

Naked timebanking!

Okay, we weren't literally naked that would have just been awkward. But the 2015 annual Timebanking UK Conference was a chance to take off masks, personas and titles and be ourselves as I got together with folks involved in timebanks all round the country.

On leaving Kings Cross there was a beautiful sunrise over the skyscrapers of London. However, very quickly all went dark and grey, nothing could be seen more than a few feet away, we were in deep fog. Just as suddenly we came through it and could literally see the wall of mist we had been in, the skies were blue again. This made me reflect that life can be like this. Sometimes we can be in a situation where we cannot see the answer and there seems no way through; but when the fog clears we realise how much more is out there, the potential and beauty. Often it is friends and family that help us through the grey mist. At the HOurBank we can help each other see the beauty beyond our own fog.

Timebanking UK is the network we belong to which connects timebanks from around the UK. At the conference I met people from Plymouth right up to the outer edges of Scotland. We also had visitors from the US, Russia, France and Belgium. Here are some of the topics that jumped out at me and backed up what I aim to do here at the HOurBank, I hope they are interesting to you too. I also wanted a chance to say that what we do at the HOurBank goes much deeper than having a cup of tea or pulling up some weeds. If you would like to discuss any of these topics, we could have a discussion group email on hOurworld, Facebook or you could arrange for some of us to meet at a pub or Coffee shop to talk more.

A lot of debate was had around the word '**co-production**' a value that goes deep within timebanking. Was the word bandied around too much to legitimise projects or is it something we all do well and should embrace more? Was it simply helping one another and running things together, or did it have to be 'users' working in partnership with larger organisations like a council, housing association or NHS? A definition I liked was 'all parties making better use of everyone's resources and skills to make things better'. Elaine Murray, Member for the Scottish Parliament that visited, thought this was a great aspect of timebanking. Co-production is something we try to do at the HOurBank, by running events together, members being on the steering group and helping run the timebank. But I know that we could do more, I would love to know what you feel the barriers are and where we could improve.

We talked a lot about '**assets**', all the amazing resources we have in each other's skills and experience. For example Minnie sewing Rose's jacket, Pauline giving Minnie piano lessons, Nasima buying the refreshments for Coffee Morning. A great quote to prove this came from Cormac Russell (Asset Based Community Development) **Focus on what is strong, not what is wrong**,¹ my main aim at the HOurBank.

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<http://blog.nurturedevelopment.org/2015/05/13/asset-based-community-development-focusing-on-what-matters-by-cormac-russell/>

We have so many assets at HOurBank, people with amazing skills to share, but we need more people to ask for help with these skills. This was a problem that was echoed around the conference, that brokers found people are more willing to give than to receive, yet a key element of timebanking is reciprocity, giving **and** receiving. One person mentioned that maybe it is because we are English, that we don't like to ask for help. However, since HOurBank is not a 'service' we need **all** members to give and receive help. It was noted how great giving is for a person's self esteem as it makes us feel valued and wanted. So please put up a 'Want' on hOurworld and allow someone the chance to feel valued this Christmas.

“People are our assets” Claire Tomkinson of Ladybarn Community Timebank told us. She should know, her timebank has over 700 active members and exchanges 4,000 hours a year! (We have 118 individual members and exchange ??????? a year, not that I'm competitive;) She reminded us of the constant media story of; Benefits Street, migrants taking jobs, problem people sitting around, and encouraged us to tell another story. The one about people helping one another, mending things, going on walks together, listening to each other. She said “Media & society define social housing tenants by issues & problems. Lets define them by talents & assets”. She encouraged us to celebrate the ‘fluffy stuff’ in timebanking and not just the statistics; where people are making friends, doing gardening instead of drinking, feeling proud of a story they wrote, meeting someone when they have struggled to get out of bed due to depression. (These are all our own HOurBank examples, so I could go on.) Claire is good at celebrating the fluffy stuff *and* getting great statistics, so she was annoyed when asked by her Housing Association to prove the timebanks’ ‘value for money’. However she faced the task and, using HACT’s way to measure social impact,² she is working out how much each person costs, against how much they save the community. And guess what? timebanks are coming out very well in how much we are saving society. Feel free to have a word with your housing association if you are in one, Family Mosaic and Hexagon Housing are familiar with the concept and Claire is happy to chat others, she is a very engaging and enthusiastic speaker.

Catherine Wilton spoke about the Coalition for Collaborative Care, a network bringing together organisations who help those with long term conditions like Macmillan and Mind. She cited a paper published by the head of the department of Health ‘5 year Forward View’.³ In chapter 2 it talks about the amazing assets people in communities have to make such a difference to our collective health. If you are interested or good at looking at policy documents then do have a look at this one for me and get evidence and quotes to give our funders about the benefits of timebanking for our increasingly ailing and aging population. At the HOurBank we already use these assets by; several members visiting David in hospital, lifts to appointments, flat cleaned after a leg injury and those with depression and anxiety encouraged out. But sometimes it is good to have quotes about this from the government and NHS England too. There are also great videos about this aspect of timebanking on the C4CC website and Timebanking UK website.⁴

²<http://www.hact.org.uk/measuring-social-impact-community-investment-guide-using-wellbeing-valuation-approach>

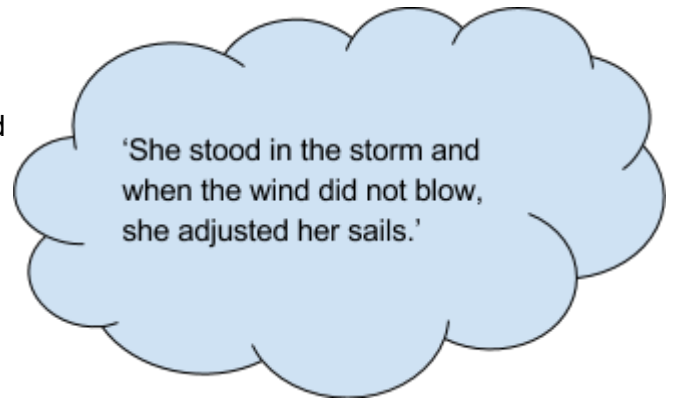
³

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/futurenhs/nhs-five-year-forward-view-web-version/5yfv-exec-sum/>

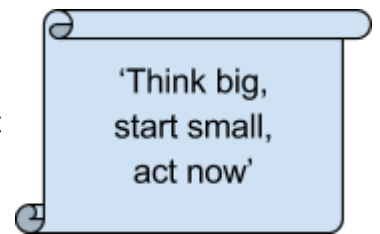
⁴ <http://www.timebanking.org/about-tbuk/publications/>

Audrey Birt, ⁵who used to be Executive Director of Breakthrough Breast Cancer in Scotland, told us of some research she'd done with people who had succeeded in transforming a workplace. She identified several principles they had in common, which I aspire to:

- 'Connect people with their passion, their purpose and their planet.'
- 'From leadership to leaderful - we shouldn't be a hierarchy, but all should be empowered to help with the decision making.'
- 'Create authentic organisations - ones with honest feedback.'
- 'Approach complexity with enquiry, sit in the challenge and get people involved.' This is something I struggle with, as I like to have the answers before I go out to people. But wouldn't it be exciting if we met these challenges together? For example how to create a better path for new HOurBank members to feel welcome.
- 'Trust more and control less.' Do I need to trust current members to welcome new members.
- 'Pattern hope and help the future emerge.' I need help understanding what this means.



These are all things I would like to be doing better, so please help me or let me know what we could change.



Natalia Nikitina who helps run many timebanks in Russia did a fantastic workshop on using **creativity to help solve problems** and get people involved. She told us some exciting stories.

1. The young people who organised a **flash mob**, to touch 1,000 people in a day. They went around and touching people lightly on the shoulder asked 'How much do you value time?' People went home discussing the question. That night, on the evening news, there was a piece inviting people to join the local timebank and value everyone's time. Imagine HOurBank being on London Tonight?
2. An event they had billed as **The Naked Discussion** (sorry, I copied the idea) Thankfully, she said, people did actually wear clothes, but they were also able to have a really frank discussion about the issues because people had taken off their masks and personas and were allowed to be themselves.
3. **The Public Fight**. Apparently it is traditional in Russia to let people get rid of their aggression and anger to fight till the first blood is sighted. As you can guess, they didn't allow actual physical fighting, but they did hammer out the pros and cons of timebanking with those who loved it and those that didn't think it worked. This helped to think through the barriers and risks to timebanking and give each a different perspective.

Lastly Natalia showed us two useful ways to help encourage creative thinking about seemingly unsolvable issues. One used pictures and metaphors to help us think from a different

⁵ <http://www.audreybirt.com/>

perspective and tackle difficult issues and then explain our thinking to others. A lot of us are very visual and pictures can help us. I hope to try this in the future.

The second was to use Edward de Bono's strategy in his book *Serious Creativity*.⁶ This used different coloured hats to think about a problem in various ways. E.g. **Blue** for *If we could do anything?* **Red** for *How does this make us feel emotionally?* **Black** for *What are the risks?* etc. Could we use this in the next Steering Group?

What great examples of using creativity to solve issues, let me know if you are interested on joining the next trip to Russia to see how their timebanks work ;)

Lastly, Ruth Naughton-Doe used her Phd research of 9 timebanks to remind us of the amazing **value of person to person exchanges**. Most exchanges we do at HOurBank are in groups or with the timebank, this is in keeping with her research as person to person (P2P) exchanges account for less than a ¼ of all exchanges. At Timebanking UK we have always struggled as we traditionally sell the concept of timebanking on P2P whilst strenuously arguing that group exchanges are essential to being community, creating trust, making friends etc. However, from her research she found that people did actually value P2P more; because it made them feel special, they got more practical support from it and people actually became *friends* rather than just acquaintances. From my own experience it takes a lot of time and effort to make P2P exchanges happen, but it is also more rewarding for all. (Although, it is getting easier after 16 years of members getting to know each other at group events!) Below Ruth sets out the barriers and supports to Person 2 Person exchanges.

Barriers to P2P

Bureaucracy, broker control, risk assessments, targets, paternalism and skills gaps. She said that where timebanks were more informal and flexible they were more innovative and had more P2P exchanges. She cited an example where one broker was even able to organise a flying lesson for a member!

She noticed that sometimes brokers were quite protective of their members which blocked some exchanges or meant that the broker felt they had to be there all the time to make sure something didn't go wrong. Apologies if I have done this and please do pull me up on it. I recognised this in terms of inducting new members, that I am worried to let others do it, whilst also realising that I didn't necessarily want to do it. Then procrastinating!

Supports to P2P

The factors that promoted P2P exchanges were timebanks that were bottom-up (led by the members), community based, had heterogenous members (that's us, anyone can join, not just for a single type of person) untargeted, informal policies and an activist broker (one who is passionate about timebanking and not just doing it as a job)

Cormac Russell cites similar factors;

"There are many ways of describing such movements towards change, but what is common across all such movements is that they are place-based, citizen-led, relationship-driven, capacity-orientated and grounded in the principles of inclusion and social and environmental justice." [Both ABCD and timebanking principles]

⁶ http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php

On taking risks when people help each other out individually, Ruth suggested that we should be **risk aware not risk averse**. Thankfully, so far there has been no insurance claim on a timebank in the UK! In being risk aware she noted that it was important to allow exchanges to go wrong sometimes, to allow member conflict to arise and let people be adults, to encourage members to run the timebank, and to perhaps write a disclaimer to allow exchanges to happen without insurance ie 'I agree to do this at my own risk', and to accept failure. For example, at our Bring and Fix's we always make people aware that we are not professionals, just neighbours helping each other out.

Her concluding reflections were that P2P was very valuable and to do more we could;

- use hOurworld to help members set up their own exchanges without the broker being so involved and vetting everything (stopping or slowing up the process)
- limit bureaucracy so that members didn't have to fill in too many forms each time
- avoid strict targets from funders

Where do you think HOurBank is on these factors?

If you are interested in any of these issues do look up www.timebanking.org or the links in the footnotes. Unfortunately I missed founding member Edgars Cahn's last speech in to get the long train home from Stirling. But will be trying to find his brilliant book *No More Throw-away People: The Co-production Imperative*.⁷ If anyone has a copy do let me know.

He was the one who inspired the HOurBank creators to start one of the first timebanks in Britain.

So here's to coming out of the fog together, focussing on what is strong, learning to receive as well as give, celebrating all the assets we bring to the table, thinking creatively, whilst being aware of the risks but not afraid of them.

Let's keep up the fantastic community that we at the HOurBank have started!

How about that drink while we work out where the path leads next?

⁷ <http://www.amazon.co.uk/More-Throw-away-People-Co-production-Imperative/dp/1893520021>