

Mapping and network building for London civil society

Connecting Londoners and Our Way Ahead. First draft November 28 2017

Summary

We propose a network of change agents to help build new support systems for London, embracing communities of practice on mapping, network building, storytelling and the use of digital technology. This distributed network - or network of networks - will support and complement the work of the new central Hub for London. We are asking the Hub advisory group to support these proposals, and make them part of their recommendations.

An invitation

This is an open invitation to help develop a network of change agents for the civil society infrastructure that London needs, and from that create learning communities of practice. It is based on a year-long exploration of how London can become a more networked city, by [Connecting Londoners and Our Way Ahead](#).

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:

- Inviting people who wish to learn about network building, mapping, storytelling and digital tech to join us in starting one or more Communities 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, bold vision of how a network of change agents, and communities 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 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.

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 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 will probably have 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.](#)

Reports about the infrastructure emphasise the need for community-led network building, distributed leadership, and online systems, all based on principles of cooperation and collaboration. While the proposed Hub should take a lead in this, it will only be able to play a small part - not least because people have to learn to build their own networks and relationships, with the necessary attitudes, skills and tools. Communities of Practice can be at the heart of that.

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 or CoPs 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 or CoPs 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 network/CoPs. [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.

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 network and CoPs 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 collaborative 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.

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*

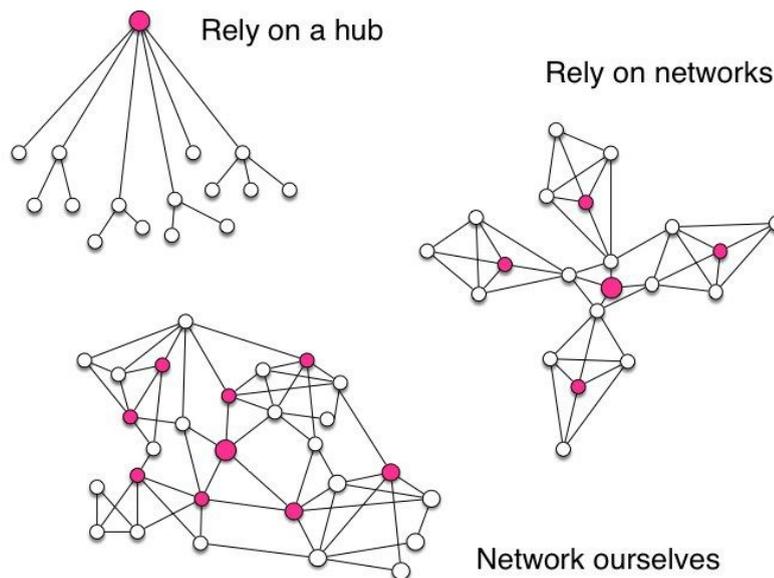
- communities advocating and campaigning on their own behalf, with support if needed

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 join up 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

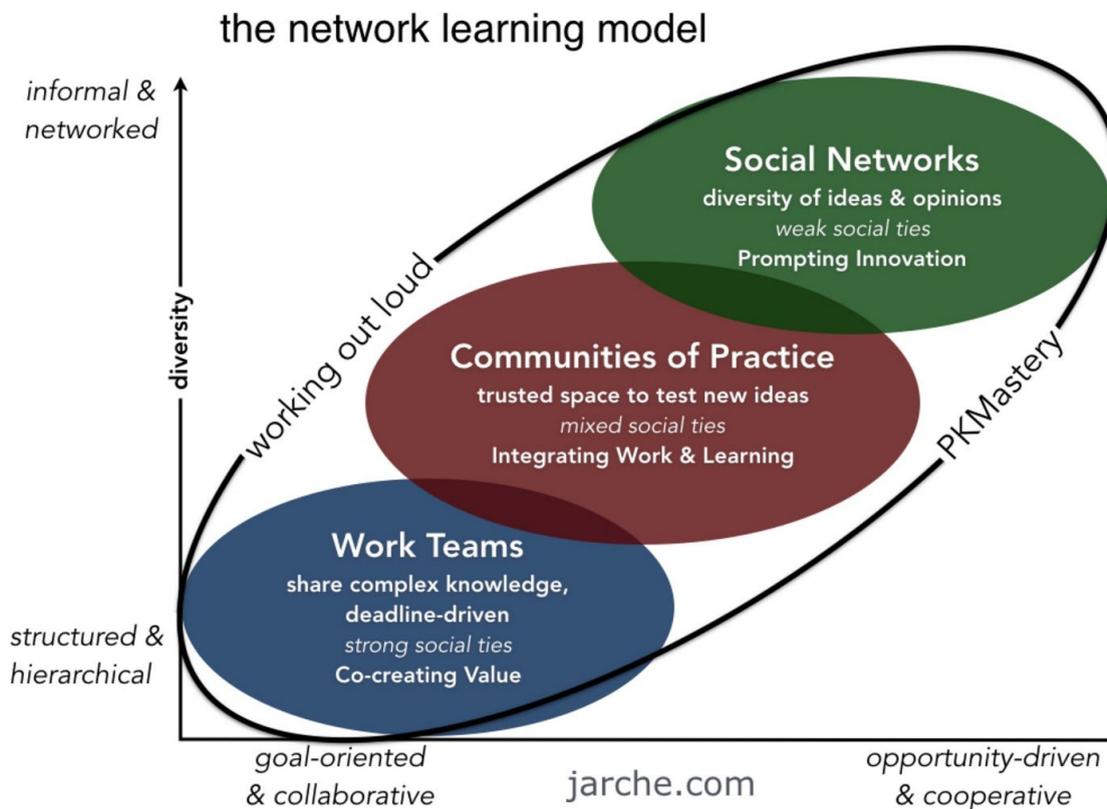
.... ‘Connecting Londoners’ is producing compelling evidence about how people are connecting with each other as never before across boundaries of place, class, age, gender, race, and London is now acknowledged as the first truly socially cosmopolitan city...

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

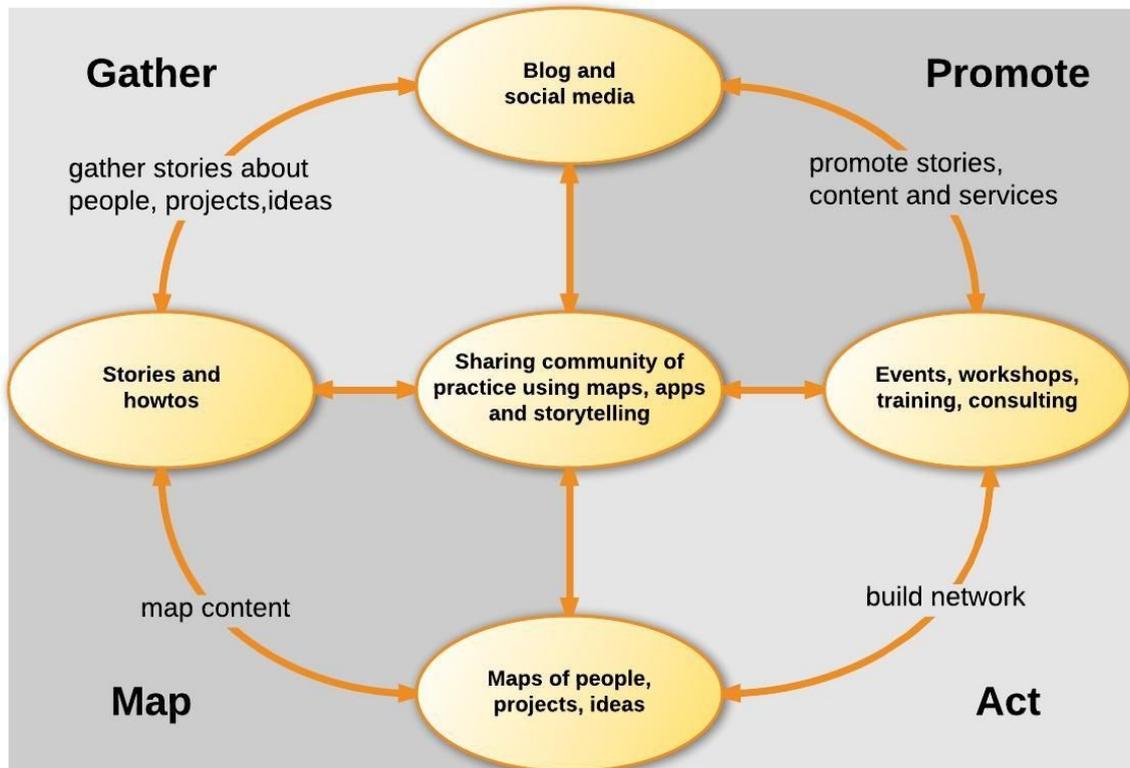


In order to operate in the networked age we need the skills and methods to move between these different domains, for work on projects, learning, connecting informally.

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 close 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?

Contacts

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We will shortly invite people to our first event to explore these proposals, and to join an online system.