attitude that can be brought to bear on almost any system

Whether you believe we have almost no democracy, or quite a lot - almost everyone would agree that we need more. And not just more of the same, but a better kind of democracy that doesn't rely on professional politicians.

The suggestion for a better kind of democracy outlined here is defined by people doing the things that need doing themselves as part of a local community of of no more than a few thousand other people doing the same.

Many people are already doing this often informally and without funding, but find themselves increasingly not just excluded, but under threat from, the current large scale political arrangement. This is a model for how they could join forces, not just as a survival strategy to continue what they are doing, but to start involving everybody to build a new type of bottom up organisation so everyone can work together to get everything they need.