A Community of Practice for network building in London civil society

Connecting Londoners and Our Way Ahead. Draft November 30 2017

Summary

We propose developing a Community of Practice for people who want to learn from each other how to build formal and informal support systems for London civil society, with a focus on mapping, storytelling, and digital technology. The CoP will bring together people working in London communities and networks who want to learn new approaches, with those involved in social network mapping, digital social innovation and community media.

The CoP will help bring a networked approach to development of the new central Hub for London, as well as strengthening existing London networks. We are asking the Hub advisory group to support these proposals, and make them part of their recommendations.

Our proposal

The proposal is based on a year-long exploration of how London can become a more networked city, carried out by Connecting Londoners and Our Way Ahead, and follows a co-design workshop we ran with London Metropolitan University on November 16 2017.

Our aim is to complement and enhance plans for a Hub for London, currently being developed by Greater London Volunteering with a £350,000 grant from the City Bridge Trust.

The Background appendix explains how plans for the Hub, developed from several reports, also emphasise the need for community-led network building, distributed leadership, and online systems, all based on principles of cooperation and collaboration.

It is that co-production approach that we aim to develop and demonstrate, based on our year of research, events and online discussion. We are doing three things in that spirit:

- Proposing development of a Community of Practice that will meet online and face-to-face.
- Continuing with the mapping work we have started with some of London's key civil society networks.
- Developing an open bid for funding and other support, and asking the advisory group for the Hub to offer their support.

What follows is a broad vision of how a Community of Practice can be developed. However, we recognise that progress depends entirely on the commitment of individuals who have to develop a shared vision and build trusting relationships. That takes time - so this is offered as a framework for development rather than a highly-defined programme. We are offering it to the advisory group for the Hub for London, where we are represented. We hope that the group will support these ideas, and if they wish adopt them in their recommendations. Either way we believe work should start now.

Why we need a new approach

We need to learn new approaches and methods from several perspective:

First, in order to help bring a networked approach to the new Hub for London, where an advisory group is considering the functions it should perform. See the attached [Appendix: How the Hub can network its suppor](#)t where we outline suggestions:

The Hub briefing document includes a range of functions that could be supported and enabled by this network/platform approach, for example:

- Networks to feed data - *help build the networks to do that*
- Voice for civil society - *help people develop their own voice, with other*s
- Convening partnerships - *help people build their own partnerships*
- Build cross-sector links - *help people develop their own links*
- Showcase impact - *help people demonstrate impact themselves*
- Asset-based resourcing - *help people identify and use resources*
- Share resources - *help people do that themselves*
- Website/portal - *help people build and connect their own presence online*
- Share what works - *encourage and support that across networks*

Secondly, Our Way Ahead [is committed to processes of network building](#) that will enhance and connect existing networks:

Our purpose is to build our voice as people working in local communities, so that we can realise our enormous collective power and create a stronger collective voice. We want to challenge ourselves to link up, as a network of networks, and undertake shared action on issues we identify together, bringing to the table issues that need addressing, and sharing in one another's capabilities with an aim to helping those most in need.

We want to build accessible digital community platforms, research and map grassroots community activity, to facilitate collaboration, strengthen local platforms and spaces for action and build the voice of those at the grassroots level.

A combination of mapping and network building will provide networks with a strong voice for campaigning, ways to share knowledge, and make best use of shared assets.

The Community of Practice will provide learning opportunities on both fronts, and for others working in this field.

We also hope that a CoP will provide learning opportunities for students at London Metropolitan University, who helped prepare for our workshop on November 16, nd who participated enthusiastically.

Communities of Practice

[Communities of Practice](#) take many forms - but the core idea is that of a group or network of people who share a craft or profession, learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop personally and professionally, by the process of sharing information and experiences with each other.

In this instance the core craft will be that of network building, together with the other activities and tools that support that. These will include social network mapping, creative events, online tools and systems, new ways of organising, and storytelling.

In practice we may end up with a number of communities of practice within a network of change agents - people who want to use innovative methods for social good. [See the Appendix on Communities of Practice.](#)

There are already many communities and networks around the world engaged in this learning and development, and where possible we will link with and join in with them. However our specific learning will start with the challenge provided by plans for new civil society infrastructure in London, detailed in the [Appendix on Background](#).

In developing the CoP we will have the advantage of relationships developed during our year of exploration; the extensive networks who are part of Our Way Ahead; and the potential of connections with the many groups and organisations involved in The Way Ahead.

We can also build on work started in 2009 on how social media and network developments impact on membership organisations - [first forum still available here](#).

The operation of the CoPs will be co-designed with members. [First ideas](#) were developed following [a workshop at London Metropolitan University on November 16 2017](#). The vision there was support for a process of bottom-up, and bottom-across, network building by which a cooperative platform could develop to complement the Hub.

Activities of the CoP could include:

- Overall, exploring [the challenges of network building](#) at local and pan-London level, and supporting communities of interest.
- Using and contributing to the [learning materials about networks and mapping](#) already developed during our exploration.
- Participating in [Living Lab workshops](#), where a game format allows participants to explore how to improve the ways in which people connect with local services, organisations, and opportunities in their community.
- Running a further co-design event, building on [the workshop of November 16 2017](#)
- Developing specific projects, including [those ideas created on November 16](#).
- Learning how to map and build networks, and use other online and face-to-face methods with members of [Our Way Ahead](#).

For our online activities we will use a variety of methods that will both support the activity of the CoPs and also provide opportunities to learn tools that will be useful in the field. These already include:

- Loomio for core group discussions and decision-making
- Blog, social media and wiki
- Network mapping software
- Zoom video conferencing
- Discourse forum for discussion and online learning - testing

We will also have regular meetups, and opportunities to explore innovative methods of running workshops and other events.

We hope that it will be possible to combine informal learning and sharing of resources with the opportunity for CoP members to collaborate in the development of funded projects and social enterprises. How to do that will, in itself, pose some development and learning challenges - how to collaborate in a competitive funding environment.

One idea we will explore is making the CoP a coop, where members make a regular modest financial contribution. The LVSC report on the Hub proposed that as an option, and current Hub proposals would allow Londoners to be member of the charitable company.

We will seek initial start-up funding, and then explore various business models. The aim will be to support the CoPs through a blend of core paid-for activity, project and consultancy work, and pro bono contributions. Organisations like [Enspiral](#) and [Outlandish](#) provide some inspiration.

At least nine members of Connecting Londoners and OWA are Fellows of the RSA, and we pitched suggestions for collaboration at a recent [RSA Fellows ideas session](#). We hope there may be scope to cooperate on London RSA plans to support network weavers.

However, all these ideas are subject to further discussion and decision-making by founder members of the CoP. [More in this appendix on CoP operation.](#)

Mapping for network building

We talk a lot about mapping networks and resources. Often 'mapping' just means preparing lists and sometimes geographic maps will be used to locate the content. The key point in mapping a network, however, is how the elements join up - how transactions of all sorts tie them together. Network mapping is a recognised technique in many disciplines from public health to policing to recording community capital.

A broad definition of a network is: 'anything that can be represented by a set of nodes and links'. Network maps can hold a broad range of data in their nodes and links - text, numerical video, sound and so on. A network map can also be analysed to show who is most central and how the nodes cluster because of their connections - key factors in network building. A network map can act as a visual database for community networks.

Continuing to map key networks

A network map of community organisations and supporting agencies has already been sketched out using information drawn from an [Our Way Ahead event](#) in July 2017, supported by London Council for Voluntary Service, and a subsequent online survey. Although this is in its early stages, it has indicated the existing networks that come to the fore when LVSC -

now in liquidation - is removed from the map. Some of these are considering mapping their own networks in more detail and this information can also be added to the overall map.
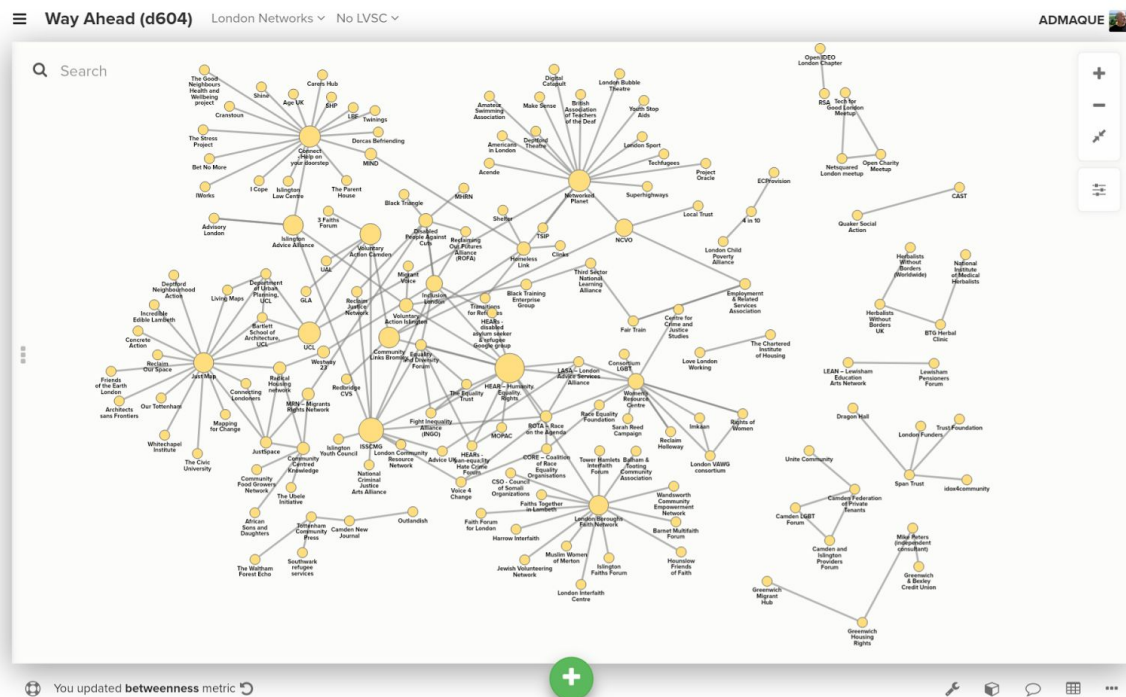
A recent development in mapping software allows us to create geographic maps directly from a network map. This enables comparisons between patterns of collaboration and the location of resources - and to identify possible local sharing where it doesn't already exist.

Developing training and support materials

A number of community connectors in London are already using network mapping approaches to assist their work. In workshops and individual sessions, we are assisting them to prepare and analyse the maps. The main issue is how the map is maintained and updated. The initial enthusiasm and usefulness of a map will dissipate if it is not kept up to date. A map needs a map manager.

Over the last few years we have developed training sessions and support materials to help mappers and map managers. There is also a considerable need for sessions that spread the awareness of how networks work, how they can be analysed and built on. Developing a receptive audience within organisations and networks will be essential to further mapping and building.

The process we suggest here is not to replace the continuing job of network building that occurs in all organisations. It is to support that and make it more effective.

An open bid for support: testing cooperation amid competition

The development and sustainability challenge for the network and CoPs is two-fold:

- Within the CoP blending open learning and sharing with the need to compete with peers for funding.
- Within the current competitive funding climate in London how to secure start-up funds for the CoP, and then maintain and develop its operation.

These are challenges faced by all organisations, large and small, in London civil society - so it important that we explore different models and approaches and share our learning.

We believe being open where possible is fundamental to any solutions - and we are taking inspiration from an initiative some of us first developed in 2007, when Cabinet Office tendered a £1.2 million proposal for a third sector innovation exchange. A group set up a web site - still available here - to develop proposals for an Open Innovation Exchange, and created the bid collaboratively entirely in the open, apart from the budget, which had to be confidential under the terms of bidding. We didn't win, but were interviewed and came fourth in a strong field.

We believe an open approach will help meet the above challenges in several ways. We can split CoP activities between some that are entirely open, and others that are private where members are developing proposals they don't wish to share. Making choices on that will help explore the benefits of open or restricted access in different situations.

Work packages

Mapping and network building

- Continue mapping Our Way Ahead networks with network leaders
- Identify other networks and projects relevant to our activities
- Develop "how to" materials on mapping and network building
- Run face-to-face and online sessions to support mappers and network builders

Development of the network and CoPs

- Identify potential network and CoP participants from mapping work
- Run introductory/design events
- Set up online systems
- Develop initial content
- Facilitate development and learning activities

We will present these proposals to the Hub advisory group on December 5, and decide how best to proceed with a funding bid in the light of their response.

- David Wilcox david@socialreporter.com - network and CoPs
- Drew Mackie drew@drewmackie.co.uk - mapping
- Matt Scott ourwayahead@gmail.com - Our Way Ahead

Appendix on background

The Connecting Londoners initiative developed from an exploration into how to make London a more Networked City, with initial support from the London Voluntary Service

Council, the only pan-London organisation supporting some 120,000 civil society organisations. The great majority of these are community organisations, many without staff. During the process we adopted "Connecting Londoners" from the Steve Wyler report cited below.

LVSC is now in liquidation, and many other organisations in London that support action for social good are challenged by funding cuts.

Over the past year we have explored how to add mapping, digital technology, network building and self organising to official plans for new civil society infrastructure called, The Way Ahead. TWA is a response to the need for new infrastructure in the face of reduced resources. Details of our exploration here.

Research, face-to-events, and online discussion culminated in a design workshop on November 16 2017 at London Metropolitan University with Our Way Ahead - a network of networks established to ensure that the needs and capabilities of community-level interests were represented in future infrastructure plans. Report of the workshop here.

The workshop design was based on TWA recommendations for a London Hub as part of new civil society infrastructure, and in particular a report for LVSC detailing its functions. Participants played through how to meet challenges using ideas and methods from the report - and to develop more ideas. The report, by Steve Wyler, emphasised that the Hub:

> *should act as a convenor and enabler, rather than direct deliverer, in effect delivering change through networks and platforms, rather than through traditional organisational and membership delivery methods. Report extracts here.*

The Way Ahead report emphasised that co-production and community-led processes should be at the heart of future civil society development:

> *Co-production is where Londoners work with those in power, and each other, in a way in which all voices are heard equally in developing a shared understanding of need and in crafting solutions to make London a better place.*

*Pragmatic co-production should cover a continuum of activity that includes:*

- *communities identifying for themselves, with support if needed, what their needs are*
- *funders, the public sector and civil society's understanding of need being based on what communities identify for themselves*
- *communities being enabled to change their own lives for the better*
- *communities shaping solutions and responses to opportunities*
- *communities shaping services delivered by others, whether these be public sector or civil society services*
- *communities advocating and campaigning on their own behalf, with support if needed*

Our Way Ahead embraced these principles from The Way Ahead, and the LVSC report, in its statement of purpose:

Our vision is to ensure that grassroots communities have a meaningfully powerful agency in the response to issues that affect their lives. It is those at the level of grassroots communities, the direct burden takers, who are best placed to lead the push for change, and the OWA Planning Group seek to work in solidarity with them through the facilitation of critical dialogue and storytelling, mapping of community activity and the support of collaboration on campaigns among groups within like communities of interest…..

… we want to build accessible digital community platforms, research and map grassroots community activity, to facilitate collaboration, strengthen local platforms and spaces for action and build the voice of those at the grassroots level.

We believe that while a central Hub is important, we should not rely on that, or on simply connecting existing networks …. we need to connect citizens, community groups and local networks "bottom across". We need all three aspects of network building.
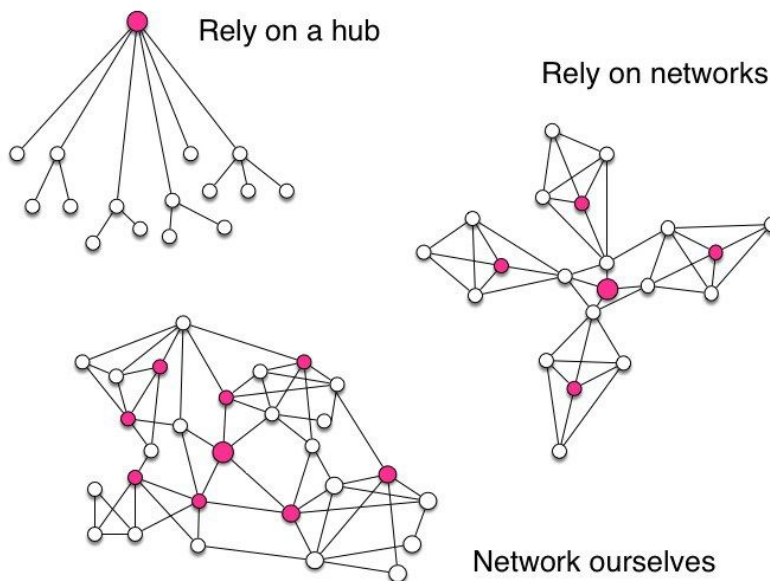
We have, through our research, events, and the workshops, developed practical proposals and methods to build those networks and create platforms. We are more than ever convinced that success depends on processes of co-operation and collaboration, based in community needs and assets, as recommended in [The Way Ahead report on pragmatic co-production](#).

This approach, promoted by Our Way Ahead and Connecting Londoners, is recognised by the official Hub Advisory group through representation by Christine Goodall and David Wilcox.

The Hub [is now backed by £350,000 of funding from the City Bridge Trust](#), and the advisory group is considering what functions it should carry out.

The challenge now is to create the process by which we can joinup the three elements of network building: development of network-building capacity in the Hub; connecting existing

networks; and enabling grassroots interests to network themselves. The Wyler report identifies this as one of the ingredients for success:

> *Creating distributed models for collaboration and leadership will allow insight and skills to be shared and unlikely alliances formed, taking full advantage of on-line platforms.*

The key point here is "distributed". In practice, very little of this network building can be done by the Hub staff. Firstly, there will be only one member of staff with that responsibility … and more importantly networks depend on people and relationships. These relationships cannot be developed top-down.

People at all levels of civil society will need to learn new skills in networking and using online systems, particularly if one of the scenarios sketched out by Steve Wyler is realised:

> *It is 2027, and cities across the UK and internationally are looking to London as an example of how to revitalise civic life...*
>
> *A whole host of London agencies – voluntary groups, councils, the GLA, and business partners have created a powerful new 'Connecting Londoners' agency. Digital platforms have generated the ability for people, wherever they live or work in London, to find out what contribution they can play to London's civic life, as volunteers, as social activists and campaigners, as donors, allowing them to meet virtually and in real time, and take action for themselves and for their community of choice*
>
> *.... Londoners have access to an amazing on-line compendium of resources, but also real people to speak to at the need of a phone, or experts who will come out and meet you and your group and help you get things going, for free or a very modest fee*
>
> *.... London's business community has really bought into all this – incentivising their workforces to play their part, sponsoring a host of exciting activity, celebrating success in a big way*
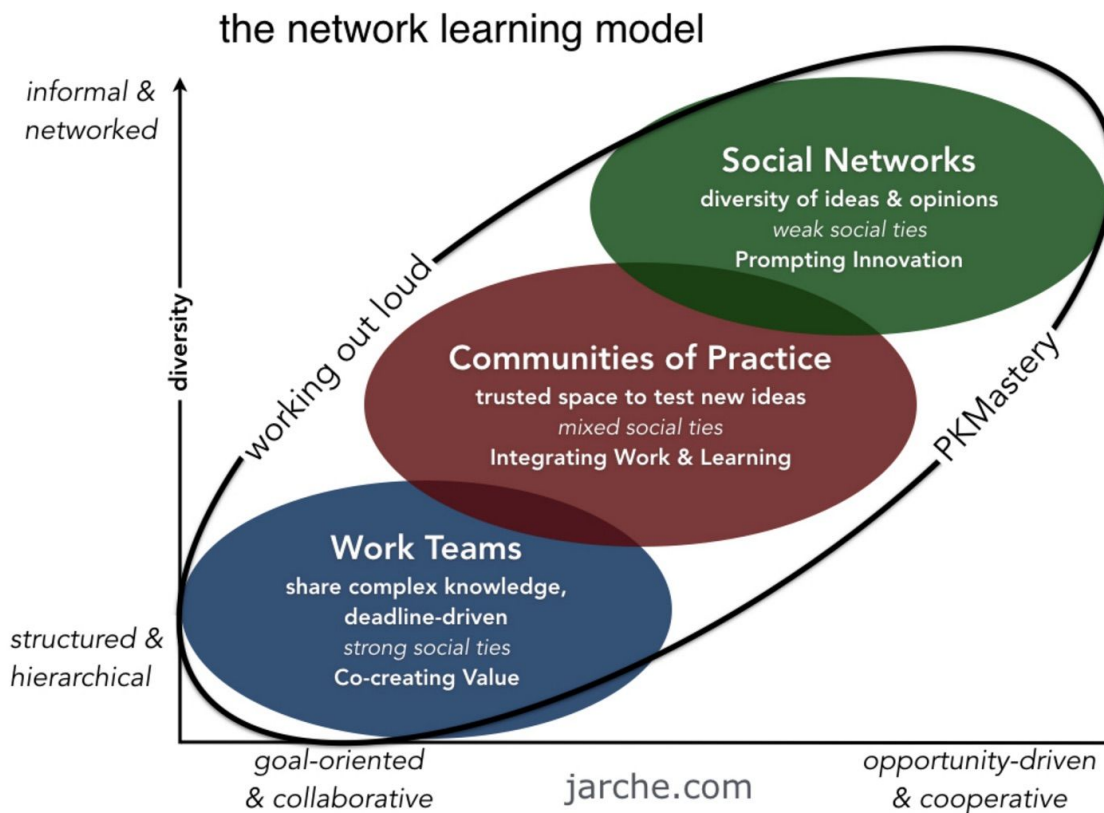>
> *.... 'Connecting Londoners' is producing compelling evidence about how people are connecting with each other as never before across boundaries of place, class, age, gender, race, and London is now acknowledged as the first truly socially cosmopolitan city...*

The Networked City exploration adopted the term Connecting Londoners following publication of the report, for the group developing these ideas.

Appendix on a community of practice and networks

Our thinking about networks and communities practice is informed by the work of Harold Jarche, who [presented at one of our events in January 2017](#). As Harold [explains on his blog](#) we we should think about connecting within three domains:

- Work teams which are goal-oriented, collaborative and structured
- Communities of practice which are trusted spaces to test new ideas
- Social networks where there are a diversity of ideas and opinions

the network learning model

informal & networked

diversity

Social Networks
diversity of ideas & opinions
weak social ties
Prompting Innovation

working out loud

Communities of Practice
trusted space to test new ideas
mixed social ties
Integrating Work & Learning

PKMastery

Work Teams
share complex knowledge,
deadline-driven
strong social ties
Co-creating Value

structured & hierarchical

goal-oriented & collaborative

jarche.com

opportunity-driven & cooperative

In order to operate in the networked age we need the skills and methods to move between these different domains, for work on projects, learning, connecting informally.

While social networks may be open, communities of practice and work teams will be more limited or closed, so that those involved may be confident about trusting other participants.

For developments in London we may well need to have some open networking around mapping, network building etc but some more contained CoPs around specific topics, with some sharing to the wider network . In that way participants may more easily be able to develop collaborative arrangements for project development and funding bids.

If we use a Discourse forum we can easily set up difference open and closed groups to achieve this. Here are ideas how CoPs and networks might operate within that framework:
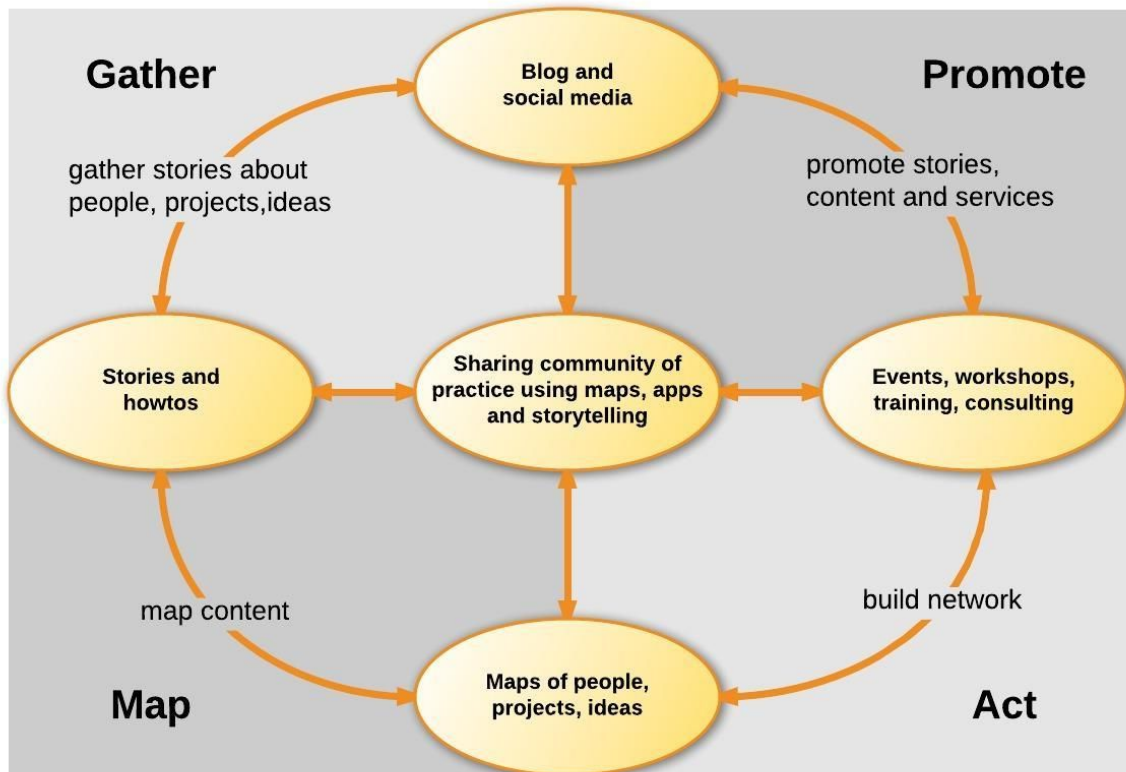
The model The diagram shows how the community of practice (CoP) could operate as a learning network:

- Gather stories about network projects and people, and ideas about the use of mapping, network building, digital technology and self-organising
- Promote the stories, share content, and offer support services
- Map existing networks, projects and stories, and also the developing community of practice
- Act on the practice through events, training, consultancy, network building

The platform The CoP uses a mix of the methods that members may employ in the field in order to share and promote their learning and activities, and help build networks. For example, these and others tools:

- Forum, blog, social media, wiki or other site for stories and howtos
- Zoom and other video conferencing
- Workshop events, games and simulations
- Social network maps

Building networks, taking action The model also describes how networks can be developed, supported, and used. The sequence in practice might be mapping network assets and people; curating and promoting stories and activities; forming project groups for further action. However, we first need the CoP to learn together how to do that.

Appendix: The challenges of network building

Pete Burden, one of the members of Our Way Ahead, has suggested for discussion that the topics/themes might include:

- What are 'bottom across' networks, why are they different, and why are they needed?
- How do I communicate the benefits to people who might support me?
- What are the practical steps involved in getting started
- What are the options for funding?
- How practically do I get that funding?
- How do I engage the support of other people, other networks and existing institutions?
- What if anything can I do to ensure that the network becomes sustainable and doesn't just fade away?
- How important is branding and reputation?
- How should I think about marketing this network? Eg What is the role of face-to-face events in promoting a network?
- What is the role of mapping?
- Do I need a legal constitution?
- How can I protect myself from the things that might go wrong?
- What about spaces and platforms? Physical ones and electronic ones? Which are the best and how can I learn about them?
- How agile should I be, how responsive/flexible, and how important is iteration?
- In other words how much control do I need, and how much should I let the network evolve and grow of its own accord?
- Is it helpful to measure success and if so how do I do it?
- What, if anything, do I need to change in myself in order to do this?
- Do I need a team? Or can I do this on my own? (!)
- Who else can I learn from inside or outside this network and how do I keep my learning up to date?
- What are the other questions should I be considering?

Appendix How the Hub can network its support

Paper for Hub Advisory Group December 5 2017

A big challenge for the [Hub for London](#) will be covering a wide range of functions with few staff, and limited resources, in ways that support activity from grassroots to pan-London.

This challenge could be addressed in part by developing *networked* support systems, as recommended in the [LVSC report on the hub](#).

The report suggests that "the Hub should act as a convenor and enabler, rather than direct deliverer, in effect *delivering change through networks and platforms*, rather than through traditional organisational and membership delivery methods".

That means helping and resourcing people, groups and organisations do things for themselves where possible, and learning how to cooperate and collaborate to co-produce solutions.

The Hub briefing document includes a range of functions that could be supported and enabled by this network/platform approach, for example:

- Networks to feed data - *help build the networks to do that*
- Voice for civil society - *help people develop their own voice, with other*s
- Convening partnerships - *help people build their own partnerships*
- Build cross-sector links - *help people develop their own links*
- Showcase impact - *help people demonstrate impact themselves*
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- Website/portal - *help people build and connect their own presence online*
- Share what works - *encourage and support that across networks*

Mapping and joining up networks

Or order to deliver through networks and platforms I suggest that we need to:

- **Think about networks and platforms** in civil society, by reflecting on how people are increasingly developing their own networks through the commercial platforms of Twitter, Facebook, Linkedin, etc. What else is needed?
- **Map assets and connections**, locally and across London to see where assets and networks exist. Our Way Ahead have started to do that, as have local community connectors.
- **Build networks** - or rather, help people, groups and organisations learn how to use a mix of old and new methods to enhance existing and develop new networks. This isn't just about technology, but tech will be important, as the LVSC report suggests in one of its scenarios.
- **Explore how to co-produce.** We could start among ourselves.

We need to combine networks at different levels. We can't just rely on a hub, or on existing networks - we need to network ourselves, and then connect with the other levels, from the top, from the bottom, and across.
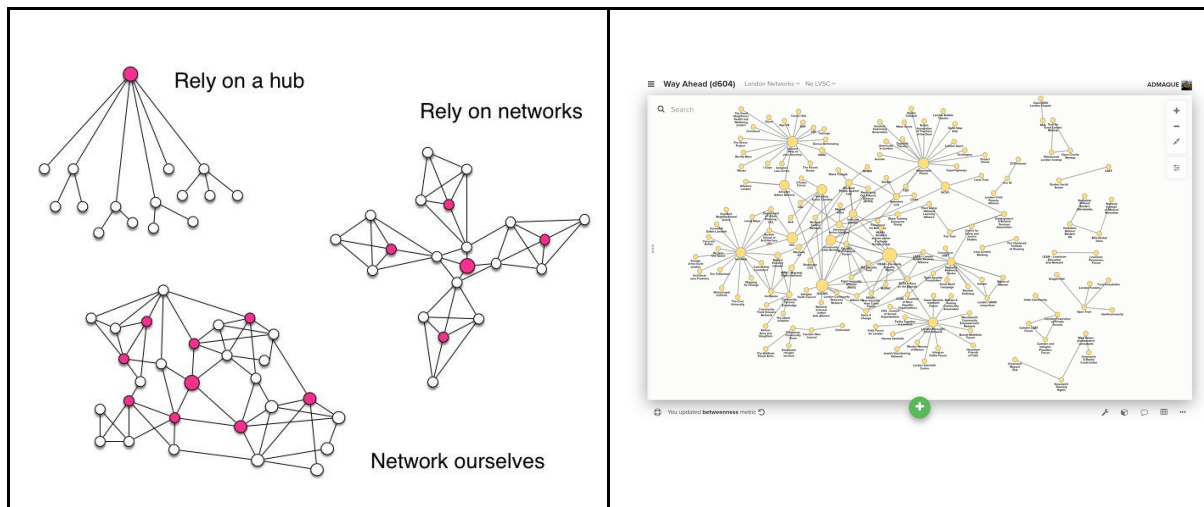
Connect hierarchical, pan-London and grassroots networks. Build on OWA mapping.

Practical suggestions

I suggest that the advisory group and others in The Way Ahead address the way that functions are delivered and enabled as soon possible, because a networked approach will influence the operational architecture of the Hub, and the skills needed by staff. It's the difference between "we can do that" and "we can help you do that".

Over the past year Connecting Londoners and Our Way Ahead have explored what it will take to make London a more networked city, through research, events, mapping, creative workshops and online demonstration. Summary here. Most of the recent work has been voluntary. We now want to collaborate with the Hub advisory group, agencies and funders, to add our experience to development of the Hub and associated activities, and develop our own capacity as a demonstration of what is possible. We believe that the best way to start is:

- **Convene and support a Community of Practice** of people who are, or want to be, network builders.
- **Learn by doing**, through mapping, network building, storytelling, informal organising and the use of a mix of digital and other tools.
- **Run a further co-design workshop**, building on the session that we ran at London Metropolitan University on November 16. For the workshop we took the LVSC Hub report and created a set of props from its recommendations representing challenges, ideas, methods. Then we took on roles, and developed solutions. In effect, we started to invent a networked Hub. Report here.

We would like to explore with advisory group members how we might collaborate in taking these ideas forward - and/or develop further ideas.