

What is a Transition Initiative?

It all starts off when a small collection of motivated individuals within a community come together with a shared concern: *how can our community respond to the challenges, and opportunities, of Peak Oil and Climate Change?*

They begin by forming an initiating group and then adopt the Transition Model (explained here at length: <http://transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/TransitionPrimer>) with the intention of engaging a significant proportion of the people in their community to kick off a Transition Initiative.

A Transition Initiative is a community working together to look Peak Oil and Climate Change squarely in the eye and address this BIG question:

"for all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change)?"

After going through a comprehensive and creative process of:

- awareness raising around peak oil, climate change and the need to undertake a community lead process to rebuild resilience and reduce carbon
- connecting with existing groups in the community
- building bridges to local government
- connecting with other transition initiatives
- forming groups to look at all the key areas of life (food, energy, transport, health, heart & soul, economics & livelihoods, etc)
- kicking off projects aimed at building people's understanding of resilience and carbon issues and community engagement
- eventually launching a community defined, community implemented "Energy Descent Action Plan" over a 15 to 20 year timescale

This results in a coordinated range of projects across all these areas of life that strives to rebuild the resilience we've lost as a result of cheap oil and reduce the community's carbon emissions drastically.

The community also recognises two crucial points:

- that we used immense amounts of creativity, ingenuity and adaptability on the way up the energy upslope, and that there's no reason for us not to do the same on the downslope
- if we collectively plan and act early enough there's every likelihood that we can create a way of living that's significantly more connected, more vibrant and more in touch with

our environment than the oil-addicted treadmill that we find ourselves on today.

If you want to find out more, check out <http://www.transitiontowns.org>

!! Cheerful disclaimer! Just in case you were under the mistaken impression that Transition is a process defined by people who have all the answers, you need to be aware of a key fact.

We truly don't know if this will work. Transition is a social experiment on a massive scale.

On the other hand, everything that you read on TransitionTowns site is the result of real work in the real world and hearty community engagement. There's not an ivory tower in sight, no professors in musty oak-panelled studies churning out erudite papers, no slavish adherence to a model carved in stone.

The transition model is brought to you by people who are actively engaged in transition in a community. People who are learning by doing - and learning all the time. People who understand that we can't sit back and wait for someone else to do the work. People like us, perhaps...

Final point

Just to weave the climate change and peak oil situations together...

- Climate change makes this carbon reduction transition essential
- Peak oil makes it inevitable
- Transition initiatives make it feasible, viable and attractive (as far we can tell so far...)

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.

#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 Initiatives Primer](#) (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.