

Tools for collaboration



Julie Stewart-Turner - Chair, Newsome Ward Community Forum

I am lucky to be part of a great team that leads the **community forum**. We all have a similar drive to make our communities stronger, and more interactive. We try to remember that the main focus is about community, and the diverse interests within our communities.

We have regular discussion groups to share information, but these meetings are bi-monthly so as not to be too demanding on people's time.

We realise that people have lots of commitments and we value the time that they give to us and to each other. We regularly consult members on the way we structure the meetings and the content, to ensure that it meets their expectations. We try to keep the meetings light hearted and inclusive.

One of the things we realised some time ago was that one of the most important parts of the meeting was the break in the middle of it - it allowed people time to catch up with each other and exchange details, so we expanded the time of the break.

If people are going to give their time to us, we want them to feel that it is worth while, we want to make sure that all the people have the chance to contribute to the meeting if they wish, and that all the people who are part of the forum feel that their contributions are valued – they are all important.

In addition to our regular meetings, we decided we wanted to do more community based things. We were given some funding from a youth group that was folding, and we made sure it was directed towards children and young people. One of the things we did was to establish the Kiddies Christmas Party.

This was our first venture into directly delivering a community based project. We tried it out to see if people would like it, and we were overwhelmed by the response. We have now put this on for 6 years and every year we have 70 to 80 children aged 8 years or younger at the party, along with a parent or guardian.

Soon after, we started to explore issues around community allotments, which became a lot more complex than we expected, but we persevered and it eventually led to our Growing Newsome project.

We found these community based initiatives a great way to engage more people in the forum, and although numbers were growing steadily it was slow. Then about 3 years ago I met Alan Williams, and we discussed the principles of Timebanking.

The idea that one hour of anybody's time is as valuable as one hour of any body else's time, is a principle that fitted well within the ethos we were creating for Newsome Ward Community Forum, and our members were willing to support the initiative. The community forum became a group member, and a willing partner to promote Timebanking.

It had a slow start, as people were a little anxious that it was going to take up more of their time, and struggled to get their heads around it. However, when Rachel, our Timebanking Co-ordinator was appointed, she was able to ease their anxieties. She went out to lots of our members and was able to demonstrate how it would relate to their own group or individual circumstances – one of the great things about Timebanking is its flexibility.

It takes time to build confidence in people to take part in any new initiative, but over the past couple of years, Timebanking has really taken off in Newsome Ward, and people now believe in it.

It has helped us in Newsome Ward Community Forum to grow our membership, it has helped to engage new people in our community based projects, it has helped us to maintain a positive communication, which ensures we don't relive some of the difficulties experienced a few years ago with duplication and competing initiatives.

Through Newsome Ward Timebanking, I've seen new friendships develop. I've seen people experiencing difficulties, being helped by volunteers. It has inspired people to take more of an active role in their neighbourhoods.

Rachel has been a great asset to Newsome Ward Community Forum and Timebanking has helped to develop our skill base. I've seen people have the courage to speak up about things that concern them and get involved in developing new projects.

Our mailing list has now grown to approximately 270, and growth in new members can be correlated to the introduction of Timebanking.

Newsome Ward Community Forum is very different from when I started in 2000.

I feel very lucky to be the Chair Person of Newsome Ward Community Forum, and member of Newsome Ward Timebanking. Over the years it has been such a pleasure watching people grow into new roles. I've seen quite shy people blossom into leaders. I've seen people remember skills that they had long forgotten. I've seen people challenge themselves to do things they never imagined they could.

The forum gives people the chance to support each other, to realise their own ambitions for their own environment or their own community. I think this is the greatest way to improve people's physical and emotional well being.



Andrew Wilson - Thumbprint Co-operative



Mobile phones are an intimate technology - we keep our phones within an arms length most of the time, often right next to our bodies, and the texts we get regularly are from our closest friends and family - so people will use text messages to say the things that they need to say, even if they would never say those things out loud.

And because we always have our mobile phones with us everywhere, **text messages** can be used to reach people in the spaces where they live, and where they feel comfortable, rather than in official spaces, for example by using signs at bus stops or beer mats in pubs. If you give people something they are interested in, they always have the means to take part by text if they want to.

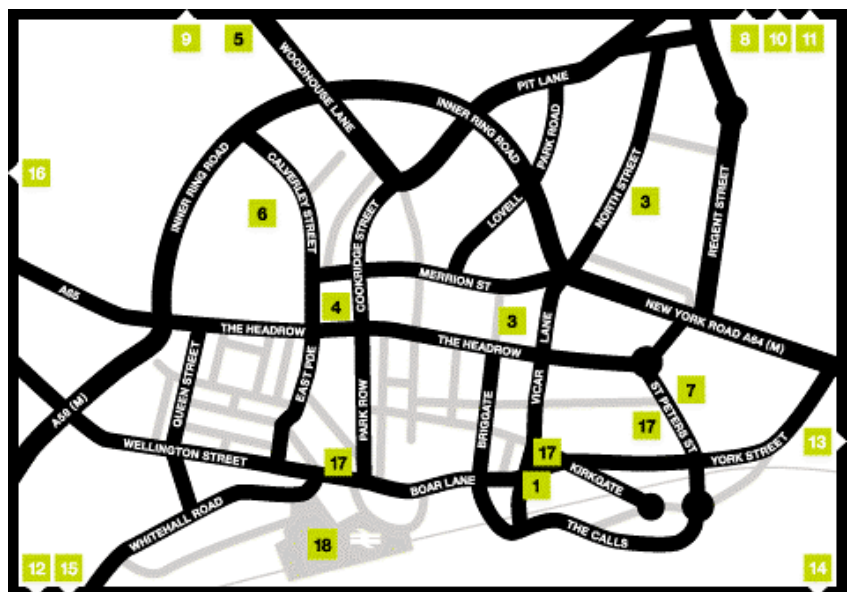
So I wondered if we could use the intimacy, inclusiveness and commitment that text messages offered to somehow “build” public places. After all, public space is one of the things we all share, or choose not to share. Lots of different kinds of people can cross paths in a public space without ever needing to know anything about each other apart from that they all care about the quality of that place, and live some of their lives there.

City Poems was a text message biography of the city of Leeds, written by the people who live and work there and delivered from a network of Poem Points at key locations around the city.

The Poem Point locations were chosen to tell the story of the city through its places, and City Poems was a book that people read on their mobile phones, finding new chapters as they walked around the city, and reading them in the place they were written about.

Each of the numbered squares on the map is a Poem Point, including a bar (3), Leeds General infirmary (6), a bus stop (17), Armley Prison (12) and an old people's day centre (13).

A Poem Point sounds quite technical, but actually it is just a sign on the wall with some instructions on and a key number. Send a text with just the key number in and you'll get a poem back about the place you are in.



City Poems was about people making their own sense of shared public spaces by reading and writing while in those spaces - readers might never find out who wrote the poem they

read at the bus stop, but they knew that there was some common ground because they shared at least one of the same places.

I was the “editor” of City Poems, I choose the places to be Poem Points, and these Poem Points made a biography that was chosen, at least in part, by me. But that is just one biography of a city, mine, and there are as many biographies of Leeds or any other city as there are people who live there. It's really not for me to say what the important, meaningful places are that people care about. It's for whoever wants to, to make their own choices. One of the things I've been doing since is trying to make a web site that lets anyone who wants to set up their own version of City Poems, or set up anything else that they want to try out by sending and receiving texts.

My friends from the Ordsall Writers group in Salford have using the latest version of this web site to run what started out as creative writing but quickly became a lot more than that, in a way that could only have happened through using text messages.

The first step in the process was a creative writing workshop. At the workshop, members of the group signed up to a text message mailing list. After that, one of the members of the group, Amber, started logging into the web site each week and using it to send out a question by text message everyone taking part, designed to draw out a fragment of interesting autobiographical writing from each participant, for example “What piece of music always brings back memories?”. The members of the group each text their answers back, and all the responses are collected and published, anonymously, on a web page for the Ordsall Writers.

This page has become a very engaging archive, written collaboratively by the people taking part, and browsing through it is a great introduction to the area and the people who live there, in their own words. This is very helpful for Ordsall, because the area has a reputation that isn't always positive. One of the questions the group asked themselves by text was "What is the best thing about living here and why?". And after a few weeks, Jane and the other organiser, Mike, incorporated the creative texting into the radio show they present on the local community radio station Salford City Radio.

As well as developing creative writing skills the group noticed how it had increased their sense of wellbeing. The questions give them reason to think and write about meaningful personal memories, and they enjoy the sense that they are doing this at the same time as other members of the group. As one of the group said “I had had a rough day and the message cheered me up”.

Everyone taking part thinks that there is something unique and valuable about using text messages. Sylvie, one of the members of the group, said that “a question out of the blue makes you be creative on the spur of the moment” and that being able to reply straight away by text made the answers more personal and honest.

Sending the text “is like a message in a bottle”, a rich, intimate experience for the person writing: “it digs things out of your head that you didn't think about”.

The web site that the Ordsall Writers are using works anywhere in the country, and is open to anyone to use, so if you'd like to try it out please do just email me:

wilsonandyb@gmail.com

Sam Hopley - CEO, Timebanking UK



Timebanking UK nationally has about 20,000 members across 220 timebanks, of which Newsome is an important one. At the moment about 2 or 3 timebanks spring up each week.

We are part of a growing **Timebanking** family. It's fascinating that at this time people all over the country, the world even, are coming up with similar solutions to the problems that we face and if we can connect up that learning the potential is unlimited.

Timebanking redefines how we relate to each other. "Marginalised people" are labeled and isolated by the services they use which then work to overcome the isolation they helped create.

Holy Cross Centre in Camden is a day service for people with mental health problems. When I started working there six years ago, we had no money, one manager, twelve staff and were trying to meet the needs of 500 people. It was impossible. It might sound strange coming from a professional - an "expert" - but I had no idea what I was doing. We were 12 staff trying to meet the needs of 500. We never had enough money. How do you ever have enough money to meet the needs of 500 people? So we became rationers of resources.

What I did have was an army. 500 people is an army, but they were 500 people who had never been asked to do anything before.

Partly, timebanking is a tool for co-production without the co-production, without handing over the decision making, without handing over the power, without this being about local people coming up with local solutions, there's not really much point to timebanking. Volunteering is already pretty good. There is a real role for volunteering, but there's also a real role for people to take control over their neighbourhoods and their lives.

Six years into Holy Cross Trust we now have 1,200 co-producers. We went on a journey from being that building where those people go, to being a community resource. We started by using timebanking for exchanges between organisations and what it meant was we could start to break out of our own little networks. What timebanking can do where we have lots of closed circles of trust - such as a church, a pub, a place of work, a family or a group of friends - is to let those closed circles relax and open up to each other.

Timebanking says everybody has something to offer and it's equal. It's a simple equation: an hour equals an hour. I think we're in the middle of a new way of doing things. I don't think anyone knows how it will unravel. We're in the process of trying to understand what the implications of building social capital actually looks like and what it's going to mean, and we yet don't know.

There is a division here.

Do we believe people can and will, given conditions of fairness and an environment of opportunity? Or do we think that people need controlling and shaping and telling and restricting? I can only say what environment and what approach has been best for me.

I recognise that in my life I've been in the right place at right time. I'm no better or cleverer than anybody else but along the way I've often met somebody that could help me or introduced me to somebody who could. We've created a system that has removed a whole sector of people from ever being part of those opportunities, from ever being in the right place at the right time.

What timebanking is about is re-establishing that sort of connection.

