Transition Network web project report
Summation of work done from 2009 – 2011 for Tudor Trust
Author: Ed Mitchell

1. Homepage until 03/10

2. Homepage 03/10

3. Homepage 12/11
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“It's inspirational - this social movement is happening around the world and this is an important connection!”

“It's made us officially a part of a worldwide movement.”

“Others in our group have utilized the resources info, and I myself have found the information and forum discussions on inclusion and diversity has helped me to have a better understanding of the challenges in this area, as well as thoughts and feelings of other Transitioners on this subject.”

“It gives a wider perspective on transition activity than the local group can achieve. I think it is important to continue showing the bigger picture and offering encouragement to local groups as it can sometimes be a struggle to remain upbeat.”

“Helps us remember that we’re not alone, because it can be hard to keep up the big effort required.”

(Comments about the website from the website survey, February 2011)
Purpose and introduction

This is as brief as possible a report on the Transition Network web project, specifically funded by Tudor Trust with £50,000 in 2008.

(Transition Network website metrics overview graph)

This report covers the period of January 2009 until December 2011. It is made up of some contextual background, brief outlines about the central project elements, two key stories, some figures, and a budgeted timeline. There is much more behind this report; to dive into more detail read Ed the author’s blog, or contact him directly with questions.

http://www.transitionnetwork.org/blogs/ed-mitchell

It is a big thank you to our funders, Tudor Trust, for giving Transition Network £50,000 for an unspecified and unknown web platform. We feel that we have used the money sensibly to build the new platform and open up new channels for the movement, and hope that Tudor feel that they made a good investment.

Another purpose of the report is to encourage other people responsible for web projects to do it themselves; take ownership of their project, accept the unpredictable outcomes and have a more resilient, affordable web system than an external service provider could produce.

Working in complex situations on multi-stakeholder systems can be like being dropped into an intimidating forest, but seeking others to do your work isn’t the answer! In this sense, the report hopes to be like a breadcrumb trail in the forest, left by a group who mapped their context, and want to support others who doing the same thing.

The big lesson from our experience is that it would not have been possible to have predicted where we would be now, then. Because so much changes as you progress.
If we had produced a detailed and fixed project plan with a product roadmap (which we could have done) it could have felt reassuring in ‘the deep in the dark forest days’ of early 2009, but it would have been wrong for late 2011.

The web project we see now has grown out of experiences and connections from all of the stakeholders, working together in a ‘constellation’ on and offline, facilitated rather than project managed, in iterative technical and social loops hung together with communications and agility, rather than control at its core.

This is illustrated with the two case studies which show that our two biggest products were at best just twinkles in peoples’ eyes in 2009, and the result of exploring the connections between people and ideas and technology, rather than having a big vision, then trying to predict, control and micro-manage the future and the unknown.

This is also a thank you to all the staff at Transition Network, the Transition Technologist group, and all the Transitioners who got on board with the project, all of whom worked on an un-defined project that deliberately tried not to control the future, but share responsibility for understanding and optimising the present.

(Pete, Jo, Rob, Sophy, Ben, Fiona, Naresh, Steph and Will following the Transition Network board meeting at which the web project plan was approved in June 2009)
Context and role

A great deal has changed since the web project officially began. Indeed it could be argued that ‘change’ itself is accelerating in a world that seems to get more and more bizarre and challenging every day.

Amid this context, the Transition Towns movement has grown rapidly in numbers and matured broadly in concept. Every day there is something new from somewhere new. Initiatives are springing up all over the world facing different challenges with different people trying different projects in different cultures, with different needs.

Needless to say, Transition Network seeks to pragmatically support the emergence of the movement; it is grassroots led so we do not seek to control it. It is a highly charged and creative environment, making for intense professional and personal challenges. There is never a moment at which things are quiet, or ‘the same as yesterday’, or something is not urgent, or brand new and requiring immediate action.
Thus the web project began in an endlessly changing context. Unlike a standard organisation, it is keeping up with a movement that is moving too fast and unpredictably to second guess. This is a challenging situation, particularly if you try to predict what ‘web product’ a movement will need in the future.

In light of this, the web team focused on three interconnected things:

1. Identify the boundaries. Build a shared view of a Transition web ‘constellation’ or ‘field’ with all the various initiative websites, social networks, blogs, etc. and the flows between them, and do not put Transition Network in the middle
2. Work with the ‘field’. Build relationships with all types of users and facilitate the emergence of supportive social groups (editorial, technical, facilitation) across the field to share roles and responsibilities as they spring up
3. Produce a robust, flexible technical platform that any reasonable developer can learn about, and work on without too much trouble. See it as a hard working shared bicycle rather than a specialised work of art!

In this plan, the platform could be extended in many directions with a facilitation model to handle the social requirements arising and share the power among the users. Then, ultimately, the Transition Network ‘website’ could move from being a highly visible, central website owned by Transition Network toward a transparent web service, moderated by Transitioners to support and promote the initiatives websites.
how the Transition Network website is not in the middle of it, preferring to see itself as part of a ‘constellation’ supported by a ‘Sharing Engine’ using web standards and services)

This worked for us. Transition Network is comfortable with navigating the unknown, and changing plans when the need arises, rather than sticking to one grand plan.

Importantly, it also promotes the concept of accepting responsibility for unknown outcomes, successful or not successful, without blame. This means that individuals carry great responsibility in the team, but not fear of blame in case of failure; indeed ‘failure’ is seen as an entity where no learnings were extracted from an unsuccessful piece of work.

![Spread of Transition Initiatives](image)

This is common sense to us, but we found that it is contradictory to most organisations’ web strategies, which are there to reflect a central institution’s self-image, and indeed, many people’s expectations; we are trained to respect centralised power. Our plan had been from the start to challenge centralised power – especially our own.

After an initial burst of work to get the platform up, technical work was handled in focused phases with small budgets, delivering required enhancements and maintenance, identified by the users and prioritised by the web team.

“... It keeps me well intentioned, to create something that the world can believe in. I am so excited when I see my project featured on the side of the projects map, after adding content to my page. This keeps my project exciting, that there is a global network which my project is connected with, despite its small size. This is good, I believe, because despite its small size, the potential is there for great ideas to spawn. thanks, so much” (2011 survey response)
Some of the central project elements

The Transition Technologists group and management roles

We wanted to take ownership of the platform and related decisions, and responsibility for our actions, so using an external agency was not an option. As well as this, given our context, we did not have a clear product roadmap, so a traditional ‘waterfall’ development model with a clear project plan was unsuitable. With our budget, we would not have enough technical work for a dedicated developer, designer, or systems administrator.

So we needed to look outside of the organisation for the expertise, without using an agency, or becoming dependent on one freelance provider.

We decided to model our solution on the Transition model, and build a co-operative group called the Transition Technologists to share tasks, roles, authority and budget. Instead of getting providers to pitch for the work based on a requirements document, we invited providers to join a group which would share roles and responsibility and budget. We released slices of the budget in phases, along with a list of developments we needed, and the group shared out the tasks and budget based on how much time they spent on the job. We used open source project management tools and worked in public so everyone could see what was going on.

The key to this was managing the group’s time carefully and being transparent about money. Trust is absolutely vital; the system is easy to cheat by cynics. It worked well for us though and we are doing all of our future work in this manner.

The Transition Technologists, who did not know each other before, have gone on to work on other projects together; we consider this to be a great indicator of success.

They have been an absolutely critical part of the project; offering time and wisdom far beyond the call of ‘duty’ and we hope this model grows in the manner it has begun.

Ed worked as Web co-ordinator for the full budget; the main task was to get the platform off the ground. Once that was done, we broke the job into two to reflect the new needs of the system:

• Webmaster: Laura: maintaining and enhancing the main site in line with user feedback and usability analysis, user management, etc.
• Projects and Strategy: Ed: Project Sharing Engine work, strategy, and off-site interests

Transition Network web project write up: January 2009 – December 2011
Ed Mitchell: Web co-ordinator: edmitchell@transitionnetwork.org
(John, Graham, Laura, Daniel, Jim and Ed meeting for the first time at the first Transition Technologists meeting, Bristol, November 2009)

The core directories: initiatives, projects and people

There was a great deal of pressure at the beginning of the project to ‘be the Facebook for Transition’. Social networking technologies have defined many peoples’ expectations of all web platforms. Before building anything, we defined the project goals, roles, future, and boundaries.

We found that the most important purpose of the web platform was to be a reliable support for the three key directories of the Transition movement – Initiatives, People, and Projects. These are the primary responsibility of Transition Network. Other technology providers will always offer great services for social networking and other facilities; best not compete with a product with millions of pounds behind it!

The data required for initiatives and people were relatively straightforward to define and remain unchanged to today. There are only a few compulsory fields and the rest is optional. After the initial launch, given feedback, we added some options to the people profiles so that people could identify themselves as facilitators and speakers, thus generating automatic maps and lists of these people rather than manage that ourselves (a time consuming task for hundreds of people).

Projects were a little harder so we found a knowledge management expert who helped us with a project data definition outline which we trialled in the ‘Transition Food’ pilot over the summer of 2009. We learnt what worked and didn’t from the
pilot, and baked that into the new directory. Things are not static though – we’ve been getting feedback ever since, which we’re working on in 2012.

Our work on the Project Sharing Engine will re-examine the projects directory; we are likely to slim down the options to make it quicker to use, and re-format some of them to make it simpler, and projects more ‘findable’. We will also revisit the design so it is more ‘usable’.

Webhosts and hardware; moving from an opportunist wiki to a balanced server

The old wiki was hosted on a relatively simple server set up that could not handle the incoming requirements for the new platform, so we had to find a more sophisticated service. As well as that, we had domain names registered in a variety of places, pointing to different places; a classic example of ‘organic growth’.

![Diagram of Transition related services on the web, February 2010](image)

(Making sense of all the places Transition related services were on the web, February 2010)

We did not know what we needed, what our usage figures would be, or how our requirements would change, and the world of webhosting is a jungle (particularly the ‘ethical hosting’ options) for technical people, let alone small environmental charity staff! It was deeply bewildering.

Our first move was to a webhost co-op in The US who had a good reputation. The service was friendly and reasonable and they were very generous to us with their time and packages.

Transition Network web project write up: January 2009 – December 2011
Ed Mitchell: Web co-ordinator: edmitchell@transitionnetwork.org
After a year we knew much more about our needs and could not fit into the host’s formula, so had to find another service. By this time, the Transition Technologist group were deeply involved so we hosted open discussions with them on the topic, took heed of their advice, and moved to a webhost co-operative in Sheffield.

This has proved excellent; the webhost is responsive, flexible and now on our team. We are about to join the webhost’s co-operative to build the relationship one step further. This relationship is particularly important as our web project becomes more sophisticated (the Project Sharing Engine’s complexity requires significant flexibility form the web host).

**Content: the Transition Network newsletter and editorial work**

At the beginning of the web project there were a variety of ‘content streams’ in different locations without a clear rationale; an understandable set up given our context. The key parts were the Transition Towns wiki, forums, Transition Culture the blog, and the newsletter on a separate free-hosted Wordpress website (not to mention hundreds of Facebook groups, Youtube channels, Ning sites, blogs, etc.).

The web project would aim to make sense of these streams without necessarily forcing them all into one space (the traditional ‘walled garden’ approach to online communities which we did not want to re-create).

Working with the newsletter editor and the technical strategy group, we established some editorial guidelines, processes, and an editorial group to handle the various types of information and approval. We also developed a model of how we saw the website’s position in the movement, on the web. This was called the ‘Transition Constellation’.

"... I think the newsletter is brilliant, the digests give you the picture and you can just pursue the ones you want in more depth. It always makes me feel that huge amounts of things are happening, everywhere, WOW."

(2011 web survey response)

We moved the newsletter onto the main site and published Transition Network news thereon. We left Transition Culture in its own space as it had a clear identity of its own, and aggregated and re-published the posts in the main ‘blogs’ section.

Work is now proceeding to produce Transition Network’s communication strategy which will take this one step further.
Facilitating a community: from passive to generative and on to ownership

It is a common assumption that technical platforms set up by organisations will attract user communities who ‘self-organise’ to provide lots of well moderated content and discussion.

This was referred to as ‘build and they will come’ in the first dot com boom, and in spite of evidence against its occurrence, organisations still hope that their ‘members’ and/or other key users will see a new platform and flock to it, and use it in the way that the organisation wants.

It does not work this way unless there is a single clear requirement to draw users to the platform (e.g. a membership society requiring a regular professional accreditation). The web is too busy, too much fun, and too flexible to expect that any one platform will give users what they want. As well as this, users do not enjoy being locked into one service (much to many organisations’ chagrin), nor being effectively powerless (a very important implicit subtext of using an organisation’s website).

Of course we wanted a flourishing and happy community on the site; to hear the voices of Transitioners, and for them to own the responsibility for content generation and moderation, but why would they? All the initiatives have their own local focus with their own websites, Facebook groups, twitter feeds etc. When we reflected on this, we saw that this ‘want’ was a reflection of Transition Network’s identity issues. The best solution is to help the initiatives promote activity on their own sites, to support them in their local context, with their users. A facilitatory role in support rather than parent-child role.

We began by fully accepting a non-centrist worldview (being part of a constellation, not an owner) and seeing ‘user engagement’ as a long term relationship built on trust over many years, in many places (their own). Instead of trying to build and own a centralised social networking tool, we focused our energy on our role in the

*(Mike the newsletter editor holding a workshop at ‘Sunrise’ Festival, 2011)*
constellation; the most important and functional aspects we could offer (the directories).

Of course we gradually built up the standard tools for ‘engagement’ (forums, blogs, etc.) and used them and invited comments (the ingredients comments ran into the hundreds). And although these are considered as engagement tools, if they are on our platform, we are the owner, so there isn’t really a genuine sharing of power. We have a Facebook page and Twitter identity, Youtube channel, all of which are shared between staff and Transitioners and are going well.

This does not mean that we abandoned our hopes of the users getting seriously involved, but that we bided our time until we could clearly see spaces in which their involvement would be meaningful and practicable.

The two spaces in which we are exploring meaningful and practicable user engagement are the Social Reporting project and the Project Sharing Engine. These are spaces where the user shares power with the organisational provider (Transition Network) and we feel are genuinely ‘community’.

The Social Reporters are now fully in charge of their project which we consider a great success (and you can read about in the case study below). The Project Sharing Engine is an enquiry into how we can gather project information from users on the web without coming to our website, and more importantly, whether Transitioners will moderate this content (which is effectively coming from their websites). We participate in both with great interest!

Web survey 2011: results summary

We ran a survey to celebrate the website’s first birthday. Its purpose was to assess work done to date, get information of the use of the site, and ask users to choose our tactical options for the remainder of the budget.

The response was excellent; we received 705 replies. The main points were that the website and related services were considered good by the significant majority of users, who were time pressured and information overloaded (and not web geeks!).

You can read our summary and download all the data on this blog post: http://www.transitionnetwork.org/blogs/ed-mitchell/2011-03/web-project-survey-february-2011-results

As well as assessing our performance we were after direction.

Below you will see what users wanted on the homepage. We took these requests and re-designed the homepage to reflect this (as it is now).
Survey results: would like to see on the homepage

What would you like to see on the homepage?

Total for this question: 549 respondents

We also sought input about how to focus our remaining budget. The reply was a clear request for initiative support and storytelling. Working with this, we put more energy into the emergent Ingredients Directory and Social Reporting project (more on both of those in the case studies below).

Survey results: what to spend remaining budget on? (View 2)

Total for this question: 536 respondents
The Sharing Engine: distributing the information from core to periphery

Alongside the development of the visible platform, we introduced the ‘Sharing Engine’ in 2010. This shares news directly between initiatives’ websites, and is forming the basis for our new ‘Project Sharing Engine’ (PSE) project.

The ‘PSE’ would not have happened without all the foundations put in place by Tudor’s early investment (see facilitation discussion above). It is funded by The Nominet Trust. It is at its simplest a ‘widget’ which any Transition webmaster can easily put on their own site, which will enable their users to browse Transition projects around the world and add their own. It is also a social experiment to see if Transitioners will moderate the content coming out of their own websites (we don’t see why they should moderate content on our site, but hope that they will on their own).

Ultimately, the Sharing Engine service will complement and ease the pressure on Transition Network’s website as it supports knowledge sharing between initiatives without them having to visit the central website. It is part of our vision of the website as a brain that invisibly connects the initiatives, not another large edifice in cyber space.

So in the future, the satisfyingly big figure of nearly three million page views on the Transition Network website will be much smaller, and another big figure of projects viewed on Transition Initiatives’ own websites, served by us in the background.

Read the Project Sharing Engine blog posts:
http://www.transitionnetwork.org/tags/pse

(Transition webmasters meet at the first gathering for the ‘PSE’, 11/11)
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

(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 a 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.
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)

(Social reporters group list, December 2011)

Transition Network web project write up: January 2009 – December 2011
Ed Mitchell: Web co-ordinator: edmitchell@transitionnetwork.org
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 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!

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

(30.4.2012 11:41:55)

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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)
## Timeline

This is not a comprehensive timeline. Also, it’s very hard to illustrate an iterative development process interlaced with a cyclical facilitation program, so please bear this in mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approx date And approx budget</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Activity and output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Jan – June 2009 £12,000.00    | Consultation Pilots in social networks and on standalone platforms | • Analysis and reflection on previous forums  
• Open forum discussions in Ning, Wiser Earth, Transition forums  
• Consultation blog  
• Workshops with Transition Initiatives  
• ‘Ubergreek week’ open online technical summit to agree on platform  
• Staff workshops  
• Weekly design meetings with management  
• Web strategy definition  
• Web project boundaries workshop and definition  
• Web core team definition  
• Pilot projects run: food projects and regional sites  
• Pilot projects lessons learned and reports |
| June – July 2009 £2,000.00    | Reporting | • Recommendations produced and presented at staff meeting, board meeting and national conference  
• Presentation and report available online  
• Web strategy document |
| Aug – Sept 2009               | Management | • Advertising for, interviewing and agreeing on ‘Web Co-ordinator’ |
| Oct – Dec 2009                | Preparation | • Open call for technologists  
• Transition Technologists group model and process and new contract defined  
• Recommendations turned into website briefing materials  
• First Transition Technologist meeting |
| Jan - Mar 2010 £16,000        | Phase 1 | • Data collation and refining – users and initiatives  
• First webhost bought and set up  
• Drupal platform configured and published  
• Core ‘content types’ set up (users, initiatives, projects, news, events, blogs, newsletter)  
• Community microsites set up  
• Big initial import of users and initiatives done  
• Design agreed  
• Blogs aggregation built in  
• Launch: March 1st  
Testing: /2010-01/ben-and-tiko-test-website  
User guide: /2010-02/adding-and-editing-your-initiative-profile-site  
Social ntwks: /2010-02/social-networks-and-how-they-fit-web-strategy  
Users: /2010-02/users-and-roles |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Alpha and beta testing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lots of user feedback on bugs and enhancements!</td>
<td></td>
<td>• New forums</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• User engagement with multiple emailshots and user guides before and after launch</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Design changes</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Design changes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Newsletters and news system</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mapping introduced</td>
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<td>• Mapping introduced</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Old forums announcements</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Wiki introduced</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Wiki introduced</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Some blogs aggregation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Community microsites work</td>
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<td>• Community microsites work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Profile changes (speakers, facilitators introduced)</td>
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<td>• Profile changes (speakers, facilitators introduced)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Bugs work</td>
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<td>• Bugs work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Navigation changes</td>
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<td>• Navigation changes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Events system beta</td>
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<td>• Events system beta</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Patterns directory alpha and beta build and content load</td>
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<td>• Patterns directory alpha and beta build and content load</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Third party newsletter service introduced following trial of drupal newsletter proving unpopular</td>
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<td>• Third party newsletter service introduced following trial of drupal newsletter proving unpopular</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phase 2.5</td>
<td>£3,000.00</td>
<td>• Second webhost bought and configured</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Web servers move to Web Architects</td>
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<td>• Web servers move to Web Architects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Massive domain name relocation to new DNS</td>
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<td>• Massive domain name relocation to new DNS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov - Mar 11</td>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>£4,000.00</td>
<td>• Sharing Engine to collect news from initiatives websites</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sharing Engine to collect news from initiatives websites</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New event types introduced</td>
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<td>• New event types introduced</td>
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<td>• New event types introduced</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Auto-save, spam protection etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• System upgrades, updates etc.</td>
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<td>• System upgrades, updates etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Newsletter changes</td>
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<td>• Newsletter changes</td>
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<td>• Newsletter changes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Password problems, system email problems</td>
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<td>• Password problems, system email problems</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Password problems, system email problems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Bugs work</td>
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<td>• Bugs work</td>
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<td>• Bugs work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Transition nearby’ introduction</td>
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<td>• ‘Transition nearby’ introduction</td>
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<td>• ‘Transition nearby’ introduction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Resources section</td>
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<td>• Resources section</td>
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<td>• Resources section</td>
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Transition Network web project write up: January 2009 – December 2011
Ed Mitchell: Web co-ordinator: edmitchell@transitionnetwork.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Patterns work with Transition Culture – daily posts for comments and feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Big website survey one year on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Web strategy group meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- News collection from group sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Widget trials</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Transition Initiatives twitter paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Twitter sharing goes international</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Youtube channel work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Nominet Trust application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community stats: tinyurl.com/tn-community-stats
Web stats at one year: /2011-03/website-statistics-one-year
End of ingredients stage 1: 2011-04/end-ingredientstools-phase-1
How we built the site: /2011-03/how-we-built-transition-network-website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June 11</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£4,500.00</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Video embedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Stories portal beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ingredients beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Stages beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- One big map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tools beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ongoing enhancements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Navigation changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Varnish – super speed caching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New Training section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- HTTPS for logged in session for security across all site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Big design changes to new theme and style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Widget upgrades and changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘Piwik’ metrics beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Navigation changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Initiative data sharing research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Film microsite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Ed Mitchell: Web co-ordinator: edmitchell@transitionnetwork.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>June 2011 – £1,000.00</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Reporters: open call for writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social reporting from national conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social reporting from Sunrise and other external events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social reporting pilot begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ingredients uploading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Project Sharing engine group outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comms work in preparation for new book, stories pilot, ingredients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• National conference workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sept – Oct 11 £4,500.00</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ingredients enhancements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ingredient generator system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Homepage changes and blocks work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maps clustering for use and speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Location module work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New webserver software research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Software upgrades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Webserver upgrades and set for 2011/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Training section completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lots of ‘tweaks’!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bugs etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Initiative (and other data types) data sharing research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Navigation changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Launch of ingredients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Reporting pilot kicks off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Project Sharing Engine project starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Webmaster moves in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“*Keeps me optimistic - other people are making change happen too*”

*Web survey 2011 comment*
Achievements

- Engaged with the project as a predicament to navigate rather than a project to control and a technology to deliver
- Navigated the predicament without restricting the complexity’s opportunities
- Producing the strategy at the beginning which was more a working practice statement than a specification
- Newsletter integration
- Transition Technologist team and group process
- Transition Technologists working on other projects together outside of Transition
- Good budget management supported emergent process
- Distribution of power to editors, Transition Technologists, staff, webmasters, hopefully more
- Not becoming a social network obsessed organisation
- Ingredients directory and its development path
- Stories pilot turning into a project owned and managed by the writers
- Sharing engine
- Design process and outcome
- Further funding for Project Sharing Engine
- Making the switch from web co-ordinator to webmaster at the right time
- Conference blogging from 2009 – 11
- Standard featureset of news, blogs, events, forums, profiles etc.
- Mapping the constellation and putting Transition not in the middle
- Good relations throughout with a fair number of different opinions
- Great webhost
- Hooks for the future – e.g. /video, /news/community
- Social media shared with non-staff

Figures

(generally rounded to nearest denominator, December 2011)

- 114,950 pages were viewed 2,827,166 times (01/03/10 – 01/12/11)
- Approximately 6,000 views of the new ingredients directory in 3 months
- 911 initiatives registered
- 231 projects registered
- Over 120 resources added
- Over 11,000 registered users, of which:
  - 1,500 facilitators
  - 1,300 speakers
- 300 news items published
- 33,500 spam attempts blocked
- 3,850 Tweets and 4,755 followers on Twitter
- 1,400 ‘Likes’ on Facebook page (in 3 months)
- 705 replies to our 2011 web survey (approximately 10% response rate)
One more thanks and sign off

We would like to thank the Tudor Trust again for their generous and flexible funding.

It has enabled us to collaborate with the Transition movement to create an informative, open and responsive web service providing support, inspiration, connection and knowledge-sharing to people exploring and pioneering a Transition to a resilient low-carbon future.

As hoped for, the web project will continue to thrive and evolve beyond this project funding. Funding from the Nominet Trust is enabling the sharing engine innovation to evolve further into sharing projects more widely. The 12 volunteer ‘Social Reporters’ storytellers and volunteer editor continue their work beyond its funded pilot stage and have taken ownership of it. The new role of part-time Webmaster will continue to edit, update, moderate and refresh the website.

(Ben Brangwyn and dog web wunderkind, Tikoh, test the first website iteration with flu, January 2010.)

“... Argh—you’re doing a great job, keep it up. You’re making great choices, I support you in these choices. Don’t think the site needs tweaking, go out and plant your potatoes!”

“... Incredible teamwork, knuckle knashing social processes, facing the coming storms”

“... make the great ideas work for you. Try and try again and experiment all the time, for there is no one way to succeed...”

(Comments from the website survey, February 2011)