

The Transition Handbook, Section 2: The Hands

(Below is actually from the Transition Primer (free download) rather than the Handbook, but it's essentially the same information).

12 Key Steps to embarking on your transition journey

To begin with, it is important to note that although the term “Transition Town” has stuck, what we are talking about are Transition Cities, Transition Islands, Transition Hamlets, Transition Valleys, Transition Anywhere-You-Find-People. Hence the new name, Transition Initiaves.

#1. Set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset

This stage puts a core team in place to drive the project forward during the initial phases. We recommend that you form your Steering Group with the aim of getting through stages 2 – 5, and agree that once a minimum of four sub-groups (see #5) are formed, the Steering Group disbands and reforms with a person from each of those groups. This requires a degree of humility, but is very important in order to put the success of the project above the individuals involved. Ultimately your Steering Group should become made up of 1 representative from each sub-group.

#2. Awareness raising

This stage will identify your key allies, build crucial networks and prepare the community in general for the launch of your Transition initiative.

For an effective Energy Descent Action plan to evolve, its participants have to understand the potential effects of both Peak Oil and Climate Change – the former demanding a drive to increase community resilience, the later a reduction in carbon footprint.

Screenings of key movies (Inconvenient Truth, End of Suburbia, Crude Awakening, Power of Community) along with panels of “experts” to answer questions at the end of each, are very effective. (See [Transition Initiaves Primer](http://transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/TransitionPrimer) (1MB pdf: <http://transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/TransitionPrimer>) for the lowdown on all the movies – where to get them, trailers, what the licencing regulations are, doomster rating vs solution rating)

Talks by experts in their field of climate change, peak oil and community solutions can be very inspiring. Articles in local papers, interviews on local radio, presentations to existing groups, including schools, are also part of the toolkit to get people aware of the issues and ready to start thinking of solutions.

#3. Lay the foundations

This stage is about networking with existing groups and activists, making clear to them that the Transition Town initiative is designed to incorporate their previous efforts and future inputs by looking at the future in a new way. Acknowledge and honour the work they do, and stress that

they have a vital role to play.

Give them a concise and accessible overview of peak oil, what it means, how it relates to climate change, how it might affect the community in question, and the key challenges it presents. Set out your thinking about how a Transition Town process might be able to act as a catalyst for getting the community to explore solutions and to begin thinking about grassroots mitigation strategies.

#4. Organise a Great Unleashing

This stage creates a memorable milestone to mark the project's "coming of age", moves it right into the community at large, builds a momentum to propel your initiative forward for the next period of its work and celebrates your community's desire to take action.

In terms of timing, we estimate that 6 months to a year after your first "awareness raising" movie screening is about right.

The Official Unleashing of Transition Town Totnes was held in September 2006, preceded by about 10 months of talks, film screenings and events.

Regarding contents, it'll need to bring people up to speed on Peak Oil and Climate Change, but in a spirit of "we can do something about this" rather than doom and gloom.

One item of content that we've seen work very well is a presentation on the practical and psychological barriers to personal change – after all, this is all about what we do as individuals.

It needn't be just talks, it could include music, food, opera, break dancing, whatever you feel best reflects your community's intention to embark on this collective adventure.

#5. Form sub groups

Part of the process of developing an Energy Descent Action Plan is tapping into the collective genius of the community. Crucial for this is to set up a number of smaller groups to focus on specific aspects of the process. Each of these groups will develop their own ways of working and their own activities, but will all fall under the umbrella of the project as a whole.

Ideally, sub groups are needed for all aspects of life that are required by your community to sustain itself and thrive. Examples of these are: food, waste, energy, education, youth, economics, transport, water, local government.

Each of these sub groups is looking at their area and trying to determine the best ways of building community resilience and reducing the carbon footprint. Their solutions will form the backbone of the Energy Descent Action Plan.

#6. Use Open Space

We've found Open Space Technology to be a highly effective approach to running meetings for Transition Town initiatives.

In theory it ought not to work. A large group of people comes together to explore a particular

topic or issue, with no agenda, no timetable, no obvious coordinator and no minute takers.

However, we have run separate Open Spaces for Food, Energy, Housing, Economics and the Psychology of Change. By the end of each meeting, everyone has said what they needed to, extensive notes had been taken and typed up, lots of networking has had taken place, and a huge number of ideas had been identified and visions set out.

The essential reading on Open Space is Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, and you will also find Peggy Holman and Tom Devane's The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future an invaluable reference on the wider range of such tools.

#7 Develop visible practical manifestations of the project

It is essential that you avoid any sense that your project is just a talking shop where people sit around and draw up wish lists. Your project needs, from an early stage, to begin to create practical, high visibility manifestations in your community. These will significantly enhance people's perceptions of the project and also their willingness to participate.

There's a difficult balance to achieve here during these early stages. You need to demonstrate visible progress, without embarking on projects that will ultimately have no place on the Energy Descent Action Plan. In Transition Town Totnes, the Food group launched a project called 'Totnes- the Nut Capital of Britain' which aims to get as much infrastructure of edible nut bearing trees into the town as possible. With the help of the Mayor, we recently planted some trees in the centre of town, and made it a high profile event (see left).

#8. Facilitate the Great Reskilling

If we are to respond to peak oil and climate change by moving to a lower energy future and relocalising our communities, then we'll need many of the skills that our grandparents took for granted. One of the most useful things a Transition Town project can do is to reverse the "great deskilling" of the last 40 years by offering training in a range of some of these skills.

Research among the older members of our communities is instructive – after all, they lived before the throwaway society took hold and they understand what a lower energy society might look like. Some examples of courses are: repairing, cooking, cycle maintenance, natural building, loft insulation, dyeing, herbal walks, gardening, basic home energy efficiency, making sour doughs, practical food growing (the list is endless).

Your Great Reskilling programme will give people a powerful realisation of their own ability to solve problems, to achieve practical results and to work cooperatively alongside other people. They'll also appreciate that learning can truly be fun.

#9 Build a bridge to Local Government

Whatever the degree of groundswell your Transition Town initiative manages to generate, however many practical projects you've initiated and however wonderful your Energy Descent Plan is, you will not progress too far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority. Whether it is planning issues, funding issues or providing connections, you need them on board. Contrary to your expectations, you may well find that you

are pushing against an open door.

We are exploring how we might draft up an Energy Descent Action Plan for Totnes in a format similar to the current Community Development Plan. Perhaps, one day, council planners will be sitting at a table with two documents in front of them – a conventional Community Plan and a beautifully presented Energy Descent Action Plan. It's sometime in 2008 on the day when oil prices first break the \$100 a barrel ceiling. The planners look from one document to the other and conclude that only the Energy Descent Action Plan actually addresses the challenges facing them. And as that document moves centre stage, the community plan slides gently into the bin (we can dream!).

#10 Honour the elders

For those of us born in the 1960s when the cheap oil party was in full swing, it is very hard to picture a life with less oil. Every year of my life (the oil crises of the 70s excepted) has been underpinned by more energy than the previous years.

In order to rebuild that picture of a lower energy society, we have to engage with those who directly remember the transition to the age of Cheap Oil, especially the period between 1930 and 1960.

While you clearly want to avoid any sense that what you are advocating is 'going back' or 'returning' to some dim distant past, there is much to be learnt from how things were done, what the invisible connections between the different elements of society were and how daily life was supported. Finding out all of this can be deeply illuminating, and can lead to our feeling much more connected to the place we are developing our Transition Town projects.

#11 Let it go where it wants to go...

Although you may start out developing your Transition Town process with a clear idea of where it will go, it will inevitably go elsewhere. If you try and hold onto a rigid vision, it will begin to sap your energy and appear to stall. Your role is not to come up with all the answers, but to act as a catalyst for the community to design their own transition.

If you keep your focus on the key design criteria – building community resilience and reducing the carbon footprint – you'll watch as the collective genius of the community enables a feasible, practicable and highly inventive solution to emerge.

#12 Create an Energy Descent Plan

Each subgroup will have been focusing on practical actions to increase community resilience and reduce the carbon footprint.

Combined, these actions form the Energy Descent Action Plan. That's where the collective genius of the community has designed its own future to take account of the potential threats from Peak Oil and Climate Change.

So far, we have taken many practical actions in Totnes. However, they add up to just a mere fraction of the final range and scope of initiatives that are currently being devised by our

community.

Regarding specific timescales for Energy Descent Action Plans, here's part of a presentation made to Glastonbury at their inaugural "Shall we become a Transition Town meeting?" in April 2007.

"You may be wondering about timescales for Energy Descent Action Plans. There are no rules - each community will embark on a plan that's right for them in terms of timing. Kinsale took a window of 15 years, Lewes is looking at 20.

If you're looking for greater precision and specified dates, here's my response:

When I recognise the effort that's gone into setting today's meeting up and the effort that each of us has made in getting here and devoting most of our Saturday to these pressing issues, when I think of all the wonderful efforts of pre-existing groups in Glastonbury that hopefully will be incorporated into, and reenergised by, a wider "transitioning" initiative, I say that the work has already started.

And if I look at what we need to do to create the communities that we're happy for our grandchildren and their grandchildren to grow up in, then that work certainly won't finish in our lifetimes..."

Incidentally, the embryonic steering group at Glastonbury decided at the end of that day to indeed adopt the Transition Town model for designing their lower energy and more resilient future.

The 7 barriers that stand in the way of a Transition Initiative (The 7 'Buts')

One of your first tasks, - individually and collectively - will be to navigate the initial barriers – real and imagined – that stand in the way of you starting off on the transition journey. We call these 'The Seven Buts'.

#1. But we've got no funding...

This really is not an issue. Funding is a very poor substitute for enthusiasm and community involvement, both of which will take you through the first phases of your transition. Funders can also demand a measure of control, and may steer the initiative in directions that run counter to community interests.

We'll show you how you can make sure your process generates an adequate amount of income. We're not talking fortunes, your Transition Town won't be floated on the Stock Market, but, as

an eco-village designer Max Lindeggar told me years ago, “if a project doesn’t make a profit it will make a loss.”

Transition Town Totnes began in September 2005 with no money at all, and has been self-funding ever since. The talks and film screenings that we run bring in money to subsidise free events such as Open Space Days. You will reach a point where you have specific projects that will require funding, but until that point you’ll manage. Retain the power over whether this happens... don’t let lack of funding stop you.

#2. But they won’t let us...

There is a fear among some green folks that somehow any initiative that actually succeeds in effecting any change will get shut down, suppressed, attacked by faceless bureaucrats or corporations. If that fear is strong enough to prevent you taking any action, if the only action you’re willing to take is to abdicate all your power to some notional “they”, then you’re probably reading the wrong document. On the other hand, Transition Towns operate ‘below the radar’, neither seeking victims nor making enemies. As such, they don’t seem to be incurring the wrath of any existing institutions.

On the contrary, with corporate awareness of sustainability and climate change building daily, you will be surprised at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts.

#3. But there are already green groups in this town, I don’t want to step on their toes...

We’ll go into this in more detail in [Step 3](#) of the 12 steps, but in essence, you’d be exceedingly unlucky to encounter any “turf wars”. What your Transition Town initiative will do is to form a common goal and sense of purpose for the existing groups, some of which you might find are a bit burnt out and will really appreciate the new vigour you will bring. Liaising with a network of existing groups towards an Energy Descent Action Plan will enhance and focus their work, rather than replicate or supersede it. Expect them to become some of your strong allies, crucial to the success of your Transition.

#4. But no one in this town cares about the environment anyway...

One could easily be forgiven for thinking this, given the existence of what we might perceive as an apathetic consumer culture surrounding us. Scratch a bit deeper though, and you'll find that the most surprising people are keen advocates of key elements of a Transition Initiative - local food, local crafts, local history and culture. The key is to go to them, rather than expecting them to come to you. Seek out common ground, and you'll find your community to be a far more interesting place than you thought it was.

#5. But surely it's too late to do anything...?

It may be too late, but the likelihood is that it isn't. That means your (and others') endeavours are absolutely crucial.

Don't let hopelessness sabotage your efforts - as Vandana Shiva says, "the uncertainty of our times is no reason to be certain about hopelessness".

#6. But I don't have the right qualifications...

If you don't do it, who else will? It matters not that you don't have a PhD in sustainability, or years of experience in gardening or planning. What's important is that you care about where you live, that you see the need to act, and that you are open to new ways of engaging people.

If there was to be a job description for someone to start this process rolling it might list the qualities of that person as being;

- Positive
- Good with people
- A basic knowledge of the place and some of the key people in the town.

That, in truth, is about it... . You are, after all, about to design your own demise into the process from the start (see Step#1), so your role at this stage is like a gardener preparing the soil for the

ensuing garden, which you may or may not be around to see.

#7. But I don't have the energy for doing that!

As the quote often ascribed to Goethe goes, "whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!" The experience of beginning a Transition Town certainly shows this to be the case. While the idea of preparing your town (or city, hamlet, valley or island) for life beyond oil may seem staggering in its implications, there is something about the energy unleashed by the Transition Towns process that is unstoppable.

You may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of all the work and complexity, but people will come forward to help. Indeed, many have commented on the serendipity of the whole process, how the right people appear at the right time. There is something about seizing that boldness, about making the leap from 'why is no-one doing anything' to 'let's do something', that generates the energy to keep it moving.

Very often, developing environmental initiatives is like pushing a broken down car up a hill; hard, unrewarding slog. Transition Towns is like coming down the other side – the car starts moving faster than you can keep up with it, accelerating all the time. Once you give it the push from the top of the hill it will develop its own momentum. That's not to say it isn't hard work sometimes, but it is almost always a pleasure.