

How to choose between a community or service directory



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Introduction

Local authorities create a directory in response to their understanding of their statutory obligations. Many of these directories appear to be largely a directory of education, health and social care services, while others aim to be a community directory, loaded with information about activities, organisations and networks in their locality. This paper attempts to unpick and then set out the arguments surrounding this choice.

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 me your suggestions for further improvements.

Recommendation #1

Describe community assets, not deficits.

Potential topics

Austerity policies have helped some local authorities realise that individuals, families and communities must be as self-supporting as possible, with formal services only stepping in when there is a need to uphold these informal processes, and the coronavirus pandemic reinforced that message, at least for a time.

Like a painting, an impressionistic map does not aim to capture everything, but uses a vivid image to convey a message. Mapmakers should discuss from the start of the project what state the map will be at when it is declared complete. Is it done when ten places have been identified as significant, ten life stories have been told or does the map need to mark every coffee shop?

[Stoke](#) tends to focus on needs and services², [Devon](#) has a substantial section for personal assistants, [Lewisham](#) confines its directory to those activities that are deemed to support ‘health and wellbeing’³ and [Calderdale](#) concentrates on tourist attractions rather than regular groups for residents, In contrast, this [Kirklees](#) directory lists lots of ‘local groups, events and things to do’ so statutory agencies are present but do not dominate. Only a few so-called community directories provide a clear indication of what sort of things will be found within or explain that this is mostly a directory of welfare services, or a tourism directory rather than a directory of community life. [Slough](#) has a useful policy statement about the vision for the SEND Local Offer⁴, while [North Somerset](#) provide some guidance on what would constitute an inappropriate entry.

Some possible selection criteria include:

- Is the group or organisation currently active?
- Are they a non-profit, or a for-profit business that is of particular relevance to people who need support? For example, [North Yorkshire Connect](#) declare 'We will not include information about commercial organisations or individuals' – despite including sole traders working as registered childminders.
- Do their aims align with particular values?
- Do they support marginalised sections of the community?
- Do they have safeguarding and other accreditation that is fit for purpose?
- Does their online material include discriminatory or offensive content?

The case for a service directory

The wide-ranging philosophical debate about the nature of community is brought to a head when mapmakers and directory compilers decide what to include. For some, **It's really a service directory.** From this viewpoint, disabled people need access to specialist, segregated services that are designed to meet their needs, since the wider 'mainstream' world is hostile and poorly designed. A map or directory is needed to support disabled people and their families to find peers, obtain expert advice and to receive tailored education, health and social care support, along with access to designated and quality-assured leisure and recreational facilities and activities. For example, [Telford & Wrekin](#) list services and events 'for the SEND Community'. These specialist networks, groups, amenities and public services are described as inclusive, since, unlike mainstream provision, disabled people can easily be included in their activities. The directory for [Manchester](#) is called 'Help and Support' and 'Service Directory' rather than 'Community Directory'; while [Doncaster](#) explain that 'Our website will tell you what help and support is available from City of Doncaster Council, the local NHS Foundation Trust and other partners such as education and social care.'

This dilemma is played out in many settings, and this includes attempts to map the 'community' for the benefit of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. If professionals see their responsibility as principally specialist, segregated services, then this will affect everything they do. Government policy that mentions 'community' will be framed as peer support amongst disabled people, a 'community directory' will be a list of specialist services that can be viewed by the public, and 'consulting the community' will mean asking disabled people and their close relatives what services they want.

In a watered-down version of the same idea, peer support groups that are run by local citizens without interference from health or social care professionals are viewed as 'the community', an approach which continues to view disabled persons and their relatives as primarily defined by their disability, rather than as people who enjoy a multiplicity of identities, strengths and contributions. In this way, a service directory might include the gardening project for people with mental health issues as an intentional therapeutic space, designed and run by local citizens, but not the allotment society, gardening club or heritage garden, where people would be seen primarily as contributors and needs would be met as a by-product of community participation.

Several reasons have been offered for building a service directory rather than a community directory, including the following:

- Some UK government policy directives⁵ omit the wider community from the entire process and local managers consider this to be intentional. Broader policy objectives regarding the contribution of disabled people to mainstream society are overlooked.
- Beliefs about safeguarding obligations means that the Directory is no more than a list of groups and organisations that are subject to statutory regulation. Mapmakers or the workers who use them are afraid that they will be seen as recommending an unregulated setting and held liable should anything go wrong.
- The size of the task proves daunting and so mapmakers restrict the size of the task by mapping services and ignoring communities. The task is further eased as they can use the regulatory and commissioning relationship to oblige service providers to submit entries to the directory.
- Some users of the directory may be overwhelmed by too large a number of returns to their searches and prefer a smaller directory in order to avoid the paralysing effect of choice overload.
- The focus is on who consults it rather than who appears on it, so it is a directory of services for the community, rather than a directory of the community for services.

Omitting community content will fail to meet the legislative obligations that underpin the provision of community directories, point professionals towards service rather than community solutions and ultimately deny citizens the support they need to participate in community life in accordance with their human rights.

The case for a community directory

Disabled people want and need the same life chances as all other citizens, and to enjoy them alongside other members of the public. Reasonable adjustments should be made by mainstream providers and assistance offered to help them become more welcoming and accessible to disabled people. From this viewpoint, an *inclusive* school, health service or social event is a mainstream facility, open to all and with disabled people present in 'natural proportions' and participating side by side with the general public. A map or directory is needed to support members of the public to find ordinary places to enjoy, belong and contribute. As an example, [West Sussex](#) introduce their SEND Local Offer webpages by declaring 'You don't need to provide a service just for families with SEND - it can be an inclusive service that welcomes anyone and everyone.'

Before starting, mapmakers need to decide whether they are intending to build a map that reflects the entire community or merely a subset of it. Take, for example, the SEND Local Offer Directories that are required in each Council area of England. The statutory obligation under which they are provided is quite clear that children and young people should have equal access to a life in the community, and supporting this human right sometimes rests on the obligation to make reasonable adjustments to universal provision so that it is open to all. A service directory consisting only of segregated, specialist provision would fail this test.

The case for two directories

Some local authorities, such as Dudley, have addressed this challenge by creating two directories, one that is exclusively populated with specialist provision (the [Dudley SEND Local Offer](#)) and the

other which lists groups and organisations that are open to all (the [Dudley Community Information Directory](#)). In their introduction, [South Tyneside](#) offer the link to universal activities first and then the link to specialist provision, thereby demonstrating their ‘presumption of mainstream’. This approach needs to be tested to see whether there are multiple ‘sky bridges’ between an entry in the service directory and its equivalent in the community directory, so that searchers can easily navigate back and forth between the two Directories. If this is not working, those who enter the specialist Directory will rarely consider universal offers. In another example, [Doncaster](#) and [Warwickshire](#) place links to universal activities at the foot (not the head) of the page listing segregated activities, but unfortunately, neither lead to much information about the community⁶. West Sussex YourSpace are to be commended for including the [Care Leavers Local Offer](#) alongside the SEND Local Offer, but, once inquirers enter this latter section of the site, there is no link back to the Directory and almost all the material about ‘participation in the community’ is actually about helping social care services improve. As can be seen in the above quotations, guidance sometimes favours services over community. A final way that segregation can be inadvertently maintained is where particular kinds of mainstream activities are offered, such as Bedford’s Local Offer Directory, which advertises crazy golf and adventure golf, but not golf.

Other areas create more than one directory, and sort potential content into one directory or another according to some overriding approach. For example, [Bury](#) offers a search facility within its SEND Local Offer tab, but also has a search facility on its homepage. The former finds 6 churches and the latter 77 of the estimated 106 in the area, so it is important for readers to understand which directory they are searching and if there is another place they should check too. This sort of signposting is not always easy to find or obvious to casual users of the directory, so it is unclear whether the six churches listed under the SEND Local Offer have something distinctive about them that makes them different from those that appear on the other list or those that do not appear at all.

Service and community together in one directory

It may be easy to respond to this dichotomy by responding ‘both’ and there is, of course, much truth in that. People need both specialist services and mainstream opportunities – occupational therapy and a job, support-group peers and wider friends, a specialist nurse and a general practitioner. It starts getting challenging when money is spent – should wheelchair ramps be provided in every mainstream school or would it be better to use the money on another classroom at the special school? Is it better to spend our limited budget on building a really good service directory or are we going to aim for a community directory? [Enfield](#) helpfully indicate that they aim to ‘make sure families are fully aware of the step-down offer from a statutory service, so they can plan and access the new opportunities’, neatly capturing their responsibility to help families navigate the transition from formal services to informal participation in community life.

Those stakeholders who see disabled people as citizens who want a job, love life, home and friendship network just like anyone else will ask professionals to broker their access to mainstream opportunities alongside their nondisabled neighbours, and coproducing the community directory will pull in employers, folk clubs, faith leaders and Mrs Jones who invites everyone she meets to go open-water swimming. As [Liverpool](#) put it, they want their community directory for children and

young people with special educational needs and disabilities to ‘better reflect community opportunities’.

Some Directories are targeted at a particular section of society, rather than being open to all. Where the SEND Local Offer Directory is managed as part of a Family Information Service, there is sometimes an attempt to include items which are assumed to be relevant to families (or even the subgroup of families with children under the age of 25 who have special educational needs or disabilities) and exclude any community group or activity that is not deemed suitable for this group. For example, Dorset’s Directory publishes its [selection criteria](#), stating that eligible services and activities must be ‘for children, young people, parents, carers or professionals working with families’. Such an approach:

- Duplicates efforts to map the community, since every distinct group will require its own directory.
- Requires ordinary community groups that are open to all to submit their information to multiple directories.
- Encourages community groups to see disabled people are different from others, adopt the kind of categorical thinking used by health and social care services and set up special, segregated activities rather than recognise the citizenship and common humanity of all.
- Assumes that disabled children and young people always need specialist provision rather than a few reasonable adjustments in ordinary community settings.
- Lets non-specialist organisations and activities off the hook by implying that it is acceptable to decide that disabled persons are not eligible to participate in their activities.
- Locks out citizens who may benefit from the information but who do not match the qualifying conditions.
- Wastes an opportunity to reduce stigma by segregating people who need support from other citizens.

This suite of papers adopts a broad view of citizenship and champions the right of everyone to participate in the wider community beyond services, thereby broadening the application of the ‘presumption of mainstream’ and ‘best endeavours’ obligations that underpin law and policy in the UK⁷.

Critics would ask whether the text provides sufficient challenge to universal services to encourage them to make reasonable adjustments, and whether the balance of entries in the Directory fully represents the range of opportunities in the community. Data reported elsewhere in this suite of papers suggests that many so-called community directories are little more than service directories. In another clear example, the [City of London](#) SEND Local Offer Directory indicates that:

We do not include links to national websites and services unless they provide a specific service to families and young people with special education needs and disabilities.

An efficiency argument might be made at this juncture. If the local authority provides no more than a service directory, then the task of locating community opportunities will fall to individual social prescribers and others who assist people to find their place. Unless this community intelligence is stored and shared, effort will be duplicated and time wasted. Opening the directory to all and permitting anyone to update it will mean that the background research that one person carries out to find the local model railway group, for example, will then be available to all.

Some directories acknowledge this issue by suggesting, for example:

Some universal activities and clubs for all children (not SEND-specific) are also included in our What's On calendar. These clubs try to be as inclusive as possible, but please be aware that many cannot support complex needs or provide 1:1 support. Please always contact these individual club/ activity organisers to discuss suitability and whether they are able to meet your child/ young person's needs.⁸

Not based here

Mapmakers must decide how to treat the local expression of a national or international organisation, especially when that organisation strictly controls its membership and maintains its own Directory. An example would be the Scouts Association where the international body has created policies and practices which every local group must adopt, as well as arranging insurance cover and setting up tracking and monitoring systems, safeguarding arrangements and so on. Some mapmakers ignore the word 'local' in their title and feel that they have reached their target by pointing to the national directories, while others aim to show local people the resources in their area and the possibilities that arise by setting them side by side. A comprehensive list of national directories, from [art clubs](#) and [bridge players](#) through [pickleball](#) and [special schools](#) to [walking football](#) and [Yestribes](#) would provide a starting point for local mapmakers and facilitate sharing of information between mapmakers in different areas. [Kingston & Richmond](#) have made a good attempt at this by including a list of 221 national organisations on their Directory, although almost all of the entries are specialist welfare providers for disabled young people rather than universal community groups. Similarly, [Rochdale](#) offer a list of charities for specific conditions.

All these decisions affect what is submitted to the Directory and admitted to its online pages. Curiously, it is rare for SEND Local Offer Directories to set out clearly what is included and excluded, leaving no more than subtle hints such as use of terms like 'providers' to indicate a preference for service over community submissions.

Unacceptable content

Community maps are sometimes loaded with jargon⁹ and acronyms, leaving readers bewildered and feeling that the Directory is not for them. The [Isle of Wight](#) includes a link to a [glossary](#) which explains jargon and abbreviations while Norfolk point readers to the [jargon buster](#) created by TLAP and [Cambridgeshire](#) have done their own.

As well as leaving out unnecessary material, some mapmakers deliberately exclude unacceptable content¹⁰. In doing so, the Directory ceases to be a representation of what is happening in the community and becomes a censored representation of the things that power holders approve¹¹. Past assets have current value, although they may be deleted from some Directories.

Some Directories set a threshold of eligibility and only admit organisations to the directory that pass this test. [Somerset](#) accredit micro-providers against defined [quality standards](#) before admitting them to the directory, while [Brent](#) may ask for proof of service quality prior to listing medical and educational provision or services for children or vulnerable adults. Islington publishes its threshold which restricts community groups and organisations to those that are 'recognised by Islington

professionals as fundamental to providing support to Islington children and young people with SEND.¹²

Warnings of danger

Other Directories expect searchers to check the contents themselves before connecting with the organisations and activities listed. In opposition to the [Free Range Kids](#) movement, [Wandsworth](#) encourage caution by recommending that ‘parents and carers should ensure their children are safe at all times’ including freedom from shouting. [Stoke](#) encourages members of the public to complete a checklist prior to participation in any activity listed on their directory, by reviewing health and safety, offender management, food hygiene and safeguarding. [Bolton](#) wants people to check the food standards rating prior to eating or drinking, [Suffolk](#) add questions about first aiders and [Oldham](#) encourages the public to ‘remember to ask staff to show you that relevant insurance is in place and staff qualifications are up to date.’ [Wokingham](#) itemise no fewer than 15 issues that they think should be investigated before using a service listed on their Directory.

In what may be a contravention of the principle of least restrictive practice, [Rutland](#) give the following blanket advice, ‘We would also recommend accompanying vulnerable people to any events or services they wish to attend.’ In a statement that is surely designed to offload blame rather than be literally followed, [Windsor & Maidenhead](#) demand that ‘You must obtain professional or specialist advice before taking, or refraining from, any action on the basis of the content on our site.’ In contrast, [East Sussex 1Space](#) confine their advice to people spending money on care homes, home care and day centres, rather than attempting to regulate everyday social participation. While the UK government recommends that parents make a wide range of checks before taking their children to a community activity¹³, in ordinary life, few citizens ask the bartender for a sight of their DBS certificate¹⁴ prior to ordering a pint!

Discouraging submissions

In addition to these deliberate actions to exclude, a more subtle set of pressures are in place to nudge¹⁵ people into appearing on the map or staying off it. For example, social care agencies may prioritise their search for community groups that offer support to people who would otherwise be queuing for statutory provision. Limited investment means that the mapmakers rarely have a moment to add ordinary community activities and when other kinds of community groups look at what is listed already, they fail to find anyone like them, so choose not to apply. Or groups that run a variety of activities see that other entries concentrate on a particular kind of activity and so follow the leaders and leave out the other things that they do. This is what may have happened with the ASKLiON directory, where only 31 of the 168 churches in the city boundary appear, and entries are confined to social welfare activities, despite the fact that all the churches are welcome to include everything that they do, including religious gatherings¹⁶.

All these filters combine until the map presents an incomplete and sometimes distorted image of the real world, not simply because information falls out of date very quickly but because of the challenges of getting information on the map in the first place. One way forward is to select a tiny aspect of community life such as a few streets, a cultural minority or a particular leisure interest, find all the related assets and then test the Directory for coverage. This would help those mapmakers

who declare that everyone is welcome or that there are examples of every kind of activity in their Directory but do not realise that these few entries are insufficient.

Mapmakers need to understand how myths and misunderstandings arise if they wish to engage and represent the whole community. An alternative approach would be to badge the Directory with a warning to readers, such as 'At present, this Directory is mostly listing organisations that help people in need. We are eager to receive information from other kinds of groups too, so that we can represent the whole community.'

Recommendation #6

Coproduce your eligibility criteria and review it with informal community members to ensure that you are not imposing service expectations on community assets. Undertake spot checks to compare what is really happening in a community with what appears on the map or directory and publish your findings.

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 "Community organisations self-select and don't apply to be listed. We'd be very happy to list them if they did apply. However, in terms of who we target to encourage to list it is probably more the community based organisations that offer support that we tend to be in touch with." (Charlotte Bennett, personal communication 05/06/2023).

³ The popular view of what supports health and wellbeing will shape who submits data to the directory, while the evidence base points out some potential social determinants of health. These include (i) reducing inequality (see Pickett K & Wilkinson R (2010) *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. Penguin UK); (ii) increasing social capital (see Rodgers J, Valuev AV, Hswen Y, Subramanian SV (2019) Social capital and physical health: An updated review of the literature for 2007–2018. *Social Science & Medicine*. Sep 1;236:112360).

⁴ I am sorry to see that the policy statement indicates that they are creating a service directory rather than a community directory, but recognise the merit of creating such a statement where the purpose is set out plainly for all to see.

⁵ An example would be [Clause 30](#) of the Special Educational Needs (Local Offer) (England) Regulations 2014 which obliges local authorities to include health professionals, disabled children and young people and their families, but is silent on the role of the wider community.

⁶ The Scout Association list around 35 Scout groups in Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council area, but none appear on the directories available via the SEND Local Offer webpage. Similarly, [SearchOut Warwickshire](#) lists just 3 Scout groups for the whole county.

⁷ [SEND Code of Practice: 0-25](#) paragraph 1.26 makes a presumption of mainstream education while allowing special schools. Section 66 of the Children and Families Act 2014 obliges local authorities to use their best endeavours to meet the child's special educational needs.

⁸ See for example, [Wiltshire Parent Carer Council](#).

⁹ The following acronyms have been found in SEND Local Offer Directories without any nearby explanation of what they mean: ACE, ASD, BBOT, CCG, CIC, CIO, CPCF, DCO, EHC, EYIT, FACE, GPCPF, IASS, ICON, MASH, NAYC, NEET, NPGF, PCF, PVI, RBG, SENC0, SENDIASS, SNAP, SSS, SWAY, TAC, TAMHS, WSoA.

¹⁰ [Northamptonshire SEND Local Offer](#) refused to admit five applicants to its directory in 2021-22.

¹¹ Beaulieu (2002, op cit) includes hunting clubs in his map, the inclusion of which would offend some conservationists. Other controversial inclusions might be the National Rifle Association, pro-life groups that perpetrate violence against abortion clinics and [Just Stop Oil](#). [Northamptonshire SEND Local Offer](#) note that they have been obliged to hide a handful of vexatious submissions to their Facebook page over an 8 year period of operation.

¹² See the full eligibility statement at [Microsoft Word - Local Offer - Inclusion Criteria - Final \(openobjects.com\)](#).

¹³ Department for Education (2023) [Using after-school clubs, tuition and community activities](#).

¹⁴ In the UK, employers can ask the Disclosure and Barring Service for a copy of the offending history of certain job applicants.

¹⁵ Thaler RH, Sunstein CR (2021) *Nudge: The final edition*. Yale University Press.

¹⁶ For example, St Nic's Nottingham ran or hosted 28 of its regular events in the 7 days from 01/07/2023, of which just one appears on ASKLiON. The meetings were Bluecoat assembly, English class, Globe café, the prayer course, Joy fellowship, English conversation, Beeston, Oikos, Oikos at the Chancery, Amor Y Esperanza, Roots & Shoots, NCCC group, breakfast prayer, Sparklers, Tots, Youth meeting, North Nottingham, Internationals, Open Book, Sherwood, Warm space, Men's group walk, NCCC children's meeting, 9am service, 10.45 service, 6.30 service, Chinese church. Fortnightly groups that might meet in this period include Wollaton. Groups that will not meet that week are: Chris & Nick, Southbank. Another example comes from [East Sussex 1Space](#), where a search for 'church' yields 107 returns, including schools, care homes and community fridges, but no actual churches meeting for religious purposes - in contrast to the 200 churches that are based in East Sussex and listed on the 'Find a Church' website.