

Social Impacts of Transition Together (SITT): Investigating the social impacts, benefits and sustainability of the Transition Together/Transition Streets initiative in Totnes

Background

Transition Together (TT) and Transition Streets (TS) are linked initiatives of Transition Town Totnes. TT brings groups of neighbouring households together to take practical steps towards a more sustainable way of living in their homes. TS was a specific version of TT, funded to March 2011 and supported by the Department for Energy and Climate Change Low Carbon Community Challenge research programme. Through TS, households in TT groups were then eligible to apply for grants of £2500 or £3500 (per household depending on income) towards installing their own solar photovoltaic panels, once they had demonstrated a commitment to household energy reduction by carrying out other measures. To date, over 450 people in Totnes and District have joined the scheme and worked through the 7-session programme.

This research examines evidence of the social impacts of the TT/TS groups, bearing in mind that a key value of the Transition movement is '*to help create thriving, healthy, caring local communities where people's ways of life take into account the needs of future generations*'. Economic and environmental impacts are not the direct concern of this research, except where they are explored by participants in the context of social and community impacts.

About this report

The overall study has two aims: to provide evidence of impacts and benefits to the funders and other external agencies with an interest in community and/or transition projects [*external focus*]; and to provide the Transition movement with lessons in its own processes of community engagement [*internal focus*]. A previous report summarised quantitative data from the survey with a focus on external stakeholders. This report reviews some of those findings and summarises outcomes of the qualitative data collection processes, with an emphasis on supporting reflection and future action on the part of the Transition movement.

Methods

The methodological approach adopted for this study was broadly in the tradition of community-based participatory research (CBPR), whereby the researcher provides expertise in the service of a community investigation, committed to involving the community in making sense of the outcomes, and in making those outcomes usable by the community. The Core and Education groups of the Transition Town Totnes initiative, and members of the Transition Together/Streets project team, have been fully involved in defining the scope of the investigation and collecting data. Due to time constraints, the study will not be fully iterative in the sense usually expected by the CBPR approach.

Mixed methods were used to reach the different target groups and ensure triangulation of data, as follows:

Method: background interviews

Informal interviews were carried out with members of the Transition Together/Transition Streets project teams to: agree scope; establish what social benefits were anticipated from the projects and what outcomes would be valuable; refine proposed methods.

Method: survey

An online survey was delivered to individuals involved in Transition Together/Transition Streets, with a prize draw to incentivise participation. 63 individuals or around 15% of the total population involved in the project provided data to the survey, with 56 providing full data sets. As the missing questions were either optional free text responses or 'personal' questions at the end of the survey, the 7 partial data sets were included in quantitative analysis. Complete data was provided by 16 men and 40 women. The mode and median age range was 55-65. All questions were optional.

Method: face to face interviews

Participants were recruited through a consent process attached to the online survey. 35 individuals identified themselves as available for interview, of which 18 were selected. 6 of these interviews involved couples, making a total of 24 interviewees. Selection was positively biased towards creating a more equal distribution of gender/age than the profile of responses to the survey, in which older, female participants predominated. The gender/age profile of TT/TS groups was explored in interviews to probe whether the survey responses were representative or had been biased by, for example, a greater availability and willingness to complete online surveys among older, female participants.

Even the solar panels, which I got in the end, wasn't a carrot. It's great to have but it's not why I want to do this – I want to do this so I can meet people.

Just wanting to get to know other mums.

While social motives were at the forefront, many interviewees described the chance of a grant to install Photovoltaics (PV) as a strong incentive, particularly at the start.

The number of people who wanted to join when we had the chance of grants for solar panels was double the number who eventually joined the group [when we lost out on that opportunity], so clearly some people were mainly motivated by the grants.

For other people I mainly put it in terms of saving energy- that was what I offered to them.

Others were simply inspired by the idea:

I thought it was interesting and TT sounded very exciting – the idea you could actually make a change together rather than just as an individual consumer.

The fact that this was a community, bottom up movement. ... It chimed in with ideas of democratic engagement... I thought yes, we have to do this ourselves.

Beyond the motivation of individuals to take part, interviews offered the opportunity to explore how groups actually came together. Opportunity often played a role – several groups coalesced around dog-walkers – while determined individuals also managed to establish groups through door-to-door leafleting and personal recruitment. Existing relationships with members of the Transition Network played an important part and were mentioned in around half of the interviews.

Mostly we focused on other dog walkers. It's so lovely because dog walkers are already a community

When door knocking I started with the people I knew. I sold it on the green thing, the street thing and the panels.

For one group, a street party provided the opportunity: for another a book group

actually the catalyst was somebody who had come from Bristol, and he was used to street parties. So he suggested a street party and that happened... And I thought that was a good moment to try and recruit for a Transition group

It came at a time when we were having a little book club and we talked about it in the book club, if you remember. And I said 'we ought to get involved'.

For yet another it was a photograph:

we saw a photo of the photograph of the first [TT] group. We had perhaps heard something of it before then, but as soon as we saw that picture and knew it was really happening we put our skates on and wanted to spread the news among the neighbours.

Some groups stuttered to get established at first, gained and lost members, then emerged strongly. Most lost a few members early on when the level of commitment became clear.

We had like a first group which changed in to a second group after some people dropped out and others joined and that group sustained.

As these snapshots show, participants in TT/TS groups brought an array of background stories and motives. However, four stories emerged very clearly and encapsulate the reasons most people gave for getting involved.

1. Taking Transition forward. An individual with an existing commitment to Transition, typically involved in at least one existing project or group, gets involved in TT/TS because it is an opportunity to involve a wider group of people in Transition and develop community structures for resilience. This individual may talk about how TT/TS has benefited the Transition movement and taken forward its aims.

I really liked that it was closer to home, so to speak [than previous Transition initiatives].

I hoped [the group I helped to form] would become more familiar with what the whole Transition movement was about

It is putting Totnes on the map in a different way – it was very much seen as a knit your own muesli kind of place before.

2. Personal empowerment. An individual with a personal awareness of environmental issues gets involved in TT/TS to reach out to other people with similar awareness, whether that is experienced as predominantly political, emotional or spiritual. Immediate practical changes are important mainly as a sign of shared awareness and commitment. This individual may talk about personal development and interpersonal relationships as key benefits.

A handful of us felt passionately about climate change, reducing our carbon foot print, Transition and so on and felt frustrated that wasn't universally a priority in the community... we have been looking for more of a spirit of commitment. So for us it was a way of bringing these issues more to the fore in a non-threatening way

3. Learning to make a difference – An individual who believes that climate change and energy descent are critical issues gets involved in TT/TS to share knowledge about how best to respond. Practical and/or scientific learning are highly valued, as are opportunities to discuss issues and share expertise. This individual may talk about practical changes and group learning as key benefits.

One of our main motivations was our passion for green energy and for energy conservation ... and we wanted to share this with the group.

I think we have always given this thought always. We have both done a bit of science, so we've thought about the physics of the thing.

For me the climate change thing was much more important [than the grant]. And finding out more about it all as well, because I didn't really know that much about the panels... I think education is the most important thing for any change.

4. Give me PV: An individual who has already considered PV – for financial and/or environmental reasons – decides to join a TT/TS group to apply for the grant. This individual may find, however, that other issues come to the fore as they get involved in the group process.

I had thought about PVs previously but when I saw there was grant available I thought I'll go for it. ... I told the others there were grants available and that is what got them on board initially.

I took advantage of it because it was a very good deal [PV].

Findings 2. What changes do individuals make as a result of being involved in TT/TS groups?

Most survey respondents – 82.4% - had made at least one significant improvement to their homes. More than half had done 'several things' to reduce their homes' energy use and carbon footprint. Analysis of free text responses shows that installation of photovoltaics, loft insulation, cavity wall insulation and double glazing were the most common, followed by new boilers, new windows, use of energy-saving lightbulbs, and installation of energy/water monitors or meters. Major projects included custom-built double glazed windows, upgraded insulation on a large communal house, and a PV project on a grade1 listed building. More improvised solutions included DIY systems for flushing toilets with saved rainwater, and the use of cotton wool to draught-proof difficult areas.

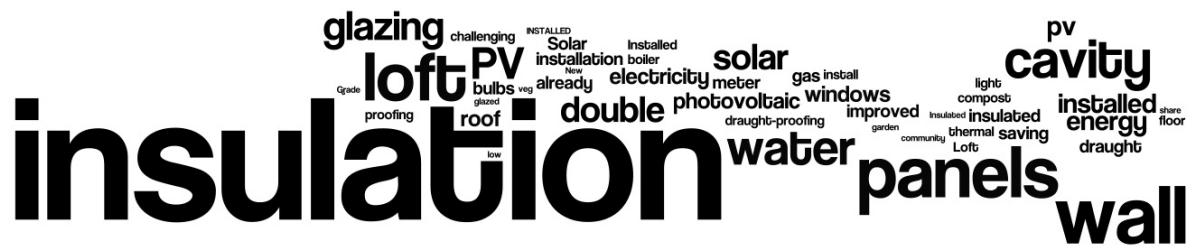


Figure 2: Wordle of free text responses to the question: 'Please tell us about any improvements you have made to your home.'

When it came to behavioural changes, 100% of participants described some impact from their experience with TT/TS with a quarter making 'a lot' of changes. From free text responses, changes to car use were by far the most common, with participants cycling, walking and using public transport more, along with rationalisation of car journeys. Reducing electricity and water consumption were next most popular, achieved for example through conservation of grey water and the use of rain butts. Eight mentioned new recycling practices and a similar number were growing (more of) their own fruit and vegetables. Five switched to a green tariff for power as a result of participation, though many had done this already.

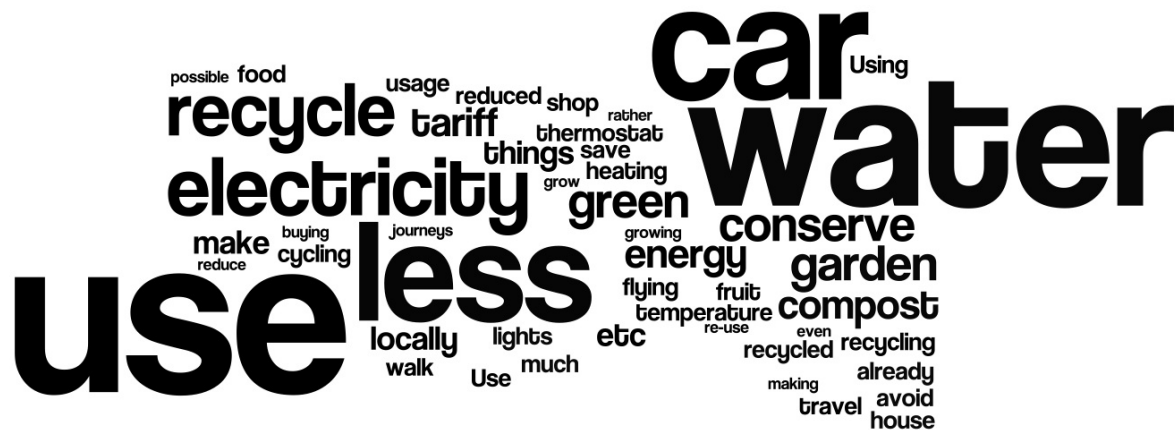


Figure 3: Wordle of free text responses to the question: 'Please tell us about any changes you have made to how you use energy, and to reduce your impact on the environment'

During interviews it emerged that many participants had made multiple changes, some of them small in themselves, but with a large cumulative effect. This was often as a result of writing down 'action points' during meetings and following up on them later:

So I went through the whole thing and thought about what I'd decided to do, and wrote out the next steps like that [a separate ruled notebook with about four pages of items]. And you see, all the things we actually did are written in blue.

Participants also undertook major changes such as installing PV (with and sometimes without a grant), home insulation, double glazing, giving up a second car, changing electricity suppliers. Often these were changes they had already been considering, but participation in TT/TS was decisive.

There are all sorts of things I wouldn't have done.

For me [the environment] has become the most important thing now.

Interviewer: Did you feel that before?

No, I didn't. I was a bit like a lot of people, trying not to hear it really, not be fully present to it.

During interviews, participants were asked which changes they felt were most significant. Some examples are reproduced here:

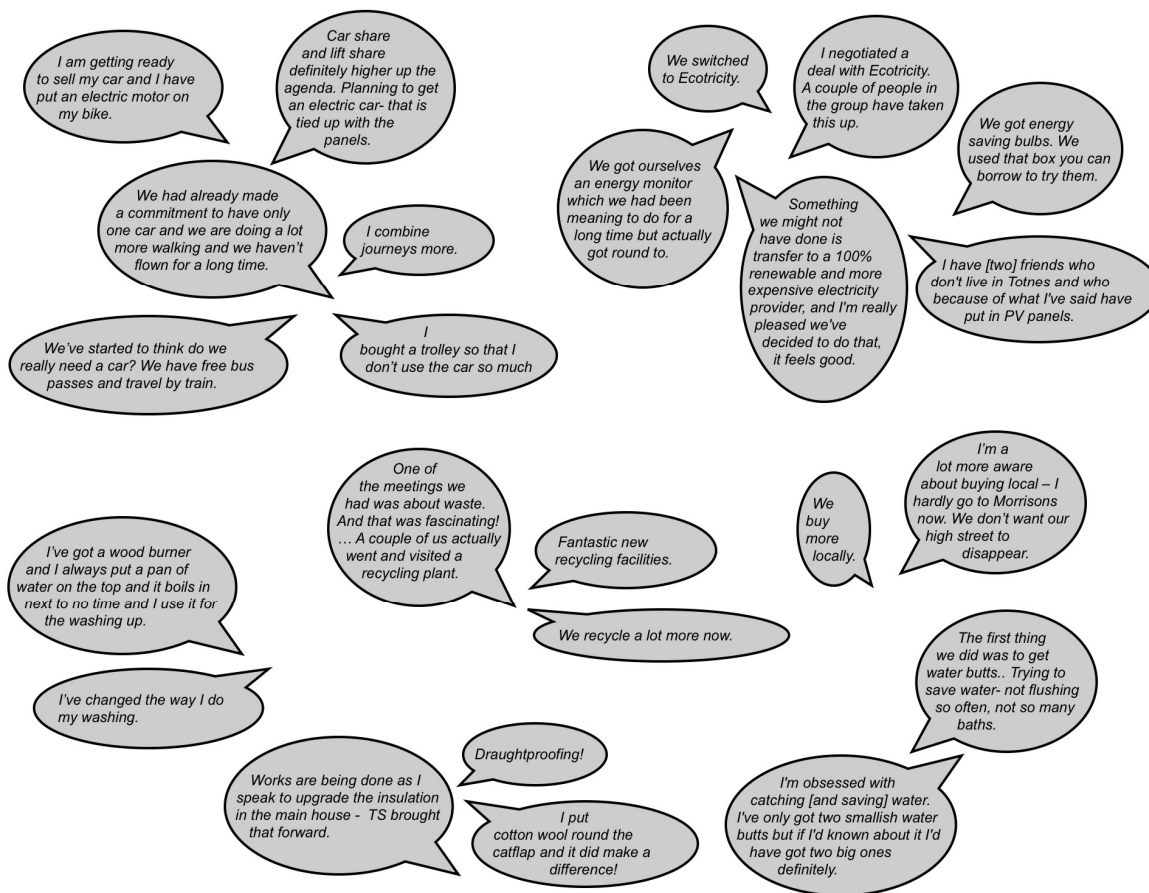


Figure 4: examples of changes made as a result of participating in TT/TS

When the reasons for making changes were surveyed, there was an interesting reversal of priorities as compared with the reasons for participating. Environmental factors were considered the strongest reason, followed by financial incentives. The social factors ('commitment to my group') were seen by survey respondents as less compelling. However, interviews gave an opportunity to tease out these issues more carefully, and from this data a rather different picture emerges.

I felt an obligation to make changes after sitting through the meetings.

It may not have made all [our changes] happen but it did help embed and re-enforce. There is just a strength in knowing other people are doing these things as well.

One of the women has a bloody Aga and I think it did make her think why am I using this to heat a house with just two people. She was quite surprised at what my energy bills were compared to hers.

It was always good to hear about other things people were doing e.g. new ways to clean your toilet! It all did help to re-enforce what I was doing.

When I was meeting other people every two weeks or four weeks, and when I heard about someone who was really challenging that, I remember thinking well if someone

else can do that, I should do it. Otherwise it's a bit disrespectful to them, I'm undermining their effort.

It was really wonderful just to have ... others to share talking about it to make it real.

Learning that other people had already done things, and the motivation side. Not just 'I can do it' but 'I should do it' because somebody else has done it. And giving you a timeframe – before the next meeting, rather than just any time. That was a good thing.

Having the group thing gave me the time to do the changes I was going to do. I need that discipline.

As earlier quotes show, many individuals took responsibility for helping others to make improvements or to change their practice, in the context of group meetings.

We did have a session one Sunday lunchtime where we thought we'd investigate everybody's stopcock in the road because it was clear people didn't know. ... So [for each household] I pointed out exactly where it is, so if it's covered in snow you can still located it. Also I think the man next door, we got him on a meter, so he got a benefit from that.

There's a couple down there from the terrace down there who we'll probably see again, and ask them how they're getting on. And they'll probably say we haven't done anything yet, but at least you've raised the idea again.

once I'd learned how to [set up waterbutts to collect rainwater] I could show the others.

Most respondents (87.5%) felt that the changes they had made would be fairly or very easy to sustain. On the whole this was borne out by interviewees, but a minority felt that the materials in the workbook and (as a result) the group itself had not acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining change. This group overlapped with those who felt the materials did not emphasise commitment enough, and tended to be knowledgeable about the psychology of behavioural change.

Findings 3: What benefits do individuals and groups actually experience?

The evidence from the survey is that participation in TT/TS had benefits of several kinds. Every person experienced the '*feeling of taking positive action about issues that concern me*', and all but three had '*better relationships with my neighbours*' as a result. Financial benefits were felt by the 68.4% who had reduced household costs – most of the rest said it was '*too early to say*' – and by the 64.3% who had improved the value of their home. Perhaps most impressively, just over 80% felt that they had definitely reduced their carbon footprint and/or energy dependency as a result of the project.

Participants were asked to name the most significant benefits they had experienced. 54 answered, and their comments were coded as below.

- Social/community benefit 40
- Financial/practical benefit 15 (especially PV grants)
- Personal/emotional/spiritual benefit 12
- Awareness/learning benefit 11
- Environmental/global benefit 3

Although this is no substitute for a full textual analysis, comparing the wordle of actual benefits with Figure 1 (anticipated benefits) shows that community, neighbourliness and getting to know one another were even more prominent as outcomes than expected.



Figure 5: Wordle of free text responses to the question: '*Please tell us in a few words the most significant benefit(s) you have experienced from taking part in TT/TS*'

On interviewee noted that '*[community building] wasn't part of my thinking when I formed the group: it was about the panels then*'. Of course, social, financial and environmental benefits were difficult to disentangle in a project that deliberately tried to create a virtual circle embracing all of these. Environmental issues were often described as providing the context for the other benefits. Assessing the environmental impact of behavioural changes takes time and specialist know-how, which may be why few people reported direct environmental benefits, but participants did feel able to assess their own and their community's readiness to respond to environmental threats:

'learning how to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem re climate change and peak oil'

'sharing an understanding of the need for resilient communities'

'a sense that we are not alone in being concerned and can work together to live in a sustainable way.'

'the combination of small very local things and better understanding of the global picture

Just as 'learning' and 'awareness' emerged as unforeseen motives for participation in the first place, this desire appears to have been fulfilled. A range of personal, emotional, and even spiritual benefits were experienced.

I feel inspired to learn more. I am committed to do the best I can.

A lessening of the feeling that anything one person can do will have no effect.

Awareness, and ability to act on this.

Sharing hopes, fears, expectations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the nature of personal transformation attested in these contributions, participants expected the benefits to be long-lasting – 87.5% said for a year or more beyond the end of group meetings.

Exploring the benefits in more detail

Social benefits

Transition groups were sometimes valuable for integrating new households into a neighbourhood, or for mending bridges between existing households:

Another family moved in and they joined us and that was fantastic in terms of getting to know them.

I moved to [x] Rd in August last year and didn't know anyone on the street. And that was one of the reasons for doing it – getting to know my neighbours.

One of the neighbours I had met once before a while back not under good circumstances... The next time I saw her was at the first Transition Streets meeting – I acknowledged that we hadn't got off to a good start and asked her to give me a second chance, which she did!

There was a really large space in the mental room that was completely empty, which was who our neighbours were. We had no real contact with neighbours. In many cases we didn't even know what their names were. That was a big plus, [TTTS] kick-started that.

Neighbourliness was experienced in a variety of ways but particularly in the willingness to ask for and give help.

I've seen how much easier it is to ask people for help etc. [There is] generally much more closeness which is important to me. We have combined in small ways e.g. taking turns who takes the various things to be recycled.

We're more inclined to ask each other favours now. The man next door is always asking me to help with things as he has difficulties with his hands, but it is fine: you never know when you might need help yourself.

When I came back from hospital, heavily sedated, and I had to sign that I would have somebody with me for 12 hours when I came back, they took it in turns to be here with me. And maybe if it hadn't have been for the group it would have felt more difficult to ask them.

Initiating community action was another way in which the experience of TT/TS had long-lasting social benefits

I'd feel a lot happier now knocking on peoples' doors and saying we have got to do something about this.

We have now set up a little group who are trying to organise a community orchard. That is a direct outcome of people getting to know each other better and thinking this is quite good doing community based things together, let's do something else

When there was all this business about the Dartington [Land Use Review], we had a round robin letter which we sent. We got every single person [50 residents] to sign. I think the people who collected the signatures were mostly part of the TS group, and it was certainly the nucleus of the group that wrote the original letter.

Many people who were involved in the [three Follaton TS] groups also got involved in [the Follaton community cinema].

Two older interviewees located the social benefits of the TT/TS programme in a history of community or communitarian politics.

There was a period when I was lot younger when community was seen to be very important and then in the 80s and 90s that faded way rather badly- so it was quite possible for people to live in places like this and hardly ever talk to their neighbours. So it is very good to find any sort of way to bring people together to talk about things.

However, many interviewees were happy just to report that they were 'in and out of each others' houses' more and felt these strengthened relationships would be the most enduring benefit.

Since TT we now exchange produce... and go to each others houses to watch football!

Those connections have been made. They don't go away.

Practical benefits

As reported, participants had made a wide range of changes from which they were experiencing financial and other practical benefits. PV panels were the most obvious example, but other financial savings were cited.

The TS programme was a real motivator for me to get around to doing things, including PVs ... Quite a remarkable reduction in my bills from last year.

I am very impressed with it (PVs) –I keep looking at the monitor. It has exceeded my expectations. I wish now I'd fitted more panels.

The co-ordination between Beco and the roofer was great so that saved us a lot of money.

I think it is good to have a carrot – things like rain water harvesting and so on.

Several older participants felt that, while it was natural to them to live as frugally as possible – almost regardless of income – younger people in their group were much less aware of and motivated by such savings. There was some astonishment at the lack of practical and financial know-how exhibited by younger members of the programme.

Personal/awareness benefits

Those for whom personal awareness had been a key goal were not disappointed.

For some people the information was awakening to some extent and to do that in a safe forum was good.

it made it possible for those of us who were passionate to speak more forcibly

Before I felt a certain powerlessness – the Chinese power stations, the environment in general - but having done this I begin to feel empowered and think well I've done this and if more people did this we could really turn this around from a crisis to an opportunity.

Others who had joined for different reasons could also undergo profound personal changes.

I feel really strongly that any new-build public building should have PVs. I'm very radical now.

Even if you think you know about it, you always find more. Like, I knew a bit about the problems of the environment, but I've learned so much from [being involved in TS].

While Damascean conversions were rare – people who signed up to TS had a degree of awareness and conscience about the issues involved – still, many interviewees were happy to acknowledge that they had changed their mind about some issues. The most common change of perception concerned TTT itself.

I now see [Transition] in a very different way and I have a lot of respect for people who are showing a lot of commitment and who are doing without. The city mentality I had before was dismissive of any thing that was not on trend.

At the start I was a bit cynical but I have to admit that it has changed things for the better.

There was less woolly mindedness than I expected.

[partner 1] Before our group we had a much narrower view of TTT and the whole movement.

[partner 2] Now we tell everyone!

Findings 4. What are the features of 'successful' TT/TS groups?

The individuals surveyed and interviewed had all been members of 'successful' groups that had completed their seven week programme to the final evaluation. In the survey, 56 of them commented on what had made their groups successful. These comments were coded as follows (descending order of frequency):

Structure of meetings (mainly provided by the workbook) 18
Personal qualities of members 16 (described as: <i>well informed, knowledgeable, educated, intelligent, interesting, willing, motivated, good-hearted, good-humoured, friendly, positive, 'not didactic', good communication skills, committed, generous, listening, 'already green'</i>)
Shared values/ethos/responsibility 14
Different ideas and expertise 8
Social situation (informal, home setting, with wine/coffee/food) 8
Leadership/facilitation 8
Humour and fun 6
Quality of materials 5
Helping each other 4
Group size 2
Good communication 2



Figure 6: Wordle of free text responses to the question: 'Please tell us in a few words what you think has made group meetings work well'.

It seems that a good group process was a question of achieving a balance: between structure and flexibility, informality and facilitation (especially timekeeping and 'keeping on track'), common purpose and diversity of views and skills. Advice on running a successful group included:

Having a theme for meetings and suggestions on how to proceed.

Rotating the meetings in different homes with different facilitators each time.

Tea, cake, a relaxed atmosphere and parity of esteem, rather than a formal committee with minutes approach

When there was a good facilitator able to keep the pace of the meetings and keep people on track.

No one being too didactic and everyone listening to each other in a considerate way.

Social mix of diverse people using their experience to further our ideals

A spirit of learning from and helping each other.

Interviews revealed that almost all the groups rotated facilitation and that this had a range of benefits: more equitable commitment and responsibility, different 'nuances' to the facilitation role, and the chance to see inside each other's houses! Because groups met over a period of at least 7 weeks, there was a chance for relationships to develop and for personality clashes to be resolved or at least managed.

The spread of sessions over quite a long time allows you to settle in to relationships

Exploring the group process in more detail

Group composition

The focus was on neighbourhood groups and one idea that emerged strongly was that 'having similar houses and therefore similar concerns' was very helpful in group formation and coherence.

The other thing I liked about doing this terrace was that we are all in housing that has been built at the same time and is very similar... it meant that we were all on a level as far as what sort of house we were talking about. So implicitly there was a reasonably similar set of circumstances of wealth too.

In one group that had formed from a Home Group, and so was made up of people not in the same neighbourhood, there were in fact some issues around differences of income:

It did feel a bit awkward that some people were better off financially. One member particularly would fly off to India every few months without much explanation...[while another] found it hard that a lot of us were talking about doing things to our homes, when he rented his property and had a lot of outgoings, and couldn't afford it.

Other shared interests could be important, and in practice this was often a shared commitment to environmental issues. Three out of four participants in one group were Green Party members, while another group formed from an existing Totnes Home group. All felt that common interest had been at least as important as geographical proximity.

If I'd chosen people in my immediate neighbourhood, I mean my immediate neighbours, some of them are not very alternative at all so it would have been quite different.

Dog walking, age (older couples) and lifecourse (younger parents) were areas of common experience that had allowed different groups to gel. Age and life experience were also frequently cited as reasons why groups could work despite *differences* of circumstance and viewpoint:

We were most of us well into our forties. So there was a lot of experience. And also quite a few of us have experience of community living. So there were a good enough number of us who know that like minded doesn't mean everyone needs to think the same.

As reflected in the survey, most of the groups had a predominance of women. Even where couples were involved, female partners seem to have attended and contributed more consistently. Some interviewees reflected that this might be due to traditional gender roles with women taking on the decision-making in domestic areas, but others felt the reasons were more complex. Men were highly valued members of all the TT/TS groups and in some were the driving force: no interviewees or survey respondents commented on the gender bias spontaneously and little significance was attached to it when the issue was raised directly.

Nurturing/supportive ethos

Despite differences of opinion and occasionally challenging personalities (see next section), TT/TS group meetings were supportive settings in which to discuss challenging topics. There was very little '*greener than thou*' behaviour, despite some misgivings that this would be the case.

We were very supportive. I don't think we were competitive. Maybe the men would have a different view on it, but I didn't notice [laughs]. In fact we were 'less green than thou' in some ways.

At the end of a day of running around after 4 children you think 'am I really going out?' but I'd come back re-energised about what we had talked about and from having socialised at that level.

The non-judgemental thing I really picked up right from day one.

Humour and having fun

A recurrent theme was humour and fun. The activity with the suitcase of lightbulbs seems to have been particularly lighthearted, and was recommended as a good ice-breaker for a first or second meeting. However, only female interviewees brought up humour as a theme. One explicitly associated it with the group being '*all women together*'. She and several others linked humour with self-deprecation, and with the women of the group being '*hopeless*' at effecting the practical measures described. Humour was used in part, then, to dispel anxieties about being '*less green than thou*', less committed, or less capable.

[The first meeting] was fun – it was cold and we didn't have enough chairs – someone popped across the road to get more. We were crammed in and there were some children there.

[The group] made it a laugh. Like [x] went and got that suitcase of energy efficient lightbulbs that you can get from the library, and we just had a real giggle one session.

A lot of the meetings were just one big laugh, laughing at each other's attempts to follow things that were in the handbook.

We just cried laughing a lot of the time, it was hilarious! Cos we were pretty hopeless the lot of us... you know when we were talking about thermostats, these six women didn't even know we had a thermostat.

Global/local focus

As described, many participants came to TT/TS with an existing awareness of global issues. They often described group meetings as linking these issues – which could engender helplessness and anxiety – with practical local actions.

They were all people who were concerned about what was happening to the earth. They were all in their small way trying to transition in their own lives.

In our group it took quite a few sessions before we got into the background to why we're making all these efforts and some of the deeper questions. But it is probably right that it waited till that stage as by then we were more comfortable with each other. It is quite difficult to talk about these things.

However, as reported in the next section, some of these 'pre-aware' participants felt that the work book did not emphasise thoughtfulness about global issues sufficiently.

Learning together and building group expertise

Previous sections have described learning as an aim and an outcome of the TT/TS process but it was also an essential feature of how groups worked together. Among the positive words which participants used about other group members, terms associated with knowledge, education and expertise were even more often encountered than terms associated with good social and listening skills.

There were resources in that group that were phenomenal in terms of information and experience that we shared.

It was quite practical and that brought different aspects of people out. And one or two people who might have been more quiet suddenly had more to contribute and other people who might have had their strong opinions were a bit more quiet.

For me it was the community learning. To see the community taking hold of this. People were learning from each other.

Structure and organisation

Most groups followed the structure suggested by the workbook and TTT facilitator, but invariably reported this as an innovation of their group, suggesting that a degree of flexibility allowed groups to take ownership of their own process. Different groups did add their own refinements such as email groups, circulation of notes and action points, allocation of areas of expertise to different individuals, and so on.

It was really worth imposing a bit of formality on the meetings. We didn't call it a chair, we called it a timekeeper.

Seeing everybody gets a go at saying something. And it doesn't degenerate into anecdote, which is very easy. And also because it had turned into a nice sitting on sofas eating cake, it was quite hard to keep the discipline.

I think trying to agree dates at the first session, that works better than organising dates later.

The start-up meeting with external facilitation from TTT was mentioned positively by a large number of people interviewed, except in one case where it had been cut short and several issues had not been covered. There was much praise for the manner and content of this intervention, but the simple fact of somebody from outside the neighbourhood coming to help launch the group was significant in giving it an identity and lending weight to its processes.

being triggered by somebody coming along and partially at least making that commitment also, somebody from the [TTT] project.

The role of the workbook

Clearly the workbook was a critical element in a successful group process, particularly its structure, but to a lesser extent also the quality and relevance of its content. Free text responses and interviews surfaced several ways in which it had been helpful:

1. providing structure to the meetings
2. providing structure/progression across the programme
3. as a starting point for discussion and sharing expertise
4. giving continuity between meetings, including for those who might have missed a session

The workbook often acquired its own presence in group dynamics, in some cases as a trusted witness who could be relied on to speak the truth, in other cases as a simple soul

whose ideas needed to be advanced and brought up to date, and in still others a conscientious timekeeper who brought discussion back to the point when it threatened to stray.

I've had all these [TTT visitor] groups come round, I so enjoy having them. Like Koreans. And when they come I just get the book out and use it as a prompt to tell them what we did.

Positive comments on the workbook were that it was concise, clearly written, easy to read 'with big writing and colourful pages', practical ('putting ideas into action'), and with 'sufficient but not too much detail'. The local angle was strongly praised. While many respondents felt that they already knew much of what was in the workbook, they appreciated having it laid out so clearly in the different sections, with opportunities to draw in the expertise of group members and to follow up with further local research. Most people felt it addressed a range of audiences with different levels of expertise.

Materials have been balanced well, not too intimidating and not too basic, with a good balance of practical considerations and opportunity for discussion.

Such negative comments as there were centred on the basic nature of the materials and, sometimes, their alleged inaccuracy or lack of up-to-date corroborating research.

I'm not a scientist but the science wasn't wonderful in one or two of the sections, and there were conflicting quotes.

When I saw the book, it was pretty basic at that point, and already outdated. And I had some worries about that, but I thought we can work on this together, because it gives you a framework, a starting point.

For me the workshops were more useful. ... when I went through a lot of the pack I either had already done it or I knew I wasn't going to do it for various reasons.

It was a good jumping off point but actually we kind of knew everything that was in there, we didn't learn a lot. But what was great was that we actually got together and talked about what we were doing in our lives, what we'd like to change.

One way of addressing this – suggested by several – would be to keep the basic version with a few well-established findings and proven responses, but provide more advanced resources, perhaps online. These could include links to research, current agendas and debates, and more radical responses such as community micro-generation and other 'big ideas' from the Transition movement. Of course, these 'advanced' resources are already available on the Transition web site, but perhaps clearer links need to be provided from the workbook materials.

An issue that came up in several interviews and can be traced in a few survey responses (possibly from the same individuals) was the difficulty of sustaining behavioural change. It was noted that discussion and awareness are not enough: that there are deep seated psychological as well as practical reasons why people fail to change environmentally damaging habits, or to sustain 'good' ones. While the workbook alone may not be able to address this, it does not at present seem to support people's desire to record their commitments and reflect on how they will overcome challenges to change.

At the end of the meetings we tended to trickle off rather than stating clearly what each of us was going to do. I think the workbook could be clearer about guiding you to do that... If you make a commitment out loud to the group you are more likely to follow through.

A second, minority perception was that the workbook supported money-saving at the expense of the wider consideration of global issues. Once again, it was appreciated that the aim of this programme was to reach a wider community for transition ideas, and that a focus on household finances was important in achieving this. However, more guidance could perhaps be given to groups about moving on from practical considerations to larger concerns, and about making space to share hopes and fears as well as expertise.

For me the social justice element is still lacking- the workbook is very individualistic about saving money... I'd like to see more about green banks, access to land.

Findings 5. What issues do groups confront in their TT/TS groups, and how do they address them?

47 respondents to the survey provided free-text comments about things that had worked less well in their groups. These were coded as follows (grouped by type of issue). As the comments show, groups were sometimes pro-active in addressing these issues once they had been identified.

Organisational issues:

Organising/attendance at meetings 15 (particular issue for parents 4)

Changing membership/drop outs 3

Different levels of commitment/responsibility 3

Maintaining momentum (e.g. over holidays/breaks) 2

Being a small group, if one participant can't make it we have tended to cancel. I have occasionally found this frustrating.

Just the challenge of finding the time because we are already committed to so many meetings here.

Process issues:

Poor facilitation 3

Variable quality of information (food, clothing, recycling mentioned) 3

Going 'off track' 3

Boredom 2

Getting 'stuck' on particular issues 1

Initially the meetings were a bit unstructured. We decided to rotate the role of 'timekeeper' to keep us to the point.

When there was less control of the agenda, sometimes [meetings] would drift off.

Interpersonal issues:

Personal qualities of (some) members 6 (variously described as *inhibited, socially inept, not well informed, negative, egocentric, domineering, patronising, opinionated, 'slightly aggressive'*)

Over-dominance of some members 4

Personality clashes/personal dynamics 4

We did not find TTT ideas re group dynamics sensible.

Outcome issues:

Not addressing the real challenges 2

Not long enough to effect sustained changes 2

People feeling they had done all they could already 1

Unwillingness to look at difficulties around the changes we were making - a feeling that we had to talk as though making big changes to old habitual ways of running our lives (eg supermarket shopping/using the car etc) was dead easy.

Certain initiatives take a long time and regular commitment to process and 6 meetings are not enough.



Figure 7: Wordle of free text responses to the question 'Please tell us in a few words what you think has made group meetings work less well'

One respondent took a practical approach to lubricating group dynamics:

bit stiff. needed more booze but i was the only one who brought anything.

Another felt that the end of the group process had not received enough recognition and care:

An abrupt/sad end and no further guidance on what/if/how the group can continue after 7 sessions.

Exploring group issues in more detail

Again interviews offered an opportunity to explore some of these issues in more depth, and find out how different groups had dealt with them.

Differences of opinion were typically managed with humour, mutual respect, and by ensuring difficult discussions occupied only a portion of meeting time.

So those two were scientists, and I think some of the touchy-feely stuff they found quite difficult to take. [x] in particular, with her chakras and her energies.[Laughs]... and after a while there was group cohesion and they would joke about it.

It could be so involved, so opinionated, it could be difficult at times, but it was a good thing to be part of.

Well you know how I can be, a bit combative, but there was a lot of humour.

There were also some people I would say who had very ill considered ideas about certain things, and seemed to be going for some kind of dogma rather than anything that was actually true. That was very interesting. To just see and be happy with where you are on that continuum.

'**Dominating**', 'patronising' and 'opinionated' individuals were, in the best scenarios, tolerated because it was recognised that their manner could arise from a sense of the urgency of the issues. However, these individuals could also be a real problem. Three interviewees described group members leaving because of the dominating behaviour of one individual or household.

When people are enthusiasts they don't listen to anybody else and don't take on anyone else's experience... And I know one neighbour dropped out immediately because she wasn't prepared to sit through being lectured at.

Approaches to managing these individuals included good time keeping – so people had roughly equal opportunities to speak – and allocating responsibility for different sessions so that everyone had an opportunity to be 'knowledgeable'. Only one survey respondent and one interviewee expressed the view that an external (TTT) facilitator would have helped the situation.

There is a lot of patience and people seem just happy to take that person on board and he has calmed down a lot since he has got to know people. He definitely did feel that he had to assert his opinions, and in some areas he knows a lot.

[One character] in the group was rather difficult to manage, he wanted to go over a lot of the fine detail, but as things went on he settled down and didn't talk as much, there were some members who tested my patience, were a challenge to my tolerance levels. It was noticeable that those people were not the people who put themselves forward or were asked by the rest of the group to 'hold' the group. Perhaps that was a way the group managed those slightly more anxious and challenging personalities.

There was one person in the group – she was younger, and more idealistic, less pragmatic. But at the same time very strong in her views. And she was tolerated because she was young, and she was enthusiastic, and she was goodhearted. But she did get challenged [laughs]. Hopefully in a kind way. She certainly didn't leave, and we're all still friends.

Of course, these may be the very same individuals who found other group members 'boring' 'inhibited' or 'not well informed' – we have no record of how *they* coped!

Difficulties **organising meetings** at which everybody could attend was the most common problem. Some groups arranged dates well in advance and stuck to those arrangements, however people's availability changed. Others – typically the smaller groups – made a point of trying to accommodate everyone. This could lead to ever-changing arrangements and a sense of frustration or falling behind. The workbook did help maintain continuity even when not every member of a group could attend a particular session. Parents with young children

were particularly difficult to accommodate in regular group meetings. They were the hardest group to engage and the most likely to drop out, and for this reason were difficult to interview, although several groups made special efforts to support parents for example by meeting at their houses.

The difficulty is we can never get everyone together, sadly. And one person had to drop out because she has a child and is a single parent and had difficulties with childcare. Another member works nightshifts.

The two with young children dropped out.

[Families with young children will only get involved if we] provide creches! I work with young families and the only way we get people on our courses is providing a free creche. I don't know whether that's possible.

Facilitation seems only to have been problematic in the early days of a group forming – within a couple of weeks groups had found an approach that worked well enough, following or adapting the guidelines. Rotated facilitation seems to have been essential to group process, both to ensure a range of styles and limit the impact of poor facilitation, and to emphasise the shared nature of the commitment.

The workbook is very clear about how to facilitate each session. We improvised a bit and perhaps put more emphasis on personal review and catch up

Sometimes conversation was a bit stilted...We didn't understand initially that we should read ahead and then perhaps one person facilitates.

The issue of participants **not following through** with the changes discussed was raised in two interviews. Groups did not on the whole ask their members to make public commitments to specific changes, in keeping with the supportive and non-judgemental ethos.

The ground rules at the beginning were important and to respect differences. If people hadn't done what they said they would the attitude of the group was well its up to you.

it's not about who can be greenest, it's not about whipping yourself because you're not green enough, it's just about seeing how you can change your life.

However, as discussed previously, at least two participants felt commitment and follow-through had been a weakness in the process, particularly once group meetings had come to an end. These two both discussed the psychology of habit forming and agreed that although the extended period of working together was important in fostering behavioural change, some kind of follow up was necessary to sustain it.

It would have been nice if in the group we had somehow managed to foster that sense of commitment a bit better.

it's easy just to slip back. I think there's a danger that we say we're meeting all these targets and we're changing people over these seven sessions, but what happens a few months later or a year later is not at all the same thing.

And there were suggestions for making follow-through more likely to happen:

At the beginning of every meeting we'd reflect on how things had been since the previous meeting. I think that was good because if the previous meeting related to a

particular topic there was quite a bit of time reflecting on what we'd done before jumping into the next topic.

I got the impression that the more follow up we could do informally, at the back of the street, when people were heading out, just saying 'how's it going?', the better... everyone needs a bit of help to keep moving.

Several interviewees noted the fact that **disclosing personal details** of household management was potentially difficult:

the discussion was about quite intimate details of how you run your household.

there were people you didn't necessarily know well before that you'd get to know quite quickly in many ways.

However, no survey respondents and few interviewees actually found any awkwardness after the first couple of meetings. Several groups had openly shared household bills, for example, and there were many examples of neighbours inviting one another into their homes to find stopcocks or adjust heating controls. The workbook and group context normalised the disclosure, and it seems that humour was used to overcome any social stress engendered.

A couple of interviewees reflected on **group size**. The recommended size of 6-8 seems to have been most successful. Larger groups sometimes found that commitment was uneven, with an inner core and outer circle developing, and the possibility of resentments in both directions. Continuity and organising meetings when everybody could attend was problematic. However, there was a large pool of expertise to draw on, and little threat to the group if one or two people's commitment wavered. Small groups were more vulnerable to this, and interpersonal tensions could be more visible and disruptive.

I had the idea that maybe there were too many people [ten+] in the group... it was a bit awkward, too many people to go around, not having enough time to share.

I don't know if we could have sustained as a group without any of us, because our group was so small. And we always wanted to make sure all four people were present.

An intention to interview people who had dropped out of their group was not followed through because of the difficulty of identifying people prepared to talk about this experience. However, interviewees were asked about *other* people who had begun attending and fallen away. Almost invariably this was because of the difficulty of attending meetings, and parents with young children were at most risk of dropping out. A few interviewees mentioned that once a group was advised that they were unlikely to be eligible for PV grants, one or more members had left, but they had often been replaced, or the group had continued without them. In fact in some ways it was seen as positive that those continuing to attend were motivated by the group experience and the change process rather than an extrinsic factor.

Findings 6. Do groups see themselves as having a longer-term role beyond completion of the Transition Together workbook?

All but one survey respondent either wanted their group to continue meeting, or was involved in continuing activities. These activities included shared meals, links with other groups, street parties, community recycling, and a community orchard project. However, there was also an appetite for more formal ongoing activities, with either a fresh impetus or ongoing support from TTT. Ideas for framing this included a newsletter, multi-group gatherings and celebrations, monthly meetings 'to keep a sense of constant forward movement', visiting speakers to address specific issues, and a review of workbook topics to assess what progress had been made.

What I'm left with is that I need to learn more. We've only scratched the surface really.

Interviewees were asked to describe some of the things that had already happened since completing the workbook.

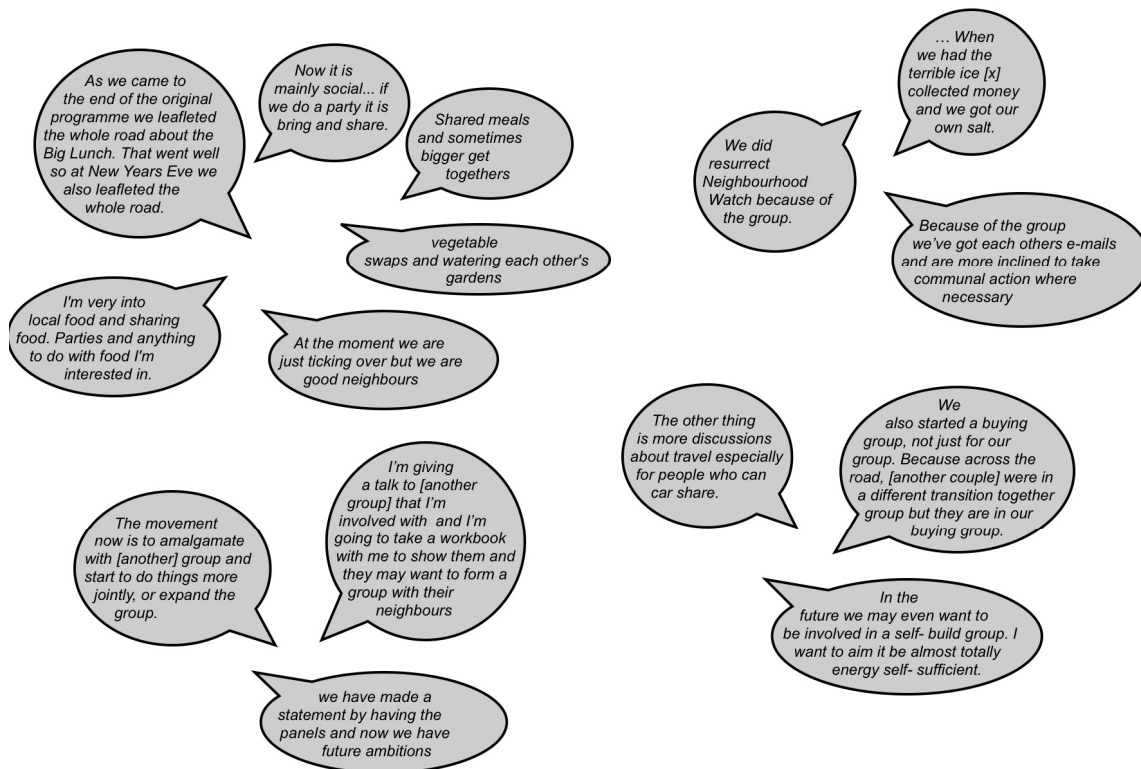


Figure 8: examples of activities taken forward

Interviews also presented an opportunity to explore some of the sadness and disappointment felt about how the process had come to an end.

I thought the last chapter was really weak and sort of just says over to you. I think it should say something like 'you could consider doing...' with a list of 6 or so things.

we've tried to organise two meetings and both of them have been cancelled. And I don't want to be the one who's organising them so I've sort of left it to everyone else and then it hasn't happened.

although it's been mentioned a few times, wouldn't it be nice if we get together, it's never happened... It would be nice to have another little go at doing something with a focus, but I think some of that focus has to come from elsewhere.

Just as there had been praise for the way TTT supported the start of groups, there was some disappointment that the ending had not been similarly marked and supported.

Maybe a facilitator coming to the last session could take a lead on that discussion, because there can be quite strong opinions and having someone external might make it easier.

It was so useful having an external influence through TS. But it would be great to have further nudge now and then: when are you doing that or that?

Findings 7: general comments and suggestions

Two questions in the survey invited more general comments about TT/TS, and the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Of 54 responses to the question 'If a friend asked your advice about whether or not to get involved in a TT/TS group, please tell us in a few words what you would say', only one was neutral, and this was from a TTT employee who felt that neutrality was required professionally.



Figure 9: Wordle from free text responses to the question 'If a friend asked your advice about whether or not to get involved in a TT/TS group, please tell us in a few words what you would say'

Of 34 responses to the final invitation to share any other comments or feedback, 12 offered further enthusiasm and praise for the scheme. The only negative comments came from households that had applied and failed to qualify for PV grants. A coded analysis of the comments reflects many of the issues already covered.

General enthusiasm and thanks 12

Well-managed project 3

Positive about PV grant and installation 4

Disappointed we didn't get PV grant/too expensive 3

Community learning 3

Good to see TTT being pragmatic 2

Handbook should be more technical/more challenging 2

Link with world/global events 2

I feel fortunate to have had the chance to be part of Transition Together. Thank you everybody!

Best thing that has happened to us since we moved in in 1974!

Shame that Transition Streets did not feel we were worthy of grants for PV. Surely it does not matter who is saving the carbon; I did not realise that Transition had a social justice agenda.

It has been a valuable programme and I think it will be of great value to other towns.

I was really impressed with the programme, the thought and effort that went into the programme.

Again, many of the comments reflected an enhanced view of the Transition movement, and TTT in particular, focused on its professionalism and ability to address 'mainstream' concerns.

This has been a very well managed project by the leadership team.

I have been encouraged to hear that TTT is making more efforts to become 'mainstream' whilst keeping its distinctive flavour. Recent world events, both natural and political, have highlighted the need to reduce oil dependency and find ways of creating energy safely.

Both the general enthusiasm, and the praise for TTT's professionalism and practical focus, were reflected in comments from interviewees.

To be honest when TTT first started I thought it was one of these talking shops but having had something tangible I have seen that they are actually doing something. I've lived in Totnes a very long time and you see a lot of these movements come and ago. At the start I was a bit cynical but I have to admit that it has changed things for the better.

It's left me with a very good view of the transition group. The only thing that worries me is you find loads of people in the town and environs – either they are completely into the transition thing or they don't seem to know anything about it.

Suggestions for future activities

Suggestions from interviews are simply recorded here as recommendations. They come from thoughtful people who were fully engaged with the TS/TT process and used the interview situation as an opportunity to think through how it might have been improved, and how the Transition movement could take forward the gains that have been achieved.

Although not a focus of TT/TS, three interviewees mentioned that the experience of considering environmental issues at a neighbourhood level threw up issues that needed to be addressed at community level, particularly recycling services. There should, in their view, be some means of connecting neighbourhood needs with campaigning at that level:

Why can't it be made easier, in somewhere like Totnes, to recycle?

I think we do need to go back to SH through TTT and say that plastics recycling is poor

Then there is the whole issue of whether you should be involved in campaigning activities rather than just educational and advice activities- that might alienate as many people as it attracts, but clearly there are issues you could take it up.

Another idea was to influence the new housing developments planned for the area by communicating what has been learned about sustainable living:

If there are going to be houses built we want the highest possible environmental spec.

There were a few suggestions for the group process itself, beyond those already covered. In particular more contact from TTT or with other groups would in some cases have been valued, to emphasise that while the process was neighbourhood-based, resources and ideas were available from the wider community.

During the process it would have been good to meet the other groups.

A page for posting ideas on your (TTT) website [so they can be shared with other groups]

We talked about collective sharing of tools and equipment and I know that kind of scheme can often work better on a larger scale. It would be really interesting to see if things like that can happen.

Other issues that came up were timing, and (once again), commitment and follow-through:

I think it's also a timing thing. Because for a lot of us, you probably grow your own vegetables in your garden, and you also want to enjoy the summer...In the summer there's just so much going on. I think focused events in the winter are much better, and families tend to be quieter then as well.

I thought I was a bit slack – maybe we all were – with recording our energy use, we never really followed it up. Maybe there could have been more of an emphasis on that, monitoring energy use in the home.

Ideas for progressing the group beyond the completion of the workbook echoed many of those already covered:

What I wanted was to go back to those chapter headings with a view to what we had done since reading that chapter. There could be a six or twelve month gap. It's a term in business, continuous professional improvement. You can't just get to a point and then stop, or if you do stop then you're going to slip down. So I think it is important to keep on reviewing and supporting each other.

That's one suggestion, to think about whether we fill in those [final] evaluation forms privately or whether we share them. Obviously some things people might want to keep as confidential, but there's also the opportunity to say how have we progressed, what have we done well. It can be a bit competitive but I think that can be helpful.

One [idea] could be ... to meet for another 5 sessions and review. Another one might be more informal arrangements. Or with practical ideas, different individuals taking a lead on different things... You could always have a composting expert, and a transport expert.

Finally, getting more people involved and getting new groups off the ground was important to many who responded. Using existing networks, and emphasising tangible benefits, were the main recommendations.

In terms of getting new people on board I think people need to see tangible benefits – useful information, sharing of skills, discounts (perhaps Totnes Pet and Garden giving 10% off) etc.

Maybe it is something you could channel more directly though [local schools]. They have a network and a weekly newsletter.

Maybe [TTT] could call a secret meeting in order to intrigue people and then explain to them how they could be that key person who creates a TT group in their road. Hear about it very directly and hear about the benefits.

The hard thing for TTT is you want to get people who aren't involved at all, but you want the people who are middling involved too... they're the ones who TS and the workshops can really benefit.

I don't know how you would enthuse people and get them to stay on board without a dirty great carrot

I think it's the personal contact between somebody who's going through it or already done it, and somebody who hasn't yet.

I think using that model of working at a street level for whatever activities like the Food Hub where you want to involve people is a good one.

Several people suggested that groups based around lifecourse or the workplace could work just as well as neighbourhood groups.

[partner 1] I think if we set it up now it would be brilliant because 2 new families have moved in which we probably have more in common with - young children and so on.

[partner 2] I'm not saying that it can't work with more diverse ages but I definitely think it makes it more difficult.

I know one other group at least that is connected through being parents at a school. And even participants at a workplace. So I don't think it could be limited to a street.

maybe people with young children need to have a group of their own, with a creche, at a time that suits them better.

[But there has to be the possibility of casual encounters because] if you didn't bump into people at all the dynamic would be different.

Conclusions

On the evidence of this study, TT/TS has been a hugely successful and popular project. Most of the people who took part in neighbourhood groups were already aware of and in some ways committed to living in a more sustainable way. Motives for participating were to qualify for PV grants, to learn more about living sustainably, to feel empowered through shared action, to get to know neighbours better, and to take the Transition movement forward. Those who joined TS because of the possibility of PV grant funding were more divided in their opinions of the programme, with a few understandably disappointed that they had not qualified. More commonly, though, participants who began with a financial motivation found that the social benefits were more significant in the end.

All participants in TT/TS made practical changes to their homes and behaviours. In some cases these were large in scope, including installation of photovoltaics. Reduced car use, reduced consumption of energy and water, and better recycling practices (including composting) were the most common behavioural changes. Even those who began the programme convinced that they had already done 'all they could' went on to make significant changes. Participants feel that these changes will be sustained and long-lasting. However, there is also a desire for ongoing support from neighbourhood groups and from TTT.

The social benefits of participating in TT/TS were the most widely felt: in fact they were experienced by all participants. They include better social contact with neighbours (street parties, shared meals, 'dropping in'), practical help of many kinds, and more communal action on issues that matter to the neighbourhood. Practical benefits to households included significant financial savings (68%) and improved value of homes (64%). Growth in understanding, practical knowledge and collective skills were important to a large minority. A similar number experienced greater well-being, through a lessening of fear and anxiety about global issues and a greater sense of empowerment. There has been considerable learning about how to get on in neighbourhood groups, some of which is captured in this report, including the confrontation of difficult issues and the management of diverse personalities and points of view.

There is no doubt that the structure provided by the workbook and by the initial facilitation from TTT were critical to group meetings. There is a strong sense that with a little further input, groups could expand, diversify, and generate further positive outcomes for the neighbourhoods of Totnes. This report documents some valuable suggestions for taking the programme forward into the future.

I think the biggest and best project TTT has done is Transition Together because it engages a new section of people.

The more I learned, the more, I suppose for me it became not a question of shall I do it, it's about having no option... It was at a time when I was looking at electricity providers and thinking 'can I get a cheaper one?' And I thought, you know, it's not about saving three quid, I just switched to the good energy one.

Getting more involved with Transition has opened up my world and made me very proud to be a Totnesian!

Research commissioned by Transition Streets in June 2011. Conducted by Helen Beetham, an academic and professional researcher. Helen has been the Principal Investigator on around a dozen nationally funded research projects in Education and was co-chair of an ESRC research seminar series in 2009-11. Helen was also a member of the last government's think-tank on educational futures, 'Beyond Current Horizons'. Supported by Mary Popham. With thanks to all the TS participants for giving their feedback and suggestions.