



Village in the City

Village Building Handbook

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This handbook is designed to help you in building your ‘Village In The City’; a community which boosts micro-local connection, support, resilience and diversity. This doesn’t need to be in a city of course – village-level communities can thrive anywhere, in towns, suburbs, developments – and even in villages!

This initiative is part of #BuildBackBetter, a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The **Village In The City manifesto** lays out seven aspects of a functioning village. This handbook acts as a growing collection of ways you can build, and engage others in building, your own village level community. The seven aspects are:

- A name
- Inclusivity
- Meeting places (inside and out)
- Connection within the village
- Hosts – to help bring people together
- Inclusive gatherings
- And.. an identity – what makes this place special?

What is a Village In The City?

A Village in the City is a micro-local community where YOU live. It could be a single block, several nearby streets, an area around a park or village built around a small shopping district in your city. The usefulness and resilience of these very local villages has become increasingly clear. These communities build trust, provide mutual support and friendship, and create more resilience both to tackle current challenges and improve our lives right now.

Why build your Village In The City?

The response to the pandemic has shown the importance and value of micro-local communications and communities. These include:

- Knowing, talking and understanding the people who live in the same neighbourhood as you do. Life is better when we know our neighbours, wave to them, say hello, greet them in the street.
- Sharing support with and for our neighbours has proved to be vital. When we have connections already, this process of helping each other becomes a whole lot easier. Who needs supplies? Who can offer to run an errand? Who can share news of someone seeking a hand?

- Cross-generational and cross-demographic conversations. It's all too easy to stay in our existing social mix of 'people like us'. In your street there are likely to be young people, older people, families with children, folk from different backgrounds and outlooks. Talking to them expands our world (and perhaps theirs too).
- An antidote to too many online relationships. The internet offers amazing communication possibilities, as we have all been learning. We can talk to nearly anyone in the world, online. This makes it even more important to talk face to face to those people who choose to make their lives in the same places as us – it's a kind of counterbalance, and another reason to connect with people who may have different priorities and views.
- Resilience. When push comes to shove (as it did for many during the lockdown periods), who are the people you can still reach to offer and request help and assistance? Your neighbours. It's much easier to get help if the connections are already there.
- Empowered action. It's easy to moan about how things could be better in the neighbourhood. If we connect with those around us, then we have a better chance to start to act together, to get things done and improve our lives.

Benefits of joining Village In The City

You could of course get started in your area right away. But there are benefits to joining up with the Village In The City community, including:

- Access to tools, frameworks, learning sessions, idea sharing which we are developing.
- Village In The City founder Mark McKergow is an internationally recognised expert in **hosting, leading and bringing people together**. He has even written **books** about it! You can access Mark's experience, skills, ideas and methods as a member of Village In The City
- Learn and share with our international community of village builders. The group is growing and we have regular calls to share new ideas and learn from experts.
- Access our online forum to let us know your developments, problems and challenges. There is a world of help waiting for you.
- When you have Put Your Village On The Map (which is quite an easy process) then you can use our logo if you wish and say you are a member of Village In The City. It helps to gain attention and credibility locally and attracts people to work with you.

Some possible first steps

Want to help to build your Village In The City? Want to get involved in a global community of people who are doing the same thing? Yes, I know that sounds like a paradox. Village building is certainly about connecting with the people around you – and you can also get better at it by being involved with our community from around the world.

To get started, here is what to do:

1. **Sign up** for information at the Village In The City website <http://villageinthecity.net>
2. Join our online community at <https://members.villageinthecity.net/>. It's free to join, you can connect with other village-builders, access resources, free calls, training and more.

3. **Declare yourself a start-up Village** – simply [complete this short form](#) and you will receive our Village Building Handbook and join our Facebook group
4. **Look around you** – what’s already in place that could be part of building a better village where you are? (You might find the [Village-In-The-City worksheet](#) helpful in making a start.)
5. **Start talking to others** – who might be interested to get involved? Who might benefit from more micro-local connections (shops, cafes, businesses, community groups)? [Talking to strangers](#), even if they live a couple of doors away, can seem hard at first, [check out our short blog](#) to help you get started.
6. When there are at least three of you interested, [Put Your Village On The Map](#) and become full members of the Village In The City project.
7. **Find a free/cheap way to start to engage people** – let them communicate with each other rather than just broadcasting your views. A Facebook group or [Whatsapp group \(maybe for a street\)](#) or similar may be a good start. You can share news of your connection with leaflets and other means to connect with everyone around you.

That’s a great way to start! Later on you might want to build towards other activities:

Do a survey or resource-gathering exercise – what do people want? What do they value about this place? What would make their lives better? What’s already going on? Who else do they know who could be keen to get involved?

Find something to work towards – a market day, a summer party, something inclusive to get people out and engaging with each other. (Here in my own village, Edinburgh’s West End, we are aiming for the post-COVID reopening as some kind of milestone.)

It’s a good idea to build on what’s already there rather than start from scratch; it helps to find existing aspects (whether they are yet working at full potential or not), and engage others who are keen to work in this direction. Note that this kind of activity doesn’t need a ‘budget’ or a ‘committee’ to get going – indeed, keeping money out of it helps to ensure you are building mostly on goodwill.

As community builder Cormac Russell writes in his book [Rekindling Democracy](#) and says on [VITC call #6 \(watch it here\)](#), the best kind of community development comes from the people in the community doing it for themselves. If you are going to get professionals involved (and there can be good reasons later on to do that), make sure that they are working WITH you, not doing things TO you.

GETTING A NEW VILLAGE STARTED

Social entrepreneur and TEDx organizer Richard Lucas shared some great ideas about how to get your new village off the ground on [VITC call #3 \(watch it here\)](#). These include:

- Be clear why YOU are doing this, and what will success look like for you. Perhaps it’s saying “hello” to people in the street, banishing loneliness, having community events, whatever. Will this inspire others? (If not, keep thinking...)
- Look at where your community is now – starting points will vary.
- Talk to people, find allies, look online and offline. Aim to engage more than just ‘people like you’ (though that may take time).
- Call a start up meeting/event. It’s a balance of madness and faith – the only way to find people who are interested is to invite them and see who shows up. This is more an event to talk about the

village project and is also a pilot for future gatherings. Aim high, rejoice in low – even if only a couple of people show up, they are the ones who can help you. Share your hopes, your skills, your backgrounds and connections and build from there.

- You don't need money! Make the meetings fun and social, get people talking about what they want. Look for easy wins and ways to do things that others in the village will notice. And get everyone's contact details!

Another way to get started is just to do something and invite others to get involved. Randy Bretz started coming out to applaud key working in the [Rousseau Neighbourhood of Lincoln, Nebraska](#), and began to connect with his neighbours. Leah Davcheva started working with a neighbour to make a garden out of an [unloved triangle in the road in Dragalevsti](#), Sofia in Bulgaria.

TALKING TO STRANGERS

This is one thing that many people – including myself – have struggled with in the past. It IS something you can learn to do better and more confidently. Gillian Sandstrom of the University of Essex has researched this topic extensively and has an excellent [resources page](#) on her website.

Some of the things that can make talking to strangers difficult at first might include:

- What to talk about/say?
- What if they don't like me?
- What if I get trapped into a long conversation I don't want?

Fortunately, there are good answers to all these.

WHAT TO TALK ABOUT

In the UK, the weather is the traditional starting point! This is not really a conversation about the weather though – as anthropologist Kate Fox pointed out, this is a traditional and culturally acceptable way of asking 'will you talk to me?'. It's more interesting to look at what makes the weather such a good starting point:

- There is ALWAYS weather – so a remark or question always makes sense
- It's a common factor for both of us (if we are in the same place) so some kind of agreement can be negotiated quickly (agreement is a great place to start!)
- A remark about the weather can be answered in all kinds of ways, from no reaction to a grunt/nod to a more fully formed reply. All these give us different clues about how (or indeed whether) to proceed.

Something in common, something we share, is often a good starting point. Are we both over (or under) dressed for the conditions? Are we both in the line for a concert or movie? Are we shopping at the same store? Have we read the book the other is clutching? All these offer starting points.

Another way to start a conversation is to offer help or support to someone who seems to be struggling. Reaching a high shelf, managing a heavy shopping basket, finding the way... if someone seems to be frustrated or unsure, a gentle offer of help may be very welcome. (Of course, if they don't want help, that's their privilege.)

HOW TO BUILD A CONVERSATION

Don't try to impress the other person, show off, act superior. Much better to take these simple approaches:

- Smile and look interested! Tons of studies from Dale 'How to win friends and influence people' Carnegie onwards show that smiling and attentiveness are big factors in making a good first impression.
- Encourage people to talk about themselves. Most people love to do this and very rarely find a place and willing audience. And whatever is their experience is their experience, it's not a question of right or wrong. (And avoid jumping in with your own experience too quickly, especially if it's very dissimilar to theirs.)
- Ask for stories, not for facts. Facts are all very well but they are at best just 'there' or at worst the source of heated debate. Stories, on the other hand, are much more personal and interesting, and offer all kinds of opportunities to expand and develop. So, 'how long have you lived here?' is a fact question (but might be the start of something). 'What do you like about living here' is much more interesting and personal, and is a great jumping-off point.
- Look for similarities, not differences (at least to start with). Points of connection, common interests, similar experiences, are all safe points to build a conversation
- Ask for advice. This is a great way to build further. What's a good place to buy paint? When are the recycling bins emptied? What's a good place for a walk? People love to be asked. (And of course, in the moment you shouldn't disagree or try to top them. You don't have to take the advice, but at least listen politely and enthusiastically.)

ENDING THE CONVERSATION

One of the things that stops people starting conversations with strangers is a fear of being trapped into a boring or tiresome exchange that you can't get out of. Not to worry – there are plenty of ways to politely but firmly draw things to a close (for now at least).

- Got to be somewhere Next – an end to the pleasant chatty Now (whether you really need to be there Next or not...)
- Use the past tense: "It was lovely to meet you" signals that things are ending very soon, without any commitment to future encounters. (And of course you can still have future encounters if you like.)
- "I mustn't keep you...". It is always polite to value someone else's time highly, even if *they* don't appear to.
- Or simply "Well, it's great to meet you! See you around." This leaves all options open for the future. In Scotland, I had to adjust to the way everyone says 'See you later' when they don't mean later, they just mean 'Goodbye'.

Starting to work with people

There used to be very formal ways of working with people – think committees, chairs, secretaries, treasurers, meetings, minutes, annual general meetings and so on. While these have their place,

you certainly don't need to start (and should not start) by setting up a formal body. Find a few people who share your enthusiasm for making your Village In The City a better, more inclusive, more active place, and talk to them. Then start to do some small things together.

Some hints about getting started:

1. DON'T set up a formal body, association etc to start with – that might come later.
2. Get together with the people who are keen. It's good to meet in a public place like a cafe, pub or park (if the weather is good) – you can invite people, and you are probably supporting a local business while you do it.
3. Focus on your hopes for the area, and very small steps to start things moving. 'A step at a time' is a good motto.
4. Look at doing things that don't cost money (or are relatively affordable). We had some leaflets printed and distributed them ourselves. If you can find someone to put in a little money at the start, great. Or perhaps all chip in what you can afford into a starter pot.

Look to use:

- The simplest possible organisational structure
- The least possible hierarchy (we all matter but have different skills)
- A focus on energy and processes rather than results

The main focus at the start should be on doing things that move you forward – create a Facebook group and/or simple website, get people signing up, inviting them to meet up, connect with local groups who may also be interested to support you.

A useful starting point is to employ what is known as a 'strengths based' approach:

1. Start where people are
2. Start with what people care about
3. Don't be afraid of starting small
4. Share ideas with others
5. Encourage fun and creativity
6. Seek innovative solutions to problems
7. Assume everyone has something to contribute
8. See issues/tension as something to explore
9. Allow things to take their own time
10. Trust in the process

Building further

The next sections of the handbook will look at the different village elements from the manifesto and build particular tools, ideas and strategies to develop each.

Name

It seems a bit obvious, but a good village has a name. Very often this name is there already, and has been so for tens or even hundreds of years. However, if you are starting to build a Village In The City where none has previously existed, then you may want to find a name and start using it.

How big should you be aiming? This is one of those times when smaller might well be better. In an urban setting, a Village In The City is within walking distance, maybe 10 minutes to walk across. That's a starting point. You are probably not aiming for a whole town (though there are very good reasons to organise at the town level too...). Smaller can be better – tighter connections, more encounters, more chance to know people by name, more opportunity for personalised help and support.

The story of the first two Villages In The City is a good example of the different ways that this can work. VITC founder Mark McKergow is in the West End, Edinburgh near the heart of Scotland's capital city. The West End is a well-known place locally – there is even a tram stop named for it. What there wasn't, at the start of 2020, was any kind of local connection, some way of residents communicating, any events, any sense of local engagement. The local traders had a thing going, which was good, but the residents had no place to connect, meet, and start to work together. The name wasn't the issue here – the West End is just fine.

The second Village In The City formed at the end of a cul-de-sac in Lincoln, Nebraska in the USA. Randy Bretz had started to go out onto his porch during the lockdown and applaud key workers, having been inspired by pictures of folk in Spain doing the same thing. He emailed his neighbours asking them to join in. Before long, a well-connected and supportive community was beginning to appear. You can [read the story here](#). However, the place doesn't have a name – there are several streets involved, but the area did not have a particular identity before Randy got to work. So, he decided to give it a name, the Rousseau Neighborhood, after a local school close by.

The moral of this story is that if you want to start your own neighborhood micro-local community, you can! And you can give it a name too. Remember that good names spread by being used, and whatever people start calling your district will end up being the name anyway. So latch on to what people are talking about. Everywhere's name started some time and some place!

Connection within the village

This is a vital starting point in building your Village In The City. How do people connect and communicate with each other? Back in the mists of time this was a combination of folk meeting in the street/market place/tavern/ church and some kind of 'official' news via the town crier, parish magazine, community noticeboard or whatever. These days, of course, the channels available to us are many and varied. Noticeboards can still be useful!

TWO-WAY

One key thing is that this connection has to be, in some ways anyhow, two-way. It's no longer enough to have one person in charge of sending out 'communication' to everyone else. We need ways in which citizens can connect with each other directly. Fortunately the tech revolution has made this much easier (in some ways). Facebook groups, Whatsapp groups, online forums, social media all have a part to play.

We suggest starting with a Facebook group or similar. Although not everyone is on Facebook and some have principled objections to it, the simple fact is that a Facebook group provides great functionality, free, with moderation features to ensure the discussion stays constructive and inclusive. Many people use the platform as part of their daily routine which means they see updates without having to go look for them (a factor which makes online forums less attractive, they require a special look to see what's going on).

You can also limit participation to those who really do live (and perhaps work) locally. It's a boon of the internet that people can in principle join from anywhere in the world, but for this type of micro-local group it pays to limit it to those who are on the spot. (This is an example of 'gatekeeping', a key activity for village builders, which we will discuss later when we come to Hosts.)

We have also found the value in having a behind the scenes organisers group for quick discussions about the suitability of posts etc – we use a Facebook Messenger group, Whatsapp groups are a good alternative. It's important for the organisers/admins to be able to quickly sort out any problems and be able to support each other.

Another way to keep things useful and relevant in your online community is to have open rules of participation. We ask all members to sign up to these when they join. Our rules in the [Edinburgh West End group](#) are:

1. Be kind and courteous

We're all in this together to create a welcoming environment. Let's treat everyone with respect. Healthy debates are natural, but kindness is required.

2. Respect everyone's privacy

Being part of this group requires mutual trust. Authentic, expressive discussions make groups great, but may also be sensitive and private. What's shared in the group should stay in the group.

3. No hate speech or bullying

Make sure that everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading comments about things such as race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

4. No unauthorised promotions or spam

Give more to this group than you take. Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links aren't allowed unless with prior approval by Admin.

We have found that enforcing these rules strictly at the outset helps to set the tone, and when folk have the idea that we will act then they are more careful in thinking before posting.

NEWSLETTERS AND PAPERS

Along with the two-way interchange of a group or email discussion, it's also good to have some kind of summary of what's going on from time to time. This can be as little as a digest of Facebook discussions, but it's often more useful for someone to put a bit of effort into constructing and editing it. Not everyone wants to be involved in a continuing exchange of views, but a regular publication can find a wider place in engaging more of the community.

In the olden times, this kind of publication often took the form of a photocopied 'parish magazine', perhaps produced by the church, delivered to every house in the village. These things still exist in rural villages, though many have moved online – a good example is [The Burtonian](#), published online in the village of Burton-in-Lonsdale, North Yorkshire in England where Mark's mother grew up. In a more urban setting the [Westhill Whistler](#) was established by Titus Alexander some 40

years ago in an area of Brighton on the south coast of England following a public meeting. It runs to this day. Take a look to see what can be done.

In a city environment there is still a key role for local information which has been assembled, curated and published. In the Broughton district of Edinburgh the **Broughton Spurtle** has long been a source of local news, gossip, controversy and connection. (A spurtle is a wooden Scottish implement used for stirring porridge, and the 'stirrer' connotation is not coincidental.)

We will talk later about the importance of inclusivity in your Village In The City. Making this summary of the news and view available widely is a key way to connect with everyone, including those who don't have internet access or simply don't go online very often.

BLOCK WALKS

Block walks are a great way to start to build connection with people in your neighbourhood. It's a good excuse to meet someone in a low-pressure situation and connect with your locality as you do it.

Partner up with a neighbour or a stranger from your local community. Decide on a route around where you live and organise a time for your walk. Introduce yourself – each person taking at least 5 minutes to talk about themselves and the things that are most important to them given current pandemic restrictions. Only share what you feel comfortable sharing. Choose one of our suggested topics (below) and spend the rest of the time walking, talking, actively listening and observing. You might like to document your walk and conversation through drawing, writing or photography. (Hat tip Eileen Inglis and Lucy Schofield, Edinburgh Block Walk for the idea.)

ENGAGING WITH NEWCOMERS

Finding a way to reach out to newcomers is also a key part of leading an effective Village In The City. Well intentioned gatherings can all too easily become cliques where the same people meet their friends, with newcomers and strangers ignored or even excluded.

Encourage your online community to tell newcomers about the group and encourage them to join. When they do join, encourage them to say hello and introduce themselves. And when they introduce themselves, be interested and enthusiastic about their presence.

Wendy Ellyat ran a newcomers groups in the **Cheltenham Connect** community in the South West of England, where new arrivals were encouraged to meet on a certain day each month at a local pub. Existing members of the community were there to greet them, say hello, find out about their hopes and help make useful local connections. This was a great success – the only problem was that people didn't want to leave the group after they had lost their 'new' status!

Hosts – bringing people together

Active and inclusive communities need active and inclusive people to help them work, bring people together, organise events, connect with newcomers and be there from time to time just to help pull it all together. These people are 'hosts'.

In the dictionary, a host is defined as 'someone who receives or entertains guests'. This translates into acting to bring people together, usually for some kind of purpose. In the olden days this fell (in a British context anyway) to the village priest and the pub landlord between them. Both had a position which brought them into contact with many others in the community and between them

they had contact with most people. These days, both of these positions are not so influential (though they can still be important) – church attendance is dropping, while the pub is often more like a restaurant than a community gathering place.

The growth of villages in the city will depend on people stepping forward to connect people, invite them to events and gatherings, create spaces for those gatherings, and introduce people to each other. This may look more like Facebook-group Admin than Reverend Father (though any good clergyman will tell you that organising is a good part of their roles too!). In the Village In The City movement we call these hosts Village-Builders.

We all, at some unconscious level, know what good hosting looks like; after all, we have all been to parties, invited people to our houses and taken part in events and celebrations. However, it is quite hard to find good information about what exactly good hosts actually do. Village In The City founder Mark McKergow is an international expert in this field. His book *Host* is a rich exploration of the history and practice of hospitality in the context of community and organisational leadership. Hosts have an unusual position – they are both responsible for their guests (the ‘others’) and also serve them, help provide what’s needed and ensure that everyone is comfortable and engaged.

Mark identifies six key roles of a host (summarised briefly here):

INITIATOR

This is about looking around, seeing what needs to be done next, and then setting things in motion. What needs to be created? What needs to be enhanced? What (perhaps) needs to be superseded? Who else is interested? How to get things off the ground? Host leaders step forward and make the first move.

INVITER

Reach out with an extended hand of welcome and engagement. Village Builders rarely have a lot of authority, it’s about working with influence and soft power. Getting others involved is best done in a way which invites – rather than insists – that they join us in working on some project, purpose or endeavour.

SPACE CREATOR

The role of host involves creating a suitable space – physical and interactional/psychological – for events to emerge and unfold. This can be physical space, and also psychological space – how does it *feel* to be involved? Creating supportive and suitable spaces, whether for big events or small meetings, is a key part of the hosting role.

GATEKEEPER

A Village Builder knows the importance (and the creative possibilities) of defining boundaries. Having some key rules about how people work together at the outset can make dealing with the inevitable ups and downs much easier. Setting expectations and norms for ‘how we do things’ is crucial, particularly in the early stages of building your village. It’s easier to start on the right foot than have to change later on.

CONNECTOR

Village Builders build connections between people, link people and ideas AND know when to leave them to get on with it. If we’ve initiated something, invited people and created a space, we clearly want to create something that it wouldn’t happen without people getting together. As connectors,

we understand that, having brought people together, at some point we need to get out of the way, let the magic work and allow possibilities to emerge. Not every connection will bear fruit, but that's no reason not to keep making them.

CO-PARTICIPATOR

Co-participants initiate, provide AND join in along with everyone else. It is no surprise; for example, when we are invited for dinner, we expect the host to not only serve us with food, but eat the same food with us. Not only that; hosting etiquette the world over demands that the host serve their guests first. A good Village Builder will be there at events and meetings, not only to show a lead but also to enjoy participating. (And if participating isn't enjoyable, then it's time to do something about it!)

Sharing the Village Building

It's a very good idea to gather a (small) team in the first instance to share the work off Village Building. More heads tend to provide more ideas and a wider perspective. It's very good to have people to share ideas and discuss difficulties. I would suggest making this relatively informal at the outset, invite people to be involved, and welcome others who show an interest. Do not rush to formalise things – that may come later. The first thing is to get things moving in some of the directions proposed in this handbook.

Inclusivity

Acting inclusively and aiming to engage with everyone in your village is one of the most important aspects of the Village In The City project. This is what makes our communities different from, say, running clubs or chess circles or mother-and-baby groups; while those can certainly be part of a well structured village, they only appeal to certain groups of people. Real VITC activities are about involving everyone, young and old, rich and poor, across class, demographic, political and faith boundaries.

CONNECTING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

21st century society is full of opportunities to talk to 'people like us'. Not only can we meet at (say) running clubs and the chess circle, we can find folk interested and passionate about those things online too. That's an amazing thing – we can communicate with at least half the population of the planet at the touch of a button, essentially for free. It's astounding. If my smartphone fell through a hole in space-time into the hands of the 18-year-old me in the late 1970s, it would be incomprehensible. And yet here we are.

While all this communication potential is a boon, it is also a risk. In all the excitement and rush to talk to people who share our passions and priorities, it's all too easy to forget everyone else. If we never talk to those from different backgrounds and with different views, then we can start to assume that everyone thinks like us and then get disturbed and disappointed when we find that isn't so. Talking to the people who literally share the same ground as us is an excellent way to add some balance and variety to our outlooks and lives.

WELCOMING ALL

It is vital that everyone who lives in your village has the possibility to be welcomed, to join in, to be included and to have their presence recognised and valued. This means addressing the multiple hopes, needs and interests of all. You will find yourself able (and wanting) to draw on what Dr

Wendy Ellyet of the Flourish Project calls the ‘treasure within’: the skills, resources and desire to participate that anyone and everyone might bring with them.

This is not easy work. It takes patience, energy and a degree of humility which is not always easy to find. Listening first is a good starting point – hear what people have to say, want to see and are passionate about, before seeking to enlist them. And being inclusive does not mean that you need to tolerate unacceptable behaviour indefinitely. In the ‘host’ section above we talked about the value of having some rules of engagement and participation. People who step outside these get a quiet word. Then they get a louder word. Exclusion is a last resort but has to be an option. A good guide is to ‘welcome all who welcome all’ and encourage actions to speak louder than words – if the loudmouth and the sensitive person find themselves at the same BBQ, they may find they have more in common than they thought!

Meeting places – inside and out

If we are to get people talking to each other, then places to do it are (of course) vital. And these are actual physical places – it’s the proximity of others that makes a Village In The City different from other communities. Finding places where people can come freely to meet others, work together, create new options for the neighbourhood, is very important.

INDOOR SPACES

Some places already have ‘community centres’. If your neighbourhood does, have a look at it. Is it welcoming? Is it used? Is it valued. I have seen many so-called ‘community halls’ that are none of these things. How can you improve it? (This is usually more of a matter of some cleaning and care than financial investment in the first instance.)

If you don’t have a public place, find a friendly cafe or pub that can offer space (usually in exchange for buying a coffee). There is something in it for the venue to be seen at the heart of community activities, so a good ally is very useful. Having your meetings in public is a good start – it helps your activities be visible, it saves any individual from having to open their home, and it allows everyone to participate on an equal footing.

OUTDOOR SPACES

It’s great if your village has an outdoor space you can use too. These are sometimes right there and obvious, in other settings a little more imagination is required. Even if land is privately owned and controlled, it is often possible to negotiate use for occasional special events.

Finding places where people can have chance encounters as well as planned events is also a good idea. Back in time people used to meet at street markets which were a key day in the week to get out and about. Many continental European cities have a continuing tradition of city squares with cafes where people can bump into each other. This is not always easy to engineer, but the opportunity to bump into others, say hello, have a chat and exchange news is key to a functioning Village In The City. Dog-walkers and people waiting at the school gates have more opportunities for this than many of the rest of us... how can you get people out and about where YOU are?

Inclusive gatherings

Having established the importance and desirability of getting people from all walks of life together from time to time, the next thing to think about is what kind of event will attract people to come out and get involved. Not every kind of event will appeal to everyone, but it's a good start to think about broadly appealing inclusive gatherings.

BROAD INCLUSIVE APPEAL

These events can turn into milestones in the year which happen on a continuing basis. A summer street party, a music weekend, a Christmas Fayre, a New Year / Hogmanay (as we call it in Scotland) event, a garden party, an open gardens weekend, a BBQ. It all depends where you are, what the traditions are, and what you think will get people involved and enjoying themselves together.

Lara Celini is an experienced village-builder in the Willowbrae district of Edinburgh. Some of the events she and her team have organised include:

- A **'big lunch'** with the street closed to traffic – which has become an annual event
- This can also include things like making bunting sessions as part of the preparations
- A #PetsofWillowbrae hashtag on social media so that people learn the names of all the pets
- 'Viral kindness cards' for people to pick up, seek help and offer support
- Decorating windows (a popular thing in the COVID lockdown here in Edinburgh, pictures and teddy bears are popular) – see the **Window Wanderland** website for ideas
- Sharing food events work very well – lots of people can contribute and enjoy!
- Ceilidhs, barn dances and other formats which involve learning the dances which get people interacting. (Very popular in Scotland!)
- Lantern procession – perhaps culminating in the dramatic burning of the lanterns!
- Quizzes and other events – keep them fun (though there is definitely a place for serious quizzing too!)
- Making 'kindness cards' for the local care home, getting the children involved and engaging with seniors
- Other creative projects such as decorating cotton shopping bags to take away and use (instead of plastic bags)
- Jumble trail – people put out things they no longer want, and everyone roams around collecting
- Community weeding events ('Willowbrae Weeds You') to maintain community ground and streets.

You can hear more from Lara on **Village In The City call #2 – click on the link.**

In the past, churches used to also be broadly attended and bring people together. They still do, though in UK settings this is increasingly a minority interest. Village-builders should be looking to engage churches in their work – they have a role to play and can be very useful partners. There are definitely benefits to coming together from time to time to sing, hear inspiring stories, reflect on the difficult questions of life, and meet others. The **Sunday Assembly movement** is one organisation who support such meetings on an inclusive basis.

We heard from **Rev Nick Bowry on a Village In The City call** that churches are often very interested in helping to build flourishing communities and lives, whether that's for church-goers or the wider population. In general ministers are accustomed to going out to look for partners with whom to work – if you arrive on their doorstep with an inclusive mindset and a collaborative stance, they will likely be delighted.

MORE FOCUSED EVENTS

Along with these broadly inclusive events, a good Village In The City will look to be offering chances for people to meet based on particular needs or interests. Examples include:

- **Newcomers get-together** – a chance for new arrivals in the village to come together, meet each other, find out about local events and possibilities and say hello to the village building team
- **Laptop Wednesday** – a day in the week for homeworkers to gather, work in the same space, and support each other
- **Play Street** – some places support the closure of local street to allow children and families to play safely
- **Film club** – a monthly chance to watch an interesting film and discuss it afterwards over a drink.

This is a very short starter list! We hope to add more as the project progresses. In general, the more specific to the locale, the better the event will be. I used to live in St George's Avenue in north London, where the people held a street party every year on... St George's Day!

And.. an identity – what makes this place special?

The final part of the Village In The City manifesto is about building on the identity of your village: what makes it a special place? What are the traditions of the area? What were (and indeed are becoming) key trades and industries? What are the main geographical features? Which famous (and perhaps infamous) people came from there?

There are very often key clues around, even if your place doesn't seem to have much in the way of unique features. If you can't find anything obvious, have a dig into the local history. Or work the other way around; what kind of thing would you like your place to be known for? Everything has to start somewhere. Hay-On-Wye in England is now known as the 'book town' and is the host of a huge international festival of writing and culture, but it wasn't always the case. In 1962 **Richard Booth** moved in, opened his bookshop with big ambitions...

Bringing it all together

We have briefly looked at the seven key elements of a Village In The City. I hope you're excited at the prospect of building your own village! A question many people ask at this point is... "Where should I start?".

Here's the thing... you can't do it all at once. The secret is to pick one of these aspects to begin with, perhaps the one that seems to need most attention or the one that seems easiest to begin with, and start working with it. Get in touch with others and invite them to get involved. You will find

that as things begin to come together you will be able to move on to other areas, drawing on your colleagues and neighbours to help and even to drive some of the aspects.

To help you start to think it through, we have created a free [Village Builder worksheet](#). This will help you look at each aspect on a scale from 1-10, think about what you already have, and figure out which area to look at next.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Here's how it worked for me in Edinburgh's West End. The area has a strong identity already, with lots of shops, cafes, pubs and plenty of history. However, there seemed to be next to no communication between residents. I decided to start there, and looked around for anything already in place that might be a starting point. There was, I discovered, a Facebook group for residents, but it only had 19 members. I joined, made a couple of helpful contributions and then contacted the chap running the group to talk about expanding it, perhaps with leaflets. He was all in favour! Within a few weeks the group passed 500 members and we are on to organising a West End Open Weekend to get everyone out and interacting. You can read more about it in my [Diary of a Village Builder blog](#) on the [Village In The City website](#).

SOME NEXT STEPS

I hope you're interested and inspired to improve your life, and the lives of those around you, by becoming a village builder and building your own community. We at Village In The City are here to help. Some first steps (if you haven't done them already):

- Sign up for information at <http://villageinthecity.net>
- Join our online community at <https://members.villageinthecity.net/> - free to join, connect with other village-builders, access resources, calls, training events and other stuff
- Look at our [resource page](#) and download stuff
- **Put your village on our map** – either yourself (as a start-up) or with a team of three as a fully fledged village in the city!

About the author



Dr Mark McKergow founded Village In The City in June 2020 following his own experiences of the benefits of enhanced micro-local community co-operation during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period. Mark has thirty years' experience as a leadership development consultant, coach and facilitator. He is the co-author of six books including [Host](#) (about leading by bringing people together), [The Solutions Focus](#) (about building on what works) and [Hosting Generative Change](#). Find out more about his work at sfwork.com and hostleadership.com.

Mark's work has focused on making organisations more human and at the same time more effective. Now he is bringing his pragmatic, engaging and usable methods and practices into the world of micro-local community building, which he is practicing at his own home in Edinburgh's West End, in the heart of Scotland's capital. Mark also plays jazz clarinet and saxophone, and is Chair of Sunday Assembly

Edinburgh, part of **an international network of 'secular' congregations** aimed at bringing church-style communities to a wider audience.

You can watch **Mark's TEDx talk about Village In The City on Youtube** or on the **videos page of the Village In The City website**.