



Community-led, Power-With Assemblies Training Handbook



“If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” [Lila Watson](#) 🙏❤️🌍

This handbook is a resource to go along with our Community-Led Assemblies training. It's a living document that is being developed as we and others use it. It is based on work being developed in Scotland, by people from a climate action background. If you're working elsewhere or are focused on other issues, some of it may not fit well with your situation. Please take whatever is useful and leave what isn't. At times there may be notes in the margins as people share their perspectives - please also feel free to share your thinking and experience using the comment function, so we can all continue learning together.

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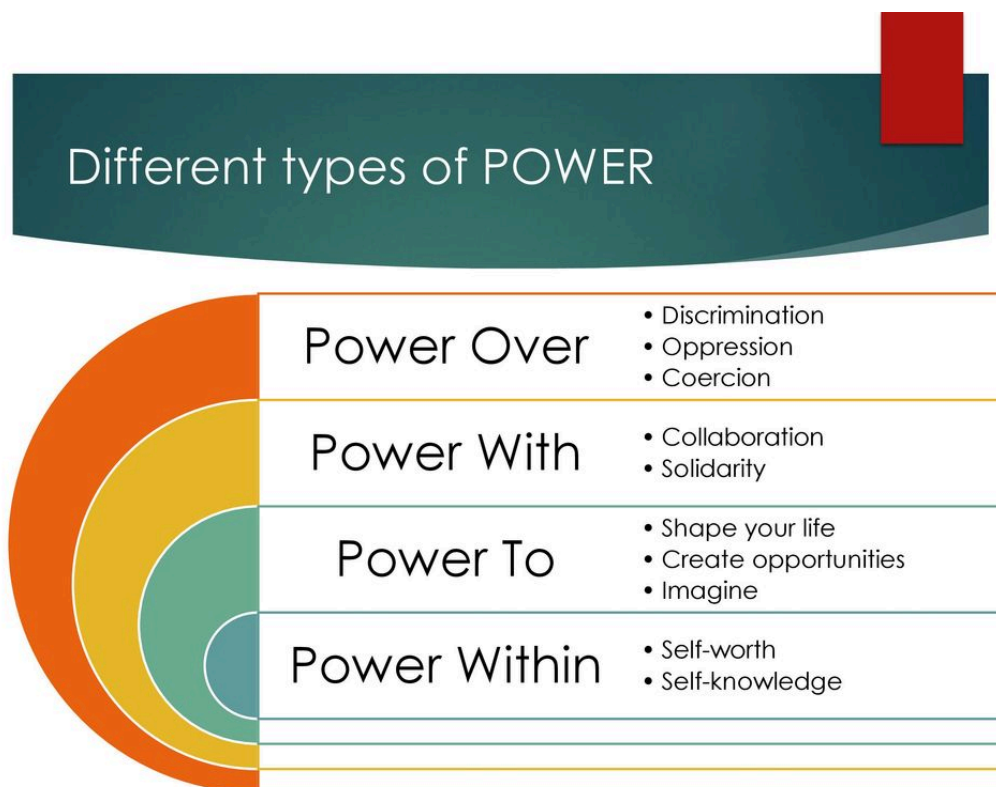
Welcome + introduction

[Open Souce](#) is a collective of people in Scotland exploring answers to the question: **“Are there ways to make our collective decisions that bring out the best in our human nature, rather than (as we tend to see in politics) the worst?”**

Our understanding is that ‘politics as usual’ (the ‘power-over’ ways that we’re currently using to make our collective decisions) are clearly - from their results in the world - not working for the vast majority of us.

We hope that during this training and afterwards in the assemblies that you run, you’ll join us in exploring the many ‘yesses’ to our question (you can read some more of our thinking on this [here](#)). This is not only a training, but an invitation to an ongoing collaboration on developing democratic processes fit for our times.

Assemblies are - or can be - a very different way of developing policies and making shared decisions to the ones we’re used to. Our goal is to help you organise, design and facilitate ‘power-with’ community-led assemblies. The intention is that these are inclusive processes, where people can listen well to themselves and each other, think caringly and creatively about their place and the wider world, in a way which frees all of us up. Enabling us to grow a new sense of ambition, purpose, direction and action that responds to the real needs of local people and also addresses big issues like poverty and climate change and the system that drives them.



So that's our starting point:

Let's not assume that the way we've been making our collective decisions is the best we can do. Could shifting from a power-over system to a power-with one give us better outcomes?

When we look at images like the one above, it looks as though we have a range of equal options when it comes to power. What this doesn't show is that we have all grown up in systems which tend strongly towards power-over. This doesn't mean power-with and the others are impossible, but they are severely limited and can often feel futile in the face of the structures of top-down power that we live with day to day.

What if we could create a new system?

This can make it hard to imagine what life might be like if our society was oriented around power-with. We have even been taught to be afraid of that possibility and told that we need a system of domination to control and keep our 'baser' instincts in check. In fact there is overwhelming scientific evidence to say that humans are fundamentally social, that we need one another and that we will work hard to develop and maintain good relationships with one another. The fear of our own nature that underlies and persuades us to go along with systems of domination is curated for us by the system which benefits from it and it can prevent us from imagining a different way of being.

But what if we could create a system which is much more robust and less easy to corrupt and coopt than the one we have? One which:

- **Encourages us to learn and think together** - not assume that what we know right now is the whole picture
- **Tries to be open about the power relations between us and creates fairer processes**, drawing in the experience of those with less power and learning from their experience, and recognising the way having more power than others so often disables our ability to relate fully
- **Teaches us skills** in self-awareness, collaboration, creative thinking, listening well and empathising with one another

This work is both practical and very ambitious:

The multiple disasters unfolding in the world are the results of decades, if not centuries of bad decisions, which many people have devoted their lives to trying to address through opposition, protest, and building structures that help combat the worst impacts. But no one yet has found a way to successfully change our current system so that it actually aligns with life and the wellbeing of all. With climate change, the moral and survival imperative to do this has become even more urgent.

Our long term intention is to shift politics as usual away from the power-over, command and control paradigm it is in now, to one which shares power fairly (power-with) and which reflects and responds to the real needs, care and pro-social attitudes of the vast majority of humans, and which gives us a chance of mitigating the worst impacts of the way of being

that has created and still permeates the unbalanced structures of power and environmental disintegration we are witnessing at the moment.

At its heart this is an issue of legitimacy: Where do we believe power should lie?

Might a more direct and inclusive democracy operate effectively and be made much more difficult to co-opt and corrupt than the systems we have inherited?

We are used to thinking that collective decisions only really count when they're made within elected parliamentary processes, but as our governments repeatedly fail to effectively tackle the biggest threats of our time, we need to show that there are other ways to make legitimate collective decisions. Ways that have much higher standards of fairness and transparency, based on a much more accurate understanding of what it is to be human, and that enable us to make the transformational changes we need.

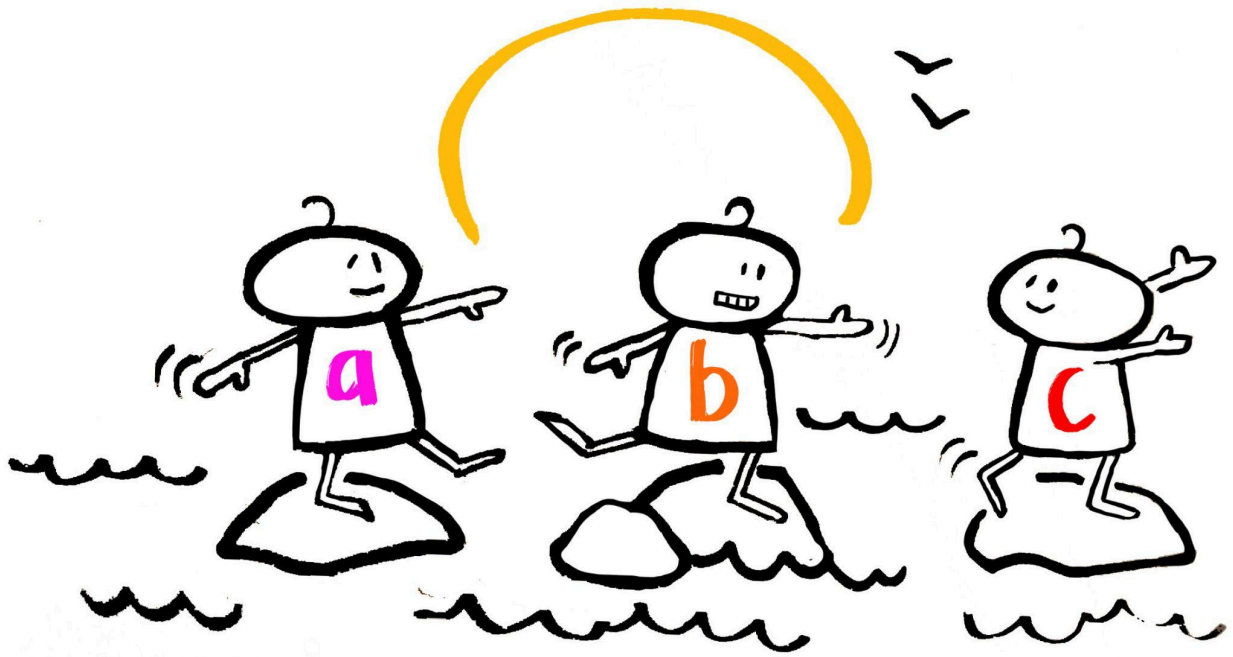
We are attempting to show that we, the so-called 'ordinary people', are capable of creating collective decision making processes that are ultimately far more legitimate than those of our governments. We contend that using processes that focus on the thinking and wisdom of ordinary people, few of whom have any vested interests aside from wanting to be able to live a good and healthy life with families and friends, enables us to be more confident that these processes have not been co-opted by other interests.

Making the seemingly impossible possible:

Attempting to turn the dominant system around can seem impossible - but we know that it is also necessary. We also know that progressive social change in the past so often seemed impossible, except to those willing to try to make the changes everyone subsequently saw had been necessary. We need to support one another to rise to this challenge.

As the cracks within politics as usual show up more and more clearly, interest in other ways of creating compassionate, effective ways of taking care of each other and of making our collective decisions is growing. There are many experiments with assemblies and other forms taking place all over the world. Some of these are genuinely trying to create new forms that enable us to come together with very different power relationships to those we've grown up with, while others are more 'tick box' or co-opted exercises. It is important that we do everything we can to ensure good practice, or assemblies risk becoming yet another trendy approach to the close-to-meaningless forms of 'consultation' we're all used to.

In this spirit of experimentation and questioning, much of the Open Source training will be learning by doing. We'll be practising some of the elements we think are most important in assemblies and at every step we invite your participation, your questions and your ideas: no one has attempted this in quite this way before - so everyone who engages with it is testing new ground.



LEARNING by doing

We hope this handbook will support you to make a great community-led assembly where you are - and be the beginning of a much longer collaboration between us.

Get in touch at engagedlistening@gmail.com

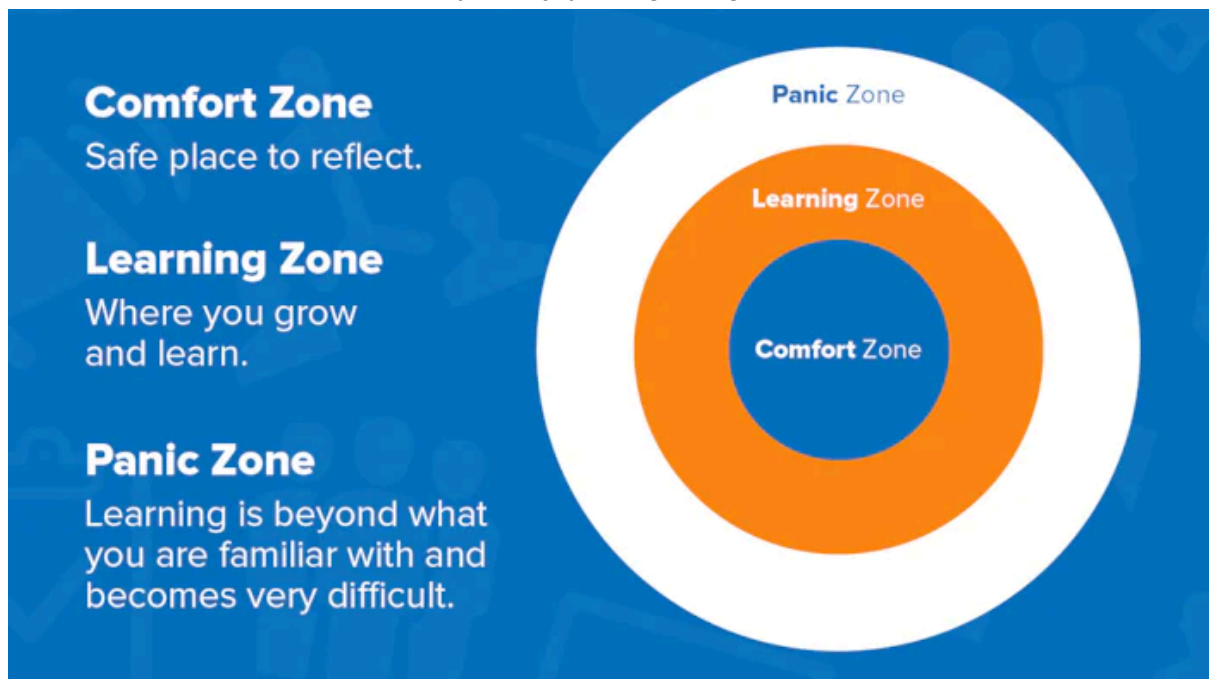
Group agreements and building safer spaces for learning

By the end of this section we hope to have:

- *Understood and practised container-building*
- *Understood the basics of building safer spaces for learning by modelling how to build a strong (safe enough) container in a group, including looking at group agreements*

Zoning in to enabling change

It can be useful to think of our ability to enjoy being in a group in three 'zones':



In summary, the comfort in our comfort zone is because we're dealing with things we already know and understand. We're stretched, sometimes a little uncomfortably, in our learning zone, but that stretch is usefully bringing new experience, knowledge or understanding in. When the stretch becomes too intense, we'll start to panic or become triggered and will move into a stress response. Our job in designing and facilitating assemblies is to try to keep everyone somewhere in their learning zone - which can be challenging because we all have our own comfort, learning and panic zones - and they don't always align. You can read more

about this model (and many others) [here](#) and there are lots of other suggestions for working together in a more connected way [here](#).

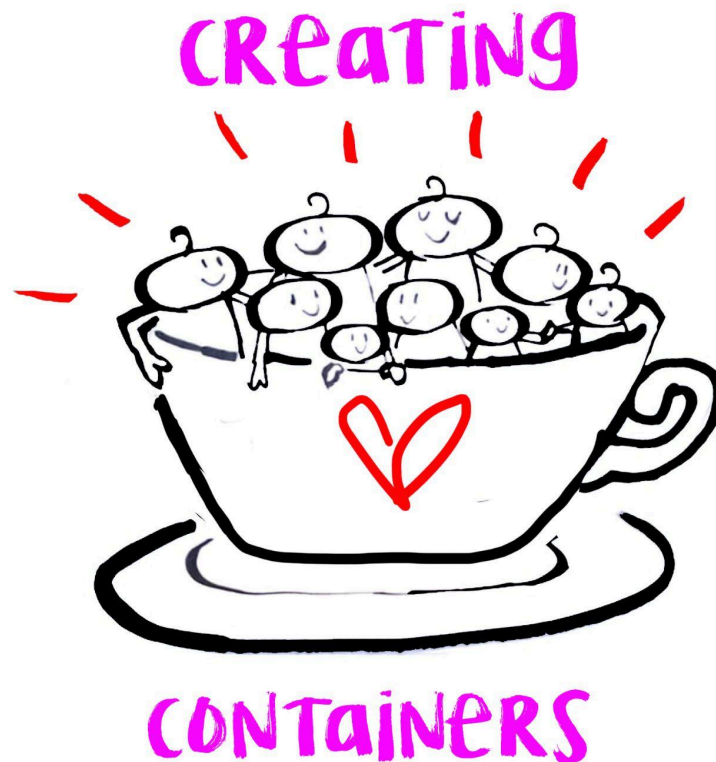
Further Reading

The Learning Zone Model: <https://www.mindtools.com/a0bop9z/the-learning-zone-model>

Container Building: https://groupworksdeck.org/patterns/Holding_Space

“Container-building”

Much of what we cover in this course focuses on *how* we do things, over what we do. This is because it's entirely possible to run assemblies that don't enable people to access their full potential for empathy and creative thinking and which in fact bolster the sense of powerlessness encouraged by business as usual decision making. In addition to this, for many people, being in a large group can be very stressful. If we don't address this in some way and so enable people to move out of their stress response, they may not be able to fully participate in the process.



Creating spaces where people feel welcome and able to relax in the presence of those they don't know - or even (as we have all experienced within communities of place or organisations!) people they do know and have a difficult history with - is crucial to getting the best out of assemblies. The early stage of this process is called '[container building](#)' - which means creating a space which feels welcoming and safe enough that people will begin to feel a sense of coming together, rather than just being a group of individuals. Spending time on this early on will make the work you do later easier, more meaningful and probably faster.

Group agreements

Setting [group agreements](#) is a quick way to help people understand - and feel able to influence - the culture we are trying to build together. You can use the list below as a basis to start from. Feel free to make your own changes - and also to spend a little time looking at them with the group, establishing broad agreement and making any changes or additions that people ask for. Emphasise that you can return to them for amendments at any point.

At this early stage it can be good to introduce the key ideas we explore in the next section about why it is important to create a culture in the group that enables people to feel welcome and relaxed, while introducing the group agreements. One way would be to mention that our bodies often know more than we give them credit for - and suggest that when listening to the group agreements, people listen for feelings of reassurance or discomfort in their bodies, as well as in their thoughts. If a suggestion doesn't feel right - or if there's still a feeling of 'unsafety' after hearing all the suggestions, this could mean there's a need for a change or addition to the agreements. It's good to be talking about and practicing this kind of thing from early on.

This resource from Training for Change offers a [critical reflection](#) on how to make sure group agreements are genuinely supportive to everyone in the group. To quote from it:

“Ground rules need to be understood as a real group process. After a list has been made, the facilitator must test for agreement in a genuinely open way. The question must be understood: is this a list of behaviours you agree to hold yourself accountable to as an individual? If there's not some open resistance to the list, you're not asking enough. Therefore, if you plan on ground rules taking 10 minutes, you are rushing the process. Rushing makes it a ritual and reduces its meaning. It needs time for people to air concerns, clarify what's on the list, and make an internal commitment to the items on it – or, throw items off the list. One facilitator makes individuals stand if they are in agreement, emphasising the process as a personal pledge. If they don't stand, then they keep facilitating until they have full agreement.”

Creating safer, braver spaces

We tend to talk about 'safer' rather than 'safe' spaces, because there is no way to ensure 100% safety in dynamic, inclusive processes: there's always the chance that we'll be triggered by something someone else says or does - or that we'll trigger others. So by accepting this and focusing on building the skills and resilience to be able to deal with difficulties as they arise, we aim to create robust processes that are realistic about our differences and disagreements as well as about our potential to come together, agree and collaborate. We create safer spaces partly in order to encourage each other to be braver, to step out of our comfort zones in a way that encourages and empowers others.

Another important way to understand groups, is that when we're in groups, in some ways we start to act as a whole. This means that the people who are having difficulty at any point are (in part) expressing something for the whole group. Thinking about it in this way can help us to see the value in understanding challenging behaviours within the group: this means that challenges that happen can shift from being experienced as interruptions to a smooth

running process and instead as opportunities to deepen our understanding and our ability to be with the underlying dynamics of our social world (this is an understanding that [Process Work focuses on](#)).

The exercises in the next section are important to bring in to build those skills and resilience - and slow things down so that everyone can re-set at intervals and be less likely to tip into overwhelm.

Sample Group Agreement (to use and adapt)

- Keep to session start and end times
- Experiment, explore, be bold
- It's OK to get things wrong - we're here to learn
- Value different ways of knowing, thinking, processing
- Share speaking time fairly and value listening at least as much as speaking
- Be respectful of others even when we disagree



Practices for getting out of 'thinking/being as usual'

By the end of this section we hope to have explored:

- *Why it is crucial to challenge 'thinking as usual' to create the basis for a different culture around our collective decision making*
- *The role of our nervous systems in maintaining business as usual*
- *Why and how to bring a range of alternative ways of thinking and understanding into assemblies*
- *How active listening and other processes can help us stay connected and build empathy - the key to better decision making*
- *How our own experience of privilege - and the lack of it - impacts on our ability to bring people together in an assembly - and what to do about it*

Challenging 'thinking as usual'

Open Source takes a psychological and cultural approach to change. We see the massive threat of climate change as just one impact (albeit an increasingly pressing one) of a social system that fundamentally relies on an unconscious acceptance of power-over.

In any culture, those who grow up within it absorb many of its assumptions completely unconsciously. Most people in our culture accept without question that the way we make decisions is the only way they can be made. The level of change we look for tends to be around which political party is in charge, rather than more fundamental changes about what kind of people make the decisions in the first place and where and how.

To get meaningfully different results, we will need to put some very different ways of being and doing things together into the mix. We will need to urgently address the assumptions and habits of power-over, control and domination that have got us into this situation. We won't be able to create the levels of change now required of us by using the same ways of thinking, doing and being that we're used to. We need to give ourselves opportunities to experience doing things in ways that enable us to be more empathic and relational, so that we can start to imagine and create more connected, kinder and wiser ways of deciding together.

Most of us learned how to be in larger social groups at school. There, our group experience is usually either tightly controlled by a teacher (who may happen to be very kind and supportive but structurally is in a position of power over you and so can tell you what to do, knows what the right answers are, and is allowed to punish you etc) or uncontrolled in the playground (where we may have a lot of fun - or may feel at the mercy of others - but where we may well feel very insecure and often feel that 'might makes right').

So we learn that we should sit and keep quiet unless we're asked to speak, that unusual ideas or too many questions are rarely welcome, that we should do as we're told, that we should not stand out from the crowd except in specific competitive ways etc... much of which is continued in some form into many of our working lives and none of which prepares us to be part of a meaningful cooperative democratic process.

For true democracy, we need to start creating a different culture from the outset and infuse it into every element of how we prepare for, run and follow up on our assemblies. Some of the basic building blocks of this are outlined below.

The role of our nervous systems

Western science is just beginning to understand the extent to which much of our 'thinking' happens unconsciously and in our bodies. It is estimated that 80-90% of what is going on for any of us at any moment is unconscious. Much of this is regulated by our nervous system - the extension of the brain into the body. This can be very helpful - it means we don't need to keep remembering to breathe, or concentrate on digesting our food. But we also have cognitive and emotional processes that are unconscious. When we are talking about making wise collective decisions, the unconscious can become really problematic!

There's a huge amount of very interesting work being done in this area, but in brief:

- **Our brains and bodies are way less separate than previously thought** - much of our thinking and feeling happens in our bodies via our nervous system, often quite unconsciously. It's not too much to say that the concept of 'the unconscious' *is* the body.
- **When we're very young our brain and nervous system's main way of learning how to navigate the world is by noticing and storing patterns.** This is how we learn how to walk and talk, how gravity acts on us and how to relate to other people.
- **These patterns form the bedrock of our understanding** of the world and become the basis for our assumptions about life that can last, unquestioned into adulthood.
- When we have a repeated or overwhelming experience, that gets patterned into our nervous systems too in a process called trauma. **These traumatic patterns also live, unquestioned in our unconscious.** They can get activated through stress, or 'triggered', they can drive what we think, say and do even as adults.
- Because many of these patterns are set in childhood, **in these moments of being triggered, we can feel and even act a bit like an overwhelmed child**, instead of the adult we now are. Most of us have had the experience of only thinking of the response we'd like to have made to a difficult encounter once we've left the room, of behaving in ways we'd rather not, or of not feeling 100% in control of our reactions: that's trauma playing out. A simpler part of our nervous system takes over and puts us into one of several reactive states: fight, flight, freeze, fawn or flop (read more on this [here](#)).
- If we understand this and **pay attention to what's going on inside as well as what's happening out there**, we can come to terms with and even heal these locked-in patterns.
- **Simple practices like finding a place in your body that feels safe, or paying attention to slowing your breathing can make a big difference very quickly,**

specially when backed up by longer term work with things like deep relaxation, yoga, body-based therapies or meditation.

This is important for assembly processes (and the rest of life) because if we are making decisions when our traumatic patterns have been triggered, we will often be more defensive, frightened, aggressive or suspicious than we usually are. This is clearly not ideal when making important shared decisions, so building our awareness of when we're being triggered and having resources to help deal well with it are essential.

This is a crucial missing piece in the collective decision making processes we have in the wider world. We have been raised to believe that what is required of decision makers is a cool and competent appearance - even though we know that these are just ordinary people like us and underneath this facade they're just as able to make mistakes and get triggered as the rest of us. The problem is that when this is not acknowledged, and when power is held so strongly in a few hands in a system that's rigged towards generational power-over, you end up with exactly the kind of inequalities and environmental disasters we're seeing playing out in the world.

Other ways of being and doing: self reflexivity - listening to ourselves - and others

Our adult responses to disagreement are shaped by the way/s our dissent was handled in our families when we were small. For most of us this means that disagreeing with others is stressful at some level. So most of us have a tendency or habit - a traumatic reaction to disagreement - we either move into a challenge, step back and try to get away, zone out and change the subject, try to seem to agree, or give up and feel defeated.

These unconscious reactions to disagreement show the five main ways that traumatic reactivity expresses itself: fight, flight, freeze, faun and flop. Once you're aware of them, you can much more easily spot how they show up in your own and others' behaviour.

So it's clear that as far as collective decision making is concerned, without an understanding of our own and others' reactivity, our ability to reach a good result together will be seriously compromised and we're much less likely to be able to use the valuable information hidden inside 'I disagree with this' - or the valuable opportunity to better understand someone who has different experience and a different way of thinking to us.

Another way to express this is to say that we have two main [systems for thinking](#) - 'system one' is fast, reflexive and mostly unconscious; 'system two' is slower and more considered.

Both ways of thinking are important but in assembly processes we want to create more space for system two thinking, conscious awareness and a power-with culture. Much can be built into the structure of the assembly to support this e.g.:

- **Emphasise the need to listen to one another** - that everyone in the room is equal and all of our experience¹ is needed if we're going to be able to make better decisions together.
- **Bringing in moments of quiet and checking in with ourselves** to draw people's attention to these kinds of responses and support a growing awareness of the different levels of what is going on for people

SELF-CARE

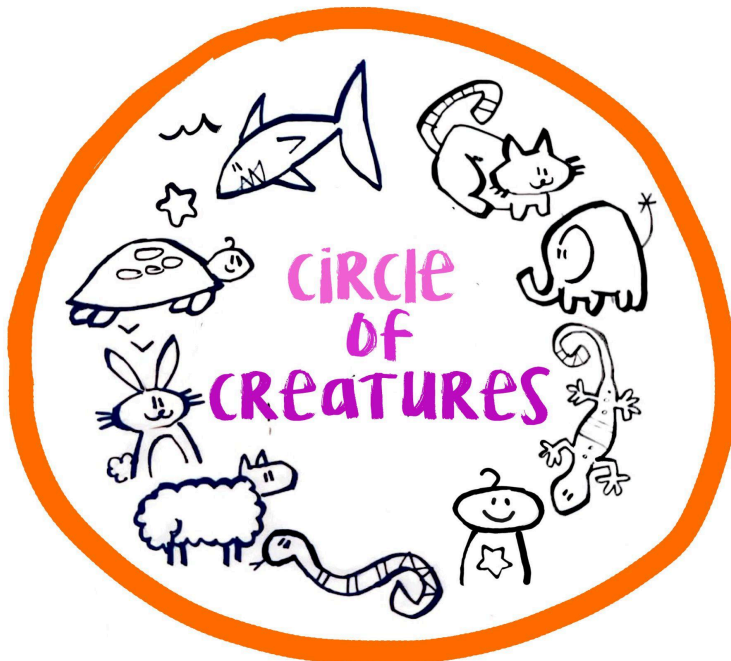


¹ This doesn't mean that all of our views are necessarily needed! Most of us hold at least some views that come from our power-over conditioning - and some of us hold many. The assembly needs to be able to show how we can make sense of our experience in different, kinder, more connecting ways.

- **Build a culture of care in the assembly**, be clear with people that we're doing things differently here: it's OK to get it wrong, to need time to absorb information, that we need to listen to ourselves and one another - etc.
- **Puncture power-over tendencies wherever possible** - as facilitators or organisers be clear that you're only there in support - not in charge
- **Slow or calm things down** to create space for integration of information or feelings
- **Create a slow paced programme** without too much packed into it
- **Take time for breaks** - and use them to bring in short physical or creative moments
- **Ask the group if they need a rest** if/when you get the sense they're flagging
- **Make sure facilitators are being calm** in the way they hold the space
- **Change the pace as you go along**, alternating more and less intense parts of the process, so people get to decompress
- **Change mode as you go along**, bringing in different ways to process information, rather than relying too heavily on verbal or written formats - bringing in creative approaches as much as possible
- **Emphasise fun and humour** - even if we're dealing with serious issues, humour can be an important way of putting people at their ease and enjoyable processes can keep people in the room, even when the subject matter is serious or stressful.

Widening our view of who and what 'matters'

A great deal of the early stages of preparing for an assembly are taken up with [reaching out](#)



to groups we tend not to connect with, or consider to be 'other' than ourselves one way or another, but we tend to limit this to other humans. Other species or the land itself, aren't considered to have important views - or *any* views - in our culture, but are central to a sense of balance in others. This is not at all the case in many other cultures, which have a much better track record of living in harmony with the ecosystems they rely on for survival than we do.

Although it is counter-cultural in much of the global north, we see it as crucial to the cultural change that we need, that we start taking other species and ecosystems into account as actors, with needs and things to offer that are as important as those of humans. Not only because it will make our decisions more sustainable and kinder, but also because when we truly align ourselves respectfully with the whole of life, not just the human part, life responds: and we need the support of the rest of life if we're to stand a chance of dealing with the mess we have inherited. The suggestions below only scratch the surface of what's being done along these lines - let's use all the intelligence, creativity and humility at our disposal to start to address this massive lack in our way of being.

The 'Work that Reconnects' (WTR), developed by Joanna Macy and others offers an amazing [toolkit](#) of experiential group activities that can support us to consider our current challenges with different eyes, such as those of non-human creatures and past and future generations.

[The Creatures project](#) (amongst many others) explores the needs, views and rights of the more than human world.

One size does not fit all

Each of us learns and develops our understanding in a [wide range](#) of ways — we are [creative, intellectual, practical and spiritual](#). Our schooling tends to favour some modes over others. Some people come out of school believing they are 'clever' while others believe just the opposite, when in fact they just have learning styles that aren't favoured in an environment where we have to sit still, listen a lot, write things down and reproduce them in exams. It is really worth working to develop a diversity of approaches that can work for very different people: there's [good evidence](#) that the more diverse the group feeding into a shared project, the more successful it will be.

Our political processes need to engage us through a range of different modes of thinking and being, not just those most socially valued. We need to value everyone's potential to contribute in a way that releases the energy caught in dualistic (superior/ inferior) thinking.

Try to make sure that you include a range of ways to approach the information or experience you are sharing so that people with a range of [learning styles](#), and a range of backgrounds and experiences, can engage and contribute.

[Language](#) is also deeply cultural. Words that seem just right to one person can come over as exclusive or confusing to another. If participants are working in their second or third language, they may struggle to keep up with fast paced conversations or find the accent hard to understand. As far as possible make what you say or write as brief, simple and straightforward as you can. It can help to make a written record of key points to support people who take longer to process the spoken word. And if there's a way of getting a point across using media other than the spoken or written word, consider using it.

The skill of [active listening](#) can be another good one to teach early on in an assembly. When we listen really well to people who think and feel differently to us, there's a much better

chance that we can each deepen our own understanding, build towards mutual understanding and be able to move forward together.

Discomfort, not knowing, getting things wrong and making a mess

Much of the above has the potential to cause discomfort because it pushes us beyond what's normally seen as 'socially acceptable'. Without this challenge, we are only left with business as usual, which as we know, isn't working well. So we need to explore ways of taking ourselves and others on a journey with these less conventional ways of doing things, while also being sensitive and using our judgement, as going too fast with new ways of doing things can be off putting.

If we accept that we are working on the beginnings of something new, that we don't and can't know exactly how to do this, and that sometimes we'll get things wrong, or make a mess, then we can relax into a more experimental, curious and enjoyable way of being with this work. It can be useful to point out when this is happening (or when we're going through the group agreements), since this way of doing things can be read as 'incompetence' if the understandings supporting it are not shared.

Politics as usual is full of people trying to look like they know what they're doing and telling us they have the answer: having the humbleness to acknowledge we don't know (but together we can understand things better) is a great step towards creating a different culture around our collective decisions.

Why we need as diverse as possible assemblies - and why it can be hard to achieve.

One of the main ways the system we live in keeps power-over in place is through social stratification: making some people feel more worthy, and some less, than others. Although the basis of this is entirely imaginary, it has real, material impacts on our lives that can be seen across elements of our identities such as the ways we are gendered, classed and racialised in education, health and other outcomes.

For those who have benefitted in some ways from this stratification, change may feel frightening, because it could mean the loss of some of the benefits we get because of our social position. And because we learn about these things mostly unconsciously, it can be a challenge to imagine things being any different. However, real material change (as evident for example in climate change impacts) is being forced on us and there is only a relatively short time for us to change the system we are in, beginning where we are, rather than be overtaken and overwhelmed by the impacts our system is having.

Throughout our lives in this stratified system, we have all had huge obstacles placed in the way of our ability to be ourselves and to live well with others. But depending on our position in the social hierarchy, our experience of this stratification is very different. It is useful in this

context to become aware of the areas where we appear to have benefitted from the social structures we currently live with - and those where we are aware of having been harmed. The mix and degree will be different for each of us and can change over time as we become more consciously aware of different elements of our experience.

It can be useful to think of our struggles as being on a continuum from [high to low intensity](#). The landscape within which these struggles happen is complex. Many of us (globally) have experience of some high and some low intensity struggles, but most of us have much more of one kind than the other.

Low intensity struggles can be very painful and difficult to deal with, however - although they may strongly affect some aspects of our lives - we have enough material and social security to be able to keep these struggles largely hidden from ourselves and others, because of the status we are given in the 'mainstream' system and culture.

High intensity struggles are ones where our day to day life is loaded with damage and risk, loaded with harm that we cannot hide from, and that we cannot hide from others - often to the point of fearing for our survival.

When we carry an aspect of privilege within this system it tends to be held unconsciously, so we will not easily notice or acknowledge it. Having our blind spots pointed out - usually by those with less privilege in the system (and therefore more conscious awareness of this area) can feel painful and often shameful. However, it is incredibly useful to get this feedback and, if we can receive it gracefully and take the time to process it, it can liberate us into a better relationship with ourselves and others.

When we carry an aspect of being oppressed by this system, we will likely also have experienced being silenced, shamed and blamed for our own oppression. It's also possible that we have had our hurt and anger about our situation directed away from the unjust system we're living in and towards others who are just as harshly impacted by it in other ways.

It is part of all of our ongoing education and growth to notice and deal with our situations as best we can. As long as we are committed to doing this, whether in large ways, or in small ways when we don't feel so much resilience, we are going in the right direction!

Why People's Assemblies?

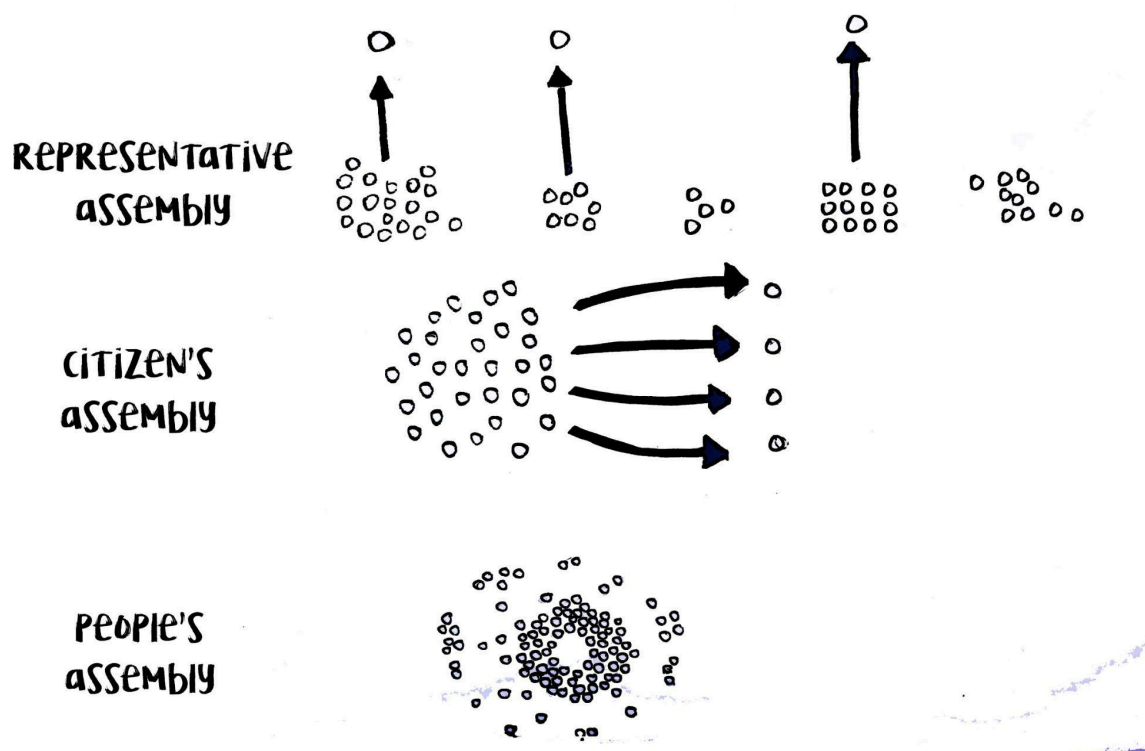
By the end of this section we hope to have:

- *Understood:*
 - a. *Different kinds of assemblies and how they may interact*
 - b. *The three main routes assemblies can take to make an impact*
 - c. *What makes for legitimacy in an assembly?*

Assemblies are already becoming a 'buzzword' that people are using to mean many things. There's a real risk that opportunistic or less well thought through processes will lead to assemblies that are just another weak and ineffective intervention which end up leading people not to trust them, much like the kinds of government 'consultation' that people have rightly learned to treat with scepticism.

Types of assemblies

There are three main types of assembly, which are broadly defined by who can attend them:



1. **Representative Sample of the Population:** Those that use a process called 'sortition' (usually using postcodes) to randomly select a **representative sample** - trying to create a similar demographic to whatever population is going to be affected by the assembly outcomes. [Citizen's Assemblies](#) often have about 100 people chosen on this basis with Citizens Juries being much smaller who are selected and facilitated by assembly experts, and listening to evidence like a jury, before making decisions based on that evidence.

- a. **Upsides**
 - i. A lot of pre-set structure and includes the widest range of people, so outcomes are most likely to be more widely accepted
 - ii. High levels of investment and transparency, so people involved feel a weight of responsibility and take the process very seriously
 - b. **Downsides**
 - i. Can be VERY expensive!
 - ii. Can be invisible to the majority of the population without a very good engagement strategy.
 - iii. Can feel exclusive
 - iv. Isn't designed for shifting power to the population
2. **Representation / Delegation:** This is the system used by local councils and parliaments in the UK, but other examples include [Spokes Councils](#), [Sociocracy Circles](#). Representatives are selected by and meant to be accountable to those that selected them. These can be effective, but also have to deal with issues of status and self interest, which, unless the culture work has been done, can tend towards the same issues we have in the current political system.
- a. **Upsides**
 - i. Can bring down the size of otherwise very large meetings
 - ii. Can mean that only people who are very motivated (or paid!) have to attend every meeting
 - b. **Downsides**
 - i. Can create cliques with more access to power
 - ii. Can end up feeling irrelevant to people who don't attend
 - iii. Can be difficult to represent a group if there are different opinions within that group
3. Those who work with **whoever turns up**. We call these '[Peoples Assemblies](#)'. They tend to be attended by people who feel strongly (one way or another) about whatever is on the table, normally an issue, a place, or both.
- a. **Upsides**
 - i. Good for generating new thinking, policy ideas, vision, strategy and tactics - and getting people who are already motivated onto the same page.
 - ii. Includes everyone who wants to be there
 - b. **Downsides**
 - i. Because these assemblies currently have little political power, it is hard to motivate people to come along and can risk being seen as exclusive, something we try to address with huge amounts of outreach and engagement work in the run up
 - ii. Because there's a lot of different interests amongst those that do come - and because people can drop in and out - it can feel quite chaotic and harder to pin down outcomes.

[Citizens Assemblies](#) are the ones favoured by governments because they are highly structured and well researched and have built a reputation for developing high levels of

participant agreement and sound decisions. They also tend to be expensive to run, so can seem out of reach to other players. Our current political system relies on delegates, as do many movements and organisations from Unions to Extinction Rebellion.

In this course we're focusing on **People's Assemblies**, which attempt, through a strong emphasis on pre-engagement, to get as much of the community as possible to engage with the process. People's Assemblies are the only kind of assembly exclusively organised by community groups, social movements, and/ or not-for-profit organisations.

Within the broad category of People's Assemblies, there is a very wide range of possibilities in terms of the style and focus, including:

- Understanding what's needed in the community and exploring / clarifying our collective vision;
- Exploring root causes & systemic issues, and identifying avenues for action/ change/ resistance;
- Discussing, developing and agreeing on proposals for future action;

Impact of assemblies: the four main pathways

There are broadly four pathways out of People's Assemblies that can be impactful:

1. **Personal empowerment:** when someone 'gets' that they can make things happen - in their own lives, in their community and beyond. This can happen as part of any of the other pathways and is an essential part of each of them. Our system has persuaded us that we need to wait to be told, or that someone else is better placed to make things change. When we realise that the responsibility for change belongs to each one of us, the change we need will happen quickly.
2. **Direct action by local people** to meet needs and create initiatives in the community. This doesn't need official permission and no / few funds e.g. community gardens, food coops, shared childcare circles etc. It can include creative initiatives that don't seek permission from those in authority, but are legitimised by the community. Benefits from being able to be initiated and carried out by the community itself. Can be limited by not having the capacity / influence to address more fundamental issues.
3. **Building relationships with, and asking or demanding from, existing power structures** (including local & national government, companies, funders etc) e.g. local research, petitions, delegations, negotiations with those in power, protest and civil disobedience, etc. Benefits from mobilising to impact and persuade powerful forces who can help address broader causes / context. Problematic because current power holders often are the cause of the problem the assembly is seeking to address, and often don't really trust or take on the outcomes of assemblies, or may react with hostility to pressure from the assembly. Also they tend to have an orientation to problem solving / fixing what's wrong in a particular area, as opposed to seeing the whole picture and imagining and bringing into being a different future.
4. **Autonomous citizen-led processes:** What could happen if communities came together to reclaim real power rather than asking those currently in power to take action? This is just a hope at this stage, but this is how most human communities

have organised for most of our evolution. It is an enduring way of organising ourselves in many - especially indigenous - communities, and elements of it are present in emerging processes such as in [Jackson](#), [Chiapas](#) and [Rojava](#). Citizen-led policy design and decision making can happen when people come together at the community / city/ regional/ national level. In Scotland, a range of assemblies could bring together their different evidence and action plans from local processes to a broader regional or National Assembly that could consider new ways to tackle our shared problems. Benefits from being able to imagine a much better way of doing things. Problematic because of (current) low levels of engagement and so legitimacy.

Pathways two and three are relatively well worn. How transformative any element of them might be will depend a lot on a wide range of factors including:

- Whether there are local people with enough capacity to push the idea forward;
- Whether single project ideas can be woven together towards more of a local or regional plan, rather than working separately.
- For pathway three, whether there are one or more people within the power-holding group who believe in the idea and are willing to champion it, or whether there is enough leverage to ensure power holders act in support of the community.

Pathway four is *not* well worn - and it's much harder to be clear at this stage about the kind of ideas we might hope to see as part of it - or how these ideas might be actioned. What we're trying to do by holding space for a third pathway, is to create a possibility in our own and others' minds that if our current power-holders are not able to effectively address the emergencies we are facing, this might be something that 'we the people' have to take responsibility for. Pathway four ideas let us start talking about what this might look like - how we may redistribute power (and wealth) more equitably across society.

This is not a common move to make, so there are few existing examples: we really have to make this pathway by walking it! Just by holding an assembly and taking it seriously, we're already beginning to sketch a fourth pathway and taking a step towards local autonomy by creating a space for local people to be creative, build a sense of agency and responsibility, raise our level of ambition and take decisions together.

One way to think about fourth pathway outputs are that they may be aspirational or imaginary at this stage: people considering 'what would we do to change things if we had the power to' are creating the beginnings of a plan, even if the conditions to enact it are not currently in place. Ideas like this could feed into regional or national processes to be further considered and refined by other communities with similar experiences of disempowerment.

Pathway two and three outcomes can also contribute to pathway four if, for example, community-led initiatives are building towards a transformative vision or if power holders and existing power structures are engaged with in a way that shifts power to communities.

It can be hard to hold onto the very divergent elements of pathway four. These ideas are largely imaginary (at this stage) and highly ambitious. They are hyper local, but could feed into national level thinking. We have found that when we feel we're on the right track, we start noticing paradoxes - these pop up when we're pushing the boundaries of what's possible within this system - and beginning to imagine a new one. So, hold onto your hats

and keep your nerve: our experience is: many more people are ready for this than you might expect. And the prompt for change can come from unexpected quarters.



The experience of Covid-19 shows how the experience of crisis can also create opportunity for significant change. These can be negative, for example power holders using crisis to amass more wealth and power, or can be positive. For example, in the Covid crisis different communities came together in Scotland (and globally) to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable (like for food and medicines) were met in a safe way - without asking for government permission. Policy changes happened very fast, like providing homeless people with clean, safe accommodation in a matter of days. As climate breakdown intensifies, knowing how to come together to make good collective decisions, will stand us in good stead.

What makes for legitimacy in an assembly?

We mentioned legitimacy in the introduction. We are taught that it is the government's job to make decisions on our behalf. This belief lives in most of us so strongly that it can be quite a challenge to imagine a different way of doing things. That strong belief, shared by many if not most people, in the rightness and fairness of the government's role is their legitimacy. This belief is partly based on strong social conditioning, but is also reinforced (whether we accept all of these or not) in a range of ways which include:

- **Voting and party membership systems** - which gives us a sense that we can influence the system, even if party membership is often strongly disciplined, and voting systems can mean having to choose 'the lesser of two evils' rather than voting for what we want
- **Thorough documentation of policies and decisions** - which gives us a sense that they are being accountable and transparent, even if the documentation can be too simplistic or obscure, and effective public input into decision making inadequate

- **System of departments that take responsibility for different areas** - which gives us a sense that they've 'got it all covered', even if it can mean connections between areas are missed, and those responsible for an area are quickly moved on
- **Use of serious, complex language** - sometimes impossible for outsiders to understand - which lets us know that the matter of government is serious and complex and not to be engaged in by people who don't have adequate knowledge
- **Dressing in sober outfits, meeting in a big, ancient /flashy new building** - to show that this is serious stuff; power and money are involved!

While the assembly we are working on may or may not challenge people's faith in the mainstream system, building a sense that the ideas and decisions arrived at in the assembly are right and fair is crucial to enabling it to gain support from people who did not attend it.

The legitimacy of citizen-led assemblies has to come from a very clean, transparent and thorough process and from an intensive process of grassroots engagement, where people on the ground are made aware of the intentions, content, process and outcomes of the assembly so that it becomes an inclusive process which can demonstrate that a deeper democracy is possible and stands the best possible chance of catalysing meaningful change.

Much of this handbook is devoted to ensuring this kind of good practice in assemblies, which we hope will give people confidence that these processes are fair and that the ideas and decisions that come out of them are good quality and reliable. To ensure this, we need to be able to show we have covered the following:

- Strong efforts have been made to involve as many people as possible
- Attention has been paid to making sure that any barriers to people joining the assembly have been seriously addressed
- Perspectives across the range of informed views on the subject have been shared by expert witnesses (N.B. lived experience is definitely an expertise)
- People have been given enough time and space to dig into the issues together
- Ideas and decisions are carefully made and have clear next steps towards putting them into action
- The process is clearly recorded and openly shared

Learning from past assemblies

By the end of this section we hope to have:

- Heard about the experience of running assemblies elsewhere
- Practised [Collective Story Harvesting](#)

In the training this handbook is written to go along with, this session is mostly practical, so there are fewer notes. We use a tool called '[Collective Story Harvesting](#) (one of many useful ways of working developed by the [Art of Hosting](#) network)' to listen to and learn from the experience of different kinds of assembly. In the session we use the stories of assemblies that Open Source team members have been involved in:

1. The Torry People's Assemblies, [2021](#) & [2023](#), including this [video](#) of Scott Herret sharing about the first assembly as part of the [Reworlding](#) event organised online by [Grassroots to Global](#).
2. [Heart Talk Party](#), 2021 - The first phase of a people's assembly in Portobello, Edinburgh

Another interesting case study to look at is the [Government-led Climate Citizens assembly](#), 2020.

Collective Story Harvesting



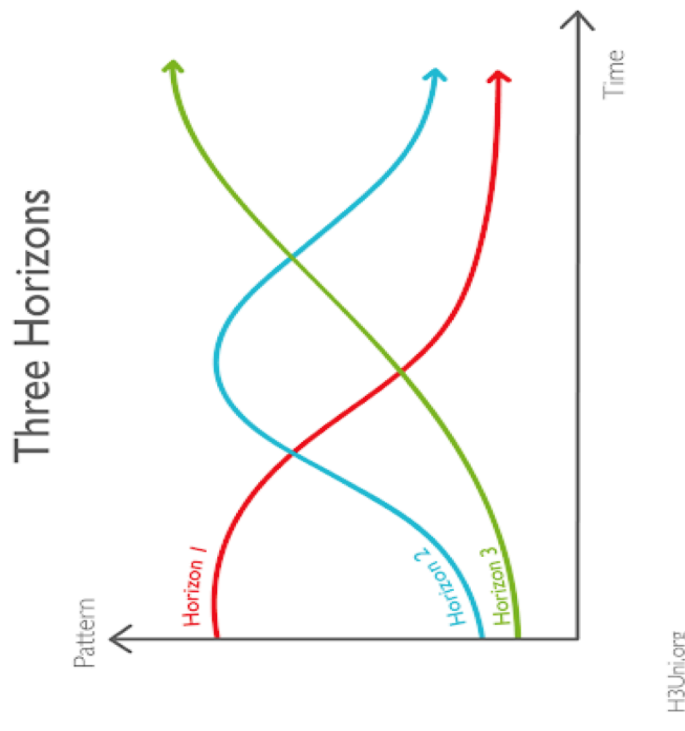
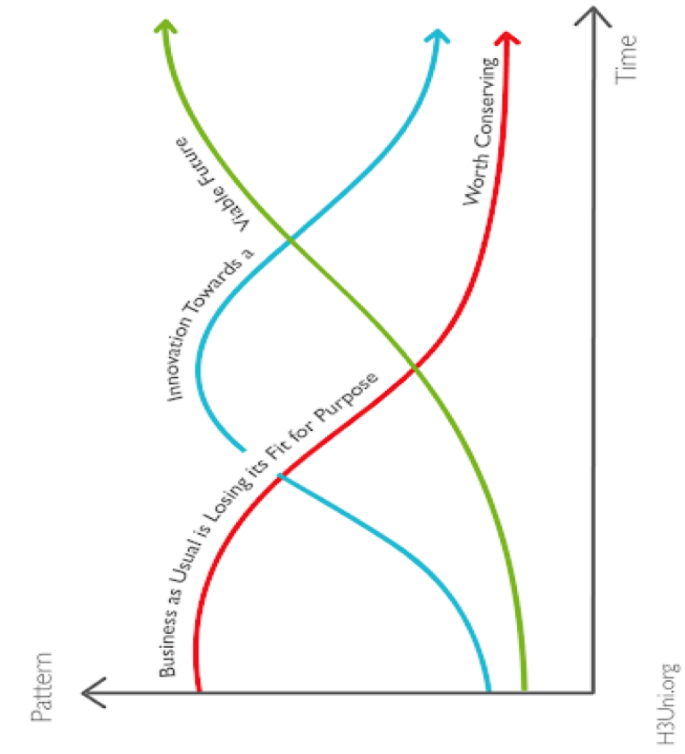
HARVESTING

In pairs, participants are given a 'thread' to listen for in the story, and take notes. Having a thread to focus on can help us to really concentrate and listen well, finding some useful nuggets - as opposed to letting the whole thing wash over us, leaving us with more of a general impression.

- **The process - what happened?** people, events, stages. You might also harvest facts, emotions and values that are part of the story, etc.
- **What were the aims of the assembly** and how did the way the assembly was designed and run reflect those?
- **What challenges** did the organisers face and how did they overcome them?
- **What were the outcomes** of the assembly?
- What can we **learn** from this story about **what makes (or doesn't make) for an effective assembly?**
- What can we learn from this story about the importance, challenges and benefits of **tending to relationships and partnerships?**

Three Horizons Framework

See [here](#) for a useful video introduction.



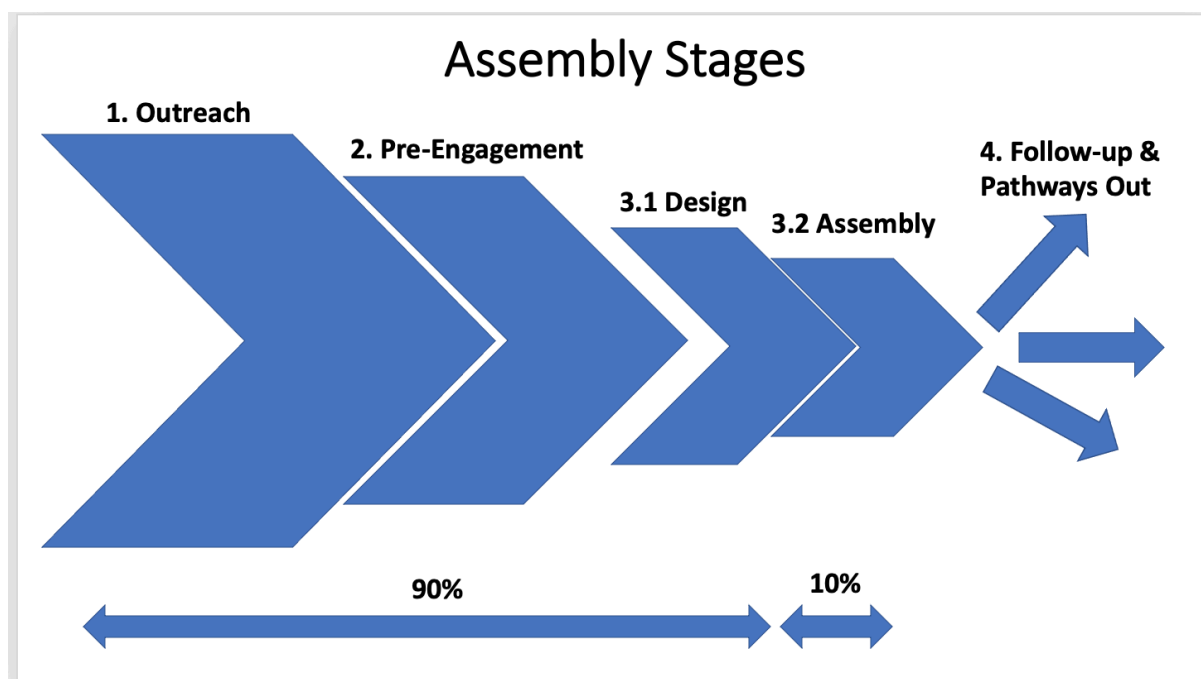
Preparing for an assembly:

Community Mapping & Engagement

By the end of this section we hope to have:

1. Understood the four phases of an assembly process (and the 90 / 10% guideline)
2. Explored:
 - a. Different ways to build connections with people in our communities and make assemblies as accessible as possible: [engaged listening](#) and community mapping
 - b. Community ownership: setting up a steering group / meeting
 - c. The range of roles needed throughout the whole assembly process
 - d. How to approach sensitive issues e.g. racism in the community, long standing community tensions etc...

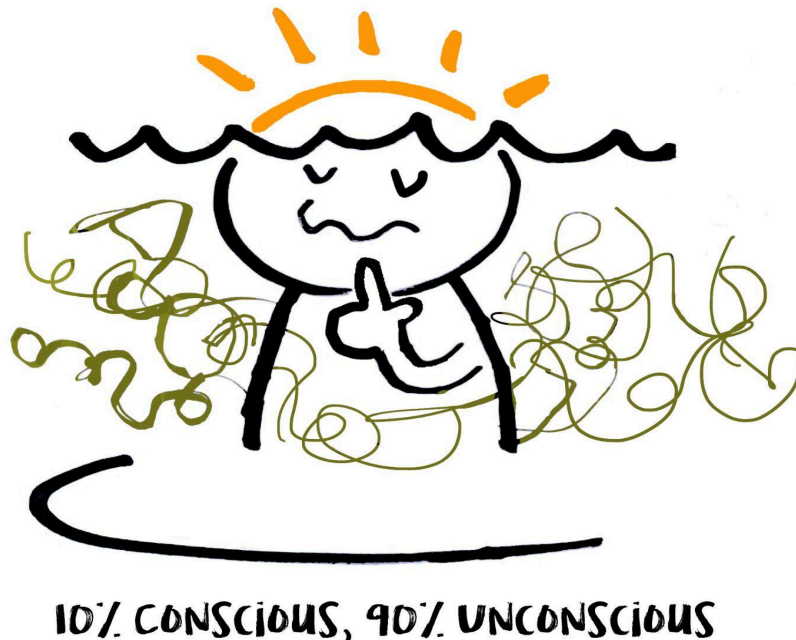
Stages in An Assembly



90%/10% guideline

We estimate that roughly 90% of the work of an assembly happens beforehand, and 10% is the actual assembly (and similarly, this pre-work and the assembly event are together only the beginning of the much longer period of follow up to make sure that the process is impactful). This is because when we talk about assemblies, we tend to focus our thinking on the event itself, but unless we've first done the engagement, preparation and put care and

attention into the design, and then stayed with the follow up to support what emerges, the assembly won't be able to do what's needed.



Wide Engagement and Engaged Listening

Whatever the size of your community, you will need to put a lot of work into engagement. Even in relatively small communities there are complex dynamics. Every community has at least one - and often several - 'mainstream' individuals and groups, and many 'marginal' ones (and we all have these parts within ourselves too). Although we're unlikely to be able to create a process that will include 100% of the people within a community, we need to put as much effort as we can towards that figure, and especially commit to engaging with folks who tend to be more on the margins.

In the early stages of engagement we find a lot of value in a process we call [Engaged Listening](#), which was developed by Grassroots to Global at the onset of the pandemic. This takes a 1:1 approach, directly approaching people in the community especially in places and with people where we think there is likely to be less representation and engagement.

Groups that are marginal tend to be those most impacted by the negative aspects of the social systems we live in. They're likely to be facing multiple challenges and be under-resourced to contribute to an assembly - but their voices are crucial to the full understanding of our situation, and how it needs to change. Engaged listening encourages a direct approach, not through organisations or other groups, but through door-knocking or just

starting a chat on the street, on a bus or anywhere else, so it's a good way to connect with people who may not be in touch with any local groups. Although this can feel a bit challenging to begin with, we find that most people are keen to talk and these connections across perceived difference can be some of the most surprising and meaningful conversations and preparations we have.

In both these approaches, we are asking people to explore four main areas with us:

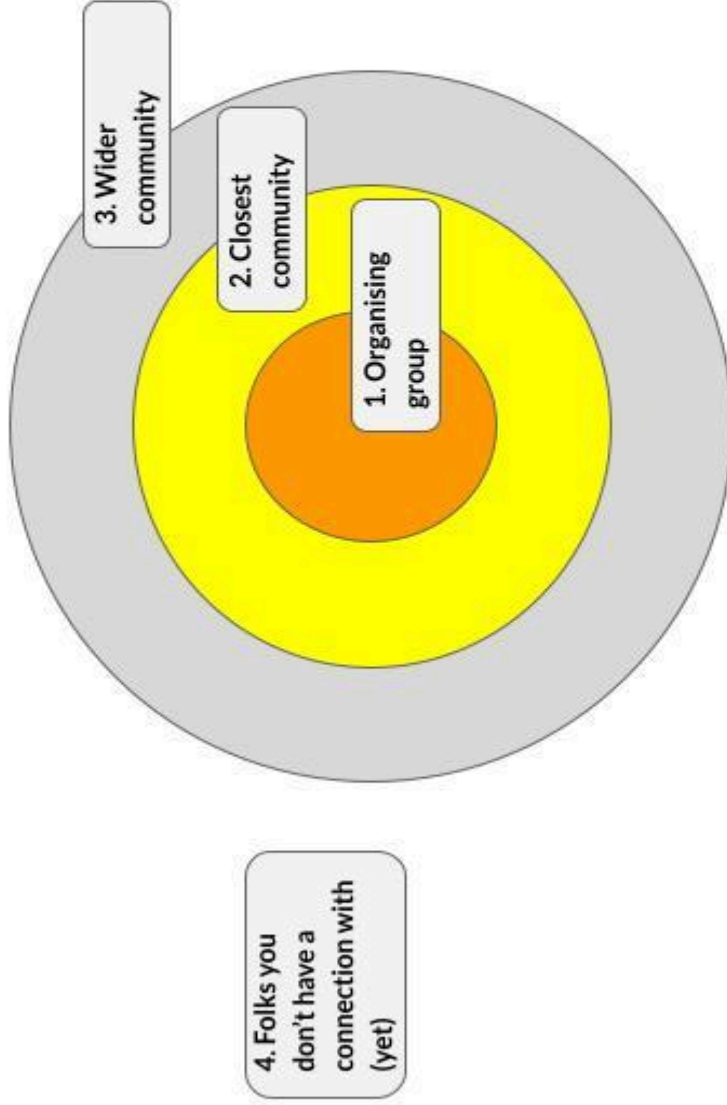
- *What do you think is good in the world? Or your local community?*
- *What do you think are the biggest crises at the moment?*
- *Why do you think these crises are happening? What are the causes?*
- *What do you think solutions could look like?*

Of course, there are as many answers to these questions as there are people, but what we're aiming for here is to get a sense of: (1) the *spread* of issues, perspectives and experience in the community; (2) the *deeper* causes, clashes and connections between these; and from this, crucially, (3) what are the *burning issues* that might draw people to engage with the assembly process. A good follow-up question could be: what would make a local assembly feel unmissable for you?

Engagement Map

Through creating, and frequently reviewing, an 'engagement map; you can identify different parts of the community and different ways of engaging them.

Engagement Map



1. Organising group
2. Groups/individuals who are part of my network, support the idea of an assembly and may want to get more involved
3. Groups/individuals who are part of my network and may be interested in the assembly
4. Groups /individuals I don't have a connection with (yet)

1. The assembly organising group /local steering group;
2. Groups/individuals who are part of our existing networks, support the idea of an assembly and may want to play a role in making it happen;
3. Groups/individuals who are part of our networks and may be interested in the assembly;
4. Groups /individuals we don't have a connection with (yet)

Your aims are to bring folks at the edges of the circle in, support those in each circle to move closer to the core, and to maintain different forms of involvement across the circles as much as you can.

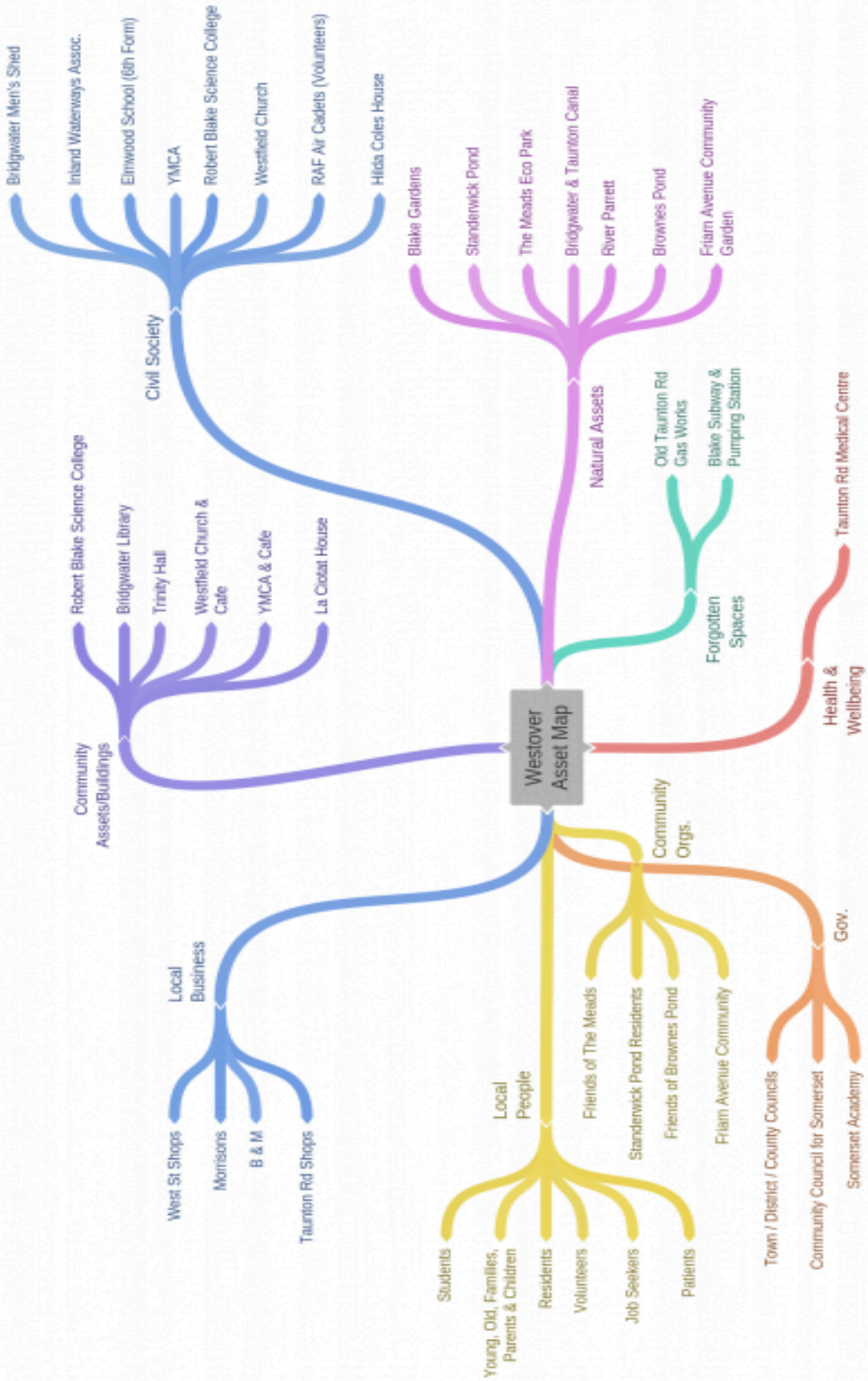
Community Mapping

As part of our engagement process we use experience in community mapping from the [ABCDE approach](#). Asset Based Community Driven Efforts (ABCDE) is a global philosophy and practice related to asset (positive things) focussed, place based and community driven initiatives - overview [here](#). Within the ABCDE approach, you find out what is already being done and what already exists for: individuals, groups, and local institutions. Mapping is more than gathering information. It is important that community members (and their associations) do the asset mapping themselves so that they themselves build new relationships, learn more about the contributions and talents of other community members, and notice potential connections between different good things already happening in the community.

You can take the following steps in the mapping process (the whole description is [here](#) on page 10).

- **Identifying associations** (formally instituted and informal groups and organisations)
- **Identifying individual gifts, skills, and capacities**
- **Identifying the assets of local institutions** (including government agencies, non government agencies and private sector businesses) e.g services and programmes, meeting places, land, equipment and other supplies, communications links, paid or unpaid staff, etc.
- **Identifying physical assets and natural resources** - e.g. land, water, growing space, food sources, etc, identifying those which are communally owned and managed and those which are owned and managed by businesses and individuals.
- **Mapping the local economy** -this exercise helps people in the community understand how the local economy works, showing how well local resources are maximised for local economic benefit. Are products and services imported that could be produced locally? Is little produced locally, and are most people tied into far larger systems which leave them feeling powerless? Are there areas of mutual support, and potentially of production too, that the community could build on?

You can find two examples by Open Source member Andy Smith below - a virtually created asset map and one 3D model made with the community. You can also use Google My Maps to do community asset mapping - there's an instruction video [here](#).



Community ownership - steering groups / meetings

The engagement process will introduce you to people who might be up for being part of a community-led steering group. These people should:

- live in, and/or have strong connections to different elements of the community
- have lived experience of (some of) the issues affecting the community.
- be good communicators and team workers
- be excited by the potential of an assembly.

It is through a group like this that local people can engage with and influence the structure and content of the assembly. The better this works, the more the assembly can be truly owned by the community.

You might gather people for this group by drawing on contacts you already have within your community, and you could also organise an information session or two. It's important to look beyond organisations already active in the area. There's a script for a presentation on assemblies [here](#).

It can be useful to think of the steering for the assembly as happening in a regular 'meeting' rather than being members of a set group. That way anyone who turns up to a meeting can feed in, even if they only manage along to one or two.

Walk your talk and share ideas from this training with this emerging steering group. Build towards a culture of trust and power-with in the group. One important way to do this is by thinking of everyone involved in it as a facilitator. We tend to think only of the person standing at the front of an assembly as the facilitator, but in fact it takes many more roles than one person can do to make an assembly really work - and if these roles are taken by a team who trust one another it can be transformative.

Assembly Roles

Successful assemblies need input from a core team of local people who will hold and drive the process and should ideally come from a range of different backgrounds and elements of the community. They will engage, collaborate, co-design, facilitate and follow up from a community-wide assembly in their place.

The following core roles are needed. They can be filled by more than one person/ group - or one person/ group can take more than one role, if that doesn't impact on their ability to do them well. All roles run through the whole process - during the preparations, through the assembly and into whatever happens next.

BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY

- **Connecting and calling in - aka 'outreach'**
 - making sure that as many people, groups and local organisations as possible know about the assembly, understand the purpose, feel welcome to attend, have communicated their access needs (e.g. language, culture, physical,

emotional) and are having them addressed. Person to person, individual or small group conversations are best for this, but presentations or workshops could also be part of it. Use mapping to make sure you're noticing your blind spots and reaching out as widely as possible.

OUTREACH



-
- **Communications**

- Very close to outreach + can be done by the same group. This is more about written and visual communication that the assembly is happening and making it irresistible to come along. Using local printed, online and social media and thinking about the different styles of communication that will get people's attention and make them feel included.

- **Sustaining the process - aka logistics**

- venue booking, materials, refreshments / catering, participant communication, signage, tech e.g. microphones, projectors, hearing loops etc

- **Finances and fundraising**
 - Making sure that there's enough money to pay for everything
 - Making sure that accurate and transparent accounts are kept and that the group are aware of the overall financial situation as they are making decisions about what to do

- **Process Design** - including:
 - **Developing a process with clear, agreed aims**, that will enable people to:
 - feel comfortable, speak their mind, listen well to and understand one another
 - explore and more fully understand the range of issues raised
 - collaborate to identify possible pathways towards change via the four pathways mentioned [above](#).

- **Relationships within the working team**
 - Thinking about power and conflict within the group, identifying, working to navigate and mitigate habits of power inequality; ensuring that any needs, overwhelm and/ or differences of opinion are well handled - neither suppressed not escalated, but picked up on, heard compassionately, better understood, and - ideally -.enabled to contribute to an emerging collective understanding

- **Whole team tasks**
 - **Clarity on the focus and question** that the assembly will address
 - Think about how you're going to stay aware of (**monitor**), work out whether our ways of doing things are effective (**evaluate**) and learn from what we do (and share that **learning**). This can be light touch, but is good to think about early on, as you'll be starting with assumptions which it will be good to test as you go along.

DURING THE ASSEMBLY

- **Process facilitation**
 - Being the 'front person' for an assembly is crucial for helping to embody the culture we want to create and to keep as much as possible in a regulated state, so that others can coregulate with them. Holding the balance between the overall aims of the assembly and the needs for understanding and expression of the people who've turned up, so being able to deviate from the agreed programme if needed by the group
 - Facilitating a range of different processes including collective decision making.

- **Logistics**
 - **Catering** - making sure the food is ready on time, that there are enough plates, cups etc and that everything gets tidied away in time to begin the

session again. Also making sure there are refreshments in between any meals, with a range of options for different tastes.

- **Tech** - making sure the right tech (e.g. microphones, projectors, laptops, screens etc) are ready at the right time.
- **Signage** - making sure it is clear to everyone how to get where they need to go.
- **Emotional process / support**
 - Sitting to one side of the action of the assembly to ensure anyone who's getting overwhelmed or having a hard time has someone to talk to if they wish. They can also keep a look out for the need for support during the planning process.
 - Identifying, working to navigate and mitigate habits of power inequality; ensuring that any needs, overwhelm and/ or differences of opinion are well handled - neither suppressed not escalated, but picked up on, heard compassionately, better understood, and - ideally -.enabled to contribute to an emerging collective understanding
- **Recording the process**
 - Using recording through a range of mediums during the process to help participants clarify and develop their thinking. Ensuring that the range of views at each assembly are clearly recorded and shared with participants and the intended recipient/s as well as others using assembly processes with aligned aims. Part of this role is the 'Wisdom catcher' - catching the things that might not seem to fit - but that are still part of what's being created, and may be the first elements in an emerging collective understanding
 - Creating a feedback process and making sure that it is used

AFTER THE ASSEMBLY

- **Sensemaking**
 - Debriefing after the assembly - ideally with your whole team. Asking yourselves: What went right? What could we have done better? What did we learn?
 - Don't be tempted to rush this stage - it's a really crucial one to make sure your next assembly is even better than this one - and also to be able to share with others who are developing these new skills
- **Sharing outputs and learning**
 - It is really important to be clear about the 'outputs' of your assembly: what did people decide? What are the next steps? Who is doing what? Sharing this info with people who attended will give them clarity - sharing it more widely can inspire others to have their own assemblies
 - Without making it into a massive task, creating a report on your assembly can be really useful to capture your sensemaking process

Accessibility

The engaged listening approach is a good way to make connections with people experiencing higher intensity struggles, since we can go to where they are, rather than ask them to come to us. Many people may not have the capacity to engage with us, but when we find people that do, it's important to have a conversation about what would need to happen for them to be able to engage with the assembly process. Possible supportive offers could be around:

- childcare
- travel costs and other expenses
- a defined role in the process (see [steering group](#) and [assembly roles](#)) - though the opposite can also be helpful!
- payment
- BSL or other language interpretation
- a buddy or other emotional support
- alternative way/s of engaging - e.g. as part of a smaller group, online, interview etc...

Oppressive views and behaviours in communities

Human beings seem to have an inbuilt tendency to think in terms of in-group and out-group. This is handled in different ways by different groups - some seeing it as something to be overcome (as seen in many cultures where welcoming strangers is a strong part of their identity) and some underlining it and defining themselves as against other groups.

In Scotland, negative opinions about people who are experienced as 'outsiders' are socially discouraged, but they are still held - sometimes in a general way, sometimes only towards certain groups.

Clearly, our approach sees diversity and mutual understanding as essential, so we need to think deeply and carefully about how to deal with these kinds of attitudes: it's more complicated than just excluding people who hold them from communal spaces, whether that's the steering group or the assembly itself. People hold negative views of other social groups for a range of reasons, including being directed towards them as the source of problems by much of the media. The existence of genuine tensions between groups of people with differing backgrounds, attitudes and needs in a context where there is no public forum for sharing perspectives can often just get more polarised. Our assemblies need to be spaces where such views can be unpicked, the true root causes understood and where we can collaborate on finding win-win solutions.

If racist or other oppressive views are expressed in an assembly, they must be addressed directly. Usually using the group agreements will enable this. These resources on [calling in](#), [calling out](#) by Seed the Way, and [this one](#) from Harvard University offer useful prompts for how you can intervene as a facilitator (or participant) when (intentional or unintentional) oppressive behaviour happens during an assembly. It's also possible that people, if they are unwilling to follow the agreements, may need to be asked to leave.

If you think this is likely, based on your engaged listening and other conversations, it would be good to make sure you have people taking [roles within the assembly](#) who have skills

around mediating difficult conversations and ultimately who are willing to go with people who have been asked to leave, to listen to their experience and, after the assembly, to try to help them recover, take accountability and learn. One approach to this follow-up work is [Transformative Justice](#).

Asking the Right Question/s

By the end of this section we hope to have:

- *Understood the need for a tailored approach*
 - *How to pick up on the issues that will encourage people through the door*
 - *how to fire people's sense of inspiration and ambition with good questions*
- *Understood the value of different kinds of questions:*
 - *Generative at the Outreach and Pre-Engagement Phases*
 - *Carefully crafted 'Calling Question' for the Assembly itself.*

A tailored approach

Each community is unique and so their assemblies need to be unique too. The outreach and engagement you do, should enable you to identify the main themes that are concerning people at the moment. This [document](#) shares the main themes that we picked up during the engaged listening process for the second Torry assembly.

It is not likely that one issue will draw together a really diverse group from the community and while the funding for this work (and much of our enthusiasm) is focused around e.g. a Just Transition, we won't get wide community buy-in if we insist that people focus solely on this.

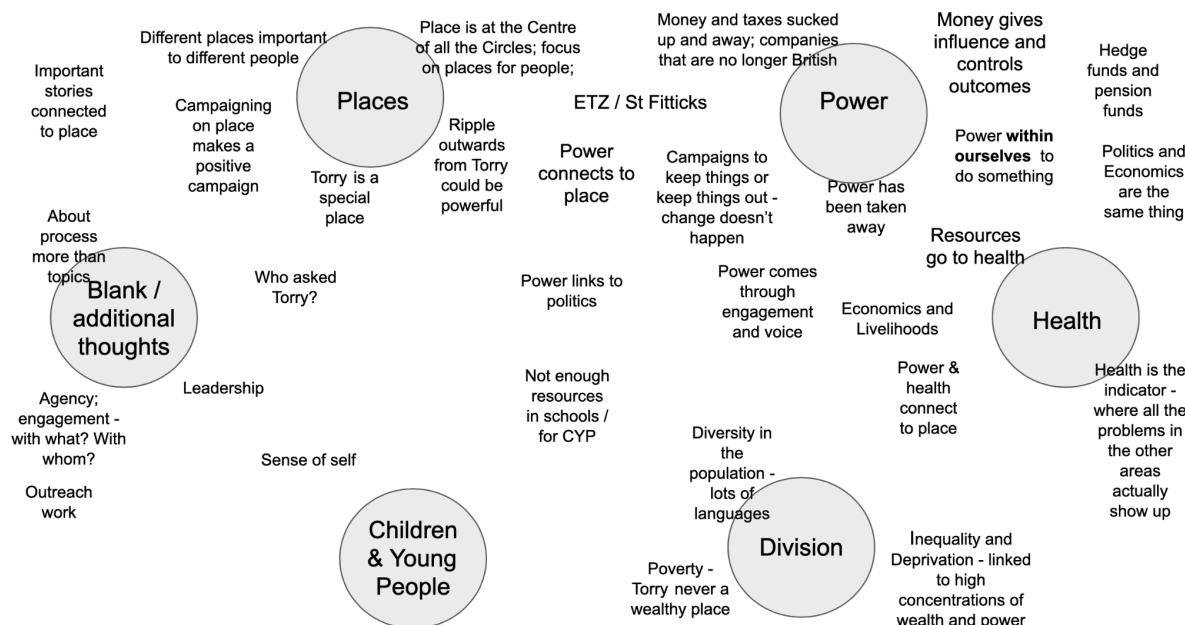
Our approach is to find ways of connecting issues so that people can see how 'their' issue(s) connects with others'. If you've picked up that a wide range of people are experiencing very intense challenges in different ways, you could frame your assembly as an 'emergency assembly' without specifying which emergency - because you want it to be able to uncover the connections between, and begin to address, all of these emergencies.

Below is an example of an exercise we developed for the Torry assembly group. We should add that although it got us to a good place, getting there wasn't easy! We learned that it's important to frame the exercise not as voting one for 'the' issue; but as a way of leaning into the *connections* between issues and that the comments and observations people make during the process will reveal further insights. All of this enables the group to clarify which issue/s feels the most potent for the community at this time - and will give you the bones of a question, which the group will need to work on wordsmithing that into a punchy calling question (see [below](#)).

From the many issues we had heard about from local people (see [doc](#) above) we distilled five main themes:



We placed these on the floor and asked people to walk round and look at each of them, thinking about the ways they had experienced or seen each of these playing out in Torry. Then we asked people to imagine lines of connection between different themes and stand on them - and invited people to say what connections they were seeing. The image below is a record of some of what people said:



In the example above, we used the exercise to identify the key elements of the question. This was drafted on the spot by a team member, based on the comments people were making. It was then shared with the group, and worked on further in a breakout group of steering group members. The question ended up as:

How can Torry reclaim the power to make this community a healthy place to grow up in?

Calling questions

It can be useful to pose your frame of the key local issue/s into a '[calling question](#)' that picks up on these themes and (hopefully) creates interest and enthusiasm for a process where people can come together. In some places there will be an immediate threat, which is often a great galvaniser for people. In other places there may be less immediate sense of threat, but there are likely to be a range of issues that people are concerned about. An obvious one currently is the cost of living (the extremely unequal sharing of resources and suffering) and of course there's the increasing reality of climate change (an issue that is clearly incapable of being addressed within a system of extreme inequality).

These are questions which invite people into a conversation - hopefully in a way that covers one or more of the following:

- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities

- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions

Here is a series of generative questions to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking. They're here to stimulate your own thinking about questions related to your own specific situation.

Questions for Focusing Collective Attention on Your Situation

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of your community?
- What's important to you about your community and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose that is really worthy of our best effort?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about your community?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in your community?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about your community?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs say about your community?

Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energised about your community?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of our community?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of our community?

Ultimately we need to start thinking in terms of an Assembly Question. Experience shows a question works better than just an issue. It requires an answer and helps avoid the tendency just to talk around an issue.

Consider how to achieve different Assembly outputs:

- What is the difference between these two Assembly Questions:
 - 'How should Scotland respond to climate change?'
 - 'How should Scotland change to respond to the climate emergency in a fair and effective way?'

- What do you like or find problematic in this set?*

 - The City Water Authority needs to find a balance between value and price which is fair for everyone. How should we do this?
 - How should we best spend £200,000 to improve our community through the use of infrastructure spending?
 - How do we reduce congestion, improve air quality and provide better public transport in Greater Cambridge?
 - This [publication](#) also has some useful thinking on questions - but they are oriented to the kinds of questions that local government might want to ask. They may not open up the fourth pathway out of an Assembly.

Facilitation basics

By the end of this section we hope to have explored:

- Why attending to group culture is important + how to do it
- Tools for including people
- Elements that help create a warm and welcoming space
- Potential difficulties and how to deal with them

Before you begin!

Getting yourself ready the day before you're going to facilitate will really help things go smoothly on the day. Give yourself time to think through what you need in terms of equipment (ideas below), but also what kind of self-talk will help you to relax - e.g.

- *The people coming along will be there because they've chosen to be - I'll be helping them to do something they already want to do*
- *The more I can just be my (authentic, messy, forgetful, silly, kind, serious, vulnerable, joyful etc.....) self, the more I'm being part of the antidote to the power-over culture that has caused this mess*
- *Fill in your own encouragements of choice here....*

Kit / prep list

- Flipchart (or other big) paper (with example agreements written up if you're using them, a session outline if you're using one - and your way of doing the tally for the council)
- Big pen/s
- Blu tac or masking tape
- Spare paper and pens for participants
- Laptop with any presentations you might be giving loaded on it.
- Hankies
- Timer / phone etc
- Drinks and snacks (if you're providing them)
- Session overview
- Email / contact info sheet (remind people to write neatly - this is your only way of getting back to them)

Things to discuss in advance if you're facilitating with others...

- Who is bringing what in terms of equipment, refreshments etc?
- What are your travel +/- accommodation arrangements?
- What are likely areas of stress and how can we best support one another with these?
- How do you want to run the session together - e.g. who is holding which parts of the session? What to do in case of emergencies e.g. strong disagreements, disruptive or distressed behaviour
- Get to know your venue - and find out where the loos are so you can let people know - or if there's anything like fire instructions you need to pass on.

... And afterwards

- How are you doing - what do you need to celebrate / recover from the session?
- What went well and what could we have done differently / better
- Is there anything we need to feed back for other facilitators e.g. difficult questions, local trigger issues, new information, inspiring examples?
- Are there other follow up actions and who's going to do them?

Why attending to group culture is important + how to do it

A healthy group culture enables people to quickly feel relaxed, positive, able to take on the information shared in the session - and more likely to be motivated to try something new.

We tend to passively learn how to be in groups in top-down scenarios - e.g. at school or at work. So running less formal, peer-to-peer meetings requires different skills, which we often have less practice using in groups. However, we already use quite a few of these as parents and in other areas of our lives: we already have a lot of what we need to be a facilitator.

There are lots of ways to create a healthy group culture, some of which you can see below. As the facilitator, you play a strong role in setting the tone: if you are (relatively!) relaxed, friendly, informal, authentic and open, people in the group are likely to follow your lead². Think about the kind of group culture that makes you feel relaxed - it's likely to work for others - and use the notes from our session on [how to create a welcoming space](#) to remind you of the range of ways to do this.

When people first come into a new group they can be very sensitive to signs that they might be asked to do things they don't want to, that they may be badly judged or that they won't feel part of the group. Make a special effort to make those [first few moments](#) feel positive and help people start to relax and enjoy themselves.

Aside from using the [tools](#) below, welcoming people with a [few statements](#) about your hopes for the group can really help with this. Just telling people that this is a place where we're going to try not to judge ourselves and one another, or where we're going to give everyone space to be heard, is a big step towards making that happen.

We all develop our own style of facilitating - which develops and evolves over time. Borrow and steal shamelessly: get into the habit of watching groups you're in with your facilitator's head on. Ask yourself: what's working well here? What's helping me take this information in - and what isn't?

Healthy culture building things to say and do during the introduction. Use these at your discretion and in your own words. You may also want to turn one or two of them into draft agreements for the group agreements sheet.

- Thank people for coming - acknowledging that most of us are very busy and their time is appreciated.

² This is partly due to a process called co-regulation where our nervous systems are strongly influenced by others' - specially those in leadership roles. Look it up - it's really interesting!

- Tell people that this is a judgement-free zone - OR - notice your judgement - we all do it, but it's not helpful to us feeling welcome as we are.
- *Everyone's* input is needed to make change - so if even if you usually sit back or stay quiet in groups - please speak up. At the same time there's no pressure to talk - if you want to pass at any point, you're welcome
- Acknowledge that assemblies can bring up strong feelings - and that our feelings are welcome
- We have a lot to get through, so I may need to move us on from longer conversations or inputs
- Teach people the sign for 'silent giraffe' (for bringing larger groups to silence quickly and peacefully): anyone who wants to bring the group to silence can put up their hand and stop talking. If anyone sees anyone with their hand up, they should also put their hand up and stop talking.
- Teach people the sign for 'round up now': both hands, each describing a half circle ()

Other helpful things to do early in the session

- Put a session outline on the wall (and/or share by email beforehand if possible). Don't include timings in case you need to re-jig them as you go.
- Let people know where the loos are

Tools for including people

- Check-ins and outs
 - Do them early in the session - it's good to hear people's voices
 - Keep them light and informal - don't ask people to talk about something loaded (e.g. how they travelled here) but something that they clearly know about e.g. how they're feeling right now, what they had for breakfast, what's their favourite animal, one food they used to hate but now they like - silly is good (to a point 😊)
- Group agreements
 - Important to get the right balance - agreements can be reassuring, but can feel unwieldy if they take up too much time.
 - Speak to each point and then check in for comments / changes
 - Feel free to adapt the list to what makes sense to you - or leave out entirely if you don't find them useful!
- Paired work or small group work
 - Helps people build closer relationships that in turn make them feel happier in the main group
 - When one person is more confident or talkative, the other can end up not having space, so let the group know when the time is halfway through.
 - If you have more than 10 or so people you may want to split the group up for some sessions so that people have more time to speak.

- **Crowdsourcing ideas from the group**
 - Great for landing ideas - people will feel much more involved and a sense of ownership of the ideas if they've contributed, rather than you've just told them.
 - Where possible, write down what people are saying, so they can see they've been heard
 - Either write neatly and photograph it afterwards for sharing - or if your writing is hard to read, let people know you'll write it up and share with them afterwards (make sure you collect everyone's contact details!)

- **Go-rounds**
 - Great for hearing everyone's voice and sharing the time more fairly.
 - Don't feel bad about asking people who're talking a lot to round up - they should understand - especially if you've flagged this in your intro.
 - Let people know they can always pass if they don't want to speak - you can come back and check if they're ready at the end.

Elements that help create a warm and welcoming space

There's LOADS of ideas here - you won't be able to use all of them all the time, so let them be an inspiring reminder...

- **Arriving in the space**
 - People sometimes need a bit of time to orient to the space and feel relaxed - providing things for them to do e.g. have a cup of tea + snack, look at things on the wall etc can help them do that.
 - make sure you build in time for people to arrive a bit late in your session plan e.g. plan to start 5-10 minutes later than advertised
 - Welcome people who come in even later and try to find a moment to let them know what's happened already so they can catch up - reassure them that they'll be able to catch up and that they can take their time

- **Feeling people are listening**
 - Make time for questions that people have, even if you're just about to answer them.
 - When people make suggestions during a crowdsourcing element, be sure to write them all down
 - Summarising longer contributions can help someone with a lot to say feel heard
 - Allow your own, and encourage others' genuine curiosity to understand one another

- **Non-judgemental, accepting**
 - Everything you do should underline that we're not here to judge one another - we live in a system where it's really difficult (quite possibly impossible!) not to contribute to climate chaos and we all have difficult choices to make.
 - Let people know there are no wrong ideas
 - Pay attention to your non-verbal cues too e.g. eye contact; open posture etc
 - Let people know they can opt out of any of the activities and won't be 'picked on' if e.g. they haven't spoken yet, and they always have the option to pass in circles.

- **Clear structure**
 - People like to feel that someone is (supportively) 'in charge': keeping things moving, keeping everyone in the picture
 - Explain what's coming up and roughly how long you have to spend on it when you introduce new items on the agenda
 - Put a session outline on the wall (and/or share by email beforehand if possible). Don't include timings in case you need to re-jig them as you go.

- **Food and drink**
 - Food and drink are essential to a feeling of being welcome, cared for and accepted
 - Hot drinks and snacks on arrival can really help people feel welcome and give them something to do in the first few minutes after they arrive
 - Provide drinks and snacks during breaks too - and invite people to (quietly) help themselves during the sessions.
 - If you're meeting for a whole day, try to provide lunch for people. Try to keep it simple and allergen free where possible. And think about what people where you're working tend to like to eat - not too many surprises.
 - Think about where your refreshments come from - if you can contribute to the local economy by using local caterers and ingredients so much the better

- **Topics people can get talking about**
 - It can be good to ask people an interesting question to respond to in their check in - something that could spark their passion and care - but not too personal (or give them options on how much they want to share).

- **Using humour**
 - Really good to ease tension and create a fun atmosphere.
 - Essential to be sensitive about what you're being humorous about - good to make yourself the butt of any jokes, rather than anyone else!

- Things that unite us
 - If you spot trends, connections or similarities, share them with the group

Potential difficulties and how to deal with them

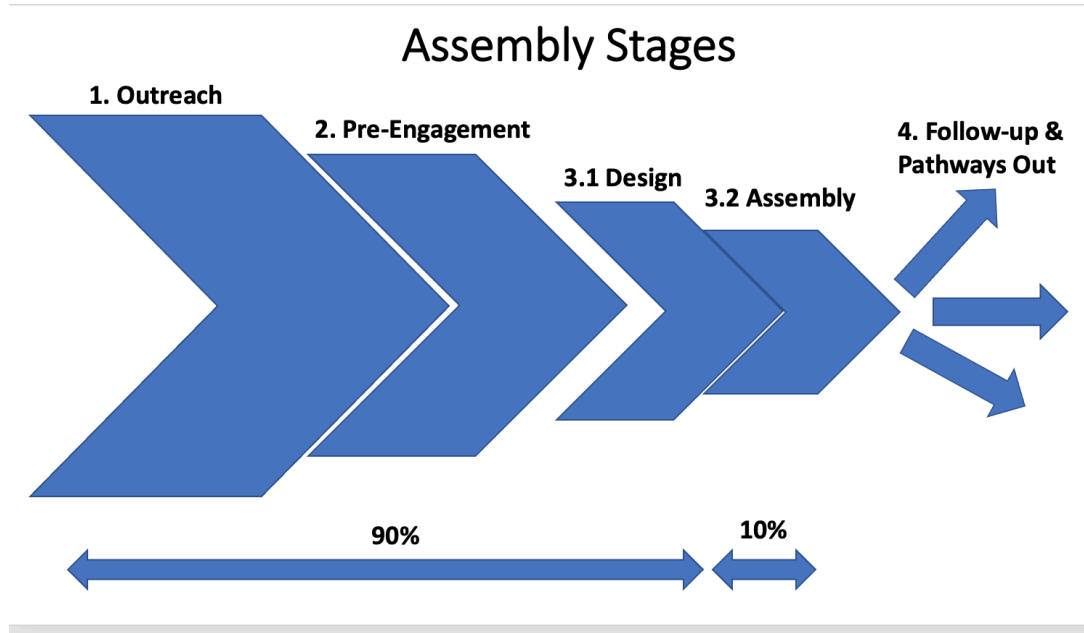
- Moving people (individuals or groups) on from a topic they're interested in
 - Important to let people know early in the session that you might need to do this.
 - Use the 'round up' gesture first
 - If people don't notice this, find a gap in the flow and apologise - let them know you're interested in what they're saying, but there's a pressure of time, so you're going to need to hear from the next person
 - Be aware that some people need more time to speak than others - they could be people who think by speaking, or have nowhere else they can speak about this stuff, or just be feeling really inspired - so although we're aiming for sharing time fairly, it's a balance
 - If it's a group conversation, use the silent giraffe
 - Ask for responses from 'anyone who hasn't spoken'
- What if no one says anything
 - Don't be too worried about a few seconds of silence - people may well just be thinking - or waiting to see if anyone else wants to go.
 - A few seconds of silence can feel really long - hold your nerve 😊
 - Have a few generative questions in your back pocket e.g.
 - What's one thing you've heard others suggesting that seems like a good idea to you?
 - Is there one change, no matter how tiny, you've thought you or your community could potentially make?
 - Do a go-round, so everyone has a turn to speak (tell people they can pass if they really want to)
- What if someone is disruptive (this is different from disagreement, which we look at [here](#))
 - It's very unlikely that someone will join the group in order to be disruptive. However it is possible, so if you've gone through everything below and believe someone is there in bad faith, you should ask them to leave. If they won't you may need to get help or reschedule the session.
 - Make sure you listen carefully to what they're trying to say and try to take on any reasonable feedback they may have.
 - Don't label their behaviour - e.g. 'you're angry' - describe what you see and ask what they need right now.
 - Be honest about your own responses
 - Agree in advance with your partner what you'll do in case of any disruption - make a plan for one of you potentially needing to leave with someone.
 - Ask whether there is another forum for this conversation

- Refer back to the group agreements and make a general statement about e.g. being respectful even when we disagree and be clear that in the interests of the rest of the participants you move on from the conversation.
- Not knowing enough, getting your facts wrong - or being asked difficult questions
 - Be upfront that you're not an expert on the topic (unless you are!) - and you may need to go away and do SOME fact-checking.
 - Be appreciative if people are correcting or bringing in new facts
 - If you can't answer a question, see if anyone else in the group can - if not, say you'll ask elsewhere and get back to people on it (and then do that)
- Having an 'expert' in the group who's maybe wanting to talk a lot
 - Start with appreciation and give them a little time to speak
 - Make sure they don't take over - if they want to speak too long say they can continue after the session + remind them that there's a programme to get through in a set time.
- Challenging false 'facts';
 - Prepare as well as you can so that you're familiar with the 'core facts' within the session
 - Try to understand what's underneath what they're saying - are they just uninformed or are they undermining the need to take action?
 - Be upfront that you're not an expert (unless you are!) - and you may need to go away and do some fact-checking.
 - Ask for references
 - Remember YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT 😊 Keep an eye on your own self-talk and don't let the 'critic' have a free hand
- Inviting quieter people in - and letting talkative people know when they need to stop
 - Mention this early on - invite people to notice their habits and try doing things differently.
 - Ask for responses from someone who hasn't spoken yet.
 - Pick on someone who hasn't spoken - but make sure you give them the option not to speak if they don't want to.
- How do we talk about the future?
 - As we know it can be difficult to think about the future in these times. It's important that we balance being realistic around the challenges we face with the fact that the future hasn't happened yet - and the one thing we can be sure of is that if we do nothing we can never succeed in changing things. With people in the sessions we can:
 - Invoke a positive cycle of hope in the framing - e.g. if we believe we can, then we can etc
 - Changing what you can impacts on a sense of helplessness
- What if someone gets upset?
 - Bring hankies with - this can be an emotive process. Acknowledge early on that this subject can bring up strong feelings.

- If someone is hiding their distress, don't call it out in front of the group - sent one of the facilitation pair over for a quiet word
- Don't label their behaviour - e.g. 'you're distressed' - describe what you see and ask what they need right now.
- Challenges about the scale needed to be effective e.g. 'only the government / council can make change'
 - Be clear that change needs to happen at every level + and change on any level encourages people at other levels: it's a spectrum
 - We can't change everything all at once - every small change adds strength to the larger change that's going on everywhere.
 - When we start trying to change we can understand the barriers better and work together to overcome them.
 -
- Dealing with strong disagreements in the group
 - Be aware of likely areas of disagreement and think in advance with your partner about how you plan to handle them
 - The best way to disagree is to find what you can agree with first - do they have a point? Make sure you acknowledge it.
 - Keep an eye on the time - some disagreement can really help people understand things better, but if they take over the whole session others will feel short-changed.
 - Make a call to your shared reasons for being there: e.g. caring about our community
 - Acknowledge that there are real difficulties that can be very difficult to solve to everyone's satisfaction
 - Ask what *their* solutions would be
 - If things get too heated, check out the section on [disruptions](#).
- Imposter syndrome
 - Remember you're not there as an expert - just as a fellow community member trying to help make change.
 - The group is there to inspire one another - you're just there to hold the space so they can do that.
- Timekeeping
 - Set timers
 - Decide in advance which sessions feel most important and plan how to ditch elements if you've gone over time with earlier sessions e.g./ quiz - and / or compress sessions e.g. tally
 - Don't give yourself a hard time if you mess the timings up - this programme has never been done before and some parts may not be possible in the time we've allocated for them. Other parts may end up not working so well and need re-working or leaving out. Treat the whole thing as a shared experiment - and feed back to the shared learning group as you learn 😊
- Write flipcharts in advance

- Go through the programme [the day before](#) and think about what you might need. The group agreements and the session outline - if you're using them - are probably the main ones to write in advance. Be clear that the agreements are DRAFT until they're agreed by the group and leave space on the agreements so that people can add others if they want.
- Working in pairs
 - Great for sharing the work, seeing someone else's style and debriefing afterwards
- Don't want to be seen as telling people they need to change - be seen as a 'do-gooder'
 - You may have people with these kinds of assumptions, but it's not likely: people have chosen to come because they're concerned and want to make change
 - Emphasise the non-judgemental attitude
 - Emphasise that everyone has different pressures and skills - the action one person might be able to take could look tiny - or huge - compared to others, but we are all in very different situations: *any* action is really welcome and we can support one another to progress over time.

Assembly Design 1: structure and flow



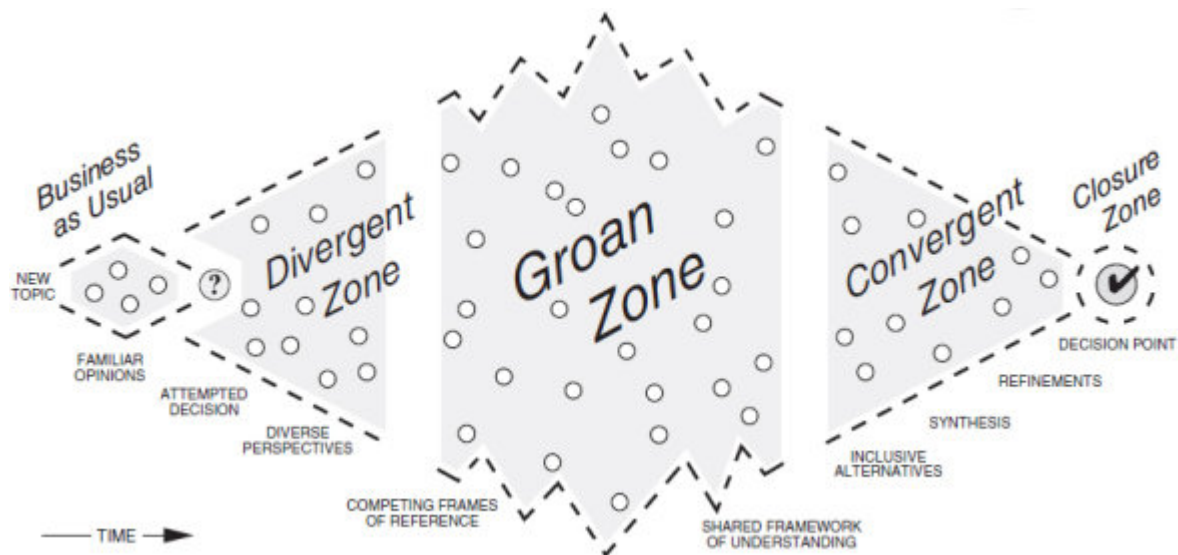
There are several different elements to assembly design which we will go over in the coming sections. In reality, they are all closely entwined, so although pulling them apart as we are doing helps to make each element clear, an assembly will only work when they're all working together.

By the end of this section we hope to have:

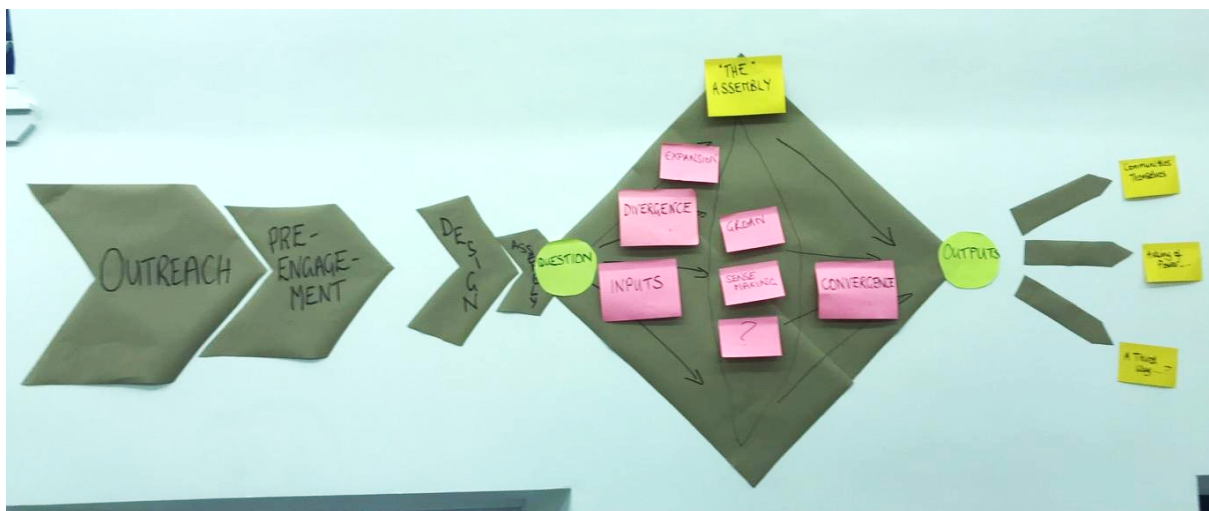
- *Explored how the flow of the assembly can help people keep track and make sense of what's happening*

The flow of an assembly is what makes it feel enjoyable, illuminating and interesting to take part in and like it all makes sense. It's the way input, deliberation and fresh thinking follow on from one another with good enough timing so that people have had time to take everything in, mull it over themselves, hear from others and evolve their thinking and been creative to come up with new ideas.

The **Diamond of Participation** below is a map of group processes created by Sam Kaner and colleagues that identifies several phases a group goes through on the way to creating participatory decisions. We find this model useful for thinking about the design and flow of assemblies - this may not work for every process, but we think it's a useful starting point.



We'll discuss the 'groan zone' in more depth [later on](#).



This is how we have extended the diamond for assemblies

Resources:

[Diamond of participation](#)

[Some critical thoughts on the model](#)

In this model, deliberation starts with opening up for 'divergence' - generating different ideas, hearing different perspectives - before heading for 'convergence' - synthesising, developing proposals and coming to decisions. In more detail:

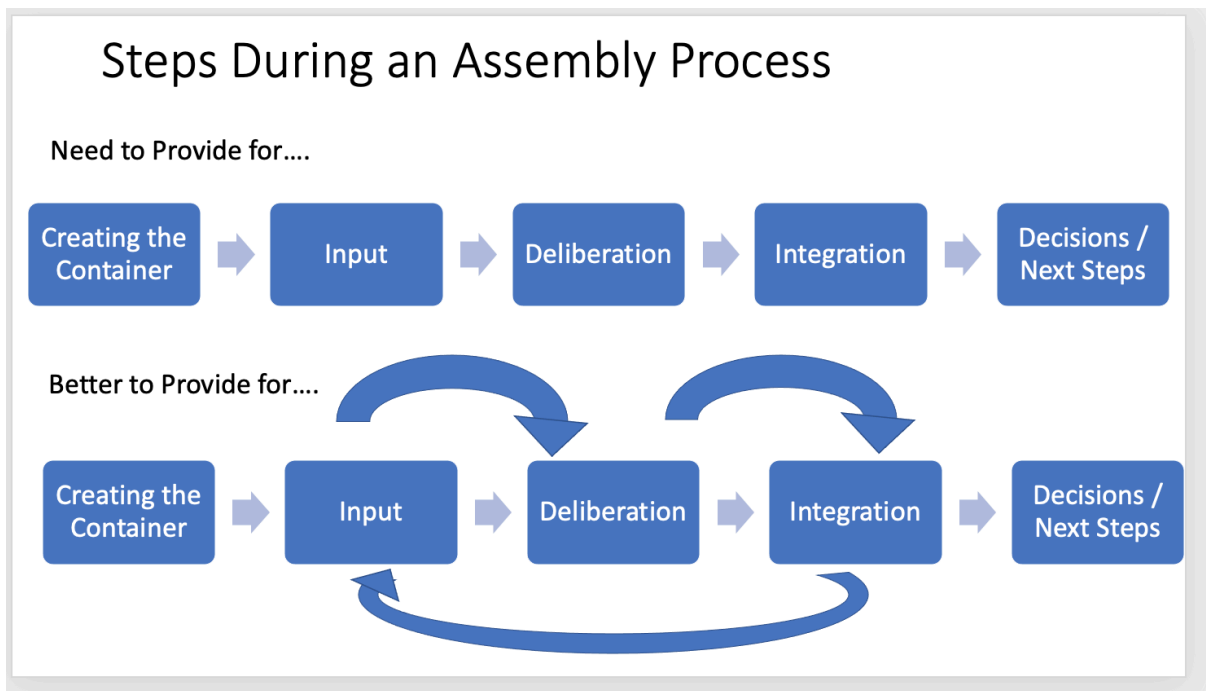
1. Divergence 1: Input (new info coming in)

- This information should be accessible but not dumbed down. It should be factually accurate and able to convey a spectrum of opinions on the issue/s. Making complex issues accessible without dumbing them down can be a challenge. For example, by breaking down potential responses to the climate crisis into different topics (travel and transport, diet and lifestyle, housing etc) in order to make them more accessible, can have the unintended consequence of drawing attention away from the underlying causes of the

crisis, and keeping us stuck in pathway two or three outputs from the Assembly.

- It's also useful to think about the four pathways out of the assembly when thinking about what you're putting in: each input should relate to at least one of the pathways - and you should aim for the entirety of your input to at least touch on all of them.
- 2. Divergence 2 / Groan Zone** (or whatever name we want to give it): Deliberation & Sense-making (speaking, listening, (re)thinking)
 - Your culture building should enable good deliberation - please refer to the section on [Deliberation and Sensemaking](#) for more tools for this.
 - 3. Convergence / Integration** (synthesising, forming proposals)
 - Bring the conversations together and prioritise using enthusiasm as much as impact as your guide: even if something is a good idea, if no one really wants to do it, it won't happen - and less obviously important / impactful things that someone is passionate about can still be a win for the community.
 - 4. Making decisions, agreements and / or setting next steps**
 - Map out what needs to happen next using the last three pathways.
 - Identify contentious areas and make sure you clarify what needs to happen to enable them to go forward, be adapted or be let go.

So when we're designing an assembly process we need to give people enough time in each of these phases to really absorb and process the complexity of the issue/s in question. You can use the [toolkit](#) below to create a range of different ways to share and process different elements so that there are changes of pace and intensity, helping people to stay in what can sometimes be a challenging process for as long as possible.



Design 2: Outputs

By the end of this section we hope to have:

- *Understood:*
 - *What we need to build in early in the process to be able to get/understand the outcomes/outputs we want*
 - *Community action plans and beyond: identifying next steps and making sure they happen etc...*
 - *Living with uncertainty + normalising our deeper sense of agency + busting the myth of 'realism'*
 - *How to record and share outcomes*

This section is looking at what we hope might come out of the assembly. It's really useful to think this through in advance as it will help us give as much support to this potential as we can through the inputs (which we look at later).

Be aware of your outputs from the beginning

The early stages of mapping, engagement and pre-engagement processes will give valuable clues as to what the biggest issues in the community are and thus what some of the possible outputs might be. Of course, we don't want to get too rigid about this - assemblies should be open processes that can create space for new thinking and unexpected outcomes, so we should expect to hold our ideas lightly. However, giving no thought at all to the potential outputs would leave assembly members without a clear structure, when what we want to do is support their best possible deliberation, ambition and ability to think creatively.

What kind of outputs are possible?

To help organise your thinking, use the four pathways and ask: for each pathway what are the kinds of things we might expect to see - including a spectrum of those that tweak our current situation through to those that could be really transformative. So, if your engagement has shown that people have a real concern around access to food, examples could include:

Pathway 1

- More people in the community getting involved in local groups
- New initiative starting up locally
- More collaboration between local projects
- Better relationships between local projects and people

Pathway 2

- A food bank
- 'Guerilla' gardening in neglected local spaces
- A community fridge

- A local food supply chain - including growing, processing, sharing and community meals

Pathway 3

- Getting the local GP to do social prescribing
- Setting up a [social supermarket](#)
- Campaign for an asset transfer of land to the community for local growing
- Supplying locally grown food to the local school or lunch club
- Getting council buy in to a local food supply chain

Pathway 4

- Ideas that address how to keep everyone fed, sheltered and warm while also drastically dropping our greenhouse emissions
- Bioregional food plans
- Collaboration between communities who are addressing access to food

Living with uncertainty and mythbusting ‘realism’

So often we are told that the things we know need to change would be great to happen, but just aren’t realistic. The questions here are ‘realistic for who?’ and ‘who gets to say what is realistic?’ Claiming unrealism can be a very glib way to fob off very legitimate challenges to the status quo and to the reality that those with more power and privilege are still very comfortable with. In reality, it’s hard to say what’s really possible, specially in times when things are changing so quickly. As responses to the Covid crisis showed, momentous changes often look impossible before they happen and then seem inevitable with hindsight. If we don’t try to do what’s right because we fear it might not be possible, we can certainly be sure we’re making it less possible.

Recording and sharing outcomes

Aside from the ideas people have about what they want to make happen, there are other outputs from the assembly that are useful to think about in advance, so you can put in place the means to make them happen:

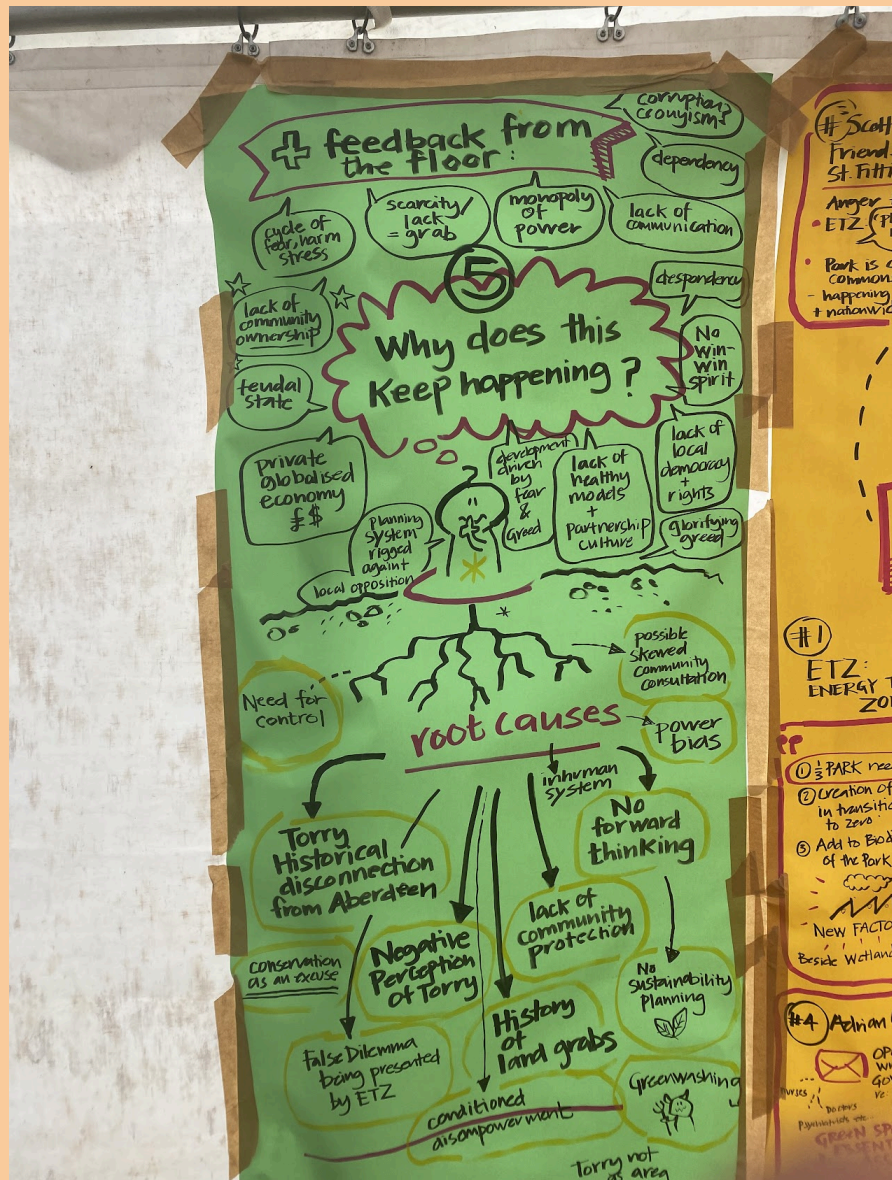
If you want...	You’ll need to...
Notes from the conversations people had	Find good note takers. Notes of what was said are key - they will enable work done in small groups to be fed back to the whole during the assembly process itself, and enable the collective thinking of the assembly to be organised and taken on to next steps, as well as feed crucial information into any reporting or next steps documents you want to make. Good notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are written clearly enough that they can be understood by others! ● Get to the essence of what’s being said - ideally no more than a few words per point made

- Often taken on post-its so that they can be reorganised into themes as needed

Ideally you'll be able to identify people who can do the above as notetakers in advance (see ['assembly roles'](#)). You can ask groups to nominate a note taker before their conversation begins, but you're less likely to get the kind of notes you really need.

A video, photographs or drawings (a 'graphic harvest') from the event

Delegate someone with some experience and a camera or just a phone, to record the process. It's good to catch a range of different kinds of images, giving a sense of the buzz of the assembly, the range of people who attended and the kinds of feelings that were in the room.



A report and / or community plan

Include processes that enable you to weave together the ideas that have come out of the deliberative phase of the assembly. This might include asking for ideas to be expressed as proposals and then

mapping out and connecting proposals, followed by a consent process to agree on the way forward. Check out the Community Chartering Network's [community life-plans](#) as one example of this.

You may also want to think about how to measure less tangible things like:

- Relationships that are made or built
- Skills and knowledge gained
- The experience of coming together as a community
- The experience of being involved in a different kind of democratic process e.g. increased sense of power and agency - remembering also to be open to hearing the less positive experiences people may have had

You could do this through some baseline interviews or surveys, with follow up after the assembly, but this can be tough to do, and needs more time than is usually available. Exit polls are easier to do - picking up on the things you really want feedback on with clear questions which people can put a dot or stickers on as they leave an Assembly...

Reporting

Reporting can be seen as an inconvenience forced on us by funders, but the organisers and the people who came along to the assembly also want to know that their time wasn't wasted. Good documenting and reporting builds legitimacy for the assembly, so that we can show the actions that follow are the product of good process. Sharing the harvest from the event in an accessible way is another way to show that this was a worthwhile process - and make it more likely there'll be even better engagement in future processes.

The key is to work out exactly what we're really interested in knowing about the assembly, and measure, evaluate and report accordingly. This might be things like:

- Did anyone change their opinion over the course of the assembly - and why?
- Did anyone feel put off or excluded by parts of the assembly - and why?
- What percentage of people at the assembly feel that the proposals coming out of it are the right ones?

Few people are likely to read a 30 page report, so it's useful to think about how you're going to share what happened as well as the vision that was developed and the practical outcomes of the process in ways that will be engaging and inspiring to local people.

These examples from [Tillydrone](#), the [first](#) and [second](#) Torry Assemblies and [Porty Heart Talk](#) are good examples of accessible ways to document the themes and ideas that come out of assemblies.

Design 3: INPUT - designing appropriate content

By the end of this section we hope to have:

- *Explored:*
 - *Where does input come from e.g. range of expert witnesses (eg science, lived experience..), videos,*
 - *How our we can support/enable the four pathways*
 - *What are ways we can help to stimulate deliberation (e.g. on energy transition, climate, greenwashing etc...);*
 - *Making sure the process is accessible, relevant and helps ensure the legitimacy of the assembly*

Important points when considering input:

- The possibility of a good question and a bad design which then precludes certain pathways as outcomes
- Approach your area of focus in the way that relates most closely to people's lived experience - e.g. the science of climate change can be hard to grasp, but the concept of carbon budgets is much simpler

This section is about what we can put into our assembly to help people make sense of their situation and develop their thinking on what to do about it. So the content could include: speakers, videos, things to read, informative games, storytelling, guided walks in the local area, etc...

The kind of content you choose for your assembly will be guided by your early engagement process and focused through your calling question as well as your evaluation of what the main focus of the assembly will be. Through the engagement you've done, you will know the issues that are most concerning to people in your community and you'll be able to choose content that starts where people are, enables them to explore these issues in more depth and provides them with examples of initiatives and strategies taken by people elsewhere which they can copy or build on.

The four pathways framework will also help to define what kind of input will be helpful. Examples from other communities will support pathway 2 thinking; policies or campaigns from elsewhere will support pathway 3 and input that encourages people to think creatively and raise their level of ambition will support pathway 4.

So for each community, the input will need to be different. Open Source aims, eventually, to develop a database of short video presentations that share information about a wide range of different initiatives across a spectrum with tweaks to business as usual at one end and (potentially) genuinely paradigm shifting at the other. In the meantime you will need to track down your own content. So for example, if it has become clear that access to food was an

issue in the community the content could include some of the following: [community orchards](#); [community fridges](#); check out [urban agriculture](#), look at [Nourish Scotland's Food Atlas](#) or the [long food movement](#).

Ideally if you can find inspiring projects nearby and ask them for speakers, people will get a really fresh sense of what's possible and be able to ask questions, but there are lots of other accessible ways of getting information over to people - so use your imagination and see what you can find.

If climate change and / or Just Transition hasn't come across strongly from within the community, it's still important to bring it in as an element of the content, since it's a massive factor influencing future events, and other initiatives need to be considered in the light of it. Climate change is a difficult issue to communicate since a real understanding of it is strongly science based and it is also potentially traumatic to hear about.

However, most people do already have a sense of what a deep threat it is and are keen to do what they can to help, especially if they can address other issues they're facing at the same time. And it is pretty straightforward to understand that there is a severe limit to the amount of carbon that can be emitted and so we need to ration and fairly share resources, and the right to emit, to ensure everyone's well being while slashing emissions and putting in place genuine, socially just, ecologically regenerating drawdown of carbon in the atmosphere, rather than training people to divide our responses into trying to adapt to, or mitigate, climate change while pursuing a business as usual

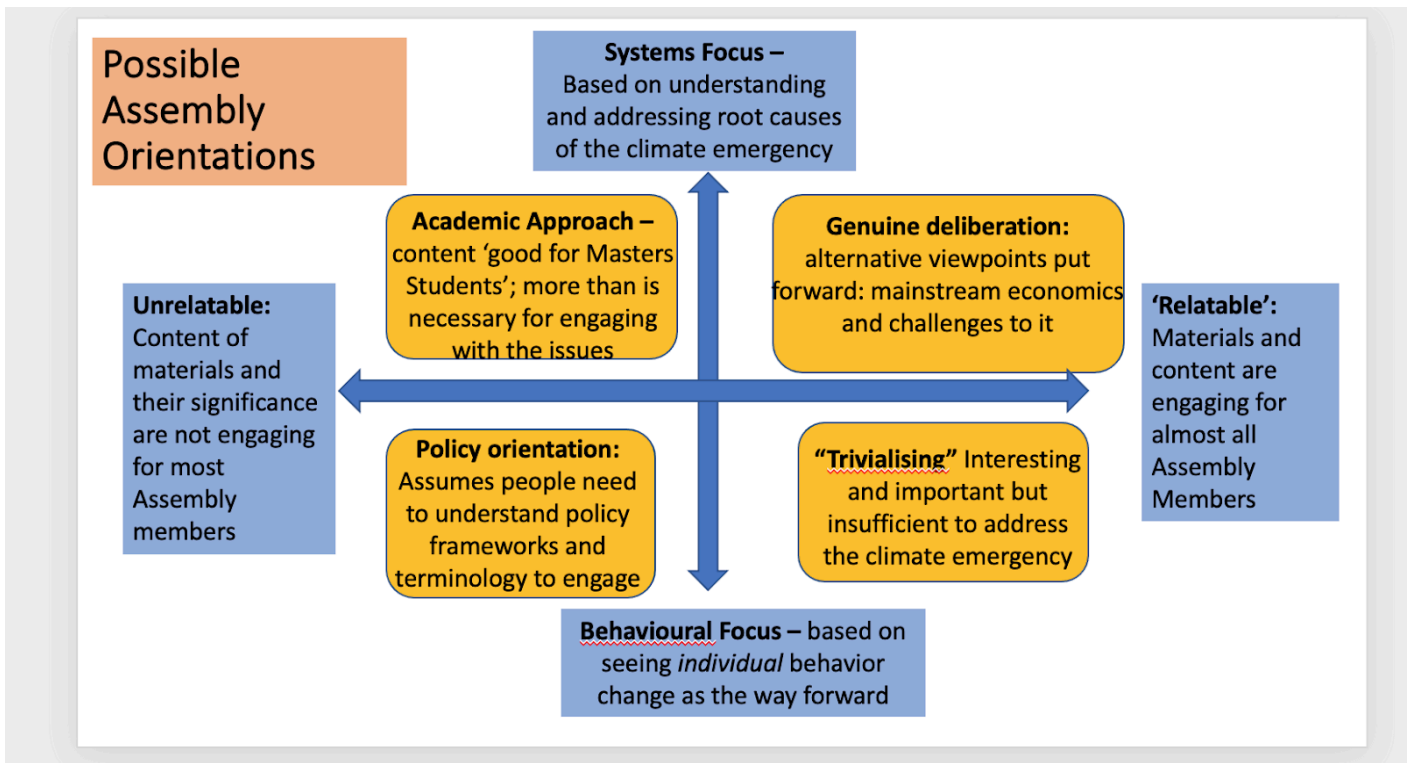
Getting into a deeper discussion of what a Just Transition means from a community point of view and if or how that might differ from government proposals might also form an interesting element of the input - as long as it can be tied in to other concerns that you know are present within the community.

Design Considerations

- 1. Accessible, relevant design, creating an Assembly that is well supported, adds legitimacy to the assembly**
- 2. A good question and a bad design precludes certain pathways as outcomes -** what are 'we' looking for? Endorsement of an agreed decision? Exploration of the acceptability of certain trade offs? Finding a new way forward based on genuine listening and good facilitation? What do we mean by systems change?
- 3. Risk of dumbing down the content to make it 'accessible', as opposed to trusting people to be able to make sense of complexities.**

For example, simplicity of the carbon budget as opposed to training people in language of adaptation and mitigation.

4. **What ground rules are needed** to ensure the assembly is a deep enough open process? (see Day One - establishing the container - needs to be open enough to reflect the increasingly acute climate crisis and the responses that provokes)
5. **A deep, enabling and original process not a rushed standardised one.** The assembly needs a process that respects participants ability and willingness to engage in difficult issues. They can grapple with complex issues, given the time, space and skilled facilitation.



6. Assembly members need to be provided with **contrasting perspectives, with enough time to discuss in small groups**, to ask questions, to hear the experts respond to the questions and to each other, and to return to further discussion in small groups before collectively gathering what has been learnt.
 - There is no such thing as neutrality in politics and economics; participants need to hear a full range of perspectives, not be limited by what those in power deem as possible
 - 'Expert opinion' needs to be balanced with lived experience
 - Input can come from video as well as face to face input

XR Scotland (J Kenrick and K Dyer 2021) analysis of the challenge of the Scottish CCA.

The Assembly needs to be facilitated (at each table and as a whole) by people who can encourage participants to think deeper with each other. Rather than simply ensuring people listen to each other respectfully, differences and disagreements should be encouraged and facilitated as a route to a deeper understanding:

- **The process** - what happened? people, events, stages. You might also harvest facts, emotions and values that are part of the story, etc.

- **What were the aims** of the assembly and how did the way the assembly was designed and run reflect those?
- **What challenges** did the organisers face and how did he/ she/ they overcome them?
- **What were the outcomes** of the assembly?
- What can we learn from this story about **what makes (or doesn't make) for an effective assembly?**
- What can we learn from this story about the importance, challenges and benefits of tending to **relationships and partnerships?**

Design 4: Deliberation and Sense Making

By the end of this section we hope to have understood:

- *Difference between discussion and deliberation - and how to create opportunities for deliberation*
- *Getting to root causes and getting from there to action the group wants to take*
- *How to support groups towards convergence /decision-making*

Discussion and deliberation

Your 'culture building' before and during the assembly should support good deliberation. We see deliberation as being quite different from discussion. In discussions or debates, people present and defend their particular viewpoints and try to convince others to see things the same way. This can often encourage polarised, either/or thinking.

Deliberation involves slow(er) and careful consideration, with the result that by the end of it, many of those involved will have changed their perspective from where they started. Deliberation requires having the time to deeply engage with the input provided and listen to each other's experiences and ideas. If done well, it leads to proposals that integrate a range of views and come up with something fresh, not compromises or trade-offs.

In addition to the conversations among assembly participants, there can be different 'feedback loops' in the process to support the collective sense-making process from e.g. artists, musicians, and others who respond to the input. You can also ask specific people to take the role of 'keynote listener', e.g. someone from outside the community, who you ask to feed back on what they heard at set points during the assembly.

Skills & Tools for Deliberation

Skill: Active listening and asking 'generative questions' are key skills for deliberation, and it's important to practise this with participants before and during the assembly.

Seeds for change has produced a [useful hand-out](#) on active listening. They offer some key tips to listen as effectively as possible:

- **Minimise distractions** so as to give yourselves the best chance of focusing on what people are saying.
- **Listen!** Really focus on understanding what someone is saying. If your mind drifts off, bring it back. Show the speaker that you are listening.
- **Offer summaries** to check your understanding. In meetings this can also help people keep track of what's going on.
- **Ask questions** to get clearer on what someone is saying or to encourage them to expand.

Deepening the level of discussion and deliberation

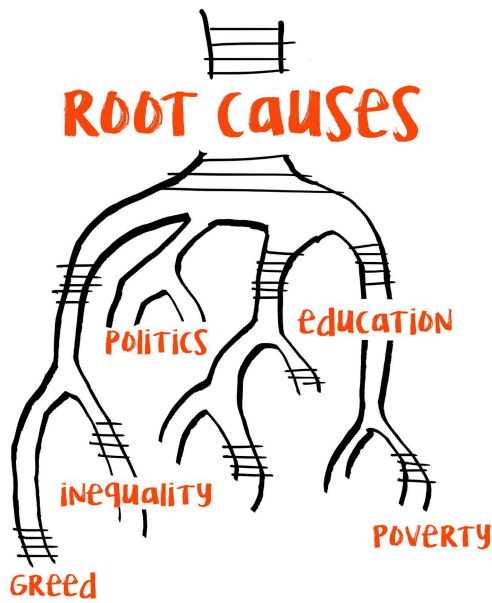
It can be helpful to think in terms of three levels of discussion and deliberation:

- The level of **opinion**, which can then be translated into actionable proposals, is the level of one group winning the argument (and others losing it).
- The level of **principles and values** is the level of trade-offs and compromise between fixed positions e.g. party lines in mainstream politics, as opposed to creating space to explore issues more creatively/collaboratively and coming up with some genuinely fresh thinking.
- The level of '**governing sentiment**' (of enabling people to empathically listen to experiences and perspectives that are very different to their own) is the level where 'winning' the argument is recognised as a waste of learning, and where trade-offs and compromise are also seen as a wasted opportunity, because what is possible instead is to enable action which meets the real needs of different human and non-human beings in a way that strengthens rather than compromises anyone.

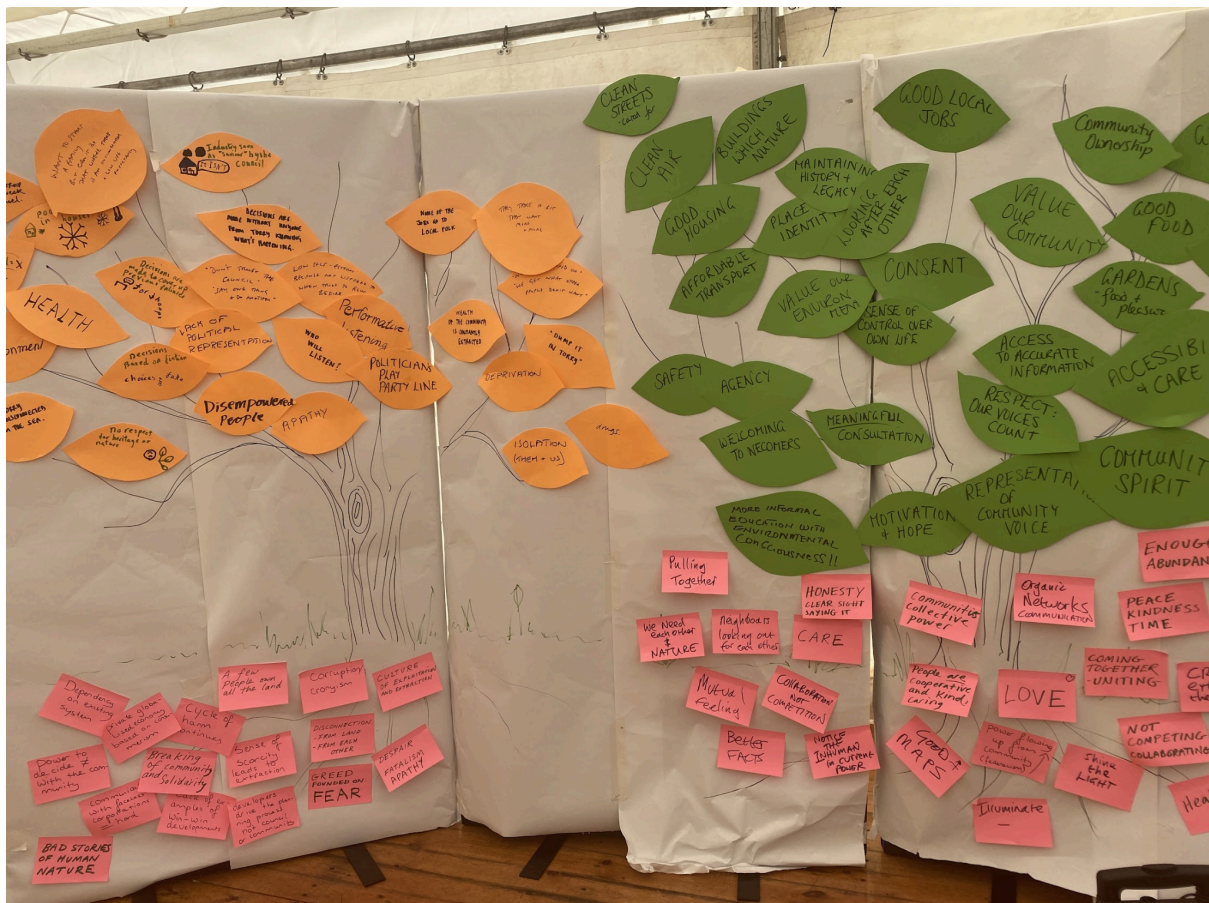
We will come back to this when thinking about how to facilitate the convergence into action points and plans at the end of an Assembly. It will be harder to reach convergence at a deep level if the question has not been set up to produce this.

Tools: Getting to root causes

In the deliberative phase of the assembly, there are various activities/ facilitation tools that can support participants to explore the root causes of the issues at stake. Getting to root causes is important because collectively gaining a deeper understanding of the issues makes for more strategic and longer-term solutions/ actions coming out of the assembly. Digging down to the root of problems also shows the common ground between what presents itself as separate issues and builds solidarity between different members of the community.



The extent to which you focus on root causes will differ depending on the type of assembly you're organising, e.g. a community visioning assembly may not dig down so deeply into the issues but instead focus on people's dreams and hopes.



The Torry problem and solution trees - including the soil each one grows from

One tool for identifying root causes is the **'Problem Tree'** or the 5 Whys? This tool supports folks to find the underlying reasons behind a presenting problem, e.g. why is life expectancy shorter in Torry than elsewhere in Aberdeen? Because it's an area of multiple deprivation?

Why? Because there are no jobs for people ... Why? because they didn't get good qualifications at school. Why? Lack of investment in schools etc etc. There's multiple root causes, and different groups (whether in an Assembly setting or in this workshop setting) will come up with different reasons, but they are all likely to point towards a shared understanding, for example of being on the wrong end of capitalism.

You can also include the soil (culture) the tree grows in - and then, starting from a different, power-with soil can build up a 'solutions' tree from the soil upwards, as in the image above.

Design 5:

Moving towards convergence / integration / decision making

By the end of this section we hope to have explored:

- *Process design that supports holistic, transformative outputs (action plans)*
- *Better ways to make collective decisions.*
 - *Convergent facilitation and getting to the essence*
 - *Consent decision making*

During and after all the input and deliberative conversations it's important to continually be making collective sense of the situation and, towards the end, start bringing it together into proposals for action and concrete next steps.

In guiding the group to create plans for action, enthusiasm and impact need to be carefully balanced: even if something is a good idea, if no one really wants to do it, it won't happen - while less obviously important / impactful things that someone is passionate about can still be a win for the community.

'Groan Zone'

An essential part of any deliberative process is what in the Diamond of Participation process is called the 'Groan Zone'. This is the time in the process where facilitators and/or participants can feel a bit lost, as it's a space of emergence and not knowing where it's going. Together you need to navigate what can maybe seem like competing ideas and value sets that have come up towards a shared understanding and collective way forward. Listening skills are key to this process, and digging down to root causes and to what really matters to people can be a way to find common ground, and a way through disagreement.

People on our training often aren't keen on the name 'the groan zone'. Other suggested names include: 'expansion zone', 'growth zone', 'digestion zone' and 'thinking zone'.

Convergent facilitation

Convergent facilitation is an approach developed by Miki Kashtan and others based on Non-Violent Communication (NVC) that aims to identify the values and needs underneath people's positions. As stated in this resource by Extinction Rebellion, [Convergent Facilitation](#) 'is about finding a way forward where no-one loses or is left behind, and people get what they need from the solution they create together.'

“There are three ways of dealing with difference: domination, compromise, and integration. By domination only one side gets what it wants; by compromise neither side gets what it wants; by integration we find a way by which both sides may get what they wish.”

Mary Parker Follett

An important part of this process is for the facilitator to support participants to express their opinions/perspectives as ‘Non-controversial Essences’ (NCE’s). NCE’s are the “why” that can be owned by everyone. It’s something the speaker recognizes as capturing the essence of what’s important to them that is at the same time noncontroversial for others in the group.

How to Get to the Non-controversial Essence

As facilitator, when you come up against a really strong disagreement, ask yourself these questions for the people on each side of it:

1. What’s really important to this person?
2. What underlying need is this person *really* talking about (which might be different to what they’re saying they want)?
3. Why does this matter to this person?“ ... and if they had it, what would it give them?”

We’re looking for responses which have these characteristics?

... is noncontroversial - no one could reasonably disagree with it

... uses positive language – what is wanted rather than what is not wanted

... applies to everyone – language that moves from what this person wants for themselves to what all would want for all; this is a need that everyone can recognize, not just one person’s need

For example, the disagreement could be about developing a skate park in part of the local greenspace:

A: One person (or group) is saying that skate parks are cool and there’s nothing for young people to do round here.

B: The other person (or group) is saying that the greenspace is lovely how it is and skate parks encourage vandalism.

The NCE statements for each of these might be:

A: Young people need space for sociable activities (need for shared social space)

B: The park needs to feel like a safe space for everyone (need for safety)

So this enables the possibility for the conversation to shift from a standoff between ‘skatepark good / skatepark bad’ to ‘what kind/s of social spaces do young people in our community need?’ - or ‘how can we make sure the park still feels safe for everyone, even with the addition of facilities for young people?’

These non-controversial essences could then also be listed as a set of criteria developed against which any proposals for action coming out of an assembly needs to be ‘tested’. For

example, depending on the criteria generated by the community, the proposal may need to include 'social space/s for young people', or to be 'community-led' or 'safe'.

Consent Decision-making

[Consent decision-making](#) is another method for coming to collective decisions (and some principles of Convergent Facilitation can be integrated into this method). In this method your main aim is not for everyone to fully agree, but for no one to object: in other words, some of us might not *love* the proposal, but they can live with it. One of the main principles is that proposals need to be '**good enough for now, safe enough to try**' (GEFNSETT).

Objections can only be made if it is felt that the proposal goes against the aims of the group. It can lead to excellent decisions but can be very time consuming in large groups.

The process starts by presenting the proposal. You work in rounds, giving everyone a chance to speak. The rounds are:

1. **Clarifying questions** (followed by a response from the proposer) - this is simply for parts of the proposal that people haven't fully understood - not for feedback;
2. **Quick reactions / feedback** (the proposer can alter the proposal in the light of these before going onto the next stage);
3. **Objections** (these should only be to parts of the proposal which are not GEFNSETT)
4. Take all the objections first and then work to adapt the proposal to resolve each objection until there are no objections left;
5. When all objections have been resolved by adapting the proposal we should end up with a **decision** which everyone feels is GEFNSETT

Text needed here for context.

Example from Kendal Climate Jury

How to handle the increasing flooding of the town? There is disagreement between those who want to cut trees along the rivers banks in order to build flood defences, and those who see cutting the trees as contributing to climate change and so increasing the flooding.

At first sight this looks like classic trade-off territory. In an 'empathic difference' approach, both perspectives would be equally valued and a way forward sought that might be better than either approach alone (the opinion level) or a trade-off between principled positions.

For example the action might be to plant a great amount of indigenous trees upstream, as well as introduce beavers upstream, to regulate the flow of water, stop the flooding, restore the ecosystem and draw down carbon. Temporary flood defences might be needed in the meantime, but over the long term, an 'empathic difference' approach enables positions to be relinquished as the exploration of differences leads to the real issue being addressed.

Design 6: Facilitation tools and frameworks

By the end of this section we hope to have understood:

- the ways that we create space for groups to harness the wisdom of the crowd/ co-think - and avoid groupthink
- practical issues around doing rounds e.g. timing
- Open space, world cafe, small group work, talks etc...

Here is a list of some formats you can use to help groups understand and explore issues, think creatively together, plan action together (and sometimes reach decisions).

Format	What it's good for	How it's done	Phase of the assembly process?
Temperature check	Very speedy check in, quick decisions on very small, immediate matters. Way to get a sense of where the group is at.	Ask people to indicate how they're feeling right now/whether they agree with a proposal using hand signals .	Convergence phase. Uncontroversial decisions can be made by a quick read of preferences
Spectrum lines	Getting an instant read on one or more specific question	People physically place themselves on a spectrum line between two points that are designated poles of opinion on an issue e.g. I love marmalade →→ I hate marmalade.	Groan zone / convergence. Decisions may be clear from the spectrum
Open space	Flushing out new ideas. Forming an agenda in the moment. Enabling everyone to have the conversation they want to have. Generating multiple solutions.	People suggest the areas they would like to speak about in response to a whole group question. These are collected and held as small	This tool can both be used to explore different issues in the divergence or in convergence phases. Proposals could emerge from the process - then moving

		group conversations which are noted and then fed back by delegates	into e.g. spokes/consent process for fleshing out / validation
World cafe	Digging into an idea and getting the whole group's intelligence on key issues	Tables are set up to explore different elements of an idea. Each table has a host who records the conversation and passes the main elements on to each new group that visits. The group is split up and rotates round the tables until everyone has been to every table.	Can be used in the groan zone/sense-making phase to lead towards convergence.
Council circles	Gathering the shared wisdom of the group Best for groups under 20 - but if you have a long time wonderful for larger groups too	Inviting everyone present to listen with full attention and from the heart to each person in turn, not preparing what one is going to say until the moment that it's one's turn to speak - from the heart and in the moment - to all present. Listening with full attention before speaking invites us to not repeat previous thoughts but to speak freshly.	Can be used at any point to give everyone a change to share and listen. Decisions can be made by intuition - when there is no more to say
Fishbowl	When you have more time/space.	A way to open up potentially 'hot' topics. The conversation is held by an inner circle, with the rest of the group witnessing. In some versions people from the wider group can request a seat and someone from the fishbowl gives up theirs.	Divergence/ groan zone
Bearing Witness	Deepening understanding and connection, stirring the pot, generating ideas,	Radical inclusivity. People speak from the heart to the whole group. Support people with active listening, trusting collective wisdom, time keeping and WAIT ³	Divergence. Proposals can emerge from the process if asked for - then go into spokes/consent

³ Why Am I Talking?

<p><u>Collective Story Harvesting</u></p>	<p>Using real-life stories and 'case studies' as rich material for learning. Giving an active listening/sense-making role to participants. Breaking down the speaker-audience format into something that feels more exciting and collective. The story-teller also tends to get more out of it, as they receive insights and feedback from the group.</p>	<p>In small groups, participants are given a 'thread' to listen for in the story, and take notes. You can adapt the 'threads depending on what feels most relevant to the Assembly's question(s).</p>	<p>Divergence</p>
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Additional resources

There follows a selection of the resources we've picked up on for this training. For more, please refer to Open Source's [Democratic Facilitation Resource List](#), which we're continually adding to (please feel free to add things you come across too - with a short description).

This is a new and emerging field of work and there's a lot of information out there, some good, some problematic and some mixed - we're not particularly endorsing what's here, just inviting people to explore what might be useful to their context...

[Towards an Emergency Citizen-led assembly](#) - an overview of Open Source's strategy

[Participedia](#) - A global network and crowdsourcing platform for researchers, educators, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations

Overview of [Just Transition](#) and for a deep enquiry into this concept across cultures: [Between the ecological modernization of capitalism and the multi-crisis: how to build the eco-social transformation the world needs?](#)

Transition Network [community involvement resource](#)

[Wellbeing Economy Policy Design Guide](#) - why and how to design Wellbeing Economy policies

[Useful toolkit](#) for using the Doughnut Economics approach at community level

[Biocultural Community Protocols: A Toolkit for Community Facilitators](#)

[How to Run a Citizen's Assembly](#) by Innovation in Democracy

[Ingredients for a Decolonial Politics - Cooking up a Future to Delight in](#) an article starting to flesh out some of the elements that might be part of a decolonised politics