

How to name your dragon – identifying the threats to community mapmaking



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Introduction

Communities are rich places, abundant in wonderful individuals, groups, networks and organisations. Some parts of community are well mapped, but there remain large tracts of uncharted land, aspects of community life where the map is almost blank. The old mapmakers would have written 'Here be dragons' but the truth is we simply did not know the terrain, its inhabitants or the challenges it may contain.

This paper starts the process of cataloguing the threats and dangers that get in the way of community asset mappers. A naïve observer might think that all the mapmaker needs to do is check the internet, send the group an email and there it is – another beautiful resource in an abundant community. This paper attempts to identify the dragons that block the road, destroy the map and devour the mapmaker. When we understand the threats we can devise solutions.

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 \(peterbates.org.uk\)](https://peterbates.org.uk/how-to-write-in-public.pdf). 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.
3. [How to meet your statutory obligations in community mapping](#) brings together the various legal requirements and policy guidance laid upon public services in the United Kingdom.
4. [How to choose between a community or service directory](#) unpacks the arguments for each option and attempts to show that a community directory is a vital element of local life.
5. [How to measure the reach of community directories](#) suggests some key performance indicators for checking whether a directory reflects the community it serves and provides some data about what is currently available.
6. [How to decide what to put in your map of community assets](#) addresses the specifics of how to obtain the data that will form the content of your Directory or map, what counts as data and what should be published.
7. [How to get your group listed](#) helps community groups decide whether to appear in a particular directory or map. This guide may also be useful to people who commission mapmakers.
8. [How to name your dragon](#) catalogues the threats to effective mapmaking in uncharted territory
9. [Goldmining – how to find hidden community treasure](#) offers some strategies which might be adopted by mapmakers in searching for community assets.
10. The [Directory of Directories](#) provides a starting point for people wishing to build a local community directory and the [List of Neighbourhood Facebook Groups in Nottingham, UK](#) offers an example of some of the social media sources in one city. The [List of English SEND Local Offer websites](#) provides the evidence source for much of the content of these papers.

I am grateful to the many people¹ who have responded to inquiries and contributed ideas to this group of papers. Please send your suggestions for further improvements to peter.bates96@gmail.com.

Offline

Some community groups simply do not use the internet. Some directories, such as [North Yorkshire Connect](#), do not provide an email address, phone number or postal address for community groups to ask questions².

Derelict

Some community buildings are neglected to the point of dereliction and a visual inspection of the façade and fabric would suggest that it is closed and nothing is happening inside. The front door may be bolted or protected by intimidating anti-vandal materials with access via another door. The building may be open sporadically and so appear inaccessible to passing visitors. Reception may be unstaffed, leaving visitors reluctant to call the mobile number to attract the duty manager who is busy elsewhere in the building.

The Directory itself may similarly appear neglected and abandoned, discouraging people from submitting information or trusting its contents. For example, on inspection, the most recent entry on the '[news](#)' section of one Directory was 18 months old and another provided a link to its 'annual report' which was four years old, suggesting that funding has been withdrawn or posts left vacant, casting doubt on the currency of other information in the Directory.

Disowned

Buildings that used to be managed by the Council have been transferred into community ownership or handed to another agency. Even within an identifiable organisation, it may be hard to find the person who has operational responsibility for the building. Remote working since the Covid 2019 pandemic has meant that staff sometimes rely on Teams or Zoom calls and no longer include a phone number in their autosignature. Others prefer to leave messages unsigned altogether, use a team's title rather than giving a personal contact or increase their distance from mapmakers by using contact forms and 'do not reply' email addresses. Demand pressure, staff churn and frequent reorganisation mean that tacit knowledge about who is responsible for what is lost within large organisations. All these things make it harder for mapmakers to find things out.

Misinformed

Life moves on, but posters, webpages and building names remain. Years after a community group has died and its goodness has returned to the soil, posters remain on newsagents' windows, banners adorn buildings and websites boldly announce that the group meets on Wednesday evenings. Promising 'contact us' message forms do not function, email addresses are returned as undeliverable and phone numbers give the unavailable ringtone. The building where the group met is decommissioned, bulldozed or turned into housing. The group passes beyond community memory and nobody seems able to confirm whether it has migrated to a new home or closed altogether.

The mapmaker may present the directory in a fashion which is wholly unappealing to the community group, perhaps by using social care jargon or representing the purpose of the group in a way which is out of step with the marketing priorities of the group itself. For example, the following acronyms were spotted on SEND Local Offer websites and appeared without immediate explanation: AP, EHCP, FAQ, FSD, LCO, SEND, SENDIAS, and one [Directory](#) insists that submissions are presented in a grammatically correct format - in the third person. Swindon provide a comprehensive [style guide](#) to help people write their submission while Kingston & Richmond offer a [jargon buster](#) rather than insisting on plain speaking. Some directories compiled by local authorities use obscure terms like 'card' (meaning a webpage of information about a group), 'practitioner' or 'provider' of a 'service', rather than promoting adventure and friendship. Indeed, one explained that community groups appearing in their directory were about:

"...reducing children and young people's vulnerabilities to becoming involved in criminal activity, child criminal exploitation, anti-social behaviour and can assist in providing health routines, peer relationships and develop self-esteem and self-worth."

Sworn to secrecy

When a community group hires a room for its meetings, the venue manager will sometimes use a form that serves as an agreement or memorandum of understanding between them³. This may provide an opportunity for the hirer to authorise the venue to disclose information about the group to general inquirers. Some groups that we might have expected to welcome newcomers instruct venue staff to withhold information about their meetings and so establish themselves as a private booking. We do not know why.

Some knowledge brokers adopt the ethic of always seeking permission before providing any information to inquirers, and sometimes requiring that permission to be provided in writing so that they have a defensible trail of evidence for disclosing anything. They may erroneously believe that the General Data Protection Regulation prevents them from sharing any information at all without explicit permission to do so (GDPR regulates information about persons, not organisations). The delays and interruptions inherent in this process of obtaining permission often means that the response is delayed or lost, leaving the inquirer frustrated.

Some venues have no policy on the matter and respond to inquirers informally, perhaps disclosing information to inquirers who sound trustworthy and withholding it from others. This may arise simply because there is no policy, because the venue is run by volunteers who do not feel obliged to read or uphold it, or where a team of people staff reception in turn, and each has their own idiosyncratic interpretation. Indeed, some volunteers may answer questions about bookings that they know personally but be unable to provide any information about groups that meet on the days they do not attend themselves.

No favouritism

When a family is seeking residential or nursing care for their elderly or disabled relative, the local Council manages its competing interests by offering a list but no recommendations. This is because

most care homes are operated by commercial businesses and a recommendation from a trusted authority will bring the provider additional income. As a result, they meet their duty of care by providing a list, outsource judgements about quality to the inspectorate (the Care Quality Commission) and perhaps suggest some broad criteria to help families make their own judgement.

Similar issues play out when mapmakers build a community directory. There are concerns about the quality and safety offered by community groups and activities as well as the reputational risk of being seen to favour one group over another. Some mapmakers resolve the dilemma by taking an even more restrictive stance than that taken by councils over care homes and confine their directory to groups over which they have management and financial control, denying the oxygen of publicity to all other community groups⁴. Others build a list and add a disclaimer explaining that sharing is not endorsing.

Local community projects face a similar dilemma when choosing which directory to submit their details to. Some are commercially driven and others are promoting a particular agenda but all demand administrative time and skill from contributors. It is easier to treat them all equally by giving a blanket refusal.

No cross selling

When building owners let rooms or host meetings of other groups, they have the opportunity to 'cross-sell' by advertising the activities offered by the hirer. They can add content to their own website or Facebook page, include a name plaque by the door to their building and place flyers on their noticeboard and brochure rack. Some building owners prefer to market their own activities and so decline to display any information about their guests. This may be because the hirer makes a useful contribution to the running costs of the building but adds nothing to the mission of the host, so advertising messages do not converge. It may be because the hirer believes that they are competing for the same recruits, or simply that the idea of cross selling has not occurred to them⁵.

Cross selling can occur between one activity and another in the same building. This is more likely to happen in community centres where regular meetings are arranged for all the regular hirers to get together to discuss washing up routines, generate ideas for joint projects and plan centre-wide festivals. If the venue is a single room which disparate groups use on different days, they may never meet one another or understand what is happening when they are absent., thus inhibiting the informal process of referral between them.

Another version of the 'no cross-selling' issue arises when the community group misses an opportunity to signpost members to a similar activity run by another organisation elsewhere, but which has a slightly different feature. For example, one free English class for asylum seekers runs on a Monday. Parents cannot bring their small children, but the class run by a neighbouring organisation runs a creche alongside the teaching. Another group offers students a free hot meal before the lesson starts, and yet another meets on a different day, accommodating students who are not able to make a Monday. If groups are possessive of their recruits, they will try to suppress the information about alternatives.

Sometimes a group will be uncomfortable about the underpinning values of the alternative provider and so will be reluctant to cross sell. This may be more prevalent in relation to groups that are associated with political, religious or campaigning organisations. Such anxieties may be based on

prejudice and assumption rather than knowledge, but it will still inhibit groups from joining a community directory where they appear alongside others.

Groups that need peers will overcome these barriers. For example, an amateur football team will have no opposing team to play unless they build alliances with other clubs. Community groups and organisations of this type will interact with others and join a directory so that they can do so, while those that operate entirely independently will be less likely to participate.

Losing volunteers

The community group relies on volunteers and works well when those volunteers believe that they are doing a something that is unique. Letting them know that there are similar activities being run by neighbouring groups may result in volunteers migrating to the more interesting competition or simply asking unwanted questions.

Fear of strangers

I am searching for groups that could offer culturally appropriate support to refugees. A community centre manager told me that he had taken a booking, but the hire agreement prevented him from passing on contact information. 'Ask them yourself', he said, 'They are there from 10am on Sundays.' At 09.55am there were no posters on display, no-one entering, and the door was locked. I peered through the window and saw people in white robes sitting on the floor in the back room. I could just hear them singing together without instruments or amplification. Should I press the doorbell and interrupt their meeting? Which language, culture and faith is being celebrated? How would my questions, in English and from a white man, be received? I slipped away.

Community groups that have prior experience as victims of hate crime may quite reasonably be fearful when a stranger asks for information about the group. Will they target the group with unwanted messages, picket their doors, graffiti their windows or bomb their worship? Will they introduce a newcomer who is from a group traditionally viewed as the oppressor? The group may prefer to welcome newcomers via a sponsorship arrangement in which established members speak for the potential newcomer before they are admitted.

A similar problem arises when a community group wishes to serve its immediate neighbours in preference to those living far away. Advertising the group via a notice in the window of the building will get the message out to passers-by, while an entry in an online directory might reach people living on the other side of town or the other side of the world. This may mean that a community café designed to provide a free meal to local people will also provide hospitality to a handful of people who enjoy the free food at every other social eating venue across the city. Community groups must decide if this stereotype is true and whether it matters.

Will providing information lead to a vast crowd of newcomers turning up? It is not so much the single newcomer who is feared, but the crowd who turn up together, eat all the biscuits, take up all the time of the leader and change the group for longstanding members.

Sometimes the fear of strangers is manifested in small yet off-putting ways that deter inquiries. Respondents who remain anonymous are harder to talk to and get back to. People who open their exchange by asking how you got their email address, why you want to know and which organisation you represent will get few follow-up contacts from the general public. These signs of fear create a mirrored reaction in the inquirer, so, despite their professionalism and experience, the mapmaker can feel anxious about approaching an unfamiliar group, unsure if their presence will elicit a welcome or whether their questions will trigger suspicion or rejection.

Blind spot

Mapmakers should examine their own preferences and prejudices about community groups and organisations to ensure that they do not reproduce their own judgements in the directory. It is possible to act out the unconscious conviction that ‘I don’t want it in my life, so you can’t have it in yours’. This would mean that a mapmaker who has no interest in sport or feels uneasy about certain political views may neglect these areas in their directory, while a mapmaker who is enthusiastic about conservation will capture details of every recycling project.

Unconscious bias can affect the overall mapping task too. When asked about mapping the community, one researcher who was studying social prescribing responded with suggestions about citizen-led peer support groups. These are undoubtedly a valuable aspect of community, but merely reframe the answer to questions about need rather than contribution. From this perspective, families with disabled children need help rather than positive social roles; an opportunity to meet others on a similar journey rather than chances to contribute to the wider community; Special Olympics rather than the local athletics club.

How do we know if we are myopic? Research reported in [How to measure the reach of community directories](#) shows that English SEND Local Offer Directories rarely capture more than 10% of longstanding community organisations, favour segregated options and inadvertently lock disabled people and their families out of mainstream community life. These Directories are built in response to a statutory obligation, are inspected and often have dedicated staff working on them, and yet almost all of them have a significant blind spot when it comes to the task of reflecting their local community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many staff teams in health and social care do not rely on these ‘professionally’ produced Directories but instead build and maintain their own informal directory of resources to which they refer. No evidence is available on the quality of these private lists, but if the people working fulltime on a similar task are victims of service-centred thinking and fail to adopt a true community-focused approach, then there are few grounds for hope that such informal directories will be more complete.

Duty to vet

The person who holds information about a community group may feel that they have a duty to vet inquirers and only provide information to inquirers who pass a test of legitimacy. Asking ‘Why do you want to know?’ suggests that the knowledge broker is suspicious about the motives of inquirers unless they are validated by someone they trust⁶. We do not know anything about the threshold of eligibility or what would satisfy them that the inquirer was genuine. It may be that the knowledge broker feels a need to filter out people who might be seen as difficult new members or that they

prefer to share information with public service professionals and are reluctant to share it with members of the general public. Knowledge brokers may feel obliged to adopt a defensible position if they are challenged by the group on why information was shared. This may be because the group is racist or homophobic, because some inquirers might demand more support than the group is able to give, or that the group is so fragile that, for a time at least, it is effectively closed to newcomers.

Mapmakers delete information from their Directories. In one example, a group is sent a reminder if they have not checked and confirmed their details in the past three months, and delisted if they have not done so within six. The administrative burden may be off-putting to community groups, especially if it is combined with being sent an excessive amount of marketing messages. These expectations are rarely set out on the terms and conditions or 'invitation to submit information' page, leaving readers nervous about what will be demanded of them.

Gatekeeper

Malcolm Gladwell⁷ described Connectors as people who have huge social networks and boundless generosity and so are eager to share what they know. In contrast, Gatekeepers have huge social networks but love to retain a grip on the information they hold and give it out item by item, retaining their power and control by selecting who to share it with. Their status and identity as the person who knows everything and everyone is secured.

Gatekeepers operate at the personal level when they respond to an individual inquiry from a single member of the public, and at an organisational level when they consider community information as 'commercial in confidence' material that gives them a marketing lead over their rivals. Both commercial owners of a community directory and charities that are seeking to expand can curate their published information in a manner designed to inhibit the activities of their competitors⁸. This is perfectly understandable given the portability of general information (facts about policy or systems for accessing welfare support and headquarters information about organisations that operate nationwide) and the immensely time-consuming tasks of collating it and establishing local connections. It may be part of the reason that some community directories publish a Conditions of Use statement which limits use of the information⁹.

Not my job

A local community centre set up an auto-reply to emails which declared "We do not respond to emails. Phone us on Wednesdays at 7pm." Another centre clearly defined their role as confined to taking bookings rather than advertising and so refused to provide information to inquirers beyond this tightly defined function. In a third example, a [list](#) was published to show details of places where free hot food was offered to anyone. The list was sent out to the providers for checking in November 2023. A week later, only 13 out of 47 organisations (28%) had responded to confirm or correct their details.

Submitting an inquiry to the mapmaker is hard when there is no email address provided or when email addresses are limited to specific types of inquiry that do not match the question. Sending an email may yield silence rather than a reply (in 2023, only 13% of SEND Local Offer Directory builders

gave any response to my inquiry beyond an auto-generated acknowledgement) and the response is sometimes an instruction to resubmit one's inquiry to a different department.

The broad declarations which national and local governments have made about promoting social cohesion, combatting loneliness and treating one another with respect have evidently not influenced these practices. Perhaps everyone is simply too busy.

Complacent

Mapmakers who think they have found everything and finished their map will become complacent and lose their sense of curiosity about the community they are charting. At the same time, community groups that have plenty of members and a waiting list will be less likely to invest time in advertising their activities.

Time wasters

The community group may believe that inquiries from a stranger are not worth responding to, since they believe that this route will never result in new members signing up. They think that the only new joiners are personally recruited by current members and strangers or passers-by simply do not engage. Therefore, spending time submitting information to mapmakers or answering their questions is a fruitless endeavour, since new members do not arrive by this path. Such beliefs lead community groups to ignore requests for information from people that they do not know.

This perspective may be broadened out to include any networking meetings or interactions with other organisations, so invitations to a meeting of everyone in the neighbourhood or everyone who runs this type of activity will be consistently ignored. The people who set up such events are viewed as time wasters and the meetings are assumed to be fruitless endeavours by those who adopt a 'me, not we' parochial attitude.

Threats from officials

Community groups can be intimidated by the threatening nature of formal communications from officials and prefer to avoid all of this contact and its implied liabilities. These formal statements regularly appear as Terms and Conditions of Use on a Community Directory, and some of them explain how, should anything go wrong, the community group is always liable and the local authority never so¹⁰. This kind of inequality, especially when backed up by the local authority's access to legal advice and substantial resources, will inevitably discourage community groups from entering any kind of formal arrangement. Intimidation can happen in smaller ways too, such as the statements that may be found at the foot of emails and contain statements such as:

- *Access to and use of the contents of this message by anyone else other than the addressee(s) may be unlawful. All emails sent to or from this address may be subject to scrutiny by someone other than the addressee may have to be disclosed in response to a request. Note the inequality inherent in these statements, by which one party may not disclose and the other has every right to do so.*

- *We do not condone or agree to the recording of this service and its staff. If it is evident or suspected that individuals are recording telephone calls from the service/staff then the call will be brought to an end and the individual will be placed on a “do not call or engage via telephone” listing.* Note that officials often record the calls made by members of the public ‘for training purposes’ and so again this reinforces inequality.
- *Yours sincerely, the Community Directory Team.* Impersonal and anonymous communication is off-putting and discourages community organisations from building human connection, asking questions or resolving issues, which will deter them from joining the Directory.

Bot phobia

Every time a new piece of identifiable information is placed online, the risks increase that online bots will harvest addresses, viruses and malware will infect computers and identities will be stolen. Some individuals see these potential harms as overshadowing any potential benefit of joining a community directory.

Too busy

For some people who are busy running community activities, an inquiry from a stranger is acceptable, but their priority is to support current members. Groups who feel this way have nothing against the inquirer, they simply do not get around to responding. This may be particularly the case when community centres are staffed by volunteers, when responsibilities have not been clearly defined and allocated and where the culture is not focused on welcome.

At its most acute, busyness means that the community group or venue is full and simply does not have capacity to respond to inquiries, help members of the public or provide a welcome, induction and supportive supervision of new people. In one example, the community centre manager declared that she was too busy to forward an inquiry to the group. Community groups are therefore not simply open or closed, public or private, but their capacity to receive, greet and welcome newcomers is a fluctuating asset. Sometimes the tank is empty and the group will realistically announce that it is closed to new members for a time, but more likely, they will demonstrate this through tense and distracted behaviour, failing to respond to inquiries, avoiding eye contact or neglecting the guest until it is too late.

Busyness can affect the mapmaker too, and failure to respond or help with inquiries from community groups or others will inevitably result in some candidates withdrawing from the process and remaining outside the Directory.

The community group may suspect that appearing in the Community Directory will tie them into a whole stack of additional obligations and duties that they are reluctant or unable to meet. This will be exacerbated if the Terms and Conditions of Use place all risks and potential penalties at the door of the group, if signing up leads people to feel that they cannot take a holiday or close the group, or if they fear that listing may attract regulatory action, such as a visit from the food hygiene inspector. One authority ominously included the following in its landing page for the SEND Local Offer Directory:

“Local areas are inspected by Ofsted and CQC (Care Quality Commission) in relation to the work they do to support children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).”

There is nothing in this statement to suggest that inspections are confined to specialist, regulated provision.

Other priorities

Brilliant community directories are visually attractive, easily navigable and present their information in a choice of formats, such as video, easy read, spoken and community languages. Some of these aspirations are set as formal requirements. This can mean that the directory is under constant revision as new platforms are introduced, videos are commissioned and webpages adapted for diverse users. Well and good, unless these tasks absorb all the available time and slow or even stop efforts to grow the directory’s community content.

What directory?

Whilst the community directory is well known to commissioners, social prescribers and mapping professionals, it remains unknown to ordinary community groups. Or the directory may be well known to those groups that receive public funds, attend networking meetings and have powerful people on their governing body, but unknown to others. Marketing may have been sent, but in a culturally irrelevant format, peppered with jargon or complicated terminology. There may be no obvious benefit to registering, or it may be targeted at social care providers rather than mainstream community groups. As a result, the directory is unknown or considered irrelevant by the community group.

Too cheap

Maybe people reject the opportunity to engage because it is too easy, too cheap and does not capture imagination like a robust, challenging bit of community development would. In attempting to make registration effortless by harnessing nudge principles¹, mapmakers have stripped away the central commitment and passion that motivates and energises individuals and communities. In attempting to build a directory, mapmakers have forgotten that a list or a directory or a map never changed the world, and it is the dream of change that warms our hearts, gets us out of bed and drives our labour. Instead of trying to get people to buy in by lowering the price, raise it. Find a bigger vision and ask for more time, more passion and more effort. Then people will recognise a cause worth living for and engage with it.

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 An email address is provided to enable people to report technical difficulties with registration on the site, an online survey form asks for feedback about the directory, a link goes to the general inbox for the Council as a whole, but there is no email, phone number or postal address for asking a general question of the community directory.

³ It would be interesting to collect a sample of these forms and review the extent to which they guide the process of giving or withholding permission to disclose information about the hirer.

⁴ A social Prescriber explained to the author that they were forbidden from providing information to their clients about community groups or activities unless they were funded and managed by statutory education, health or social care agencies. When this view was put to Dan Hopewell, Director of Knowledge and Innovation At the London Region for Social Prescribing, he responded in the following way, "Directories (and onward referrals) are definitely not limited to 'therapeutic activities' and I would estimate that in London referrals to such activities form well under 25% of onward referrals. Social prescribing is definitely not about only meeting a defined health or social care need, and it is very odd that a social prescribing link worker should think that to be the case." (personal correspondence 3 Jan 2024).

⁵ The website of St Nic's contains no reference to the Chinese church that meets in their building. St Ann with Emmanuel made no reference to the Ethiopian church that meets in their building.

⁶ I sent an email inquiry to a youth club with my name, postal address and charity details appended, "Do you have any churches that meet in your building?" "Yes, a couple". (Recent annual report indicates four churches met there until recently and possibly still do). "Here's why I am asking (explanation given).... May I know the name of the church?". "I don't have time to forward an inquiry, so you will have to visit on a Sunday and ask them." "Thanks – what time do they meet?". "I need to know more about you before I tell you."

⁷ Gladwell M (2006) *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Little, Brown.

⁸ Organisations that provide community directories include the Public Consulting Group (Connect to Support), Oxford Computer Consulting, Synergy, Idox, OLM and Send and You. None of these six organisations have yet responded to inquiries by the author, suggesting a Gatekeeper approach.

⁹ For a discussion of Conditions of Use statements, see [How to get your group listed in community directories](#) and [How to decide what to put in your map of community assets](#).

¹⁰ For example, Age UK Lambeth require those who submit data to indemnify them for all harms and refuse all liability themselves.

¹¹ Thaler RH, Sunstein CR (2012) *Nudge: The final edition*. Yale University Press.