Goldmining – how to find hidden community treasure

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Introduction

Communities are rich places, abundant in wonderful individuals, groups, networks and organisations. Some of this treasure lies on the surface, visible to all and easy to grasp, but more is to be found underground, hidden somewhere in them there hills. Recent years have seen a goldrush in several advanced economies as welfare systems have realised people need community first and services second, but so far, not much gold has been found. This paper offers some suggestions on how to find hidden community assets when the easy nuggets have all been picked up, how to choose where to dig for buried gold.

This guide is being written in the United Kingdom, but international references appear in the text from time to time. A fuller explanation of the approach taken to creating this guide can be found at How-to-write-in-public.pdf (peterbates.org.uk). It is part of a suite of linked documents made up of the following:

1. _Detecting dark matter_ demonstrates that a brief internet search will not locate many community resources and therefore mapmakers need to employ other search techniques

2. _Introduction to community maps and directories_ sets out some concepts and explains what people might be doing when they use these terms.

I am grateful to the many people[1] who have responded to inquiries and contributed ideas to this group of papers. Please send me your suggestions for further improvements.

This paper takes up the search for community groups, organisations and networks and suggests some useful approaches. A whole bunch of additional ideas will come to light by

- Taking the paper *How to name your Dragon* and flipping its messages.
- Reviewing the things that social care services provide and searching for the 'Community Equivalent' where the same activity takes place but the event is open to all[2].
- Concentrating on the process of by which people who need support get to participate in community activities that are open to all. See the Social Inclusion Training Pack.

Share ownership

 Whilst formal organisations have clear duties regarding the data they collect, own and distribute[3], community maps are usually coproduced by an informal group. Requiring the asset mapping process

to be managed by an accountable entity with an identifiable data controller imposes bureaucratic systems and irrevocably changes the culture of the group[4] by reminding everyone who has the real power[5]. As *Think Local Act Personal* declare, "Where possible, asset maps should be 'open source', with a wide range of local people able to update and use them" [6]. Unfortunately, they do not go on to say what open source means in practice[7, 8]. Heller[9] usefully warns us of the risk of 'anti-commons', the tragic situation where a variety of agencies collaborate, ostensibly to share information, but each is given the power of veto, resulting in a nett reduction in utilisation of the shared data.

A similar power shift can happen when informal community groups look at the copyright issues and online security obligations that are associated with publishing their community map. If the only way to be safe is to use fancy software with expensive encryption and access to legal advice, then most neighbourhood groups will forsake their principles of street-level ownership and pass the job to officials.

Unanswered Question #1

Is Open source or Creative Commons a solution?
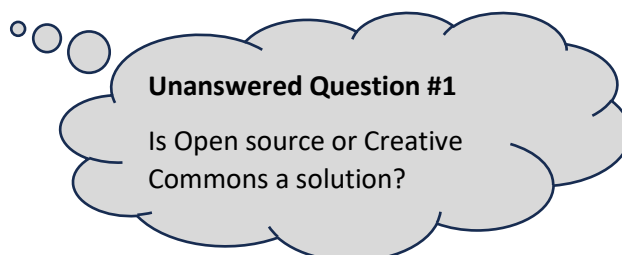
Bath & North East Somerset neatly handle this challenge by declaring; "We encourage organisations and groups to add and update their own information about their service and/or events. Ownership of the data remains with the organisations and individuals who create or update the information. Live Well B&NES does not undertake vetting or visits to the organisations listed and access to the services is at individual discretion." It is certainly the case that organisations and individuals who appear in a map should have the opportunity to see how their information is being used and to withdraw it if they so desire.

Understory identify an 'Anchor Organisation' in the local community who will invite others to join in the community asset mapping process. They keep a record of who joins the mapping group. Personal information from the map is shared freely within the group with everyone taking responsibility for looking after each other's personal data and ensuring that it is not shared beyond the group. Over time, the Anchor Organisation encourages all the members to recruit others to join the group and so diversify and enrich the map. At the same time, they ensure that expectations regarding personal data are maintained. They do this so that new members understand the arrangements and commit to their duties regarding handling of personal data, but also to ensure that people leaving the group do not carry away or misuse personal information.

All this personal information is stripped out of the map to create a sanitised version that can be published. The whole process is monitored by Understory to ensure that the coproduction values of asset mapping are maintained whilst data protection obligations are observed. They also fulfil the role of Data Controller for the mapping process to satisfy the expectations of the Information Commissioner's Office, whilst taking real care to ensure that power remains distributed rather than diffused and people know their responsibilities.

Recommendation #2

Ask the people with least power whether they are full partners in the coproduction process and feel that they share ownership of the outputs.

Keep the faith

Community asset mapping rests on a firm conviction that there is more out there waiting to be found. Without this hope, mappers become complacent and start to believe that what they have is what there is. They abandon curiosity and replace it with complacency, trade humility for arrogance and act on the basis of what they can see. The organisations that are easy to find and engage assume the power to define the world, share its resources amongst themselves and treat the hidden gold as a myth for dreamers rather than fellow citizens.

Open new doors

Hierarchical and managerialist thinking suggests that everything should be streamlined and routed through a single point of access. This is the approach taken by Wiltshire[10], who direct all inquiries about football to go through the same individual. There are clear advantages to this, since demand can be measured, resources captured, intelligence harnessed and unmet need addressed. However, it concentrates power, leading to the priorities of the single gatekeeper affecting the whole field. If the gatekeeper thinks that almost all disabled footballers should join a segregated group, then mainstream teams will never learn how to make reasonable adjustments and disabled footballers will live in a benevolent ghetto. In contrast, if there are many pathways into sport and every other kind of community participation, then the Directory will include non-specialist options as well as segregated provision, and people will be supported in making an informed decision.

Find the Connectors

Malcolm Gladwell labelled people as connectors if they were rich in helpfulness and contacts. They are those rare individuals who seem to know everybody, are often doing a favour for someone and love to introduce people to one another. They are the people who are likely to know someone in the group you are trying to contact and will help to broker an introduction. This approach prioritises human connection over information, so find someone in a neighbouring group or who shares the group's interest and who will get you in. To find an Amharic group, choose a quiet moment to visit your local Ethiopian restaurant for injera and conversation with the waiter.

Cultivate your relationship with the connectors and consider wasting some time with them. An hour spent drinking tea and chatting informally sometimes achieves far more than a brisk and businesslike exchange. Genuine curiosity about others can prepare the ground for your agenda, as well as yield some valuable ideas for collaboration.

Find out how venues respond to an inquiry

When a venue takes a booking for a one-off or regular event, there are various ways they can treat it, as follows:

- If the hirer is making a private booking, venue staff have an obligation to keep details confidential. Some venue staff appear to treat every booking as private.

- There may be a central booking system and an online diary to show availability and perhaps contact details of the hirer and times of the booking.
- Helpful venue staff will disclose information to a legitimate visitor, such as by confirming the booking and providing directions to a lost party guest.
- In addition to its confidential record of the booking and invoicing data, venue staff may invite hirers to post anything that they are willing to place in the public domain onto a noticeboard so that the information can be shared with visitors or inquirers. They direct in-person visitors to the board and consult it themselves when answering telephone or online inquirers.
- Where individual requests for information are received, venue staff may delay their response until they have contacted the hirer to ask for permission to disclose and been satisfied that the inquirer is a fit and proper person to be trusted with the information.
- Venue staff may provide the hirer with resources to help them carry out their own advertising, such as a photo of the venue, map and plan of the building as well as exact details of address, bus routes and website.
- Venue staff may have their own marketing programme which might include material offered by hirers. This would include online material on the venue webpage or Facebook page or a brochure rack where hirers may display materials which can be taken away by inquirers.

The General Data Protection Regulation obliges venues to keep booking information private where it includes personal data. Information about bookings by organisations is not covered, although there is a broad obligation to treat private parties as confidential and inhibit unauthorised entry.

Where an organisation such as a local authority has responsibility for a number of venues, it is helpful to find out which of the bulleted options above are used. In my own area, I have not yet found the name of the relevant manager or a policy on this matter. The result can lead to practices that thwart the commissioners' intentions of promoting healthy living and social cohesion in communities. On one occasion, a venue insisted that they could not provide any information until they had obtained permission from the hirer and then refused to seek it as they were too busy. They also indicated that my name, postal address, email and phone number, the name and registration number of the charity for whom I volunteer and the purpose for which I was seeking the information was insufficient to permit them to disclose the name of the group and its meeting time.

Variations also arise in the relationship between a community group and the mapmaker. Where the local authority is creating the map or directory, they can try to force some kinds of community agencies to provide information by making it a condition of funding or registration. Some agencies will be noncompliant despite the obvious power that is held over them, perhaps because they resist all kinds of coercion. Such mechanisms also cast into shadow the more challenging question of how information is collected from groups, networks and organisations over which the mapmaker has no direct power.

Collect directories and infrastructure

Community directories are incomplete, out-of-date and biased, but valuable. A *Directory of Directories* allows you to start with the accomplishments of others and systematically search them for what you need. Some community groups have existed without interruption for a thousand years, so old maps will point out unchanging landmarks and suggest new lines of inquiry. Where directories are national or international, then efficiencies can be achieved by sharing the list of directories

between mapmakers working in different localities. For example, Devon has published a list of directories for Christian denominations which could immediately benefit colleagues around England. However, it is important to maintain curiosity rather than assume that one directory satisfies the search, since about half of the active churches in an area do not appear in any of these directories. Similarly, a naïve observer might assume that a niche activity such as Nordic Walking would be represented by one national body and its directory, but it turns out that there are at least two distinct organisations[11], each with its own directory of trainers and walking groups.

While community directories are based on a locality, other directories favour an interest or agenda such as equalities or environmental issues. Systematically working through a number of directories will usually provide some fresh leads and lines of inquiry about community assets. A directory will list eligible groups on offer within that locality or interest but respondents can also help locate groups that address other interests. For example, the directory of local churches will connect the mapmaker to people who can point out local foodbanks, dog obedience classes and badminton clubs. This presents us with the intriguing question of how to sequence our search topics – would it be better to start with jazz musicians or Gurdwaras? If we locate them, who will give us most help in finding answers to search topic number two? This is likely to be culture specific, but also be influenced by practicalities.

In my own local efforts, a search for churches was helped by first locating community centres so that they could point to church groups that hired a room in their building. Similarly, locating the management committees for playing fields and where league data are stored might be useful precursors to finding amateur football teams. Some of these steps are easier said than done, since, for example, there are a plethora of football leagues, distinguished by age, gender, locality, disability and more, no obvious place to find them and no obvious link between the team name listed on the league table and contact details or even address. A single club may host several teams who each play in a different league. Regional infrastructure bodies may promote the sport whilst demanding subscription fees from participating clubs, thus driving unfunded teams beyond view.

Infrastructure organisations bring people together to compare experiences, coordinate responses and collaborate on plans. Locating and linking with these organisations and gatherings can provide new insights and connections. Such groups may be interest-based, such as a 'Churches Together' network, or hyperlocal, such as the Facebook page for a neighbourhood[12], or identity based, such as the Nottingham Spanish Society or even a WhatsApp group for a single street.

Publish your question

Church directories yielded the name of a particular local church, but none of its electronic contact details were up to date – Facebook was last used in 2014, the phone number was unobtainable and searches revealed no website. Posting a question on the local Facebook Church Noticeboard finally yielded a contact point. The published request for information was headed 'lost churches' in a deliberately provocative style to stimulate a response from someone eager to correct misinformation. This is a dangerous strategy as they were indignant that their seventy years' faithful service to the community was somehow unrecognised.

As we have seen elsewhere[13], Directories and Noticeboards miss whole sectors of the community, so publishing a question in several places may be more successful.

Log your investigations

Every website you visit has a hyperlink that can be filed and saved in your own growing list of community assets, saving you time the next time you need to search for a similar or neighbouring resource. Maintain a record of when you reached out to make contact with the group, so that you can follow up as necessary.

Vary your communication medium

Try email, Facebook messenger, txt, phone call, typed and then handwritten letter. Always check the postcards on a shop door and step into front gardens to read the poster displayed on a neighbour's window. Take a photo of the information, enlarge the image if necessary and transfer the data to your files. Some cultures and some individuals have a favourite medium and do not respond to messages in other forms. Visit the building and check signboards and noticeboards inside and out. Chat with the receptionist in person. Take a sealed, handwritten letter with you and leave it at reception to be handed to the group. Join the online group and post your inquiry on their page.

Change the author

Your inquiry may be more successful if it comes from a Black woman rather than a white man, a local person rather than an office worker in another part of town, or a person who writes in everyday language rather than an academic style.

What is in it for them?

A community group that meets to play badminton is probably not very interested in spending time completing online questionnaires. This may be partly responsible for the tiny percentage of community groups that appear on most community directories. So try to find out or guess how they might benefit from responding to your inquiry, and present your request with this in mind.

Check any small print on your request for information and ensure that it is not off-putting. For example, some community directories include a statement of terms and conditions of use that prohibit most uses that local groups would want, and that lay the entire burden of liability on the group should anything go wrong. Are your forms or inquiries written for specific respondents and therefore put everyone else off? Are there other examples of groups like the one you are seeking to connect with already in the directory or does the current content suggest that your target group is ineligible? Engage some respondents in providing you with feedback about your draft request for information and act on what you are told so that your messages are clear and encouraging.

A few community groups may be motivated by the opportunity of becoming compliant with their legal obligations[14]. Associations with more than 25 members are obliged to comply with the Equality Act 2010 by ensuring that they have anticipated the arrival of disabled persons as members or guests and made reasonable adjustments to enable them to participate. Advertising the existence of

the group in a directory which is read by disabled persons would be one way to demonstrate a commitment to equality of access.

Other groups may wish to develop new skills and competencies. Helping them to make reasonable adjustments, address anxiety about receiving disabled members and knowing what to do in response to distress or other crises will likely turn an unfriendly group into a friendly one, especially if specialist staff offer continuing support. Offering to support the group through the process of acquiring accreditation, such as Scope's Inclusive Activity Award, will help community groups to gain the skills and confidence they need.

Repeat

Leave a courtesy period of perhaps ten days before contacting them again to check if they received your message. Always assume that the person is off sick or on holiday rather than ignoring you. If you have evidence that your message has been read but not answered, try repeating it. After gentler strategies had failed, I finally got a reply from one organisation by pasting six copies of my inquiry one after another on their Facebook page. This was a kill or cure approach that could have resulted in my membership of their Facebook page being revoked!

[1] A list of those who have been approached and responded to a request can be seen in *Introduction to community maps and directories* (op cit)*.*

[2] Where health and social services offer bibliotherapy or rebound sessions, the community equivalent is a book club or trampolining. Some people make the journey from music therapy to musician, from the segregated Scoutlink group to ordinary Scouts and even from the Recovery College to…. College.

[3] For example, Onion Collective assert that "We promise never to share or sell your information to other organisations or businesses and you can opt out of our communications at any time."

[4] Bates P (2010) Living on Triangle Island *British Journal of Wellbeing* Vol 1, No 9, pp26-29. For the wider implications of taking a bureaucratic approach to community issues, see the 'Parable of the blobs and squares' from Cahn E (2000) *No more throw-away people: the co-production imperative.*

[5] Maclure suggests that ABCD needs augmenting with anti-oppressive practice to reduce its tendency to increase power imbalances. He notes, for example, that traditional ABCD approaches lead to a situation where comparatively powerful people are more likely to take up the new connections made during the ABCD process. See Maclure L (2023) Augmentations to the asset-based community development model to target power systems, *Community Development,* 54:1, 4-17, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2021.2021964.

[6] Getting to grips with asset-mapping - Resources - Think Local Act Personal

[7] See Home | Open Source Institute (opensi.net).

[8] When we share, everyone wins - Creative Commons.

[9] Heller M (1997) "The Tragedy of the Anticommons: Property in the Transition from Marx to Markets." William Davidson Institute Working Papers Series 40.

[10] Inquiry sent 21/02/2024 to ask how it works in Wiltshire.

[11] Nordic Walking UK provides this directory, while British Nordic Walking offers this one.

[12] Nottingham City Council provides services for over 300,000 people who live in its urban area within a larger conurbation. Facebook was searched in October 2023 to find groups that linked neighbours together rather than those that promoted a single organisation – see . Search terms included 'Nottingham' and the names of each of the local neighbourhoods within the City boundary ('Arboretum', 'Aspley' and so on). More than 100 Facebook groups were found that linked local residents together. Adding together the membership numbers for each group generated a total of more than 600,000, approximately twice the population. Many citizens belong to several groups and others belong to none, but this gives an idea of how pervasive such groups can be. See Neighbourhood Facebook groups in Nottingham, UK.

[13] Bates P (2023) *Detecting dark matter*.

[14] Further details on the legal context surrounding community maps and directories can be seen in Bates P (2023) *How to meet your statutory obligations in community mapping*.