

Transition Network web project report: 2009 - 2011

Case Studies Section only

Author: Ed Mitchell

Transition Towns WIKI

Main / HomePage

MENU



Get the transition movie



Subscribe

- About this wiki site
- What's new

Transition Initiatives

- Let us explain...
- "Official" initiatives

What is a Transition Town (or village / city / forest / island)?

Here's how it all appears to be evolving...

It all starts off when a small collection of motivated individuals within a community come together with a shared concern: **how can our community respond to the challenges, and opportunities, of Peak Oil and Climate Change?**

They begin by forming an initiating group and then adopt the Transition Model (explained [here](#) at length, and in bits [here](#) and [here](#)) with the intention of engaging a significant proportion of the people in their community to kick off a Transition Initiative.

A Transition Initiative is a community (lots of examples [here](#)) working together to look Peak Oil and Climate Change squarely in the eye and address this BIG question:

"For all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change)?"

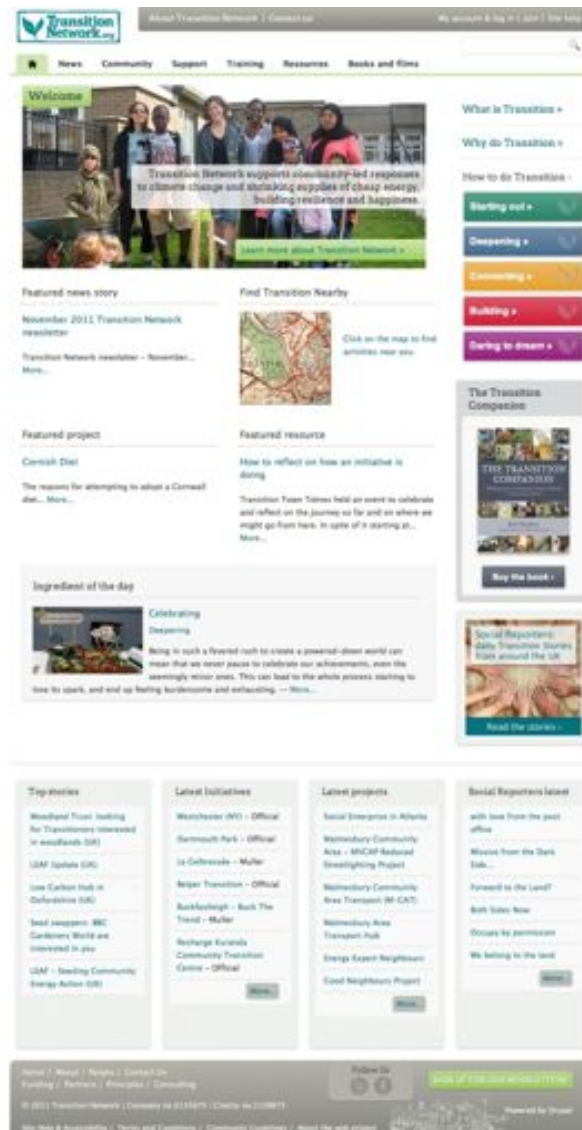
After going through a comprehensive and creative process of:

- awareness raising around peak oil, climate change and the need to undertake a community lead process to rebuild resilience and reduce carbon
- connecting with existing groups in the community
- building bridges to local government

1. Homepage until 03/10



2. Homepage 03/10



3. Homepage 12/11

Case studies

Ingredients

1. 10/09: The Pattern Language idea hits Rob on a train going North
2. 03/10: Phase one website arrives, rough patterns written
3. 06/10: Phase two website with beta patterns directory
4. 06/10 – 09/10: Big online engagement
5. 10/10 Rob takes the patterns back to the writing board; web team re-think directory
6. 06/11: Phase four website with Ingredients Directory beta and content
7. 10/11: Phase five website with completed Ingredients Directory



How best to bring a group of people together, and lay foundations for their working together successfully?

From the outset, create clear structures and processes that help your group to work enjoyably and effectively – and take some time to get to know each other as people!

(Coming together ingredient card front and back)

The Ingredients Directory (<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/ingredients>) now forms the core of the online support offered to Transitioners by the web platform. It had not been foreseen at the beginning of the web project, and is the result of a series of iterative editorial and technical developments which honed it to its current status.

Since the publication of the first 'Transition Handbook', Rob Hopkins had been thinking hard about how to follow it up with a second. The movement had evolved significantly in the few years that had passed, Peak Oil and Climate Change had reached the mainstream. The editorial challenge was less about converting readers to the Transition concept and more about how to support those 'doing' it. It was a clear that a different editorial approach was needed to support the now ever expanding number of initiatives with an ever expanding number of different outputs, challenges, and experiences.

In November 2009, on the way to the Transition North Conference, Rob came up with the idea of answering all of this by using the concept of a 'Pattern Language', an ontological method invented by Christopher Alexander to describe a technical domain in human language, in a series of 'Patterns'. All of the patterns in a language are individual items in their own right, and inter-related in some way; this makes them excellent items to publish on the web, which is at its most basic, a clever system of hyper-linked documents.



(The sartorially elegant Rob Hopkins and Ben Brangwyn on route to the Transition North conference; the day Rob thought of using a pattern language for Transition)

Over that winter, Rob started writing the first draft of the new 'pattern language'. The main website was not even underway at that point, so any online work for the patterns was clearly marked 'phase 2', and over the spring of 2010 a working group emerged of Rob, Helen his assistant and Ed the web co-ordinator to capture the key elements of the patterns.

The first version of the website went live in March 2010 (phase 1), and Rob had a rough version of the patterns done by then. This gave the working group the material to design the patterns directory, so the Transition Technologists produced the 'alpha' and then 'beta' directory on the website to publish each pattern and represent its relationships. Each pattern had a comments feature, which enabled website users to add their experiences, criticisms, photos, additions etc. to the pattern.

As no-one knew at that time how this would work out; either editorially or technically, the working group drew up an engagement plan to frame an online release of the first draft of the patterns so that Transitioners could respond to, and augment the patterns with their, on the ground experiences.

Rob presented the patterns' first draft at the Transition Network conference at the end of May, 2009. Following that, the patterns were published on the Transition Network website. Every day over the summer, Rob published a 'pattern of the day' on his Transition Culture website, calling for comments and experiences from readers. The patterns were also published in the newsletter, and publicised on Twitter and Facebook. Almost every pattern he had written attracted useful and stimulating comments, and in the vast majority, constructive criticism. These were noted, stored, replied to, and put into a significant 'feedback' document for the second draft of the patterns. As well as the editorial input, the technical team noted the strengths and weaknesses of the patterns directory, building a 'changes' document for the directory's second, beta, version.



(an ingredient page online)

One of the meta-criticisms was the term ‘Pattern and Pattern language’ itself – although it worked for people who knew about Permaculture and the original work, others found it confusing, too technical. A new term ‘Ingredients’ was suggested in the online discussions, which stuck.

With armfuls of insight, over winter 2010/11, Rob went back to each ‘Ingredient’ for editing, while the technical team re-visited the online directory.

Significant changes occurred – Rob introduced the concept of the ‘Stages of Transition’, and removed some of the subtler pattern language concepts, making the new Ingredients more Transition-friendly, and introducing a significant new Information Architecture. The technical team took their technical, design and usability learnings from the alpha ‘patterns’ phase, combined them with the editorial and informational changes, and re-built the directory as the Ingredients Directory.

The new Ingredients Directory was available behind the scenes in summer 2011, along with the completed editorial content, which was uploaded into the directory over some weeks. It was agreed to publish the Ingredients at the same time as the book, so the time lapse between editorial completion and official book launch gave the working group time to get feedback on the ingredients directory and make the final changes over the summer and early Autumn.

The launch of the Ingredients Directory went very smoothly, a day before the official book launch.

Transition Network were giving away two-thirds of the new book content, online, in such a way as to offer the most support to Transitioners as possible for free, while supporting sales of the book with an ongoing marketing campaign.

To complement the project, the ingredients had been produced as a card game which anyone could download, and a new feature 'add your own ingredient' was introduced to keep the flow of ingredients fresh, and 'from the ground'.



(Transitioners using the ingredients cards face to face)

At the beginning of the web project, none of this was foreseen; neither editorial nor technical plans. The framework of the web platform, iterative technical development phases, and good working group teamwork, made it possible to produce the new directory in an evolutionary manner, including Transitioners at every stage, producing the most powerful online and 'offline' support tool for the movement to date.

"Beef up the patterns area. One of the main benefits of the TT site is to offer tried and tested methods for tackling problems that similar groups around the country are/will experience. Ideally a group facing problem XYZ should be able to find the suggested pattern, and pick up enough information to set up and deliver whatever they need to overcome that step."

(Direct feedback about the patterns which we took into account)














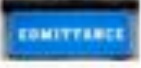
"Definitely a very valuable resource. We refer new people to your site, rather than regurgitating everything on ours - this also gives the whole Transition movement more credibility by showing them how extensive this is!!" (Web survey comments 2011)

Stories

1. 12/09: Stories are discussed at job interviews as a 'thing that would be really cool'
2. 03/10: Website phase one: Blogs system launched and aggregation trialled
3. 10/10: Ed and Charlotte meet in winter 2010/11 and an idea crystallizes
4. 03/11: Website phase three: News Sharing Engine launched and aggregation of initiative news installed
5. 03/11: Website survey March 2011 shows Stories very popular with website users
6. 05/11: Stories social and technical design scoped out with Charlotte and Ed
7. 08/11: Call for writers, festival and conference launches
8. 09/11: Writers chosen and visited
9. 09/11: Social Reporting pilot runs
10. 12/11: Pilot ends; group survey and workshops indicate clear desire to turn into an ongoing project; widen and sustain work

"... In your writing is all the warmth and heart and energy of Transition, with the ups and downs and the reflective alongside practical activities and actions. We've read about the fun and hope of building positive approaches, so much better than the failed economics and lifestyles dependent on the cheap oil era. We've been inspired and uplifted. We've been encouraged and supported in the parallels with our own experiences. A very sincere thank you..."

(Comment on the final Social Reporting blog post, 2011)

 Adrienne Campbell admin	 Ann Owen admin	 Caroline Jackson admin	 Catriona Ross admin	 Charlotte Du Cann admin
 Ed Mitchell admin	 Jay Tompt admin	 Jo Homan admin	 Joe Rake admin	 Kerry Lane admin
 Marella Fyffe admin	 Mark Watson admin	 Rachel Savage admin	 Test User1 admin	

(Social reporters group list, December 2011)

Transitioners have been telling each other stories about their experiences of being in Transition since the beginning of the movement. It is a deep part of community activism, sharing new stories from the ground up in a mainstream world driven by top down marketing and advertising, political and business decisions. It is a vital part of Transition to disrupt the over-arching consumer narrative with grassroots stories of community pride and activism.

‘Story’ is not new; ‘Story’ as such is a powerful vehicle through which communities of all types and locations have passed down vital knowledge through generations, retaining culture and morals, boundaries and experiences.

What is new is how Transition is trying to:

- (a) create new stories on the ground, and
- (b) share and co-create them between physically separated people sharing an emergent group identity.

Ben and Ed discussed using Story to help Initiatives share their experiences of being in Transition at Ed’s first interview in December 2009. The grassroots emergence of the initiatives and their activities, coupled with the decentralised nature of Transition would suit the anarchic power of blogs and blogging and Story, but it was very much a long shot.

At that time, the actual organisational examples were of big, well funded corporate knowledge sharing using blogs (mostly in IT companies), and big charities using carefully manicured blogs to present a more informal front to their stakeholder groups. Naturally they all talked about decentralised knowledge sharing, but not of the type that would suit Transition’s essentially anarcho-syndicalist emergence. In order for it to be of any value, it would take a specific kind of facilitation style to challenge any central power (not done in any of the examples above) while providing enough authority and structure in which to motivate and drive physically disconnected writers with already busy lives.

The first phase of the Transition Network website had been to build a ‘directory engine’ to capture and store the explicit aspects of the Transition movement; the lists of People, Initiatives, Projects. These were, and remain the most important informational aspects of the web project. As well as this we wanted to explore a way for Transitioners to share their implicit knowledge and experience, and had a hunch from the beginning that Story would be one of the keys to this requirement. We just did not know how or if or when this might happen.

We began exploring the more implicit, story aspects of Transition by configuring a blog aggregator, and collecting and re-publishing blog posts on the main site. We also set up some blogs on the site, the most popular of which was Stephanie Bradley’s storytelling walk around the UK in 2010 (which was a successful reportage of her storytelling walk and experiences and we hope to re-use the Social Reporting technology for her projects in 2012).

We found that it was relatively simple to publish our own, and re-publish others' blog posts, but it lacked coherence as they all came from different places with different narratives. So our first foray didn't feel correct, but we learnt from it, and still use this technical feature to collect items from other publishers who cover thematic gaps in our output (e.g. Energy Bulletin's economics coverage). This is more about 'external' news and opinion than Transitioners' experiences.

The narrative coherence we were seeking came one rainy night in Norwich in October 2010 in the form of Charlotte Du Cann. A keen writer and editor with a professional editorial background, Charlotte had been doing the communications for Transition Bungay and Norwich, as well as leading an experimental group blog for Norwich. She and Ed met in October 2010 after various email discussions and the spark fired; following much discussion they hatched a plan to encourage writers from around the UK to take part in an online storytelling experiment called 'Social Reporting' (a term coined by David Wilcox, London).



(Ed the web co-ordinator and Charlotte the Stories editor at Sunrise Festival just after the stories project had held its first workshop, June 2011)

The plan focused on facilitation and editorial work more than technical wizardry; at that time, they had no idea if they could coax people to do the writing, how to find them, what they would need, what they would write about, and many more questions. They began a number of parallel tracks; technical design work to produce a 'social reporting portal', budget agreements to support Charlotte's expenses to visit the as yet unknown reporters (all her time and work was voluntary), an engagement plan to attract, select and support 12 writers from the edge of Transition, and a definition of what this new and odd sounding project actually meant.

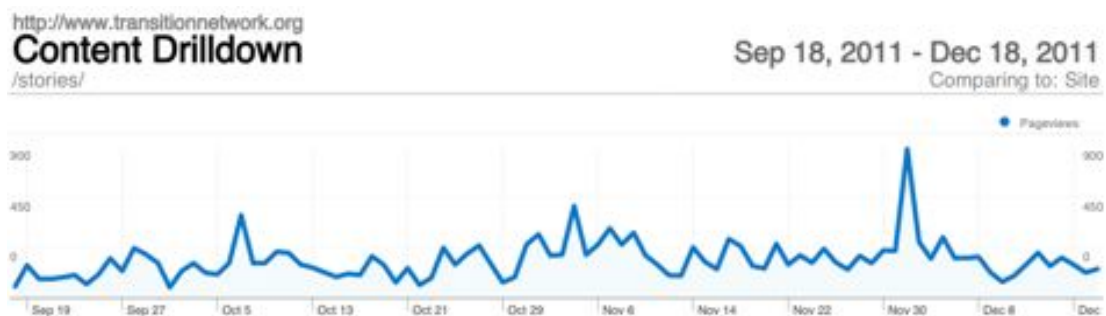
In March 2011, the website's 'first birthday' feedback survey asked the users how they would like Transition Network to spend the remaining web project budget. One of the options was the Social Reporting project. It was the second most popular selection (after 'project support', which became the online ingredients). Naturally, if it had been an unpopular selection, the team would have stopped work on the project, so they were very pleased to proceed!

Charlotte and Ed produced definitions of Social Reporting and planned the engagement out; a pre-pilot introduction at the Sunrise Festival in May, formal workshops and launch at the Transition Network conference in July, an online survey and call for reporters across August, selection (based on criteria) and personal visits to reporters in September, and blogging to begin in mid-September. The 'Social Reporting portal' design proceeded and iterated, until the technical build took place in phase 4, June, with some changes in phase 5, once the blogging had begun.

Responses to the initial call for writers were slow but steady; we did not get hundreds of people wanting to blog about being in Transition. We felt that this is partly due to Transitioners being busy doing 'Transition', not being particularly web-friendly, and communications is generally not high on the list of activities in initiatives. As well as that, the whole concept was new, so although it was popular in the user survey, it would be a group of 'early adopters' who would be pioneering and actually 'doing' it.

Following some extra calls for writers through social media and personal contacts, we found 12 writers who fit the criteria, and Charlotte went to visit them.

Writing began on 18th September. Each week had a different theme, led by a 'guest editorial' to inspire the writers from various 'thought leaders' from within Transition. The 12 writers wrote once each per fortnight, on half of the themes. None of the posts were edited; the aim was to let the writers find their own voices instead of traditional editing. The only rule was to stick to the deadline: 10am on the day of publishing; this was nearly always done!



41 pages were viewed a total of 20,752 times
(graph of web metrics for Social Reporting portal)

Asides to producing a lot of stories the pilot produced some great usability insights. It was the first time someone who wasn't a member of the core web team was using the content management system regularly. We hadn't expected the first version of the 'portal' to be perfect, and produced a round of changes to make the administration easier for the writers.

Charlotte wrote the last post on 18th December. Then her and Ed lead a research phase of online workshops with the writers, a survey and analysis of the web metrics to assess the pilot. Everyone wanted it to continue, and almost everyone wanted to

keep writing. Everyone felt it had been worth the effort and had great ideas for taking the project forward in 2012.



(Social reporters Adrienne, Caroline, Jo, Charlotte (editor), and Mark meet in London to plan for the project in 2012)

In total, ninety two posts were published on eleven topics by twelve bloggers with twelve guest editors, one working editor, one producer in three months. The 'portal' received just under 16,000 unique pageviews (5% of the site's total) and the average time on the page was nearly 4 ¼ minutes (site average is 3 minutes).

"Allows us to see what others are doing about similar issues."

"A place to pick up ideas for our community activities"

"A light in the dark...ah, let's say 'horizon'. Inspiration."

"I am able to read up upon other people's experiences."

(Web survey comments 2011)