

Transition Stroud

'GETTING ORGANISED'

Proposals from the Co-ordinator Support Group

November 2008 (Revision 3)

Summary of Key Recommendations

- *Transition Stroud (TS) could be more effective (and could offer more support to its member groups) if it were to be more organised – but at the same time it needs to avoid the pitfalls of over-organisation.*
- *TS should set up a new TS Council (TSC) with responsibility for management and decision making on behalf of the whole organisation.*
- *Each member group should nominate and send a representative to the TSC.*
- *Once or twice per annum there should be an open meeting for all TS members to guide the decisions of the TSC.*
- *TS would benefit from involving the working groups in the development of a shared vision, a practical strategy for achieving this and a set of values and working principles.*
- *The activities of the working groups would be expected to be consistent with the agreed TS purpose, vision, strategy, working principles and values, but the activities of the working groups would be in other respects entirely unconstrained.*
- *The TSC should identify any additional central TS groups (eg IT, external communications) required to support the working groups.*
- *TS should seek funding in the short term for a paid co-ordination and development post.*
- *TS should establish an appropriate form of corporate entity that would allow it to apply for funding and enable it to enter into partnerships with other organisations.*
- *Other organisations with overlapping aims should be encouraged to become affiliate members of TS.*
- *TS should commit to a programme of activities to maintain momentum towards the goals outlined in this report.*

Full details on these recommendations and the thinking behind them are in the report below.

Changes in Revision 3, 12/12/08

This revision of the report includes the following main changes:

P3: additional paragraph emphasising TS's role as a hub for other activities

P6: amended recommendation dealing with observers & speaking rights for TS members at TSC meetings

P6: new recommendation concerning newsletters and Transition Drinks

P7: working definition of a 'TS member'

P8: new recommendation to split the current roles of the CSG

P8: new recommendation for development of a disputes procedure

P10: revised organogram for TS

P11: update note regarding the meeting of 4/12/08

P11: new recommendation on action planning and review

Introduction

The Co-ordinator Support Group (CSG) was set up at the Open Meeting of 8 May 2008 with the following remit:

- develop a job specification for current and future coordinators
- review TS financial management
- review organisational structures with reference to other Transition groups and the Transition Network
- propose a suitable organisational form for Transition Stroud (TS)
- network with other TS groups

It quickly became clear to the CSG that first two items could not be satisfactorily resolved without addressing more fundamental issues concerning the way TS was organised and we have focused on these in this report.

The CSG Process

The process since May 08 by which we have arrived at our proposals has involved a number of strands:

- Approximately 12 full meetings of the CSG itself to plan the process, allocate tasks and explore ideas,
- Many smaller meetings between some CSG members engaged on particular tasks
- Web research on organizational models, and particularly those used by other Transition Towns

- Direct contact with Totnes, Bristol & Lewes Transition Towns to discuss organizational issues
- Direct contact with the Transition Network
- Phone calls to people active in TS, to gauge their views and encourage them to attend workshops
- A series of three open workshops for TS members in September, October and November 2008
- Circulation of this report
- A proposed presentation to the TS open meeting on 4th December 2008

Why change? The pros and cons of getting organized

In comparison with the other Transition Towns we researched, TS was the least structured. However, the CSG did not assume that this, in itself, automatically indicated a need to change. Indeed, for some TS members, this is one of its main strengths: they saw that it allowed flexibility and creativity and feared that these could be crushed in an atmosphere of greater bureaucracy, leaving us indistinguishable from traditional forms of organisation we are trying to escape from.

It was equally clear that others did not agree and found the relative formlessness of TS a real impediment to its effectiveness and to their involvement. The lack of structure made TS very difficult to navigate and reduced its visibility to the outside world. Some questioned whether the existence of TS has added anything at all to the value of the efforts of the individual working groups and projects – many of which existed before TS was created and/or could probably continue without it.

(Appendix I gives a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of TS identified in the workshop sessions.)

The CSG was also aware of the need to support TS in its role as a hub for a variety of different activities which nevertheless shared many of its principles and values.

It was evident that there is a price to be paid for being over-organised – and a different price for not being organised enough. The CSG has concluded that, whilst freedom from rules and restrictions has real benefits, TS has erred too far on the disorganised side. As one workshop participant put it, “There is an acknowledged tendency in Stroud towards chaos, duplication, anarchy and hidden power – and a risk of others not tolerating this.” Our sense is that the majority (but not all) of those we have heard from agree with this conclusion.

With these opposing forces in mind, the CSG has looked with particular interest at ‘chaordic’ models of organisation which attempt to combine the strengths, and minimize the weaknesses, of both models. The proposals below are intended to move TS generally in that direction although we also need to point out the obvious – that there is no final, “right” form of organisation for TS now and for all time (although there are some we believe to be wrong) and the questions of how we identify

ourselves, communicate with each other, distribute our limited resources and so on, will no doubt require attention again in future.

Recommendations:

- *The advantages of an appropriate form of improved organisation strongly outweigh the benefits of the current approach. Without change, TS is likely to remain less effective than it could be.*
- *Issues that need to be addressed through re-organisation include decision making, access to funding, internal communications, the need for a shared vision and working principles, maintaining creativity, creating a sense of identity, helping newcomers get more easily involved and raising our external profile and effectiveness.*

What Transition Stroud wants to achieve

Most of this report is concerned with *how TS works*, in organisational terms. However, the CSG recognises this is necessarily linked with questions about *what TS wants to do*. The section below outlines some steps needed to clarify this.

The TS purpose

The following statement of purpose was developed over the course of the workshops and appears to be widely supported:

“Our core purpose is to take, and inspire others to take, collaborative actions that strengthen our local communities and respond positively to the challenges of climate change and declining energy supplies.”

Recommendation:

- *The statement should be adopted, at least on a ‘good enough for now’ basis, even if there is a need to revisit it in the future.*

The TS vision

The September workshop included a preliminary visioning session (see the workshop report for a write-up) but a good deal more work would be needed on this before it could be set out as a coherent, shared vision.

Recommendation:

- *A shared vision is one of the main elements in the identity of any group and this should be developed in more detail once the immediate organisational issues have been dealt with.*

A strategic framework

Some other transition towns are beginning to develop a strategic approach to ‘the challenges of climate change and declining energy supplies’. The Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP) is one of the best known, although there may be others.

The CSG recognises that some TS members have misgivings about this and believe that an attempt to set up a TS strategy could take more time and energy than it is worth. Others, however, have expressed strong support for a more strategic approach and suggest that it will bring greater clarity and effectiveness to the work of TS as a whole.

Recommendations:

- *TS would benefit from a more strategic approach and should establish a strategy process to investigate this issue in more detail, agree a suitable framework and develop it with input from TS as a whole.*
- *The strategy development process needs to be transparent, accessible and inclusive; anyone in TS who has a contribution to make should be enabled to do so.*
- *Any strategic framework adopted needs to be flexible and realistic: it needs to be a real aid to the ongoing work of TS – increasing the effectiveness of the working groups – not a just a paper exercise or an additional burden.*
- *The strategy should include a set of working principles to guide the activities of the working groups (see Working Groups below).*

How Transition Stroud can work more effectively

This section returns to the main question of how TS should organise itself to improve its effectiveness.

Internal structure, communications and decision making

Since January 2008, the monthly meetings have been the designated decision making body for TS, but this arrangement is not working well.

- Attendance has declined steadily to the point where, at the November meeting, only the TS Co-ordinator turned up.
- Even when attendance has been higher, it has been patchy, with some groups represented and others not.
- There has often been a lack of continuity regarding the individual representatives which makes good decision making harder.
- Decisions have sometimes been expected of newcomers to TS who may have neither a mandate for this nor appropriate experience.

- As part of our consultation process, the CSG set up a data-gathering meeting with working group co-ordinators. Although this seemed to fulfill a need for the co-ordinators to meet and share information (to the extent that a second meeting was set up) it appears to be a duplication of effort to have both the monthly meetings and separate co-ordinators' meetings.
- Some TS members have described the meetings as unfocused and ineffective.
- Some monthly meeting decisions have stuck (eg the TS logo) while others have not (eg the decision to make the monthly meetings the decision-making forum for TS).
- To the CSG, and to many of those we have consulted with, the current monthly meetings would clearly not be a satisfactory forum for decision making in an organisation with significant financial or legal responsibilities.

The CSG acknowledges that the many other Transition Towns have their own equivalent of the monthly meeting but it appears that some of them work a good deal more effectively than ours.

Recommendations:

- *There is a clear need for a regular, formal, ongoing, management decision making and leadership body for TS and the current 'monthly meeting' should be renamed as the 'Transition Stroud Council' (TSC) and confirmed in this role, subject to the changes below.*
- *Any working group that wishes to be a member of TS must nominate and send a representative to each TSC meeting.*
- *Any central support groups must also nominate and send a representative to each TSC meeting. (Currently the CSG is the only central support group, but others are recommended below.)*
- *The nominated representative from each group need not necessarily be the group co-ordinator but there must be reasonable continuity of representation, with each nomination to stand for 6 months.*
- *Voting rights in the TSC will be limited to those who have been nominated. Other TS members¹ and representatives of affiliated organizations may attend as observers but may speak only at the discretion of the chair and speaking rights should normally sought from the chair prior to each meeting.*
- *The TSC agenda is to be circulated in advance to all TS members, who can submit comments via their group representative or via the TS Co-ordinator.*

¹We have assumed that, for the time being at least, an individual 'TS member' means anyone who wishes to be associated with TS and who may or may not be active in a working group or central support group. Members will have given their address and contact details to either a Working Group Coordinator, or the central Coordinator and will have signed up to either the TS DISCUSS or ANNOUNCE Google Groups .

- *Meeting reports will be published after the TSC meetings.*
- *The TSC will be responsible for the management of TS, including overseeing the role of the TS Co-ordinator or any other posts, strategic decisions, future developments, internal communications, co-ordination and any legal/partnership issues. (It will not be the body with legal responsibility for the management of the new, legally incorporated element of TS but will give policy direction to this – see ‘Funding and legal incorporation’ below).*
- *The CSG will initially provide support for the TSC meetings until the group is clearly established. In the longer term the TSC will need to consider how best to manage these meetings (eg use of facilitation?) as they are likely to involve long agendas and a fairly large group.*
- *In addition to the TSC there will be open meetings for all TS members at least once every 6 – 12 months. Agendas for these will be open to requests from members but one function would be to consider any upcoming strategic issues before the TSC needs to make a decision on them, or to review draft proposals from the TSC.*
- *TS should produce a regular members’ newsletter and members and newcomers should be encouraged to attend social events (eg Transition Drinks) for informal communication.*

Funding & legal incorporation

Because TS currently has no legal status, it cannot apply to the majority of charitable or statutory bodies that might otherwise offer substantial funding. Other transition towns have set up legally registered entities to get round this problem and are then able to pass on funding to working groups or projects and to enter into contractual partnerships with other organisations. It appears feasible to set up a legal entity that would have little or no other purpose than these. Such a body would require a separate management group, but the work involved need not be onerous if its function was limited.

Recommendations:

- *Set up an appropriate form of corporate entity (eg Community Interest Company or Industrial & Provident Society) that would enable TS to access funds but without curtailing TS’s freedom of action.*
- *Recruit a management body for the new company from the membership of the TSC.*
- *The function of the company will be to support TS and it will receive its policy direction from the TSC.*

Paid staff

Some Transition Towns have paid staff; TS has a part-time, voluntary co-ordinator.

Recommendations:

- *As soon as funding permits, TS should, as a minimum, recruit a full-time, paid co-ordinator/organizational development worker.*
- *The CSG will develop a draft job description for the post, for approval by the TSC.*

Other central services

Some Transition Towns are set up in such a way that their central body can offer other resources and support (apart from finance) to the working groups, or to the organisation as a whole. At present, TS has very limited capacity to do this.

Recommendations:

- *The current functions of the CSG should be split between two groups, one of which would be responsible for the management and support of the Co-ordinator while the other would continue to monitor, review and support TS's internal organisation, processes and communications.*
- *Set up additional central TS groups to take responsibility for appropriate services and activities, including (as the need arises) external communications (media, PR, events, website, outreach, etc), IT and administration support, risks & liabilities, membership & induction, staffing, and finance.*
- *Any such central groups must report to, and be represented on, the TSC.*
- *TS should consider developing a disputes procedure for the constructive resolution of conflicts within the organisation.*

Working groups

As things stand, TS working groups operate with little or no support from the centre – which also means they are free to act with total autonomy. As with the 'organisation/no organisation' dichotomy explored above, there is a question of where to strike a balance on this spectrum.

No-one wishes to apply a culture of control to the working groups and the question is more one of finding ways in which the centre can help them in their work. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to develop a more co-ordinated approach. There have already been some instances of duplication of responsibilities between groups and this kind of thing is likely to increase if the groups become more numerous or take on more projects and activities. It is also likely that in time there will be statements made or activities undertaken, in the name of TS, which other members may feel they cannot support – hence the establishment of shared values and working principles would be helpful.

Recommendations:

- *TS working groups should contribute to the development of an agreed purpose, vision and strategy, and set of working principles and values, and then work within these if they wish to be included in the TS family or make use of the TS brand.*
- *These principles would include a requirement to send a nominated representative to TSC meetings to address cross-group co-ordination and communication.*
- *Subject to the requirements above, working groups would be free to set their own goals and would be eligible to seek central support, including finance.*

Other organisations and projects

There are already a number of other organisations and projects in Stroud that appear to share our values but which are not part of the TS family. Closer links with these could be of real value.

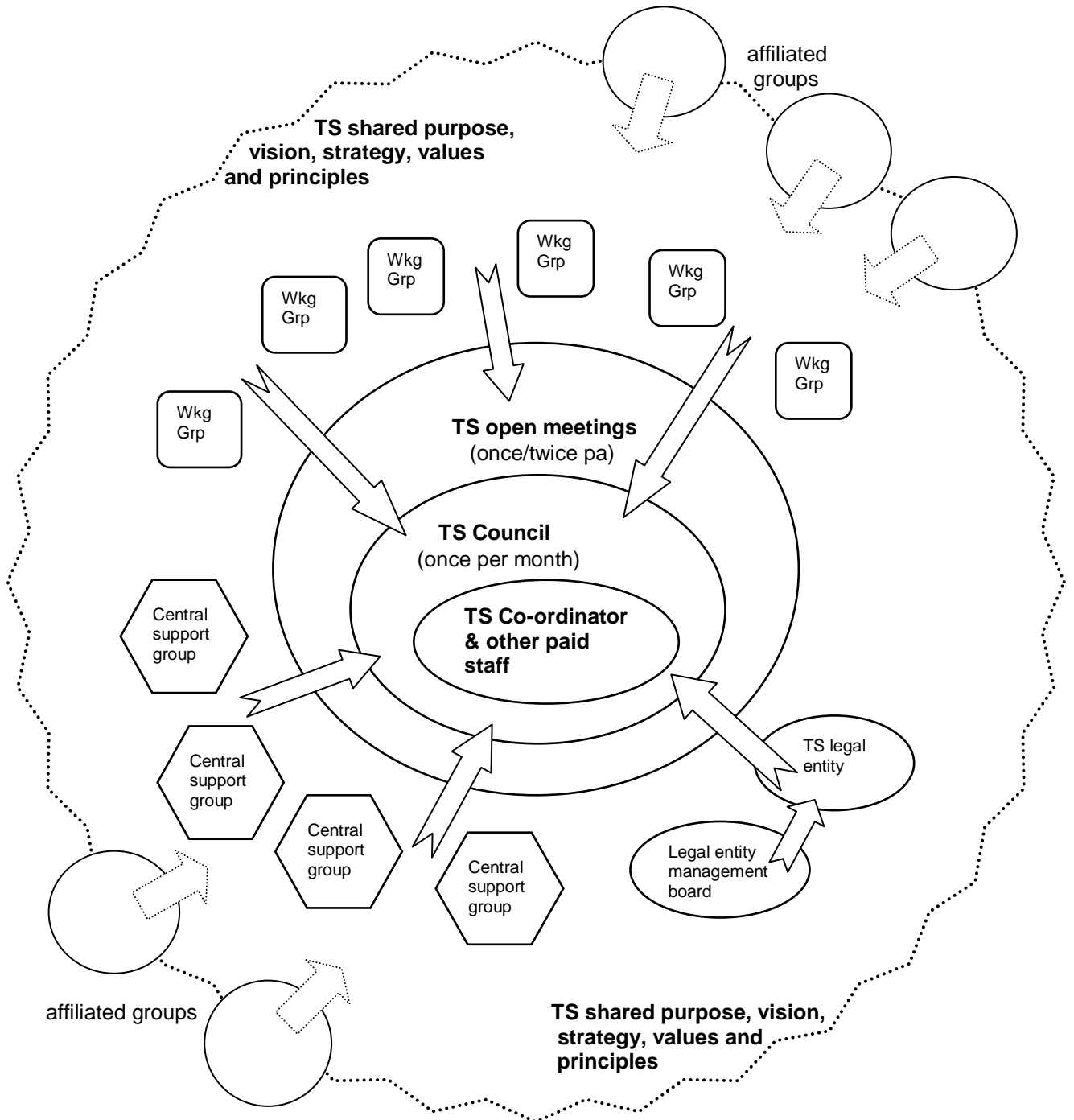
Recommendations:

- *Other appropriate organisations and projects should be encouraged to become affiliate members of TS.*
- *TS may choose to offer resources to these if it wishes.*

Organogram for proposed TS structure

Figure 1 below illustrates the main features of the proposed TS structure.

Figure 1
Organogram for proposed TS structure



What happens next?

The CSG recognises that, however appropriate its recommendations are in a 'technical' sense, no progress will result unless these are actively supported by TS members.

Adoption of the report

The immediate actions concern the process for adoption of this report.

Recommendations:

- *The report will be circulated to TS members through the usual channels and posted on the TS website and members will be asked to comment.*
- *The report will be presented for discussion at the Open Meeting on 4th December 2008.*
- *Unless significant concerns are raised by TS members the report should be adopted at the Open Meeting.*

(Note: the meeting of 4th December strongly supported the adoption of the report, subject to amendments now included in this revision.)

After adoption

The CSG also recognises that adoption of the report is only a first step and a good deal more will be required if momentum is to be maintained.

Recommendations:

- *The TS Council should be set up as soon as possible.*
- *Interim funding should be sought for office space and a paid post to co-ordinate and develop the organisation.*
- *The visioning work started recently should continue from early 2009 and should feed directly into a process to develop a TS strategy and a set of working principles.*
- *The first of the new open meetings for TS members should take place in early 2009 and should incorporate a further stage of visioning work and a launch party for the new TS structure.*
- *The options for legal incorporation should be investigated, a suitable form of company identified and established by mid-2009.*
- *Longer-term funding sources should then be identified.*
- *A more detailed action plan should be developed for the implementation of these recommendations and progress reviewed regularly against this*
 - i) *through the open meetings for TS members generally;*
 - ii) *through the working groups at their own meetings, and*
 - iii) *through continued monitoring of TS as a whole by the CSG.*

APPENDIX I

The following are summaries of the lists generated through the CSG workshop process. The full version can be seen in the report of the September meeting.

Key TS Strengths

Energy & creativity of members
Flexibility, freedom & personal responsibility
Connecting up existing & new environmental & social groups in Stroud
Working group activities and projects
Mix of thinking and doing

Weaknesses

Internal communications – we need to talk to each other more
Poor outreach/poor PR/poor external communications – no-one else knows what we are doing
Too hard for outsiders to find the way in
Lack of central support to projects
No decision making process
No accountability
No funding
No strategy
Most of the work is done by a few committed individuals
Burnout/periods of negativity/groups fade in and fade out again
Duplication of effort between groups
No sense of belonging
No legal status – TS can't be a formal partner
Website needs improvement and better access
It's a hobby for the alternative Stroudie – not enough impact
Insufficient connection to the outside world and events – we don't respond to these

What we need

Better external communications
Better internal communications
Access to funding
Clearer structure
Paid posts
Higher public profile/better public interface
Long term overview group